

## Chasms and Collisions: Native American Women's Decolonial Labor

MOLLY McGLENNEN

“I have always felt there is a significant *chasm* that divides Native people from non-Natives...that began at first contact and continues to this day.” Shan Goshorn<sup>1</sup>

“[My basket narratives] weave old forms of articulation with new forms of iconography to create a *collision*, which echoes the cultural experience of my life.”

Sarah Sense<sup>2</sup>

### *The Forced Absences within Settler-Colonial Violence*

In his introduction to *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*, Gerald Vizenor states, “Cultural simulations of natives abound in museums, monuments, commerce, art, cinema, literature, and history. These detractions are the derisive signifiers of manifest manners” (5). One needs only to think of an Edward Curtis photograph to recall the powerful, metonymic universality of *indian* iconography created by the settler colonial enterprise. It is mockery, to be sure, as Vizenor indicates; it is also a calculated move toward a common goal of securing settler colonial futures. Undeniably, the “signifiers of manifest manners” shape and continually signal how non-Indigenous North Americans imagine themselves to be. As many Native American Studies scholars have argued, *indianness* as a symbolic construct has been and continues to be hijacked, perverted, and ultimately performed by non-Indigenous westerners throughout a long history of profit from cultural appropriation of Native peoples, whether land, practices, or lives.

The quotes with which I begin this article address the ways in which two Native American visual artists understand and characterize the fallout of the project of “cultural simulations” that preoccupy systems of continued colonial occupation in the Americas. Each creates Indigenous visualities that trouble settler colonial designs of signifying the *indian* -- visualities that are hyper-aware of settler colonial methods of reading Native subjects by binding them to metrics of authenticity. What’s more, their works record Indigenous subjects not as static representations but as dynamic, living peoples that have complicated relationships to the settler state; each of her “visual records” is not a document of closure but is a decolonizing blueprint

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fortified by the vitality of Indigenous lived experience. The “chasm” of misunderstanding about which Eastern Band Cherokee artist Shan Goshorn argues and the “collision” of cultural expressions about which Choctaw/Chitimacha artist Sarah Sense describes provides a way of thinking about artistic renderings of lived experience for Native women. I argue that artistic grammars are decolonized expressions that critically and creatively reckon with both the *chasm* and *collision* of historical and contemporary genocidal terror. The labor of reckoning which Sense and Goshorn take on in their works recognizes that the invention of cultural simulations is the specter of white desire – a necessary fiction which protects and projects white innocence from the on-going project of cultural genocide.

### ***Doing Decolonizing Labor***

The logic of settler-colonial efforts and its narratives collapses Indigenous bodies and bodies of experience into representative truths, which graft Indigenous nations and their histories to stalled-out and fixed branches of human evolution. These distilled, packaged, and symbolic representations of *the indian*, especially *the indian woman*, serve as evidence that dominant narratives preoccupy and energize modern historiography and contemporary actions and policies. Historical amnesia as a tool of colonial control neutralizes and justifies not only continued violence against Native peoples (and theft of land and resources), but also energizes continued aggression through the creation of persistent symbolic violence – that is, discursive dominance. Ojibwe scholar Scott Lyons in *X-Marks* argues how violence stems from what he calls “discursive formations” -- ways of speaking and image making “that are traceable to institutions, the state, and dominant cultural understandings, and always associated with power and hierarchies” (24). These ways of dominance rely on amnesic insulation. Iconography via films and media, even via U.S. currency (as we will see ahead) has produced some of the most common virulent and debasing depictions of Native peoples in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and stand as reminders of long-standing and ongoing state dominance.

The works of Sense and Goshorn, in the form of culturally-specific basketry, intervene in and resist both the progressivist unfolding of white settler colonial history and the violent archiving of its accompanying narrative -- a discursive enterprise that wields Native peoples as “simulations” of past-ness as it secures its own future. I argue that Sense and Goshorn present to us what decolonial labor can look like. As I argue this I am also aware of Aleut scholar Eve

Tuck's and Ethnic Studies scholar K. Wayne Yang's warning in their article "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" that "the metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or settler moves to innocence, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity" (1). While Tuck and Yang are primarily analyzing education studies and activist efforts (mainly the Occupy movement), their reminders about the divide between actual decolonizing labor versus settler decolonial desires remain pertinent. Tuck and Yang stress an "ethic of incommensurability" by arguing that "decolonization as material, not metaphor," obstructs settler moves to innocence (28). As I will show ahead, the visual narratives Sense and Goshorn create are important decolonizing materials needed to disarm the hegemony of settler discursive formations in order to safeguard Indigenous futures.

At the core of this labor, many Native American Studies scholars suggest, lie the contours of sovereignty. In fact, Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja asserts in *Native Studies Key Words* that "to engage deeply in the process of decolonization, it is critical to insist on a much broader notion of sovereignty that takes seriously the importance of sovereignty as it is expressed intellectually, politically, socially, and individually (I would even add therapeutically) in cultural forms as diverse as dance, film, theater, the plastic arts, literature, and even hip-hop and graffiti" (28). Thus, it is quite understandable how contemporary Native American artists are, in many ways, leading that essential engagement with decolonization. Artists like Goshorn and Sense express not just wishes or metaphorical desires for decolonization, but rather provide creative models that particularize unburdened material realities of and futures for Indigenous peoples. I argue ahead that their works demonstrate a labor of dimensionality, which directly combats the emptied-out and un-bodied nature of settler imaginings of the *indian*.

The deep-rooted binary of the primitive *indian* versus the civilized Euro-American sustains the genealogy of modernity. As we know, modernity's project of archiving and historicizing the other has served to disassemble Indigenous cultural practices and methodologies in various ways. This progressivist ideology, as Native American Studies scholar Joseph Bauerkamper states, "authorizes the violence and destruction of colonization [as it] neutralizes historical, social, and legal claims against violence and destruction by willfully and relentlessly forgetting the past." (135 "Videographic Sovereignty"). Thus, the willful work of settler historical amnesia (erasure) must be coupled with unyielding symbolic violence (invention), or "nominal discoveries," in order to conceal the more than five centuries of "colonial siege" and

"virtual exile," (105-106) as Gerald Vizenor argues. In *X-Marks*, Lyons also understands that recognizing this illogic could be the first step in launching "a counterattack to the genocidal implications that are always inherent in the notion of Indian identity as timeless, stable, eternal, but probably in the minds of most people still 'vanishing'" (60).

### *Native Women Creatively Theorizing*

The array of visual culture that contemporary female Native artists produce enlivens the ability to work against colonial control by actively producing unburdened discourses, or in the words of Native American Studies scholar Dean Rader, the ability to "tell us [non-Natives] what Americans have told the world Indians can stand for (151 "Indigenous Semiotics"). By engaging with select woven works from Sense and Goshorn, my article attempts to unpack the tensed linkages between the histories of self/representation and decolonizing efforts that combat the ongoing processes of genocide. I want to pay special attention to the way the artists create complex, two- and three-dimensional narratives via basketry that resist metonymic settler-colonial constructions, which not only perpetuate fetishized stereotypes but also normalize and rationalize continual violence, especially against Native women. Basketry weaving, specifically, provides a relevant method of engagement for this type of labor because of what it allows the artists to do and how it allows them to do it. In their own unique ways, both artists utilize a double-weaving technique, which radically upends the intentionally planate nature of settler narratives. Sense's and Goshorn's woven works establish not only the "counterattack to genocidal implications" (Lyons) of such stereotypes, they also intervene in the colonial enterprise of normalizing such stereotypes that work to insist on Native peoples vanishing.

Indigenous feminists Dian Million (Athabaskan) and Mishuana Goeman (Seneca) have helped me make even deeper sense of the creative ways Sense and Goshorn resist colonial violences through their work. Because of their attention to gender as it intersects with settler colonialism, Million and Goeman illuminate how Native women artists' visualities prompt imaginative thinking about Indigenous histories, realities, and futures. Specifically, Million's theory of Indigenism and Goeman's analysis of colonial grammars are at the fore of how I am able to read the artists' visual narratives that emerge through their basketry. Million argues that Indigeneity "must be understood as a lateral and internal strategy to rebuild Indigenous social relations across hemispheres that are not merely reactive to any nation-state's embrace" (38

“There is a River”). Goeman asserts that “representations of Indian bodies are stagnant, as is the nature of space in a majority of colonial discourses,” (237 “Disrupting a Grammar of Place”). Taken together, Million and Goeman disclose a set of dimensional strategies which -- when exercised -- stymie the practices of state-determined fixity and violent, gendered naturalization of “cultural simulations.”

Moreover, I argue, these strategies recognize the importance of *theorization through creativity* that Sense and Goshorn practice through their basketry. Sense’s and Goshorn’s use of the double-weaving technique (an extremely difficult technique where splints are woven bottom to top, over the lip, and back down again) strategically reorients the viewer and exposes him/her/them to imaginative ways of signifying Native women’s experiences. I want to say that Native women’s visual art produces narratives which work both from the ground up (internally, from tribally-specific knowledges) and in connection to the web of hemispheric Indigenous consciousness (laterally), through “a space,” in the words of Goeman, “that remains unfinished and unconquered” (237). Sense’s work undertakes this by constructing uncompromised Indigenous female subjects in direct collision with the colonial imagining and reproduction of the subservient *indian* princess. Goshorn’s work achieves this by fashioning the realities of Indigenous women as they are affected by extreme chasms of misunderstanding.

If the willful work of settler historical amnesia (erasure) is necessarily coupled with inflexible symbolic violence (invention) for the project of colonialism to continue and spread, then the tribally specific (from the ground up) labor of Native artists must also be commensurate with the hemispheric/global Indigenous connective tissue (lateral) of Native women’s work against all forms of violence and oppression. It seems to me that dimension best addresses the oblate nature of discursive dominance, and it seems to me that Sense and Goshorn are entirely aware of just that.

### ***The Cowgirl and Indian Princess Remix***

***<http://sarahsense.com/Artist.asp?ArtistID=11571&Akey=L6DFM793&ajx=1#!pf22225>***

Chitimacha/Choctaw artist Sarah Sense’s oeuvre<sup>3</sup> reveals nearly a dozen powerful series of works over the past two decades that capitalize on her signature practice of weaving photographs by way of traditional Chitimacha basketry techniques. In this process of weaving in her 2004-2012 “Cowgirls and Indian Princess” series, Sense provides a complex remixing of U.S. history

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and contemporary pop culture through her “interpretations of Hollywood appropriation of the Native experience, most simply explained as the real with the fake” (Sense’s personal website). Much of her work examines and dismantles the gendered and violent construction of U.S. nation-building and those accompanying progressivist narratives that perpetuate, legitimize, and sanitize the on-going aggression against Native people, and in particular women. Sense’s “Cowgirls and Indian Princess” series consists of works that evoke classic Hollywood films (thus, “classic” narratives of hetero-male Euro-American dominance) through iconic actors such as Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, Buffalo Bill, Rhett Butler, Gary Cooper and Ronald Reagan, among other prototypical figures. Often these symbols of aggression, virility, and superiority are placed adjacent to female figures who symbolically register either a stereotypical *indian* princess or cowgirl. Sense’s works, however, are far from a simple counter-appropriation of that vintage west with which viewers are so acquainted. Sense’s series *Gone With Him*, *The Sex Is in the Mouth*, and *Play Dead* are not just transforming western visual metonymy and synecdoche into Indigenous stage-settings; they are also challenging the inevitability and dominance of those common assumptions about Native peoples. Moreover, the artist’s creative process and experience of artistic labor are in and of themselves challenging and transforming structures of power.

Sense relayed to me that while living in Los Angeles in the early 2000’s she started collecting old movie posters as part of what would become her long-standing project “Cowgirls and Indian Princess” (personal correspondence). Through this collecting, Sense told me, she began thinking about how one might reclaim depictions of Native women despite the history of violence perpetuated against them. It was also around this time she was determined to read everything she could that was written on Chitimacha basket weaving—which she found out is overwhelmingly dated and ethnographic and, not surprisingly, sparse. It was over a series of summers on the Chitimacha reservation (which is located in what is now southern Louisiana) and working with and creating programs for Chitimacha youth that she bought a Chitimacha basket from an elder. Studying the bottom of it and its designs, she taught herself the technique *by drawing the patterns*. Being fully aware of how she has circumvented traditional protocol that would have her learn how to weave by first showing interest in and seeking guidance by the four remaining elder weavers in the community and by harvesting and working with the local sugar cane, she went back to the tribal chair to ask permission to continue to teach herself and the

Chitimacha youth by showing him the drawings she had made. Through their conversations together and through his stories and teachings to Sense over time, the tribal chair granted permission for her to continue. From here, Sense's series takes off.<sup>4</sup>

Referencing the classic 1930's *Gone with the Wind* film and the famous Rhett Butler and Scarlet O'Hara pose, *Gone with Him 6* (2011) showcases Sense's technique of splicing and then interlacing imagery by weaving photographs and movie posters printed on Mylar strips with artist tape through Chitimacha basketry techniques. *Gone with Him 6* interrupts representations of colonial dominance ordinarily fashioned by female virtue and male misogyny (Scarlet and Rhett respectively) by inserting female Indigenous presence. In her entire series, in fact, the female images are overtly sexualized with exaggerated presence. The *indian princess* is not a passive, timid victim in *Gone with Him 6*, but is the figure wielding the gun. What is more, that *indian princess* figure, who looks seductively at the viewer with a pistol raised in the air, is the artist herself. Rhett and Scarlet are mere table dressing in this corrupted fantasy. In *Gone with Him 5* (2008), a cousin work, Rhett and Scarlett may very well be the target of the female figure's pistol.

Sense told me that while in her MFA program at Parsons the New School for Design in New York she talked over her ideas for her works in the "Cowgirls and Indian Princess" series with her thesis advisors (Personal correspondence). One of them asked her why she inserts herself into the pieces by saying "you don't look Indian, so how is the effect of unsettling representations working?" (Personal correspondence). Sense told me, laughing, that this is probably the best thing he could have told her because from there she began to see and understand how and why she was moved to turn the lens on herself. By inserting herself sometimes as cowgirl (who is Native) and sometimes as *indian princess* (that isn't necessarily identifiably Native), Sense creates a resistant discourse about self-representation that works against dominant paradigms that reign supreme in American consciousness. In fact, *Gone with Him 6*, like many of her works, exposes the devious short hand that obfuscates settler colonial violence against Native peoples. Turning the lens on herself, Sense incorporates Indigenous presence into the visual terrain, which in the words of Goeman, creates "lived spaces" which belie the fixity of *place* that colonial mappings determine, as well as the fixity of "*bodies* that are made absent in settler-spatial imaginaries" (259). Sense's use of dimensional intervention by

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way of capsizing blueprints for conquest and inserting blueprints for Indigenous futures surely compels people (like her thesis advisor) to reckon with their own settler colonial assumptions.

Sense’s remixing of Chitimacha basket weaving onto planar surfaces emulates the traditional practice of “double weaving,” where a basket is woven from its base upwards along the sides, to the lip, and then back down again to the bottom. Even though many of Sense’s works are expressed two-dimensionally rather than three-dimensionally, the artist is working from fundamental Chitimacha techniques. To this point, Sense relayed to me that she may not have been fully conscious of this at the very beginnings, but she soon recognized as she was creating the series over the years that she was finding a way for the practice and its protocols to work so that Chitimacha weaving would continue. (Personal correspondence). While some may critique Sense’s actions as bypassing tradition, I have come to view her creative methods as one of the many crucial ways contemporary Native peoples ensure Indigenous continuance.

Gesturing laterally toward the connective tissue that spans contemporary Indigenous visual culture, Sense’s series *The Sex in the Mouth* (#’s 2, 3, 5 and 7) showcases a more overtly violent figure, Clint Eastwood, from the 1976 film *The Outlaw Josey Wales*.<sup>5</sup> Here, the figure of Clint Eastwood quintessentially captured, half screaming, half snarling, wielding two revolvers, is book-ended by what one might read as *indian maidens*. The figure on the right is Sense herself, once again playing *indian* and playing with the idea of *indian*, a type of ironic (and hilarious) play of seeing and being double. The figure on the left registers any number of stock *indian princesses* modeled by white women. In many ways, this “being double,” as represented by Sense herself, exposes the fraudulence in playing *indian* by revealing the superficiality of it, while -- at the same time -- demonstrating the dimension of actual Native women’s existence.

As we know, in efforts to subjugate Indigenous nations of the Americas, the practitioners of colonization and importers of Christianity recognized the implicit need to subdue Native women through rape and murder in order to secure gendered hierarchies of power. Responding to this logic and action, Indigenous women’s visual works teach us that seeing the west’s representation of Native women is to see the blueprint for conquest and to access the narratives that get contracted to symbolic shorthand. Part of the blueprint, indeed, is the way in which colonial imaginings, renderings, and narrations intentionally abrade, flatten, and consume the representation of Native women as a practice. Seeing actual Indigenous women is to see the history of conquest and the targeting of female bodies for extinction. This targeting, however,



gets adjusted in Sense's work. The literal weaving of narratives necessarily puts settler colonialism in conversation with, interwoven with, Indigenous experience. Violence is re-contextualized. But even more than this, the myth of settler colonial *innocence* is exposed through Sense's planar baskets because they create new vantage points and orientations to violence.

The *Sex in the Mouth* series is plainly about violence and the targeting of Native women in the violence of conquest. It is also, however, about the U.S.'s move to create the illusion of innocence in that enterprise. Josey Wales/Clint Eastwood symbolizes white purity; no matter how rugged his appearance or how vile his actions, his motives are entirely righteous. Because what the face/body of Clint Eastwood symbolizes on the film screen (and therefore in the U.S. imaginary) is so soundly fastened to the onlooker's notions of white heterosexual masculinity, his image perpetually produces a virtuous representation of settler colonialism. In his essay "The Savage Mind," Ojibwe scholar David Treuer argues that there is no innocence to be found in this land, implying the U.S. "American goodness/innocence" is a fiction we collectively tell ourselves that makes permanent the ongoing, yet always hidden, happenings of violence. And this virtuous American dream, he says, is dependent upon the fear and loathing of the racialized other, particularly the *indian*. What Sense does is expose this symbolism of American innocence to daylight and exhibit not only the virulent nature of conquest, but its continual and present day ramifications. Sense's work expresses the decolonizing labor of denaturalizing the settler colonial logic that works only to sustain settler futures.

As the series progresses, the images focus more and more onto the subjects lower half of their faces and the figures become more and more imbricated. Thus, by *The Sex in the Mouth 7*, with only the mouths of the three figures visible and nearly touching, the basket imagery becomes highly sexualized. Yet, the work also seems to suggest the eclipsing of the Josey Wales/Clint Eastwood by two women on either side. The scream of white male virility that is read in earlier works in the series could now be taken as a scream of terror in light of impending doom -- his literal demise by the hands of two women. It is "the mashup of familiar images that defamiliarizes their signification," argues Lenape scholar Joanne Barker in her introduction *Critically Sovereign*. In her discussion of Jemez Pueblo/Korean artist Debra Yepa-Pappan's *Live Long and Prosper (Spock Was a Half-Breed)*, Barker asserts that "[her work] resituates

Indigenous women and their communities in multiple possibilities of the past, present, and future in ways that refuse their foreclosure as historical relics or irrelevant costumes in the services of imperial formations and colonized identities” (30). Thus, Sense’s autonomous messaging moves Indigenous women out of the realm of service to white male violence and the colonial system that is fueled by it. At the same time, she calls our attention to how the practice of playing *indian*, signaled by the white *indian maiden* in the work, encumbers that autonomy by naturalizing white *indian* play.

It is not only Indigenous bodies to which Sense is attentive; it is also Indigenous land. In Sense’s *Play Dead* (#1, 2, 3 and 4) series, the woven planar basket depicts two figures: on the left, Gary Cooper as the righteous and rugged Will Kane from the 1952 film *High Noon*, and on the right, the artist herself in the role of contemporary *indian cowgirl* with a gun. On the original film’s theatrical poster it reads “the story of a man who was too proud to run” foreshadowing the film’s storyline of Kane, the Marshal in a town in New Mexico territory, who remains steadfast in protecting his town and wife from a posse of outlaws who have come to exact revenge on him. Sense’s work, however, delivers an ironic twist on the shorthand that Gary Cooper’s profile provides. Will Kane signifies the morality of white (male) American character and its righteous and manifest connections to and dominion over Indigenous lands. His refusal to be removed, become invisible, or rendered extinct eclipses real Native peoples’ and nations’ moral title to their lands, just as it obfuscates real histories of Native peoples resistance against colonial and genocidal terror. If in the settler colonial imaginary, as Sense alludes to through her title, Native people “play dead,” then that extinction opens up free, vacant land for continued expansion as it sanitizes that violent theft. White men, like Will Kane, become the rightful benefactors of the land. But *Play Dead*, which serially zooms in on the arms of the two figures wielding their guns at each other, illustrates the violence imbedded in the ideology and practice of Manifest Destiny at the same time it reveals the powerful intervention of Native women in that autocolonial narrative of inheritance. Cooper, in this visual narrative, doesn’t stand a chance.

### ***Beautiful Mashups***

***<http://www.shangoshorn.net/baskets/>***

Like Sense, Shan Goshorn<sup>6</sup> is another contemporary artist who uses the double weaving technique. Eastern Band Cherokee artist Goshorn’s three dimensional baskets interlace text and

imagery from both Native and settler colonial documents which establish a visual storytelling of both tribal and colonial traditions and realities. While Sense says that her basket narratives “weave old forms of articulation with new forms of iconography to create a *collision*,” Goshorn says that her baskets reveal Indigenous versions of history, which necessarily uncover – rather than enshroud -- the *chasms* of division between Native and non-Native peoples.

Goshorn’s work *Color of Conflicting Values* (2013) addresses a tribally-specific era of terror for Cherokee people caused by and represented through the tyranny of Andrew Jackson. Employing the traditional Cherokee double-weave technique, Goshorn uses reproductions of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 printed onto arches watercolor paper along with gold foil as her splints for the interior. Goshorn explains in her artist statement that the “applied gold foil represents how the discovery of gold accelerated the process of Cherokee removal.” (Goshorn’s personal website). For the exterior, “the imagery combines the [mostly green] forest vegetation of the mountainous Cherokee homeland” (personal website), but what emerges from this verdant scenery is the replication of the U.S. twenty-dollar bill with Andrew Jackson’s face. Because, as Goshorn found out, she could not digitally scan U.S. currency, she painted by hand the 20-dollar bill that is incorporated into the visual narrative of the basket. Goshorn explains some of the meaning of her artistic choices:

I can’t think of anything more important to Native people than land because it is the very land that links us to our ancestors; consequently, it is what binds us to our families. Unlike the prevalent attitude of harnessing the earth’s resources for financial gain, Native people consider the earth a relative – our first mother- and our relationship to the plants, animals, rocks and soil is familial as well. Few, if any, of our government leaders share this outlook but President Andrew Jackson demonstrated a particularly tyrannical approach to removing Indians from their homeland for personal profit, displacing most of the SE tribes to lands west of the Mississippi so settlers (and he personally) could claim the land. It is galling that his portrait should be on the \$20 dollar bill but perhaps this usage best sums up what was valuable to this man. It seems a bitter irony that US currency is the same color of the beautiful lush mountain forests of my people’s rightful homeland. (Personal website).

Goshorn adds that the Cherokee consider Jackson to be a “traitor of the worst kind.” *Color of Conflicting Values* decodes the settler colonial logic, which narrates the inveterate story of

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Jackson as a great leader worthy of memorialization on the nation’s currency (thus righteous and inculpable), and not as the tyrant who unconstitutionally and vindictively removed Native peoples from the southeast to Oklahoma Territory via the death march known as the Trail of Tears, among other forced removals of Southeast Native peoples.

More than this, Goshorn’s work exposes not only the tyrannical actions of a U.S. president, but the system of violence that permits those actions. What is made explicit by *Color of Conflicting Values* is that it is not enough to simply understand the truth about settler colonial history (e.g. Jackson is not the man that U.S. history lauds him to be); rather, the work steers its non-Indigenous viewer to reckon with his/her/their privileged inheritance from state sanctioned genocide. In particular, *Color of Conflicting Values* reveals how settler idolization of money trumps the care for and life with the land as well as the value of actual Indigenous human beings. Through its history to this day, the U.S. and its settler inhabitants have demonstrated just that: Native peoples and their connections to the land matter very little within in systems bankrolled by greed. Thus, the work signals the fiction of white innocence as well as the unsettling of white futures in reckoning with that fiction. Goshorn’s work suggests the continuities of settler colonial violences that, if not checked, continue to act as forms of tyranny in Indigenous peoples’ lives.

The effects of tyranny and terror, as we know, are themselves gendered. Goshorn’s extraordinary basket *Reclaiming Our Power* (2014) weaves the language of sections 904, 905, and 910 of the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act of 2013 that re-instituted tribal authority to prosecute abusers on tribal lands, especially non-native abusers who until 2013 could act without fear of prosecution<sup>7</sup>. Public testimonies of personal accounts of abuse, Goshorn explains, were what convinced the House and Senate to pass the vote (Personal website). The language of VAWA and statistics of high levels of violence are interwoven with a series of images. The images are taken from photographs from over 50 Native women across the northern hemisphere, women of all ages, wearing street clothes (rather than, say, powwow regalia) and wrapped in intertribal shawls, indicating how this act may serve to protect Native women and “untie the hands of tribal courts to dispense justice.” (Personal website). A community project, the basket is a beautiful array of the Acts’ text interwoven with dozens of Native women, shoulder to shoulder, encircling the work. *Reclaiming Our Power* shows women united -- literally body to body – defending and regenerating their strength and value as Indigenous human beings.

Here again, Goshorn's work interrogates the violence Native women experience as that violence is plainly codified into laws and maintained by official narratives. As a way of keeping present the staggering statistics about Native women and violence (one in three Native women will be raped in her lifetime, for example), Goshorn explains that the splints are made from "the paper text...washed with purple, black and blue paint to emphasize the bruising severity of this violence" (Personal website). *Reclaiming Our Power's* narrative does not rest on this reality; rather, it foregrounds the immense power in Native women's leadership in addressing these ongoing violences. Native women's cooperation in this piece, from across the hemisphere, speaks to the constant and conscientious coalescing with which Native women have always been engaged. Her basket narrative makes apparent Million's and Goeman's articulations of Native women's creation of spaces of interaction, based on both tribal, grounded knowledges and lateral networks of coalition. In addition, *Reclaiming Our Power* illuminates an "active visioning," (39) as Million outlines her theoretical framework. Through the visualities of Goshorn's baskets, these creative coalitions produce "the imaginary that Indigenous peoples hold to when they attach to a future beyond a present that is increasingly ensconced within a medicalized therapeutic diagnosis of our colonial wounding" (39).

Interaction and coalition are actions for which Native peoples have always recognized and revered Native women. Goshorn's 2015 triptych set of Cherokee style, single-weave baskets *Vessel* was inspired by Lakota writer and activist Luther Standing Bear's quote "It is the mothers, not the warriors, who create a people and guide their destiny" (Personal website). On the outside of the baskets, Standing Bear's words are braided with a single image of a young pregnant Native mother, stunningly posed in each basket of the triptych. Goshorn explains:

The interior weaves together words from one of the many emails this young mother and I exchanged during our collaboration, in which she eloquently expresses her gratitude to the Creator for choosing her to help grow this child, emphasizing how beautiful and powerful motherhood makes her feel" (Personal website).

Goshorn's choice of and collaboration with her subject seems essential to her creative process and the ways in which Native women's images are rendered. That she formed a relationship with the subject and includes her words in the baskets lifts her from not only anonymity, but also objectification and the "signifiers of manifest manners." No euphemism for *indian* nor surrogate for Pocahontas, Goshorn's subject inspires an uncompromised Indigenous female presence, with

the animate promise of Indigenous progeny. Unlike the unknowable nature of the *indian princess* figure that occupies so much of the U.S. imaginary, Goshorn’s subject is known -- and loved.

Goshorn is not the only contemporary Indigenous artist who features the relational aspects of subject choice in his/her/their work. Native American Studies scholar Cynthia Fowler, in analyzing the photographs of Seminole/Creek/Navajo artist Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, stresses Tsinhnahjinnie’s critical choices for subjects:

This shift from a fictionalized model to a real individual [a friend or relative] is a highly significant change....Thus, it is through these specific women as models in the photographs ...that the viewer experiences beauty” (199).

The figure in *Vessel* becomes a critical site to better understand how the white romanticized and often violent notions of the *indian princess* and her progeny factor into the securing the settler colonial agenda. Instead, the contemporary subject in Goshorn’s basket, supported by her own voice and in conversation with Standing Bear’s visionary words within the visual terrain of the work, signals the promise of Indigenous continuance. The mother and her unborn child not only communicate a threat to colonial constraint, but they also signify Indigenous notions of beauty, which include the sacred responsibility of bringing children into the world. Goshorn explains that in addition to the “divine gift of conceiving, loving and guiding [our] children, ...men and women alike [as] vessels of this sacred responsibility,” the works also “points to the commitment of Native people [treating] our traditions in the same way. Our culture requires dedication, respect and devotion to nurture it and keep it alive” (Personal website). Goshorn ties the literal labor of birthing a child to the labor of cultural continuance. She also ties the continuities of ancestral wisdom to the ways in which present-day Native peoples make sense of their lives and realities. It is, to me, a type of decolonial labor that does not remain in the realm of ideas or discourse, but is actualized on a day-to-day basis by Native peoples. It is also the type of decolonial labor that centers creative theorization and its methods, which primes the onlooker to engage his/her/their imagination rather than latent assumptions.

### ***Conclusion***

The settler colonial utilization of history naturalizes its benign nature while the dominant, monolithic historicization of U.S. history designates the settler as a neutral body. Unchecked, this purposeful and ongoing project has always and will always produce settler innocence and

protect settler futures. As decolonizing methods, rethinking and re-narrating history does more than monitor this project. Native women artists intervene in ways that expose the fraudulent claim of settler innocence of Indigenous genocide. As revealed by Sense and Goshorn, this labor of creative intervention is not merely reactive; rather, in the spirit of Million's theory of Indigenism, it "is an active doing, the imagining and revisioning...that is never, never static (38), and in the words of Goeman is necessarily resisting a gendered settler grammar. Cultural simulations are the result of the fixity of colonial definitions and historicization. Indigenous creativity provides an antidote to the seemingly impervious logics of settler power.

Each of the works creates narratives that skillfully generate impedance in the type of *cultural collisions* and *chasms of misunderstanding* that both Sense and Goshorn, respectively, express from their beginnings. The weaving in which each artist invests her time and creative energy brings Native women's histories and realities right up against the violence of colonial narratives. Through the process of braiding images and text next to, on top of, beneath, and through representations that have, by themselves, remained motionless and monochromatic (but nonetheless purposeful in the project of settler colonialism), the artists' tribally-specific labor demonstrates the type of embodied decolonizing work that brings dimensional resistance to erasure. Indeed, Sense and Goshorn make indispensable Indigenous women's centrality in that decolonizing work. Through the visual narratives they create, Sense and Goshorn provoke the viewer to lean into the type of animate reckoning needed to shift the dominant paradigms that would otherwise secure the continuance of Indigenous cultural genocide.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://kinggalleries.com/woven-creation-shan-goshorns-color-conflicting-values/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sarahsense.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sarahsense.com/>

<sup>4</sup> I thank art collector Edward Guarino for introducing me to Sarah Sense's work. I also thank Sarah herself for being so generous with her time, sharing insights about her work, and making a visit to Vassar College.

<sup>5</sup> The film *The Outlaw Josey Wales* was based on the 1973 novel by Forest Carter, a pen-name for Asa Earl Carter who was a segregationist, leader of the White Citizens Council, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, and an unofficial speech writer for George Wallace. Under his pseudonym,

Carter authored *Josey Wales* as well as *The Education of Little Tree* and posed as a Cherokee Indian author.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.shangoshorn.net/>

<sup>7</sup> I thank Shan Goshorn for being so generous with her comments on an earlier draft of this essay. It was with tremendous sadness I learned of Shan's passing during the final stages of drafting this article. She will be greatly missed.

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