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# From Activism to Artistic Practice: (Re)imagining Indigenous Women's Labour Activism in Contemporary Art

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Article abstract

En 1978, le personnel du restaurant Muckamuck de Vancouver s'est joint au Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada pour contester des conditions de travail injustes. Sous la direction de travailleuses en majorité autochtones, la grève a permis de conjuguer les préoccupations des mouvements féministes, de justice ouvrière et de souveraineté autochtone. Cet article examine les oeuvres de l'artiste Hunkpapa Lakota Dana Claxton, de l'artiste de la Première Nation Vuntut Gwitchin, Jeneen Frei Njootliet, et de l'organisation militante des femmes autochtones ReMatriate Collective qui traitent de la grève de 1978 pour explorer les intersections de la souveraineté autochtone, du travail et de la justice de genre dans les pratiques militantes passées et présentes. Cet article traite des manières par lesquelles ces artistes repensent la grève du Muckamuck par leurs engagements matériels avec les archives pour mettre en lumière les trajectoires de l'activisme des femmes autochtones au-delà de la conception linéaire du temps.

# From Activism to Artistic Practice: (Re)imagining Indigenous Women's Labour Activism in Contemporary Art[1]

Erika Kindsfather

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**En 1978, le personnel du restaurant Muckamuck de Vancouver s'est joint au Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada pour contester des conditions de travail injustes. Sous la direction de travailleuses en majorité autochtones, la grève a permis de conjuguer les préoccupations des mouvements féministes, de justice ouvrière et de souveraineté autochtone. Cet article examine les œuvres de l'artiste Hunkpapa Lakota Dana Claxton, de l'artiste de la Première Nation Vuntut Gwitchin, Jeneen Frei Njootliet, et de l'organisation militante des femmes autochtones ReMatriate Collective qui traitent de la grève de 1978 pour explorer les intersections de la souveraineté autochtone, du travail et de la justice de genre dans les pratiques militantes passées et présentes. Cet article traite des manières par lesquelles ces artistes repensent la grève du Muckamuck par leurs engagements matériels avec les archives pour mettre en lumière les trajectoires de l'activisme des femmes autochtones au-delà de la conception linéaire du temps.**

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Indigenous women have been developing and actuating strategies to resist the overlapping oppressive forces of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy for centuries. From their struggles against the patrilineal assignment of "Indian Status" defined in Canada's Indian Act to their leadership in movements such as Idle No More and La Marche Amun, Indigenous women have demonstrated the importance of recognizing and resisting the heteropatriarchal logic embedded in the ongoing structures of settler colonialism.[2] I will examine the strategies Indigenous artists have developed to explore and nuance the coalescence of gender justice and Indigenous sovereignty in activist and artistic practice. Specifically, I turn to works by Hunkpapa Lakota artist Dana Claxton, Vuntut Gwitchin artist Jeneen Frei Njootli, and the ReMatriate Collective that were displayed in the 2018 exhibition *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts* held at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver. I ask, how do these artists configure the relationship of labor, gender justice and Indigenous sovereignty through their engagement with historical and contemporary Indigenous activist practices? How do these artists work between archival and artistic practice to envision solidarity and relationality across moments of social justice organizing centered on these themes?

These questions emerge from the critical inquiries posed in the exhibition *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts*. The third of four exhibitions investigating the coalescence of activist movements and contemporary artistic practice that emerged in the 1970s, *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts* centered themes of labor, feminism, and Indigenous activism, and explored the intersections of activism and art through works that activate the generative potential of archival research and collective practice. The three works by Claxton, Frei-Njootli, and the ReMatriate Collective that I will examine use these methods of creation to establish connections among historical and contemporary activist practices, which centre issues of gender justice in their configurations of Indigenous sovereignty. Taking the Muckamuck Strike (1978–1983) as an entry-point into their investigation of the intertwining of Indigenous sovereignty and gender justice activism, the works I examine establish dialogues among diverse forms of activist labor. I argue that the artists demonstrate the generative potential of employing archival research, collaboration, and collective action in artistic practice as

they facilitate their investigations into the relationships among past and present Indigenous activist practices.

## Indigenous Feminisms: Gender Justice and Indigenous Sovereignty

Indigenous feminisms emerge from uneasy points of contact between Indigenous social justice politics and feminism. They propose a nuanced space to resist overlapping hetero-patriarchal and settler-colonial systems of oppression and oppose the white-centricity and homogenizing discourses pervasive in mainstream feminism.[3] As Tanana Athabaskan scholar Dian Million identifies, networks and tensions between Indigenous women's activism and the feminist movement emerged in the 1970s in Canada as the coalescence of Indigenous rights and gender justice came to the forefront in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women Report, when Indigenous women testified against the sexist structures established by the Indian Act.[4] Yet mainstream feminisms' long-assumed white, often middle or upper-class subject has largely occluded the potential to address the overlapping structures of oppression that BIPOC women face. Despite this, many Indigenous women have found feminism to be a valuable point of entry into their experiences with gender-based oppression. In her 1984 article "Thoughts on Indian Feminism," Assiniboine scholar Kate Shanley explains her embrace of feminism and addresses how her subjectivity as an Indigenous woman nuances her engagement with the movement.[5] She argues that while feminism provides a lens to address concerns such as unequal pay, domestic violence, and reproductive rights, "Indian feminism" diverges from mainstream feminism as it centers Indigenous sovereignty as a main objective.[6] Soon after, the turn to intersectional politics within the feminist movement coupled with the efforts of BIPOC women to develop non-homogenizing *feminisms* has led many Indigenous women to cultivate *Indigenous feminisms* as a means to address the overlapping systems of oppression they face.[7]

The intersections of gender justice and Indigenous sovereignty remain a common concern of Indigenous women scholars and activists throughout the trajectory of the development of Indigenous feminisms. In "From the 'F' Word to Indigenous/Feminisms," Salish and Kootenai sociologist Luana Ross explores the trajectories of Indigenous women's engagement with feminism in order to examine the relationship of feminist politics and Indigenous sovereignty from the mid-twentieth century to her present day.[8] Specifically, she traces this engagement through the activism of Sihasapa, Minneconjou and Lakota scholar Beatrice Medicine, the writings of Kate Shanley and Laguna, Sioux and Lebanese scholar Paula Gunn Allen, and her own understandings of feminism informed by her lived experiences.[9] She identifies the uneasy relationship between feminism and Indigenous sovereignty politics. She also recognizes both the alienation of BIPOC women from the mainstream feminist movement and the criticism she and other Indigenous feminists have received from their communities for their involvement in gender justice activism.[10] Writing around the same time as Ross, Lenape scholar Joanne Barker further addresses this marginalization

1. This paper was initially presented at the 2021 UAAC/AAUC conference session "In Favour of Human Rights in America: Between Artistic Interpretation and Documentary Compilation," chaired by Diego Renart González.
2. Joanne Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, Rights: Native Women's Activism against Social Inequality and Violence in Canada," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (June 2008): 259–266.
3. While Million uses "Native feminisms" in her article, more recent scholarship, including a 2014 lecture given by Million, uses "Indigenous feminisms." Dian Million, "'I Feel for You': Trauma, Self-Determination, and Indigenous Feminisms' Affective Response to State Violence," presented at the Institute for the Study of Social Issues, University of California, Berkeley, November 20, 2014.
4. Ibid., 269.
5. Kate Shanley, "Thoughts on Indian Feminism," in *A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women*, ed. Beth Brant (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1984), 213–215.
6. Ibid, 213.
7. African-American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to navigate the homogenizing categorization of identity in legal contexts. Elaborating the concept to develop a political framework that pluralizes overlapping aspects of identities, Crenshaw positioned the term as a way to describe the nuances of race, class, gender, ability and sexuality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 139–167.
8. Luana Ross, "From the 'F' Word to Indigenous/Feminisms," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 39–52.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

of gender justice in Indigenous band governments and activist ideologies. She calls attention to the fact that Indigenous women combatting gender violence, discrimination, and sexism have been accused of contributing to the colonial project by imposing the Western ideology of feminism onto Indigenous communities. Their critics go so far as to deem their efforts "anti-Indian."[11] This pervasive understanding of gender justice as non- or anti-Indigenous, as Barker argues, stems from histories of colonial impositions of patriarchal values onto Indigenous communities.[12] As a result, the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy remains a relatively marginal concern of dominant scholarship on Indigenous sovereignty.[13] Yet Indigenous women have continued to expose and resist the patriarchal structures of settler-colonialism despite criticisms. They have developed theories and practices to nuance Indigenous sovereignty through a lens that accounts for issues of gender justice.

In "Self-Determination and the Concept of Sovereignty," Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. traces the concept of sovereignty from its origins to its contemporary meaning for Indigenous communities.[14] Sovereignty originates as a theological concept in the ancient near East to signify the arbitrary power of deities.[15] Later, sovereignty was appropriated by European countries to describe the absolute power of a monarch, and as European countries began to encounter each other and Indigenous nations during the colonial projects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it came to signify a nation's power to self-govern and control international affairs.[16] Following the American Revolution, sovereignty was used predominately as a legal term, appearing in Supreme Court cases that attempted to regulate and often erode Indigenous nations' rights to self-governance.[17] Recognizing these origins while configuring conceptualizations of sovereignty to serve Indigenous communities' decolonial efforts, Deloria calls for an expansion of the concept from its legal context to refer more broadly to the unified identity of Indigenous nations in shifting socio-political conditions.[18] Sovereignty, then, comes to signify practices of community-based unification, cultural continuity, and self-determination.[19] Ultimately, while definitions of sovereignty surfacing from Euro-American ideologies have been used to justify settler-colonial state violence against Indigenous communities and facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous communities from their land, Indigenous scholars and activists have appropriated the concept to develop Indigenous sovereignty, which asserts the autonomy of Indigenous nations and continuity of their cultural practices and thought.[20]

Indigenous sovereignty has been expanded to encompass a diverse range of Indigenous social, cultural, and political practices oriented towards decolonization and self-determination, giving way to the new categories of cultural sovereignty, intellectual sovereignty, visual sovereignty, and rhetorical sovereignty, among others. Scholars attending to questions of gender justice nuance these articulations of Indigenous sovereignty politics. In "Native Feminisms Engage American Studies," Kanaka Maoli scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui and settler scholar Andrea Smith highlight the

11. Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, Rights," 260.
12. Barker, 259–266.
13. Ibid.
14. Vine Deloria, Jr., "Self-Determination and the Concept of Sovereignty," in *Native American Sovereignty*, ed. John R. Wunder (New York: Routledge, 1997), 107–114.
15. Ibid., 107.
16. Ibid., 107–108.
17. Ibid., 108–111.
18. Deloria, 113.
19. Ibid., 114.
20. While Deloria focuses on early Supreme Court cases that worked to define or subvert Indigenous nations' sovereignty in the United States, Joanne Barker further details the material and epistemic violence of settler state configurations of sovereignty in court cases, laws, treaties, and other governing structures in the United States and Canada. Joanne Barker, "For Whom Sovereignty Matters," in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 1–32.

importance of attending to issues of gender justice in Indigenous sovereignty activism. They call for an embrace of Indigenous feminisms to adequately address the ways hetero-patriarchy functions as a tactic of the settler-colonial project.[21] As they write:

> Native feminisms transform how we understand the project of sovereignty and nation-building in the first place. They change how we conceptualize the relationship between Indigenous nations and nation-states, how we organize for sovereignty, and how we tie sovereignty to a global struggle for liberation.[22]

Indigenous sovereignty activism that fails to address the hetero-patriarchal structures working as part of colonial paradigms runs the risk of perpetuating these very systems of oppression.[23] Joanne Barker echoes Smith and Kauanui's assertion that the project of Indigenous sovereignty must address gender. She refers to the destructive impacts of the Indian Act's hetero-patriarchal regulations imposed upon Indigenous communities as an example of the importance of including gender justice within the scope of Indigenous sovereignty.[24] Unpacking how gender discrimination acts as an integral component of the settler-colonial project's assimilationist practices, the Christianization of Indigenous communities, and the erosion of Indigenous knowledge and ways of being, Barker argues that combatting the gender-based discrimination and violence of the Indian Act serves as a key component in the project of Indigenous sovereignty.[25] "Native sovereignty struggles," Barker concludes, "are gendered."[26]

## Situating the Muckamuck Strike (1978–1983)

While scholarship and activism that explicitly worked towards the development of Indigenous feminisms emerged in the 1980s, encounters between Indigenous sovereignty and feminist activism had materialized earlier, during the social movements of the 1970s.[27] One such instance of this coalescence is the case of the historic Muckamuck Strike, which demonstrated the generative potential of Indigenous women's self-organizing in the face of gender and race-based discrimination in the workplace.[28] In 1971, three white US expatriates, Jane Erickson, Teresa Bjornson, and Doug Christmas, opened the Muckamuck restaurant in Vancouver's West End, which advertised "authentic" Northwest Coast First Nations cuisine.[29] The owners hired mainly Indigenous staff.[30] From 1971 to 1978, many workers reported mistreatment by their employers, including unfair fines, inconsistent scheduling practices, and the firing of employees who demanded better working conditions.[31] After going to the Labor Standards Branch to complain about the management's illegal labor practices, the Muckamuck workers were told that they would need to join a union to assert their complaints.[32] In 1978, many staff members decided to join the Service, Office and Retail Worker's Union of Canada (SORWUC), a feminist labor union that allied predominately women workers in industries that were not organized by the major trade unions.[33] This organizing was done mainly by Indigenous women workers, who turned to SORWUC because of the union's attention to the overlapping issues of gender and race within labor disputes.[34] On May 28, 1978, after

21. Andrea Smith and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "Native Feminisms Engage American Studies," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (June 2008), 241–266.
22. Ibid., 241.
23. Ibid.
24. Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, Rights," 259–266.
25. Ibid.
26. Barker, 264.
27. Luana Ross identifies Kate Shanley's article as the first instance of scholarship referring to "Indian feminism" explicitly. Ross, 41.
28. Indigenous women were the main organizers and leaders of the Muckamuck Strike and were impacted the most by the discrimination and illegal practices of the Muckamuck owners and management, given the fact that women have historically accounted for the majority of service sector positions, especially hosting and serving. Julia Smith, "An 'Entirely Different' Kind of Union: The Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972–1986," *Labor/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 42.
29. Janet Mary Nicol, "'Unions Aren't Native': The Muckamuck Restaurant Labor Dispute, Vancouver, BC (1978– 1983)," *Labor/ Le Travail* 40 (Fall 1997): 235.
30. "Muckamuck Workers on Strike," *Kinesis: Vancouver Status of Women* 7, no. 6 (June 1978): 2.
31. Ibid.
32. Nicol, 236.
33. The industries encompassed by SORWUC have historically employed predominately women workers. Nicol, 236.
34. Nicol, 240.

many failed attempts to negotiate a contract with management, the majority of unionized Muckamuck workers voted to strike.[35] The strike lasted over five years, making it the longest in BC history.[36] By April of 1980, the Muckamuck restaurant closed completely.[37] In March of 1983 the Labor Relations Board (LRB) ruled that the owners of the Muckamuck restaurant owed the strikers $10,000, but this was never paid since the owners returned to the US and had no remaining assets in BC.[38]

The trajectory of the Muckamuck Strike reflects the tensions and possibilities that arise from the coalescence of feminism and Indigenous sovereignty. In a 1978 article in *The Indian Voice*, Stó:lō activist and educator Ethel Gardner, who had been instrumental in the unionizing of the Muckamuck workers and remained a main activist during the strike, outlined the discrimination the Indigenous workers at the Muckamuck faced.[39] She wrote:

> For too long the fact that Native workers in BC. are badly treated has gone unnoticed. At the Muckamuck we are told by our management that we are slow, stunned, inexperienced and hard to train, rude, stupid and ungrateful for the beautiful place that they have built for us (the Indians) to work.[40]

While many First Nations organizations supported the Muckamuck strikers throughout the strike, some avenues of community support dwindled and even turned into criticism as the strike progressed.[41] This criticism emerged mainly from Indigenous men and male-dominated organizations. They targeted specifically the fact that SORWUC was not an Indigenous organization, and unions were not rooted in traditional Indigenous models of organizing.[42] Over the course of the strike, the strikers were targeted by management, discriminated against by the LRB, harassed by predominately Indigenous strikebreakers, and criticized by some First Nations organizations on the basis that "unions aren't Native."[43] Alongside the explicit discrimination from the LRB and the Muckamuck management, the organizers found themselves having to justify their choice to unionize through SORWUC to their communities.[44] In a 1978 article appearing in the feminist newspaper *Kinesis*, an anonymous Muckamuck worker wrote, "we needed a union contract because it is the only way we are guaranteed a say in our working conditions. We joined SORWUC because it is a union that lets us draw up our own contract to reflect our own situation."[45] In this respect, SORWUC afforded the Muckamuck workers a channel to both navigate institutional spaces and legal frameworks and determine their own needs within the process.[46] In an interview with Janet Mary Nicol, Gardner reflected on the workers' decision to join SORWUC, and when asked why they had not chosen a Native union, she stated that they simply did not exist.[47] Further, the mainstream trade unions would have denied the employees the autonomy and self-determination central to the politics informing their strike.[48]

Throughout the strike, criticisms and dwindling support from within Indigenous communities persisted. A particularly troubling instance of this came in 1980 when the president of the American Indian Movement (AIM) Russell Means sent a telegram expressing his support of the strikebreakers, which management hung prominently in the Muckamuck Restaurant's

35. Smith, 55.
36. Ibid, 63.
37. Nicol, 235.
38. Ibid, 249.
39. *The Indian Voice*, June 1978. Cited in Nicol, 238.
40. Ibid.
41. Nicol, 243–244, 248.
42. Ibid, 243.
43. Ibid, 243.
44. Ibid, 244.
45. "Muckamuck Certified," *Kinesis: Vancouver Status of Women* 7, no. 4 (April 1978): 3.
46. Nicol, 239.
47. Ibid, 237.
48. Ibid, 239.

window.[49] In addition to employing vicious legal tactics to limit the strikers' picketing allowances, the management of the Muckamuck exploited the criticisms of the strike coming from Indigenous organizations and activists to further undermine the voices of the strikers. They mobilized the idea of SORWUC being a "white union," posting signs in the restaurant's window taunting the picketers for their union affiliation and even hiring a First Nations employee of the Federal Department of Indian Affairs to create anti-union leaflets.[50] Further, by 1980, many of the original strikers were forced to seek other jobs because they were unable to live off the strike pay, and the active picketers became mainly white women involved in SORWUC through other channels.[51] This led to a confusing image of Indigenous workers at the Muckamuck crossing a mainly white picket line.[52]

Despite these tensions, the alliance developed among Indigenous women workers and the feminist trade union yielded a productive space for Indigenous women to organize, advocate for their rights and navigate exclusionary and inaccessible institutional spaces. Many Indigenous activists and organizations expressed support of the strikers, including the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, United Native Nations, and the Vancouver Indian Centre.[53] Covered widely in feminist, Indigenous, and mainstream newspapers, the strike sparked dialogues and brought to attention issues of gender and race-based workplace discrimination and the failures of state institutions to support Indigenous workers, especially Indigenous women.[54] Ultimately, the Muckamuck Strike demonstrates the generative potential of intertwining feminist and Indigenous activism, as the Indigenous women workers were able to express agency and self-determination through community organizing and collective action.

## Rhetorical Sovereignty, Visual Sovereignty, and the Archival Imaginary

Inspired by a 1999 article titled "Muckamuck: A Strike for Indian Self-Determination" published in the alternative feminist newspaper *Kinesis*, the ReMatriate Collective created the banner *YOURS FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY*, | **fig. 1** | to propose an inquiry into the shifting, yet enduring conceptualizations of Indigenous sovereignty from the 1970s to the present day.[55] This banner was hung on the façade of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery during the exhibition *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts* and was accompanied by a smaller banner that blacked out the name of the gallery. The ReMatriate Collective was founded in 2014 by Jeneen Frei Njootli and Taltan architect Kelly Edzerza-Bapty, who developed the arts collective to connect and empower Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people through social media activism.[56] Shifting the framework of *repatriation* towards a matriarchal model reflective of Indigenous configurations of kinship and relationality, the collective's name proclaims their goal of centring Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people in their activist practices.[57] Working to create spaces for Indigenous women to determine their own self-representation while combating stereotypes put forth in mainstream media, the ReMatriate Collective intertwines gender justice and Indigenous sovereignty in the scope of

49. Russell Means did not speak with the strikers before issuing his statement. "All the questions you've wanted to ask about Muckamuck," *Kinesis: Vancouver Status of Women* (August 1980): 8–9.
50. Nicol, 246.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid, 245–246.
53. "Muckamuck: A strike for Indian self-determination," *Kinesis: Vancouver Status of Women* (December/January 1999): 12.
54. Nicol, 250.
55. "ReMatriate Collective at 259 Lake Shore Blvd E," Toronto Biennial of Art, https://torontobiennial.org/work/rematriate-collective-at-259-lake-shore/.
56. "Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Act—The ReMatriate Collective," Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, https://belkin.ubc.ca/exhibitions/beginning-with-the-seventies-collective-acts/.
57. Ibid.

**Figure 1. ReMatriate Collective, *YOURS FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY,*, 2018. Appliqué banner.** Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, purchased with support from the Canada Council for the Arts, 2019. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

their activism.[58] Taking the language of the political framework of the Muckamuck Strike as the foundation of their monumental banner, the ReMatriate Collective references histories of activist practices that brought together Indigenous sovereignty and gender justice. In doing so, they establish a dialogue between their contemporary practice and that which precedes it. This relationship is further highlighted in another piece in the *Beginning with the Seventies* exhibition, Dana Claxton's photo-mural, *The Muckamuck Strike Then and Now*. | **figs. 2–3** | In this work, Claxton revisits a photograph of a 1978 picket action against the Muckamuck Restaurant and alters it by digitally inserting members of the ReMatriate Collective into the group of protesters. In modifying the archival image of a Muckamuck protest action, Claxton imagines a relational space of Indigenous women activists in diverse socio-temporal situations. She concretizes continuities among Indigenous womens' activist initiatives.

Resisting the relegation of the Muckamuck Strike to "the past," the artists in the *Beginning with the Seventies* exhibition turn to archival research to develop connections across temporalities between Indigenous activist practices dedicated to gender justice and Indigenous sovereignty politics. The resulting works stress continuation and exchange within these visualized relationships. Establishing and regulating archives has long been a tool used by settler-colonial nations to configure sanitized narratives of colonial histories through the perspective of the colonizer. Such practices preserve Western knowledges and facilitate the erasure of others.[59] For many Indigenous communities, self-representation through the development of community-based archives and interventions into the archives of colonial institutions are important assertions of sovereignty.[60] In "Nikikiwan: Contesting Settler Colonial Archives through Indigenous Oral History," Cree scholar Dallas Hunt turns to alternative archival practices as holding the potential to configure shared futures oriented towards community-based social justice initiatives.[61] Hunt employs Dian Million's concept of felt theory to demonstrate the importance of oral histories, local narratives, and lived experiences as sites of knowledge-production in the construction of a counter-archive from Indigenous perspectives to destabilize the authority of colonial entities within the construction of colonial histories.[62] Turning to the misrepresentation of his family's history in the Sodbusters archives, Hunt uses his grandmother's narrative and experiential knowledge to counter sanitized and inaccurate community histories constructed by this colonial institution.[63] Hunt's intervention into colonial archives both calls attention to the common colonial frameworks that shape many institutional archives and imagines the possibilities of using past narratives to rewrite accurate representations of Indigenous experiences into archival histories.

Given both the difficult histories of archives and the potential of archival interventions to assert Indigenous sovereignty into institutional spaces, intertwining archival research and artistic practice can transform the communicative means of the archives through Indigenous self-representations. Claxton and the ReMatriate Collective's use of archival research can

58. Tenille Campbell, "REMATRIATE," *Canadian Art* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 124.
59. Dallas Hunt, "Nikîkîwân 1: Contesting Settler Colonial Archives through Indigenous Oral History," *Canadian Literature* 230/231 (Autumn 2016): 25–42.
60. Hunt, 26.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid, 27.

be understood in terms of settler scholar Michelle Caswell's concept of the archival imaginary, which she develops in her article "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives."[64] Using the South Asian American Digital Archive to guide her study, Caswell employs Arjun Appadurai's concept of the imaginary to configure how archives can imagine future social justice trajectories through community engagements with a shared past.[65] Out of this research, Caswell defines the archival imaginary as follows:

> The archival imaginary is the dynamic way in which communities creatively and collectively re-envision the future through archival interventions in representations of the shared past. Through the archival imaginary, the past becomes a lens to the future; the future is rooted in that which preceded it. Through the archival imaginary, the future can be conceived through the seeds of what was possible in the past.[66]

Caswell explores the archival imaginary within community-based archives by examining the strategies communities have used to envision future trajectories through their engagements with shared histories.[67] Considering Hunt's argument regarding the potential of intervening in institutional archives to assert self-determined community narratives, I propose that the concept of the archival imaginary can be extended not only to describe practices of constructing community-based archives, but also to stress the political potential of using institutional archival engagements to express Indigenous sovereignty. The concept of the archival imaginary, then, can be mobilized through both institutional and community archives based on *how* they are employed.

While the SORWUC archives are housed in the Rare Books and Special Collections Library at the University of British Columbia, a colonial institution, the records include newspaper clippings, documents, and other materials that reflect the perspectives of union members, SORWUC leadership, Muckamuck Strike organizers and diverse media sources.[68] In this respect, the SORWUC archives take form as both community-based and institutional. Because these archives are situated between community and institutional practice, the artists' engagement with the archival materials becomes increasingly important to the political potential of their artistic interventions. To examine the strategies through which the artists enact the archival imaginary, I turn to the concepts of rhetorical and visual sovereignty. Proposed by Ojibwe and Dakota scholar Scott Richards Lyons, rhetorical sovereignty signifies the self-determined representations of Indigenous people through language and related modes of communication.[69] Building on Lyons's research, Lisa King writes:

> Rhetorical sovereignty functions to articulate the act of Native peoples taking control of an institution and redefining it along Native lines. But what rhetorical sovereignty also recognizes—because we are talking about rhetoric—is that *sovereignty is also an act of communication*, and communication requires addressing communicative goals, selected means of communication, and the anticipated audiences.[70]

The ReMatriate Collective employs rhetorical sovereignty in the *YOURS FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY*, banner as it engages with the status of language in

64. Michelle Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives," in *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada*, eds. Dominique Daniel and Amalia S. Levi (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2017), 35–56.

65. Caswell, 48–52.

66. Ibid, 49.

67. Ibid, 35–56.

68. While the current situation of COVID-19 has prevented me from engaging with these archives in person, I am able to access them partially through the RBSC's finding guide and inventory records for the SORWUC archives. Further, the digitized newspapers I have consulted in my own research into the Muckamuck Strike allows me to imagine the general rhetoric surrounding the strike in both mainstream and alternative media, which are included in the archive records. *Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada Records*, The Library of the University of British Columbia Special Collections Division, prepared by Joan Lighthall, August 1989.

69. Scott Richard Lyons, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 3 (Feb. 2000): 447–468.

70. Emphasis mine. Lisa King, "Speaking Sovereignty and Communicating Change: Rhetorical Sovereignty and the Inaugural Exhibits at the NMAI," *American Indian Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 77.


**Figure 2. Dana Claxton in collaboration with Sean Griffin, *Muckamuck Strike Then and Now*, 2018. Photographic mural.** Courtesy of the artists.

**Figure 3. Dana Claxton in collaboration with Sean Griffin, *Muckamuck Strike Then and Now*, 2018; and Dana Claxton and Jeneen Frei Njootli, *The Sew In*, 2018.** Courtesy of the artists. **Installation view, *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts* (September 4–December 2, 2018), Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia.** Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

activist practices and the forms of communication responsible for the production of knowledge in the SORWUC archives. Picket signs, leaflets, banners, and newspaper coverage of the Muckamuck Strike served to mobilize the activists' political frameworks and communicate their self-determined aims to the public. Echoing the sentiments reflected in "Muckamuck: A Strike for Indian Self-Determination" with reference to the language of the newspaper article and adopting the site-specificity of protest signs and banners, the *YOURS FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY*, banner reorients public space through its re-presentation of the rhetoric defining the politics of the Muckamuck Strike. In bringing this notion of self-determination into a contemporary moment, the ReMatriate Collective employs the flexibility of sovereignty to establish connections among past and present Indigenous activism while posing an inquiry into the contextual significance of the concept. That is, having transferred the language of the strike from its historical moment, the ReMatriate Collective highlights the fact that, while sovereignty is historically contingent and defined through the specificities of its contexts, contemporary configurations of sovereignty are inseparable from a broader lineage of Indigenous sovereignty activism.[71] Engaging specifically with the Muckamuck Strike, which saw the coalescence of feminist and Indigenous sovereignty politics, the ReMatriate Collective configures Indigenous sovereignty around the persistence of Indigenous activist initiatives that incorporate issues of gender justice into their political framework. The banner enacts rhetorical sovereignty by re-presenting the Muckamuck Strike's political framework forty years later. It asserts a continued relevance of Indigenous activism centered around the intertwining of gender justice and sovereignty.

While Claxton similarly turns to the communicative modes of the archives, her focus on photography renders *visual sovereignty* a useful tool to understand the political functions of her creative interventions into the archives. Introduced by Tuscarora scholar Jolene Rickard in 1995 and further developed in recent scholarship by Seneca scholar Michelle H. Raheja and visual anthropologist Kristin L. Dowell, visual sovereignty refers to the assertion of sovereignty through strategic uses of artistic practice and visual media.[72] Indigenous artists, filmmakers, photographers, and visual culture workers have asserted visual sovereignty through a variety of tactics, including Indigenous self-representations in the realm of visual culture, the development of visual strategies informed by Indigenous cosmologies, and the resurgence of traditional, community-specific aesthetic and material practices.[73] Visual sovereignty, therefore, describes how Indigenous self-determination, autonomy, and agency are expressed in artistic practices and the institutional spaces they occupy.[74]

Claxton asserts visual sovereignty through her use of an archival photograph to reanimate the historical protest action and imagine embodied connections among Indigenous activists across temporalities. By reconfiguring the Muckamuck Strike protest action photograph from a historical newspaper to a life-scale mural applied to a wall in the gallery, Claxton engages

71. Barker, "For Whom Sovereignty Matters," 21.

72. Jolene Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," *Aperture* 139 (Summer 1995): 50–59.; Michelle H. Raheja, "Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 1159–1185.; Kristin L. Dowell, "Visual Sovereignty in Aboriginal Experimental Media," *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 154–172.

73. Jolene Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 465–482.

74. Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand."

the action in a contemporary moment. This establishes layers of relationality, both among the strikers and the members of the ReMatriate Collective, and between the group of activists and the people moving through the gallery space. By scaling the photograph from the newspaper to life-size, Claxton asserts a sense of the embodied presence of the activists. Inserting the ReMatriate members into the photograph, she then renders this interrelationality physical by staging encounters among Indigenous activists while, at the same time, asserting their presence in the gallery space. Claxton's use of scale, location, and digital manipulation act as visual strategies to resist both the exclusion of an Indigenous presence in institutional space and the erasure of Indigenous women from histories of activist practices.

These works enact rhetorical and visual sovereignty through their engagements with the archives and their development of visual strategies that assert control over forms of communication and representation. Bridging of archival research and artistic practice, the artists assert a continuity of past and present Indigenous activism that centers gender justice in their conceptualizations of Indigenous sovereignty. They thus imagine a future presence of Indigenous women's activism. In this respect, the artists' expressions of rhetorical and visual sovereignty strategically enact the archival imaginary, draw continuities among diverse socio-temporal situations, and extend a sense of enduring presence into a proclaimed future.

## Material Connections and Collective Action

In addition to centering past and present activist initiatives that intertwine Indigenous sovereignty and gender justice, Claxton and the ReMatriate Collective embed an Indigenous feminist politics into their works through the visual and material strategies that they employ, specifically through references to ribbon skirts and garments.[75] The political significance of the ribbon clothing is central to the collaborative installation by Claxton and ReMatriate Collective member Jeneen Frei Njootli titled *The Sew In*. | **fig. 4** | A band of yellow with three pink, white, and blue lines transformed the white wall of the gallery into a bright reference to the visual language of ribbonized garments. In addition to this visual transformation of the space, the installation consisted of an assembly of overturned tables, sewing machines covered in grey fabric cases, and chairs draped with colourful sheepskins. *The Sew In* was not only an object-based installation but also a collaborative action.[76] Two public workshops led by Lakota Woodmountain artist and educator Kim Soo Goodtrack, "Ribbon Skirt Making" and "Ribbonizing a Shirt," activated *The Sew In* with the embodied presence of participants, who filled the space with engaged action. | **fig. 5** | The tables were flipped right-side up, and the machines were uncovered and placed on the tables' surfaces. The chairs were brought to each machine, and fabrics, ribbons, and tools rested on the tabletops. The presence of participants catalyzed this transformation, and the objects were mobilized for the creation of ribbon garments.

The cultural meanings of the ribbon skirt are central to the significance of this dialogue as it frames how the artists relate activist practices across

75. The multi-coloured ribbons hanging from the *YOURS FOR INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY*, banner reference ribbonized clothing, while in Claxton's photo-mural, the ribbons on ReMatriate member Denver Lynxleg's ribbon skirt are rendered in colour against the black-and-white image.

76. "Workshop: Ribbon Skirt Making," The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, https://belkin.ubc.ca/events/workshop-ribbon-skirt-making/.

**Figure 4. Dana Claxton and Jeneen Frei Njootli, *The Sew In*, 2018. Ribbon, sewing machines, sheep skin, irons, ironing boards, tables, chairs and sewing materials. Installation view, *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts* (September 4 – December 2, 2018), Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia.** Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

**Figure 5. Dana Claxton and Jeneen Frei Njootli, *The Sew In*, 2018. Ribbon, sewing machines, sheep skin, irons, ironing boards, tables, chairs and sewing materials. Workshop, "Ribbon Skirt Making," October 19, 2018 at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia as part of *Beginning with the Seventies: Collective Acts*.** Photo: Michael R. Barrick.

temporalities. Cree founder of the National Indigenous Young Women's Council Kari-Dawn Wuttunee, Michif teacher Jennifer Altenberg, and settler scholar Sarah Flicker unpack Indigenous women's relation to the ribbon skirt through testimonies of participants in a ribbon skirt making workshop held by the Young Indigenous Women's Utopia (YIWU) in Saskatoon.[77] The authors state that the ribbon skirt indicates Indigenous resilience against colonialism, the continuation of Indigenous knowledge and culture, and a reclamation of Indigenous women's agency, power, and self-representation in the face of overlapping structures of patriarchal and colonial violence and dispossession.[78] Ribbon skirts are tied to a politics of gender justice and Indigenous sovereignty. They act as a means through which Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people can express autonomy over their bodies, assert connections to their cultures, and declare their resilience in the face of the violent oppressive forces of colonial hetero-patriarchy.

By establishing connections among *The Sew In* and the artworks engaging with the Muckamuck Strike through the visual language of the ribbon skirt, the artists situate the process of making ribbon skirts within histories of Indigenous activism. These connections serve to further illuminate the importance of collectivity in activist practices. Evident in the ReMatriate Collective's practice, the past initiatives of the Muckamuck strikers, and the sewing actions mobilized during the workshops of *The Sew In*, collective action is central to various projects expressing Indigenous sovereignty. The relationships developed among the artworks configure collectivity within and among the activist practices presented. As *The Sew In* workshop participants occupy the room of the gallery where Claxton's photo-mural re-activates the collective space of the Muckamuck picket action, a collaborative dynamic among workshop participants, strikers, and ReMatriate Collective members is formed. Therein, the artists envision a form of activism, which intertwines Indigenous sovereignty and gender justice as collective not only within their socio-temporal milieus, but also among Indigenous activist histories and practices as they reference, build upon, and create space for one another.

The artists' configuration of collectivity among Indigenous activist initiatives across socio-temporal milieus and through various forms of action offers an expanded vision of the practices that constitute activism. From occupying public spaces through protests, picket actions, and banners, to enacting Indigenous cultural practices through the sharing of knowledges and collective making, activist practices intertwining Indigenous sovereignty and gender justice materialize in many forms and spaces. In their engagement with the archives, in their emphasis on contemporary Indigenous women's collective organizing and in their activation of space around the sharing of Indigenous women's knowledge and modes of creative expression, the artists demonstrate that collectivity spans time and space in the broader project of Indigenous sovereignty. Establishing connections among these activist practices and asserting the persistence of Indigenous women's leadership in social justice organizing, they create ground to combat erasure and imagine collective futures of Indigenous women's activism. ¶

77. Kari-Dawn Wuttunee, Jennifer Altenberg, and Sarah Flicker, "Red Ribbon Skirts and Cultural Resurgence (kimihko sîmpân iskwêwisâkaya êkwa sihcikêwin waniskâpicikêwin)," *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 3 (January 2019): 63–79.

78. Ibid, 63–79.