Artist’s statement: Indigenous collage

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I am the granddaughter of Big Salmon Charlie and Leda Jimmy of Big Salmon River and Little Salmon River, respectively, on my dad’s side; and Ben Larusson and Bejete Olsen of Iceland and Denmark, respectively, on my mother’s side. I was born in our ancestral lands in the Yukon, and raised by my mom on unceded Lekwungen Territory in Victoria, BC. My dad passed away when I was six. He was 35. I’ve spent most of my life in urban centers and on other peoples’ homelands.

Sometimes I find it difficult to explain my art: why I make it or what it means. Usually I turn to art to help me work through strong emotions. When I start, I have no idea what will come of translating my feelings into lines and colors. But, in most cases, by the time I finish, the intense feelings have dissipated and have morphed into a new form. I started relying on art to navigate my emotional world more regularly when I began a PhD program in Indigenous Politics at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa three years ago. There was something about being away from home (again) and on another Peoples’ homelands (again) that brought about intense feelings of dis/connection. The feelings needed an outlet.
As I was learning new theories, concepts and practices to navigate our political world as Indigenous Peoples, I was also learning new theories, concepts and practices to navigate my own indigeneity. Art has played a big role for me in trying to figure out what it means to be a Tagé Cho Hudän woman who cannot speak our language, who cannot sing our songs, who cannot dance our dances, who cannot traverse our lands and waterways with ease; but who is comfortable in the city, outfitted with over a decade of post-secondary education and a deep desire to re-learn and put into practice the ways of our ancestors.

My arts practice started to merge with my academic pursuits a year and a half ago. I had been struggling to figure out the methodology for my PhD project. I was in the company of classmates who were born and raised in their homelands, rooted to their culture, proficient in their language and ways of their ancestors – the backbone of solid, land- and community-based research methodologies. Without such knowledge, and far from my source of that kind of knowledge, I was struggling to identify a foundation for my project. After spending a fitful week writing a poem about fireweed, which I hoped could serve as a metaphor for the kind of resurgent work I want to do in my project, I submitted it to my professor and classmates for their feedback. I decided to present my poem as a digital collage.

Digital collage has been my medium of choice for a while. It started out as messing around on the computer and making posters for my previous employer, and recently it has transformed into a means of personal expression and creative exploration. I use my own
Indigenous collage

photographs—usually of my homelands—and manipulate them into digital collages, occasionally adding digital hand drawings using a pen tablet. That day in class, my fireweed poem was received well, but its presentation as a collage and my professor’s insight set me on an alternative path. “The poem is great,” my professor said, “but I think the metaphor is actually collage.”

“Èhè. Yes!” say the ancestors. From that point on, I set off to explore the potential of an Indigenous collage theory.

Collage is widely employed as an expressive and illustrative exercise in educational, therapeutic, and recreational contexts (Davis, 2008). A collage in its most common and accessible form is the result of combining together an assortment of images and texts, like photographs or those cut out of print media, into an entirely new and reimagined image. It is inherently suited to generate and accommodate what are sometimes contradictory elements. “In honoring the disconnected, inexplicable, irresolute and relative,” writes Davis (2008), “collage process engenders an inclusive reality where disintegration, disorder, and even destruction can be coincidental paths to meaningful renewal, and insists that restoration and insight are not easily rationalized and prescribed” (p. 250).

Collage has been used as a qualitative research method in visual arts, education, psychology, and behavioral science (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2011; Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999; Kostera, 2006; Vaughan, 2005). Until now, however, it has not been applied to or reimagined within an Indigenous context.

Indigenous collage invites us to work with the fragmented realities of Indigenous identities, families, communities, cultures, and lands that have been created (sometimes violently, always intentionally) by historical and contemporary colonialism. It offers a space for Indigenous historical realities, present realities, and desired futures to intersect in innovative and unexpected ways. Collage accounts for and accommodates the chaotic, contained and often contradictory life-worlds that have been left in the wake of continued settler colonialism by creating a space for Indigenous Peoples to navigate them in creative and empowered ways.

Collage brings seemingly unrelated and diverse pieces—people, places, texts, contexts, experiences, practices, histories, traditions,
ontologies—into purposeful and productive juxtaposition (Allen, 2012); essentially allowing for multiple and sometimes incommensurable elements to be placed within new proximities to one another (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Collage is being deployed in my academic work as one way of augmenting our current view of our political world in a way that better reflects the realities of our communities; while also accounting for the distinct and diverse contexts we must navigate and the tools (i.e. theories and practices) we have to do so.

For our Nations in the Yukon, for example, collage captures the fact that communities are having to navigate a political world that is made up of diverse and incommensurable pieces. On a broad level these can be summed up as: an ontological divide between distinctly Indigenous and Western political systems and their relationships to/with land; polarity between Indigenous scholars’ stances on the politics of recognition and theories informing participation versus disengagement, and reconciliation versus resurgence; as well as, a desire for justice that continually abuts and/or is stifled by “shape-shifting” contemporary settler colonialism (Corntassel, 2012).

Current socio-economic pressures—like poverty, lack of housing, and pervasive substance abuse—and the territorial and federal governments’ insistence on expanding natural resource extraction in the North, is also forcing our communities to compromise and redefine our relationship with our land. The result is very real tension between two incommensurable values: capitalism and the sacred.

Indigenous collage, as theory, invites us to maneuver with(in) a political context that has, in some cases, been cast as fixed, rigid, and too massive to unsettle. In Indigenous collage theory, the collage-makers—you, me, our families, communities, nations—are outfitted with tools and optics that enable us to dismantle and reconfigure the pieces in ways that reflect our needs, desires, and responsibilities as Indigenous peoples. At the same time, collage acts as a metaphor for many things: building alternative governance forms, (re)claiming and (re)occupying our homelands, working with(in) the complex composition of our communities, returning to one’s homelands after growing up away. In sum, it is a means to creatively extend our understanding of Indigenous contemporary politics and Indigenous methodologies.
References


