In Search of Hózhó: Notes on Performance and Performance Art

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
ABORIGINAL PERFORMANCE ART IS A HYBRIDIZATION OF EUROPEAN THEATER AND NATIVE AMERICAN CEREMONIAL DRESS AND DANCE, WITH THE RESULTING PERFORMANCE BEING A COMBINATION OF THE TWO.

By Matthew Ryan Smith

The Unbroken Line

FOLLOWING 1492, IT BECAME COMMON PRACTICE FOR SETTLER-COLONIALISTS TO CAPTURE AND ENSLAVE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES. SOME CAPTIVES WERE PUT TO WORK AS GUIDES OR INTERPRETERS, WHILE OTHERS WERE TRANSPORTED TO EUROPE TO PERFORM FOR HEADS OF STATE. IN DOING SO, THEY BECAME INSTRUMENTS OF POLITICAL LEVERAGE, A MEANS OF GAINING POWER AND SUPPORT FOR THE EXPANSION OF EMPIRE. FOR EXAMPLE, CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS ENSLAVED ARAWAK PEOPLE FROM THE BAHAMAS AND TRANSPORTED THEM TO SPAIN FOR PROOF THAT RESOURCE-RICH LANDS HAD BEEN “DISCOVERED,” WHICH HELPED SECURE SUPPORT AND CAPITAL FROM THE CROWN. IN THE MID-19TH CENTURY, THE CITY OF BIENVILLE PUSHED THROUGH THE PLAINS AND INTO THE PACIFIC, AN AREA THAT IS NOW PART OF CANADA. GEORGE CETLIM PARADED HIS PAINTINGS AND OBJECTS FROM PLAINS PEOPLES THROUGHOUT EUROPE AS PART OF HIS INDIAN GALLERY. UNDER THE GUISE OF CULTURAL PATRONAGE, THE ARTIFACTS WERE ACTUALLY BEING USED TO UNDERMINE THE AUTONOMY OF THE NATIVE PEOPLES.

Ephemera. “I have, for many years past,” writes Catlin, “contemplated the noble races of red men who are now spread over these trackless forests and boundless prairies, melting away at the approach of civilization.” Yet, perhaps the most famous example of these early performative gestures is Chief Sitting Bull’s participation in William Cody’s Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Expositions. At most of these performances, Sitting Bull circled the arena on horseback, saluted the crowd, and charged audiences for his autograph and/or his photograph. In 1883, the wild west show’s organizers celebrated the completion of the Northern Pacific Railway, and efforts to sing its praises were candidly expressed during performances. In response to the displacement and maltreatment of Indigenous peoples for the sake of the railroad, Sitting Bull is alleged to have cursed his audience in the Lakota language. Telling off a vast majority of non-Indigenous audiences not only draws a line to the actions of the Mi’kmaq man, but also to a lengthy tradition of utilizing performance to refute and refuse the apparatuses of settler-colonialism.

On the other hand, to argue that performance or performative gestures occurred after 1492 and evolved into the expanded field of contemporary Live Art seems doomed to failure. To do so would mean that the history of performance by Indigenous peoples is merely 400 years old, while conceding that it is a discursive offshoot of European colonialism. For curator and artist Greg A. Hill (Mohawk), “there is an unbroken line of performance going back to time immemorial that includes ritual, dance, oratory, storytelling, dream interpretation, and ceremonial protocols.” In a similar line of flight, Lori Blondeau (Cree-Saulteaux) affirms that “performance is something we’ve always done as Native Americans. It’s storytelling. It’s a continuum of what we’ve been doing for hundreds of years.” Performance by Indigenous peoples and artists is best understood outside the vacuum of settler-colonialism, since to bestow European colonialism with setting up the conditions for performance is not only misleading but affords it too much power over Indigenous cultural history. Rather, each performance carries a trace—consciously or unconsciously identifiable—of those who came before, and speaks to a cosmology of contexts, including gender, race, aesthetics, sexuality, or politics, that informed each performance. This may also embody the transmission of elemental principles: Indigenous knowledge, language, family lineage, tribal narrative, spirituality, and storytelling. Though we may not consider it as such, performance is an archive of events and experiences, a vessel of knowledge that connects the performer to his or her cultural history. In turn, the physical body of the performer functions as a repository of existence and generates meaning by articulating the act of living. Every performance is a performance of a previous performance. Surely this is the unbroken line.

In an expanded field, performance now symbolizes a breadth of practices and aesthetics that fall under the updated term Live Art. Contemporary live art is often defined by its ephemeral quality. —Archer Pechawis

By: Terrance Houle (Kainai-Saulteaux), Friend of Foe #7: iisistsikóówa (he is tired), 2014, performance at the 7a/11d Festival Toronto. Photo: Henry Chan. Image courtesy of the artist.

Notes on Performance and Performance Art

Aboriginal performance art is the high-heeled, steel-toed mocassin of the telegraph; a series of mountain passes known for extreme weather and dangerous curves. Here, First Nations artists hybridize the telegraph, distilling the information into communal hyper-parable, the issues couched in metaphor or served raw. —Archer Pechawis

5. Lori Blondeau in discussion with the author, November 24, 2016.

ARTIST REBECCA BELMORE (Ojibwe) was visiting a friend’s house in Lethbridge, Alberta, and picked up a book titled 1492 and All That: Making a Garden Out of a Wilderness by Ramsay Cook, which tells the story of a Mi’kmaq man taken captive by French settlers. The settlers returned to France with the man and created an enclosure to describe him as a wilderness garden. In effect, the wilderness garden was little more than a human zoo masquerading under a different name.

The man was forced to hunt a deer with a bow and arrow, skin it, cook it, and then eat it. The French audience watched him for a long time, clearly enthralled with what they were seeing. According to the Mi’kmaq people, the hunter later squatted down and excreted in plain sight of his captors. Doing so was an act of retribution, and presumably many of the onlookers could sense the hunter’s displeasure in the air. For Belmore, the event not only represents one of the first international performances by an Indigenous person, but it’s also a dissident act of anticolonial resistance. —Archer Pechawis
and sexuality continue, particularly through the writings of Judith Butler, the concept of performing Indigeneity has also become a productive tool in examining how Indigenous individuals and communities nurture subjectivities and identities “through performance and performative acts in intercultural spaces.” Cultural identity can be strengthened through performance in public spaces and is essential for underrepresented or marginalized Others to expand their visibility while reclaiming the politics of their representation. As a potential “site of opposition,” to use bell hooks’ phraseology, performance lends itself as a powerful mode of political critique and resistance to institutionalized forms of racism. Performance is the everyday made epic. It can serve as a site to disturb, to decolonize, to talk out, and to talk back. In performance, the question of audience is omnipresent. The relationship between audience and performer is often prefigured by bodily movement, voice, and environment; nevertheless, this reading severely limits the interconnectedness that exists between the performer and the audience when inhabiting the same space. In her book, *The Transmission of Affect*, Theresa Brennan contends that affect can be thought of as “emotions” or “energies” quite literally shared between individuals or groups that share physical space. In the words of Brennan: “The transmission of affect . . . is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual.”

Our moods, our feelings, and our thoughts have the capacity to affect and transform the condition of others. Here Brennan is speaking specifically to hormones and other chemical messengers that circulate through the air and produce physiological responses that may trigger certain feelings, both short and long term. The deep consequence of her study is that our emotions and energies are not as independent as they would first appear, and thus our proximity to other people—to our friends, family, and even strangers—is far closer than we could have imagined. The notion of the physically autonomous body is in some ways a communal body. The implications for performance are tremendous. In Brennan’s provisos, the audience can sustain a visual, emotional, and now physiological affinity to the performer in some capacity. The activation of the audience is not wholly dependent upon the actions of the performer but also the transmission of their affects; that by setting the tone or the mood of a performance might now involve the artist’s critical introspection of the types of affects to be transmitted to the audience. Perhaps the fourth wall has always been a myth. The expression of emotion is political for many Indigenous performers. Stereotypes of being stoic or noble pervert into the present day. Emotional is what Indigenous people are not supposed to be. For artist Shelley Niro (Mohawk), this form of pigeonholing of Native people is endemic: “You have this idea already in your head—a simply dressed person with a kind of sad look on their face—sort of a poster child. I get so sick of that.” Deliberate and designed expressions of emotion function as powerful marks of resistance that recover Indigenous subjectivities and identities. To this end, emotion has become a cyruscule for critical examination by performance artists including, but not limited to, Sanete Smith (Mohawk), Terrance Houle (Kainai-Saulteaux), Duna Ashbore (Cree-Métis), and Bently Spang (Northern Cheyenne).

The manipulation of emotion through performative gestures and subject matter is a different but interrelated aspect of performance’s pedagogical potential—intense emotion, as a “shock to thought,” does not reveal truth but rather aids in the stimulation of critical inquiry and deep introspection. There is value in intense emotion. It can kindle a fire that sustains longer periods of study and contemplation. It helps to understand things beyond their surface. In this context, to draw comparisons between performance art and the Navajo concept of *hózhó* may prove productive. In Navajo, the term signifies one’s harmonious balance with the world, which is why *hózhó* often translates to “beauty” in the English language. “*Hózhó* expresses the intellectual notion of order,” explains Gary Witherspoon, a professor and scholar of Navajo studies, “the emotional state of happiness, the physical state of health, the moral

** reality. But what is particularly attractive about performance is its autonomy from capitalist forms of mass (re)production—technological, economical, and linguistic. Hence, to write about performance is its autonomy and about invisible histories, to imagine ghosts. For marginalized performers, the medium is a volatile one since it can frame an already underrepresented community within a matrix of its inevitable vanishing. Philosophies of power are instrumental in how performance is hypothesized. While the scrutiny of “performance” vs. “performativity” in recent scholarly discourse on gender.

11. Phelan, Unfused, 149.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
condition of good, and the aesthetic dimension of harmony." Conversely, notions of order, harmony, and balance can only be achieved in the negotiation between philosophical opposites—anger and calm, frustration and satisfaction, sadness and happiness. This is the space where hózhó exists, only then can a sense of beauty be actualized. Hence, when Rebecca Belmore pronounces, "I try to make things beautiful or at least visually attractive," and Adrian Stimson (Siksika) states, "I'm always looking for the beauty," they speak obliquely about hózhó.

In Search of Hózhó

AT SUNSET on October 1, 2016, Rebecca Belmore started her durational performance in Walker Court at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) as part of the city's annual, all-night art exposition, Night of Galleries. The gallery of Ontario (AGO) as part of the New Project of a doctor's office, especially when

New Project

Rebecca Belmore (Ojibwe), New Project, 2016, performance at Night of Galleries, Art Gallery of Ontario. Photo: Patric Knight (CC BY 4.0).

22 Lynn Bell, "Adrian Stimson: Buffalo Boy at Burning Man, " Art in America (June 1, 2007), web: 44-48.
23 Robert Enright, "The Poetics of History: An Interview with Rebecca Belmore," Border Crossings 9 (August 2005), web: