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### Decolonizing the Classroom: Native American Art History, the Voice of Indigenous Students, and Community-Oriented Teaching

Nancy Palm Puchner  
*UNC Pembroke*

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## **Decolonizing the Classroom: Native American Art History, the Voice of Indigenous Students, and Community-Oriented Teaching**

Nancy Palm Puchner  
*UNC Pembroke*

Over recent decades, progressive and exciting changes have taken shape within the study and display of Native American art and culture in the United States. Museum curators, researchers, and scholars have sought to challenge stereotypical modes of representation and instead establish and follow what is often referred to as a decolonizing paradigm, by which Native communities are served and empowered, rather than exploited or marginalized. In June of 2019, for example, *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. *Hearts of Our People* represents the first major exhibition of artwork by Native women, and its curators organized the exhibit in consultation with the Native Exhibition Advisory Board, a panel of twenty-one Native artists and Native and non-Native scholars. The creation and contributions of the panel were meant to “provide insights from a wide range of nations at every step in the curatorial process.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars have begun to discuss these types of decolonizing practices in museums more broadly speaking, and revisionary textbooks encourage similar decolonizing practices in the classroom.<sup>2</sup> Empowering new directions in this field reject a stereotypical or colonial understanding of Indigenous cultural production, and instead contextualize Native art within contemporary Native contexts. At the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, I regularly teach a course on North American Indian Art, and this essay explores the place and the potential of my teaching in this revisionist, decolonizing process.

### ***Decolonizing the Classroom and Dismantling “Authenticity”***

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<sup>1</sup> “Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists,” Minneapolis Institute of Arts, June 2019, <https://new.artsmia.org/hearts-of-our-people-native-women-artists/>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) and Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

The process of decolonization can be defined as “disrupting the ways that white bodies have established privileged relationships to Indigenous lands, labour, natural resources, and what counts as knowledge itself.”<sup>3</sup> Although similar to postcolonialism, decolonization can also be understood to challenge postcolonialism, as some scholars have begun to critique the latter’s theories and methodologies. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that for many Indigenous peoples, “post-colonialism is viewed as a convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world.”<sup>4</sup> In a recent essay about their Decolonizing Methodologies graduate seminar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Patricia S. Parker, Sara H. Smith, and Jean Dennison further argue that “while postcolonialism seeks to understand what colonialism has done in the world, decolonising [sic] work seeks to disrupt ongoing colonial approaches to and understandings of knowledge.”<sup>5</sup>

Dismantling colonial concepts of “authenticity” and “tradition” has become a flash point within the evaluation of Indigenous art. The style guide for contributing authors to *First American Arts Magazine*, a leading publication covering art of Indigenous peoples of the Americas, warns writers against use of the terms “tradition” and “traditional” due to their “vagueness and overuse.”<sup>6</sup> In my teaching of Native art, I make efforts to destabilize and demystify such terms. I discuss with my students how the notion of “tradition” exists only in the imagination of a white audience because, at any given time in history, what appears to be “tradition” may be no more than a few years old as practices were continually revised through contact between tribes. And in many cases, “traditional” artistic practices were also affected by or even introduced by outside groups, including Europeans.

Unsettling the false dichotomy of “traditional” versus “modern” in the classroom is aided by rich revisionist scholarship and notably the textbook I use for the course. In *Native North American Art*, Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips refuse the concept of “tradition” as a marker of authenticity. They instead take into account issues of media, content, training, and the history of colonization. The authors ultimately identify as “modern” any work of Native art that is made to

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia S. Parker, Sara H. Smith and Jean Dennison, “Decolonising the classroom: Creating and sustaining revolutionary spaces inside the academy,” *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies* 20 (2017), 235.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, second edition (New York: Zed Books, 2012), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Parker, Smith and Dennison, 241.

<sup>6</sup> “FAAM Style Guide,” *First American Arts Magazine*, <http://firstamericanartmagazine.com/submissions/faam-style-guide/>

communicate with both Native and non-Native viewers.<sup>7</sup> This designation has nothing to do with the level of “tradition” or “authenticity” one perceives on an aesthetic level. Students come to understand that these terms – “traditional,” “modern,” “authentic” – carry no real value in our study of Indigenous art. However, examining their ubiquity within the field of art history provides a valuable context in which to unpack the ways that Indigenous art circulates in the postmodern world. As a class, we examine this framework of perceived authenticity to help understand the challenges that contemporary Native artists face today. My class is therefore intended to both teach about Indigenous cultural production and challenge the ways that Indigenous art histories have been controlled by non-Native historians, anthropologists, curators, and collectors.

The process of decolonization is steeped in the destabilization of binary, colonial-based concepts like Indigenous authenticity, and Parker, Smith, and Dennison point out that the university classroom is an important entry point for this type of decolonizing work. Like museums, the classroom is a historically colonizing space, but also an important site for revolution and transformation. The question, however, of who exactly is entitled to produce or revise knowledge about Native cultures has also been recently raised. There are many scholars, curators, and artists who believe that the revision of deeply-entrenched modes of misrepresentation is only truly possible when the history of Native art is told by Natives. For example, A'aninin scholar and museum curator, Joe Horse Capture, recently argued against the non-Native curating of Native American art, stating that “Native people have a story to tell – their own. And there are plenty of people in the field that would qualify.”<sup>8</sup> Cree and Blackfoot artist, Gerald McMaster, argues that the process of revision is not possible without Native voices, recently calling for an “Indian-made critical discourse, one that has an aboriginal perspective with the *possibility* of convergence with other discourses.”<sup>9</sup> Significant sites, notably the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, have fully embraced this approach.

As a non-Native historian of Native American art, I must consider my own position in this debate. On the one hand, I respect the desire of Native artists and scholars for an “Indian-made critical discourse.” On the other, I want to explore,

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<sup>7</sup> Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 245.

<sup>8</sup> “Horse Capture: ‘Native People have a Story to Tell – Their Own’,” *Indian Country Today*, April 26, 2015, <https://indiancountrytoday.com/uncategorized/the-week-that-was-the-big-stories-in-indian-country-april-26-2015>

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis is mine. Gerald McMaster, “Towards an Aboriginal Art History,” in *Native America Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (Routledge, 1999), 92.

celebrate, and teach the art of cultures to which I do not belong – cultures badly exploited by non-Native historians over the course of many decades. As such, I like to consider my classroom practice a stride toward partnership. I hope that my students and I can study the art of groups that are considered marginal, without simply absorbing them into dominant white ideologies. As we are continually offered new means by which to understand Native art outside of dominant Western narratives that historically sought to define it, Native students play an integral role in this process. As a professor teaching Native North American art, I strive to expose students to a range of Indigenous arts and crafts and the theoretical and spiritual contexts that surround them. As a means to decolonize my classroom, my goals while teaching this material are as follows: 1) give a voice to Native students who are functioning in a university structure that, as part of a larger bureaucratic system, has served to historically oppress them as a people; 2) both serve and absorb into my classroom the Native community in which I teach; and 3) remain teachable. None of these goals would be attainable without the contributions of the Native students in my class.

### *The Voice of Native Students*

My institution, the University of North Carolina in Pembroke, prides itself on being one of the most diverse universities in the American South. The student population at UNCP is approximately 38% white, 33% African American, and 15% American Indian.<sup>10</sup> Pembroke is home to the Lumbee Indian Tribe of North Carolina. The Lumbee themselves are a particularly diverse group. Historians identify the Lumbee as descendants of dozens of tribes from the Piedmont region and Eastern North Carolina, as well as Europeans, and Africans.<sup>11</sup> No single origin story exists, but instead a range of stories coalesce into a rich tapestry of historical roots. That said, there is little doubt as to what constitutes Lumbee identity. Several core families create a deep kinship, which, coupled with an intimate attachment to place, are at the root of Lumbee identity.<sup>12</sup> The Lumbee have maintained a coherent identity as a people connected by kinship and place in

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<sup>10</sup> “Diversity Resources, Fall 2018 Enrollment,” UNC Pembroke, <https://www.uncp.edu/campus-life/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-resources>.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Karen I. Blu, *The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Adolph L. Dial and David K. Eliades, *The Only Land I Know: A History of the Lumbee Indians* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); and Malinda Maynor Lowery, *The Lumbee Indians: An American Struggle* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity and the Making of a Nation* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010), xiii.

Robeson County, North Carolina for nearly three-hundred years, and with more than 55,000 members they are the largest Indian group in North Carolina, the largest tribe east of the Mississippi River, and the ninth largest tribe in the nation.<sup>13</sup> The University of North Carolina at Pembroke holds a prominent and lasting place within Lumbee identity. It was originally founded in 1887 as a Normal School for training American Indian teachers, becoming part of the UNC State system in 1972. As faculty at this diverse institution, in the heart of a large Indian community, in which I teach Native topics, I have a deep responsibility with regard to inclusivity and collaboration.

While UNCP is approximately 15% American Indian, typically around two-thirds of the students in my North American Indian Art classes identify as Native (most, but not all, are Lumbee).<sup>14</sup> As a non-Native art historian, I was admittedly intimidated by this demographic when I first began teaching the class. Despite my credentials, the task of teaching the art of cultures with which I do not identify to a group of students who largely do identify felt pretentious and colonial. As a young, white professor in a room of about two-thirds Native students, I felt my whiteness. My initial response was to avoid and push through any discomfort I felt. While always recognizing the atrocities of American history, I could avoid the contemporary specter of that history on our campus and in our class. It became clear very quickly that I was missing an opportunity and doing a disservice to my students. On a conceptual level, I began to allow the discomfort caused by historical (or not so historical) violence and oppression to direct the course toward deeper, more meaningful discussions of why that discomfort persists and in what it is rooted. I still feel my whiteness, but allow it to serve as a point of departure to meaningful considerations of how race and power functions in my class and in the study of Native art more broadly speaking.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina have had state recognition in North Carolina since 1885. They later received “partial” federal recognition with the congressional passing of the Lumbee Act in 1956, which recognized the Lumbee as Indian, but withheld the full benefits of federal recognition.

<sup>14</sup> Based on a list of all American Indian students enrolled during the 2017 Fall semester compiled by John Hays on June 21, 2018, roughly 1 in 10 enrolled students that identify as American Indian identify their tribal affiliation as something other than Lumbee. This estimate is not exact in any way, as both tribal identification and racial/ethnic identification are optional for enrolled students.

<sup>15</sup> The subject of identity and power dynamics in the classroom has been recently discussed by Rebecka A. Black in “Understanding How Perceptions of Power and Identity Influence Student Engagement and Teaching in Undergraduate Art History Survey Courses,” *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* 5 (2020).

I encourage students to question and unpack how the history of Native American art has been constructed by Euro-Americans through a Western (and often imperialist) lens. We explore the means by which identities are constructed, often from outside of the community or group that is being represented. This is a concept that many students have never before considered, and many engage with the process on a very personal level. Unpacking and exploring identity construction through this lens has the potential to provide Native students with a critical (and visual) framework through which to understand the change that many of them, their families, and their ancestors have experienced as Indians in the United States. While my attempt at revisionist teaching has been greatly guided by decolonizing exhibitions and critical scholarship, it has also been directed by the profound contributions and reflections of my Native students in the classroom.

As Amy Lonetree poignantly describes in *Decolonizing Museums*, “museums can be very painful sites for Native peoples, as they are intimately tied to the colonization process.”<sup>16</sup> She emphasizes the need to not retreat from but instead directly address the history that creates Indigenous pain, arguing that it is “critical for museums to speak the hard truths of colonization [as they] honor Indigenous ways of understanding history. When museums shy away from telling these truths, they sadly limit their capacities to address the historical unresolved grief that is ever present in Native American communities.”<sup>17</sup> It is clear during classroom discussions that many Native students approach a majority of class material from the perspective of the Indigenous cultures that we explore and discuss. For example, when studying James Luna’s 1990 photograph, *End of the Trail*, from his 1990-91 installation, *AA Meeting/Art History*, Native students tend to process the work through their own Indigeneity, using pronouns like “we” and “us.” The photograph features Luna seated on a wooden saw horse, dressed in black, gazing at the ground absentmindedly, with the weight of a large liquor bottle pulling his right arm toward the ground. The work is a play on James Earl Fraser’s famous bronze statue of the same title, which depicts a deflated Native male on an actual horse, epitomizing the Eurocentric stereotype of the “vanishing Indian.” Luna transports this centuries-old stereotype into contemporary times, using it to explore the negative impacts of scourges like alcoholism on Native populations today.

Luna generates a great deal of discussion in any classroom. His art is provocative, it comes from his experience as an Indigenous person in the United States, and it confronts the ways that Native Americans are both historically and currently

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<sup>16</sup> Lonetree, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Lonetree, 171.

understood and treated. Luna was a member of California's Luiseño tribe, residing for over forty years on the La Jolla Reservation in San Diego County until his death in 2018. The history and experience of Luna and his ancestors is quite different than the experience of my students and their ancestors in North Carolina. The Lumbee, like the Luiseño, have faced copious abuses as a people and they have certainly suffered at the hands of the U.S. government. The Lumbee, however, were never confined to reservations, they retain ownership of their ancestral land, and they reside in the Eastern U.S., not the West. Despite specific differences, Native students in Pembroke, most but not all Lumbee, often approach Luna's work from a place of familiarity. They identify the struggles that he points out, like alcoholism, as the struggles they themselves are in lineage to. Phrases like 'we suffer from alcoholism,' 'alcohol was given to us by Europeans' are a regular part of student writing and classroom discussions.<sup>18</sup>

In his now famous performance, *Artifact Piece* (first installed at the San Diego Museum of Man, 1987), Luna laid in a case of sand surrounded by museum labels that identified his tribal affiliation and other demographic information. He also labeled his scars and personal attributes, much in the same way that museum curators labeled the archeological objects on display around him in the museum. Luna presented himself as a living, human artifact to challenge the exhibition practices that relegate Native American art and culture to the past through their display in history museums. Displays of cultural artifacts in history museums suggest that such remnants are all that is left of many still thriving Indigenous cultures. Luna's *Artifact Piece* famously calls attention to this type of display that ignores and marginalizes living Native Americans within Eurocentric historical narratives.

In student writing and classroom discussions of this work, again the pronouns used by Native students – 'we are still around,' 'our objects in museums' – echo this sense of identification.<sup>19</sup> They also underscore Luna's message that Indians are not extinct but are still very much a part of the social framework of America. One Native student wrote that Luna's *Artifact Piece* addresses "how people used to look at us as a vanished species no longer existing."<sup>20</sup> Another Native student wrote the following when comparing Luna's *Artifact Piece* to Nicholas Galanin's *What Have We Become* (2007, Hood Museum of Art). Galanin's work is a mask-

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<sup>18</sup> Classroom discussions, ART/AIS2170: North American Indian Art, Spring 2018. Emphases mine.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Student Exam, February 13, 2018. Emphasis mine.



like construction cut from the pages of a nineteenth-century anthropological text about the artist's Tlingit ancestors. My student's comparison read as follows:

[Luna] stated that Natives are here to stay... he illustrates that we the actual Native Americans are [not] artifacts for the Western world. That we're still here and are a part of society. Galanin shows that regardless of all the negative history of Native Americans, we are shaped and molded by it, and have formed a strong identity from it.<sup>21</sup>

The identification of these students with contemporary Indigenous art is present and powerful, and it highlights the specter of pain, struggle, and loss that can surface in the classroom. It greatly impacts and aids the class's collective understanding of contemporary artists who create from that place of loss.

Contemporary artists often create in a way that interrogates stereotypes that work against them as a marginalized group. Studying art that pushes back against systems of racism in the United States offers Native students a critical lens through which to negotiate their own identities. And their sharing of that process in the classroom – evidenced by their use of pronouns like ‘we’ and ‘us’ – is not only cathartic for them, but for the non-Native students as well. Part of the stereotype that a course on Native art needs to oppose is the idea that Native Americans exist only in the past. Non-Native students, especially those who attend college surrounded by a large Indian tribe, may logically know that Indians are very much alive in the United States. But the colonialist stereotype of the “vanishing Indian” still plagues a collective understanding of Indigenous populations in the U.S., and, as an educator, it is critical to challenge this way of thinking. Cultural stereotypes run deep, and I can teach against them, but making that type of critical thinking stick outside the classroom is challenging. When Native students identify in the classroom with the decolonizing message of contemporary art, it greatly supplements what I or the scholars we read can impart. The voice of Native students can shatter the stereotypical myth of the “Vanishing Indian” for non-Native students in a way that no lecture or piece of writing ever could. The voice of Native students can also dismantle any real or perceived barriers that insulate my (or any) classroom from the community that the University of North Carolina at Pembroke is intended to serve.

### *A Community-Oriented Classroom*

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<sup>21</sup> Student Exam, February 13, 2018.

Amy Lonetree has also recently described how many museums have “witnessed a shift from curator-controlled presentations of the American Indian past to a more inclusive or collaborative process.” Museums are becoming more open and community-relevant sites, transitioning, as Lonetree explains, from “temples” to “forums.”<sup>22</sup> Ruth Phillips further describes this type of community-based curatorial approach as one of two models for the collaborative exhibition of Native American art. According to Phillips, in the community-based model, “the role of the professional museum curator or staff member is defined as that of a *facilitator* who puts his or her disciplinary and museological expertise at the service of community members so that their messages can be disseminated as clearly and as effectively as possible.”<sup>23</sup> This process marks a transition from object-based presentations and ethnographic categorization to a stronger focus on arts’ relationships to contemporary communities. Objects are still the central focus, but are no longer isolated in the past. Instead, objects are exhibited with reference to their contemporary resonance regarding issues such as family, land, or sovereignty.

I seek to adapt this community-oriented exhibition philosophy to the classroom in which I teach Native art. In any classroom, I insist upon a high standard of student performance, but I also seek to foster an informal atmosphere in which active participation is a necessary component of the learning process. Overall, like many fellow educators, I find that a collective creation of knowledge, in which students are active participants in a cooperative goal, rather than the passive recipients of my expertise, is the most effective way to build knowledge and work toward the goals of a class.<sup>24</sup> This philosophy is particularly vital when making efforts to create a decolonizing space in the classroom. I must take the role of *facilitator*. This role includes facilitating the discussion of topics and themes of my own design. It also includes facilitating the reactions, considerations, and contributions of my students. A great deal of the artwork we study is meant, like Luna’s *Artifact Piece*, to illustrate how deeply racism is embedded in American culture, to the point that everyone, even those who would never consider themselves racist, are

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<sup>22</sup> Lonetree, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Emphasis mine. Ruth Phillips, Introduction to “Community Collaboration in Exhibitions: Toward a Dialogic Paradigm.” Pt. 3 in Peers and Brown, *Museums and Source Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 163.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, John Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrated Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, second edition (John Wiley & Sons, 2011); Marie Gasper-Hulvat, “Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature,” *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* 2 (2017); and Stephen Michael Kosslyn and Ben Nelson, eds., *Building the Intentional University: Minerva and the Future of Higher Education* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

implicit in its perpetuation. Native students often speak about this type of art with reference to the discrimination or stereotyping that they, their relatives, or their people have experienced. Through this type of identification, non-Native students are shown the cultural ubiquity of racism and racial stereotypes. Part of a community-oriented classroom experience is to allow this process to become the topic of discussion, alongside the artwork we see and the scholarship we read.

I also incorporate community into my curriculum by teaching the Native art to which many of my students have been exposed much of their lives. The Lumbee exhibit a strong and deeply rooted sense of cultural identity – through a common notion of survival; through powwows and an annual homecoming; through rich musical traditions, food culture, quilting, agriculture, and storytelling; through symbolism; and through a rich tradition of visual arts and crafts. Contemporary Lumbee art evokes a resilience and cultural character that channels the fluidity and conceptual nature of Lumbee identity, it shatters deeply entrenched stereotypes and Eurocentric perceptions, and it creates a fresh perspective on what it means to be Native American in a postmodern era.<sup>25</sup> Lumbee art, however, has gone largely under the radar of art historians; it is not included in canonical studies. Anthropologists and historians often focus on Lumbee identity, but there are no critical studies of Lumbee art.<sup>26</sup> I was unfamiliar with Lumbee art until hired to teach at UNCP, and in my first semester there, I did not teach Lumbee art.<sup>27</sup> Being surrounded by Lumbee culture was an unexpected windfall of my job, and I have subsequently begun to study and publish on contemporary Lumbee art. I have also begun to incorporate it into my curriculum, which offers many students a more relatable visual and conceptual lens through which to understand important developments in contemporary Native art history.

In my Native art class, we often discuss how Native artists reappropriate concepts of place as a way to push past limitations and expectations of what and to whom their art should communicate. This typically occurs outside of the confines of a Western pictorial style. For example, in his 1989 series, *Where the gods are present* (National Gallery of Canada), Robert Houle created four large panels in

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<sup>25</sup> See my published work on Lumbee art, including “Reclaiming Lumbee Identity in the Postmodern Era,” in *Postmodern Native: Contemporary Lumbee Art*, exhibition catalog, Greenville Museum of Art (October 2018), 16-24; and “Community in Contemporary Lumbee Art,” *First American Art Magazine* 16 (Autumn 2017), 34-39.

<sup>26</sup> See Blu and Lowery, as in n.11.

<sup>27</sup> I taught North American Indian Art for the first time in the spring of 2015. That semester, the only time that Lumbee arts and crafts were included in my syllabus or curriculum was during a class tour of the Museum of the Southeast American Indian (then Native American Resource Center) on campus, which houses a significant collection of Lumbee cultural production.

reference to a sacred place the Saukteaux called “Manito-wapah” – the area now known as the Canadian province, Manitoba. Each canvas in Houle’s series is an abstract layering of color and line. According to Gerald McMaster, the work gives abstracted form to the tribal narratives Houle grew up with.<sup>28</sup> The paintings make strong allusions to landscape, but they are not landscape paintings in a traditional, European or Euro-American sense. Broad horizontal fields of color provide the suggestion of a horizon, and we can discern other suggested forms from nature – blades of grass, water, clouds. However, Houle’s paintings do not provide an illusionistic window onto the natural world. They are instead representative of his memory, of his own spiritual understanding of place. The visual representation of land is abstracted and symbolic.

Native (as opposed to Western) concepts about land are complex, and they inform an understanding of how place functions in a great deal of contemporary Indigenous art. Lucy Lippard explains the distinction as follows: “land” (with a lower-case-l) can be thought of as those geographical remains and ties of ownership into which Native Americans have been absorbed. “Land,” on the other hand (with a capital-L), can signify a sense of place that transcends ownership and other notions that have been imposed by a dominant culture.<sup>29</sup> Understanding the intrinsic differences between Native and Western conceptions of and relationships to the land is critical to a discussion of contemporary Native art, and incorporating the visual art of the Lumbee community into class discussions makes the process more relatable to Lumbee students.

Hatty Ruth Miller is a resident of Robeson County and a member of the Lumbee Tribe. Her abstract paintings mine the history of the Lumbee nation, its belief structure and mythology, and then re-present them within vivid explorations of form and color. Miller’s work holds a deeply symbolic connection to place, yet her paintings include few, if any, recognizable features of a specific location. Miller, like Houle, challenges a viewer’s conception or expectation of landscape art. She resists the conventions of a Western pictorial formula and creates a sense of place rather than a straightforward representation of it. The artist’s use of abstract forms and color is inherently inspired by the natural world, even specific places. It is, however, never directly representative of it. *Between the Atlantic & Pacific* (1999, Collection of Terrence Brayboy), for example, is a richly layered canvas of neutral colors, with red and green forms colliding at the center. The

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<sup>28</sup> McMaster, 87-88.

<sup>29</sup> Lucy Lippard, “The Color of the Wind,” in Deborah Ward, ed., *Our Land/Ourselves: American Indian Contemporary Artists* (Albany: University Art Gallery), 7 cited in Ohnesorge, “Uneasy Terrain,” 50.

work is broadly inspired by the land between the oceans, but in it we find no direct representation of that land. *Dawn* (2018, Private Collection) is more specifically inspired by the view from the artist's bedroom window, looking out through the trees. A network of flat lavender lines separate fields of turquoise blue, with no recognizable features of the natural landscape present. Instead, the viewer perceives the inspiration of the natural world through form and color.

Lumbee identity is firmly rooted in a strong sense of place. Place is a very powerful concept in the Lumbee community, an idea that spreads beyond any Western economic or geographic limitations concerning land. According to Malinda Maynor Lowery, all Lumbee, regardless of physical location, belong to the land around the Lumber River (also called the Lumbee River) and the town of Pembroke in Robeson County.<sup>30</sup> Many of my students were raised with an inherent understanding of this concept. To see it through the lens of an artwork that symbolically represents the land around them (that surrounds all of us in a UNCP classroom, regardless of how we identify) creates a community-oriented connection and understanding, and it greatly aids and expands our discussion of this concept more broadly speaking.

Furthermore, teaching Lumbee art demystifies the study of contemporary art more broadly speaking for many students. Not only do many students have deep connections to the places being symbolically referenced in Miller's abstract landscapes, they may know the artist, or know of her. Miller has exhibited her work nationally, as have all of the Lumbee artists that I incorporate into my curriculum, and seeing their work as part of developing trajectories in the contemporary art world is an enlightening and gratifying experience for Lumbee students. I, however, had to teach myself about Lumbee art; it was not included in the books or articles that I had read or assigned. I sought to expand my own understanding in order to provide a space in which students could expand their own, a process which brings me to my third and final goal in decolonizing my classroom – to remain teachable.

### ***Being A Teachable Teacher***

A range of educators have described specific strategies for creating a revisionist learning experience that challenges insensitive stereotypes of Native American material culture. Much of this comes down to teaching context, as opposed to

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<sup>30</sup> Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity and the Making of a Nation* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010), xi.

presenting Native cultural production through a Western aesthetic or philosophical lens. Context is critical to an understanding of Indigenous art at any level and in any medium. With regard to the college-level teaching of Native American literature, Abenaki writer and storyteller, Joseph Bruchac, has declared that “to begin to understand [Indigenous literature] . . . it must be seen as it was used.”<sup>31</sup> Bruchac thus developed a particular method of “field experience” for teaching Native literature at Skidmore College. He began his courses in the woods, rather than in the classroom. Direct experience of the land was meant to enhance a student’s ability to see the work as it was used.

Other educators have utilized Bruchac’s technique of field experience with positive results. Roberta Rosenberg, Emeritus Professor of English at Christopher Newport University in Virginia, began taking her literature students on a pre-course field trip to the Walapai and Havasupai Reservations near the Grand Canyon. Rosenberg argues that these types of field experiences were invaluable to unsettling the ways in which non-Native students have been “programmed” not to see Indians:

Old and new film stereotypes, images from advertising, and little if any exposure to reservation life have all contributed to students’ obscured vision. And . . . if students do not see what they expect to see, they will either be disappointed or see it anyway, regardless of what is really there.<sup>32</sup>

Rosenberg argues that her non-Native students enter the classroom expecting to see Native cultural production align with cultural stereotypes, or they expect to not see Native peoples at all, and she uses the practice of direct observation and interaction to unsettle this type of thinking and enrich her non-Native students’ understanding of Native arts.

This type of “field experience” can be beneficial, but there are pitfalls as well. Despite a professor’s best intentions, to what extent does a field trip to an Indian Reservation exploit the people living there and reinforce a colonial binary between those observing and those being observed? And to what extent might a trip into the woods, while providing a valuable contextual experience, also have

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<sup>31</sup> Emphasis is the author’s. Joseph Bruchac, “Four Directions: Some Thoughts on Teaching Native American Literature,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, Volume 3 (Summer 1991), 6.

<sup>32</sup> Roberta Rosenberg, “Being There: The Importance of Field Experience in Teaching Native American Literature,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, Volume 12 (Summer 2000), 40.

the potential to perpetuate misunderstandings and stereotypes about Native Americans and the land? Educators must, therefore, be willing to accept that certain practices may not have the desired effect. Or, along with the desired effect, some practices may have undesirable side effects.

Lonetree has described an experience from her own curatorial career when she suggested to community members of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe that an exhibit at the Minnesota Historical Society could potentially tell, alongside the Band's own origin story, various other stories of tribal origin about their community told outside of their community. Lonetree was incorrect in her assumption – members of the Band expressed no interest in what others had to say about their origins; they wanted to tell their own story. She uses this experience to illustrate that, despite her best intentions, there is always room to learn and adjust:

These experiences need not be a cause for negative judgments or taking things personally. Rather, they show that participants are engaged in an authentic, transformative process. As with any relationship, the challenge lies in how we respond to these experiences when they arise. Developing community-collaborative exhibitions demands more than just being well versed in the scholarly literature on respective topics or on the latest in exhibition practices. It is about building trust, developing relationships, communicating, sharing authority, and being humble.<sup>33</sup>

As an educator, I must leave myself open to similar learning experiences in the classroom. Despite my own best intentions, I must remain open to the reactions of Native students (and colleagues), and be willing to revise and reconsider my approach when necessary.

As I lack the first-hand perspective of a Native person, I must seek it out and consult it when teaching or researching Native material. This essay was first conceived as a paper at the annual meeting of the Southeastern College Art Conference on a panel about teaching the art histories of the United States. My paper focused specifically on the potential of Indigenous student contributions and viewpoints to transform my teaching of Native art and its histories. I ran the idea by a Lumbee artist/scholar/friend, in search of her reaction, and in hopes that she would tease out whatever complications surely lingered beneath the surface. Her response was a series of questions: what expectations was I placing on my

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<sup>33</sup> Lonetree, 168-170.

Indigenous students? And to what extent are minority students, be they Native American, African American, or any other underrepresented group, expected to somehow represent and speak for their entire race? Furthermore, who gains from this process? And how, as an educator, can I ensure that the emotional and intellectual labor of my Indigenous students is appreciated and celebrated rather than extracted or exploited in these types of classroom situations? I honestly do not have answers to these questions. But I now allow them to direct my process, and I will keep them in my sights. As Parker, Smith and Dennison state with regard to their own teaching, “a decolonising [sic] classroom does not have all the answers, but it also does not shrink from raising critical questions.”<sup>34</sup> As I seek to adapt and develop my own decolonizing classroom experience, I must never lose sight of the constant need to question and modify my own practice.

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<sup>34</sup> Patricia S. Parker, Sara H. Smith and Jean Dennison, “Decolonising the classroom: Creating and sustaining revolutionary spaces inside the academy,” *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies* 20 (2017), 236.