March of the Land Writers: Indigneous Street Art Interventions

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
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Unsanctioned Indigenous Street Art Interventions

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

In August 2014, a group of street artists converged on Montreal to participate in the first annual Decolonizing Street Art (DSA) program of unsanctioned art interventions, workshops, and panel discussions. DSA staunchly remains a grassroots initiative funded by crowdsourcing campaigns and individual sponsorship, while their principal mandate wholly opposes any form of governmental and corporate financial assistance as to maintain the group’s “opposition to colonialism, capitalism, and all forms of oppression.”

DSA’s objective marks two distinct but interrelated fronts: the first, to establish a structure of solidarity with other Indigenous street artists. And second, to execute a type of anticolonial resistance through unsanctioned street art interventions on unceded Kanien’kehá:ka territory known as the city of Montreal.

The works created during this period—many of which are now destroyed—are tantamount in execution and subject matter. They include, but are not limited to, Chris Bose’s (Nlaka’pamux-Secwepemc) rhythmic wall mural of swimming salmon, SWARM’s portraiture that pays homage to murdered or missing Aboriginal women and girls, ZOLA’s marching masked figures holding “NO PIPELINES” messages and Cam’s craftivist, text-based sign Kauaueshtakanit (Justice). Each are, in a sense, “public” artworks in that they could be seen by anyone at anytime, yet they carry a bold challenge to official public art policies initiated by municipal governments.

These are not meant to beautify civic space but completely and utterly present a strategy for the reclamation of space itself. There exist unsanctioned street art practices by Indigenous artists that are a means of taking back the land by physically inscribing it with Indigenous signage, symbols, and iconography. Essentially, it upholds oppositional politics and the defiant spirit of activism. Used effectively, the brushstroke, the spray paint, the roll-up, the stencil, and the marker are weapons that disrupt status quo oversight and ignorance of Indigenous treaty rights, sovereignty, and cultural loss. These marks and inscriptions of Indigenous imagery—illegal or otherwise—on the dumb, grey walls of the city, serve as a subtle yet cutting reminder of who was here first.

Contemporary Indigenous street artists working in Canada and the United States are not alone in their strategy for reclamation and decolonization. For instance, in Johannesburg, South Africa, political opposition to the racist and destructive histories of colonialism and apartheid by urban street artists take fascinating lines of flight. For art historian Sabine Marschall, urban art murals and urban wall decoration entail a fundamental resistance to the segregationist policies of exclusion precisely because the physical body of the artist/activist must be present to execute the work on appropriated buildings and spaces.

In Canada and the United States, the situation is obviously different yet similar to Johannesburg. However, the process of reservization—the systematic segregation of Indigenous peoples to demarcated areas—finds similar racial, political, and social comparisons with South Africa under apartheid law. In fact, as few Canadians are aware, the South African government modeled elements of apartheid after Canada’s own approach toward segregating Aboriginal peoples to reserves in order to achieve their racially motivated policy. That being said, presence, appearance, embodiment, or whatever you want to label it, is the lifeblood of the decolonizing street art movement.

2. For more information on how South Africa modeled elements of apartheid after Canada’s approach to Aboriginal peoples, see Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Canada’s Economic Apartheid: The Social Exclusion of Radicalized Groups in the New Century (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2006); see also Joan G. Fairweather, A Common Hunger: Land Rights in Canada and South Africa (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015).
Of course, this symbolizes the absolute reverse of a colonial history predicated on absence, segregation, and killing. The meat and flesh of the physical body is again thrust into the center of Indigenous political autonomy. Yet, it is the remains of the artwork that traces the physical presence of the body. It is these works and works similar to them that “celebrate cultural difference; they recover history and aspects of traditional heritage; they offer unpretentious, candid glimpses into the activities and environment of daily life.” At the very least, the creation of street art serves as a symbolic method of occupancy, one where the image stands in for the body, and the controversial “tag” (or signature) of the artist is but another means of visibly reoccupying tribal lands by embodying its spaces, a push toward decolonization.3

For Aboriginal street artist Warraba Weatherall, a member of the Gamilaraay Nation, the signage has become an important means of supporting land claim rights. He is also known as Land Writers; he hopes a group of street artists will form as a collective of street writers premised on the grouping of “land rights” and “graffiti writers,” hence their title as land writers. One of Weatherall’s central concerns is the fact that discussion about controversial topics such as land claims garners with it unsympathetic media and official censorship, so the street provides the only means of aesthetic freedom.

“I feel graffiti in the public domain,” he says, “is the best way of addressing these issues and your voice isn’t censored.” The stickers Weatherall affixes to walls, street signs, postboxes, and other vernacular structures carry the slogan “HELLO my name is … LAND WRITER!” Indeed many of these pictures overlook unceded, rural landscapes and urban geographies as a way to call attention to the issue. The pieces are, nonetheless, a distinct form of stylized graffiti “tagging” that can be used as a political instrument to both occupy and define physical space. Thus, tagging is often more complex for Indigenous writers than often thought, namely because the “tag” is a symbolic and visual embodiment of the individual used to reoccupy tribal lands.4

Tlingit-Unangax visual artist Nicholas Galanin continues to engage European colonialism as the weight of his subject matter. Similar to Weatherall’s interventions, Galanin photographed a simple yet cutting graffiti intervention he titled Indian Land in 2012. In the work, the original green-and-white road sign “Indian River” has been painted over to read “Indian LAND” in bold, black lettering. The intervention itself is not uncommon. Similar imagery can be found almost everywhere in Canada and the United States—bridges, roads, streets, light posts, billboards, parks, and elsewhere feature texts such as “IDLE NO MORE!,” “THIS IS INDIAN LAND,” “WE WON’T DIE,” “HONOURED OUR SOVEREIGNTY,” and “OH CANADA, OUR HOME ON NATIVE LAND.” Are these interventions illegal? Yes, technically so. Yet, the very notion of graffiti’s illegality is thrown to question when considering Indigenous land claims, since a law cannot rightfully be enforced on another sovereign nation’s people.

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or territory. The tension in this grey area between land claims and the illegality of graffiti makes the practice of unsanctioned interventions so consequential, so political.

Somewhere in the State of Washington, artist Corey Bulpit (Haida) affixed a black-and-white sticker to a standard gas pump. Its two-dimensional block design, rhythmic patterning, sharp line, and vibrancy of color make it easily recognizable as Haida. The piece is beautiful yet its implications are sinister: It’s a subtle reminder for those easily recognizable as Haida. The piece is beautiful yet its patterning, sharp line, and vibrancy of color make it

other street artists work to preserve local histories and encourage calls to action against contemporary social issues concerning Indigenous communities. Mixed Indigenous artist Red Bandit draws her attention to recovering and revitalizing cultural and spiritual practices through a series of eclectic interventionist strategies. While much of her work focuses on the reassertion of Indigenous iconography into vernacular life, she is also concerned with the violence directed toward Indigenous women and girls. Pieces such as

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8. Chris Bose, Facebook correspondence with the author (September 10, 2015).
