A Transition of Visual Ritual: Making Medicine, George Flett, and the Historical Emergence of Native American Ledger Art[1]

Heidi C. Powell, Ph.D.
University of Florida

ABSTRACT
How do Native Americans have a voice through art practice, especially since they have been silenced for centuries? And how does one convey an understanding that Native American people and their cultures are still here, alive and present in the United States today? This historical inquiry (Bolin, 1995) into ritual and memory pedagogy (Powell, 2017) focuses on a small part of Native American history through the ledger drawing of Making Medicine and George Flett. Reflecting on history and my own memories of George Flett, we can see their voice, both past and present, within their art practice. Through a connected history that expands on the original ritual of Plains Indian buffalo hide painting into a transitional place for Native American ledger drawing, we can see beyond Native Americans' artistic characteristics associated solely with craft or utility to engage their past and contemporary artists. Their history, culture, challenges, and issues are made visible through their art practice, while bringing awareness that Native Americans are still here!

KEYWORDS: ledger art, Making Medicine, George Flett, historical memory, Chicken Dance, Memory Pedagogy, Plains Indian

NATURAL
[It's]
We Don't Want Indians
Just Their
Names
Mascots
Machines
Cities
Products
Buildings
Living People [?][2]

1 *In this paper QR codes are links that direct the reader to images. This is an interactive component to engage the reader and provide links to artworks in order to foster personal inquiry and educational use.
2 Edgar Heap of Birds, 1989, words from his artwork, Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi, serigraph

In this poem of resistance, LAЯUTAИ, found in the artwork of Edgar Heap of Birds (1989) (see Figure 1), each line builds to tell a story of the struggle of the Native American plight to be recognized and acknowledged as living people—a people still in existence today. As we teach through different contemporary methodologies such as Visual Culture (Duncum, 2002), Multicultural Education (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001), and Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2018), we can also focus on the idea of cultural ritual in art making. Seeking representations of cultural continuity through the ritual of art practice and memory pedagogy (Powell, 2017) can teach us how others have adapted ritual through the challenges of change over time and maintained their cultural voice through art making.

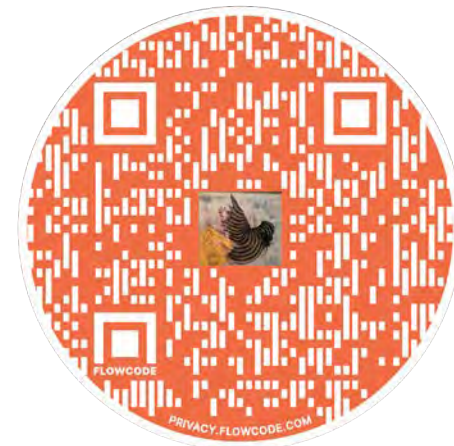

Figure 1: *QR Code for Edgar Heap of birds, 1989, Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi, serigraph.*

The art of Native Americans and Native communities, from the historic past until now, shows us how ritual through arts practice keeps identity and historical memory alive. This historical identity, especially as intergenerational learning, remains deeply embedded, yet often silent, in the fabric of North American history. Although Indian, or American Indian, are terms often associated with the historical American West, they are meant to specifically reference an individual Indigenous person—who is often unnamed in Native art—especially when no Tribal affiliation is identified. Today, the Indigenous populations of the United States are usually referred to as Tribal nations, tribes, Alaskan Natives, First Nations, native nations, Indigenous nations, indigenous peoples, and Native Americans. Identity for contemporary Native people is not a neutral issue and is rooted in cultural ritual and practice as the place where art making is grounded. Current Native identity has

evolved from the distant past and is socially constructed through contact, groupings, and living out Tribal values and understandings. Holms, Pearson, and Chavis (2003) described this as peoplehood where "language, sacred history, religion, and land—were interwoven and dependent on one another" (p. 12). Here, the past has been reinvented in new ways that redefine life as Indian/Native in a post-colonial, yet colonized culture, often re-reading Indian/Native histories and redefining identity for groups in which those doing the telling are not a part. So, how can we teach about Native Americans and Iindigenous culture authentically in art education? And how does ritual in art making convey an understanding that Native American people and their cultures are still here?

This topic, when framed in historical research methods (Špiláčková, 2012)—with an understanding that historical research responds to contemporary trends (Bolin, 1995) and is affected by a post-structuralist narrative turn (Howell & Prevenier, 2001)—becomes a search for past happenings and their relationship to the present (Berg & Lune, 2017), thus explaining evolving histories. Not only can we learn from the past through historical research, but as a result, we can illuminate or make visible previously invisible understandings of U.S. history, and the presence of Native Americans in it through their creative practice.

In this case, we can honor Native Americans that have inhabited the United States for millennia by making historical moments of cultural continuity visible through ritual art making practices, where teaching and learning about Native American creativity makes visible a living culture. When people look, they rarely see a living people; they see objects mostly in museums. If we are to delve deeper through art education, perhaps we can see them and what they want/ed to tell us.

The Rituals of the Past: The Painted Buffalo Hide

For centuries, the art of Native Americans has been a form of cultural preservation through ritual practices. For example, the Plains Indians followed a nomadic lifestyle, specifically the seasonal migration patterns of the American Bison from which they obtained unlimited sustenance and made many utilitarian and ceremonial items like ornamental robes. These robes often depicted geometric designs, pictographs that represented daily life, and winter counts—pictorial calendars and historical records of a tribe or specific warrior's heroism. This long tradition preserved oral histories pictorially. According to the Smithsonian (2009), these visual histories, winter counts, were added to each year, sometimes recopied by successors, and in tandem with narrative retellings as a historical record. These painted buffalo hides were the expression of ritual, a ritual which would take on new meaning as Native Americans began to lose their homeland, families, and ways of life. Colonization shifted the visual recording—from the ritual of art on buffalo hides, created while freely living on the plains, to art on White men's ledgers during incarceration as prisoners of war. These visual recordings serve as a means of cultural survival.

Ledger Art

Ledger art first emerged just a few decades after the Indian Removal Act of 1830, as Native warriors were taken as prisoners of war. This Act, signed by President Andrew Jackson, forcibly removed Native Americans from their homes and land. The subsequent tensions saw some Native American tribes fight back against the U.S. military, which led to their incarceration in U.S. military forts. These forts were where Native Americans first began creating ledger art to continue retelling their stories as a visual narrative, maintaining the ritual of drawing their histories. This tradition of ledger art, which evolved from paintings on Buffalo hides, is known as Plains figurative art on paper. The Plains figurative art ritual shifted visual recordings to paper, ledgers, and lighter, more accessible materials. This was not only because of incarceration but also due to the scarcity of buffalo that followed the US federal government-supported eradication programs. Native Americans were thus denied a food source, a way to communicate their histories through buffalo painting, and in general, their very way of life.

Ledger art became a transitional ritual practice that captured Native American stories, memories, and experiences mainly from the 1860s through the 1920s. The more well-known ledger artists were prisoners of war at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida. Those who had lost their land and homes continued to speak of their histories through the ritual of drawing on paper. At the turn of the 19th century, ledger books became increasingly available from Europe, along with colorful drawing and painting materials. The ledger books were often already used, having recorded information that was later discarded by White settlers or the US military. The ledgers were then given to Native people to paint or draw their stories on, usually while incarcerated. The ledger art of Native Americans served to represent something much bigger—the transition from their way of life to the reservation life. According to Hail (Pearce, 2013), "the bittersweet nature of ledger art is clear" (p. xvii). They were the record of commercial transactions, such as land transactions, some documenting the loss of Native lands and people. Thus, in many ways, they were a record of Native trauma. Hail (Pearce, 2013) also notes that ledger art was a place of transformation where "the white man's documents" (p. xvii) were used by Native people to create drawings, which then became a middle ground to contest conflicting views of history. To add to the trauma of stolen land and a way of living, much of the ledger art created by incarcerated Native Americans, especially the art created at Fort Marion, was sold to visitors becoming "commodities" (Szabo, 2007, p.172). These creative commodities then supported the very place that held them captive. The

White dominant culture, namely the US government, tried to create a place of forced appropriation of white culture. The Native American response was to do all it could to tell their stories, share their memories, and hold on to the value and ritual of tribal traditions. Ledger art can be seen as the evidence of stolen culture.

Making Medicine: Connecting Ritual to the Learning Landscapes of the Past

While Europe made sure to name their artists throughout the centuries, the ones we most study in Art History courses today, by contrast, Native American artistry was rarely attributed to an individual in historical contexts before the 19th Century. There are many reasons for this, but in contemporary Native American art, we can finally truly grasp the voices of Native Americans and what they wish to tell us through their work, reemphasizing the need to make the invisible visible giving voice to those whose culture was stolen. It was easy to see how ritual among the collective ledger artists of the past paved the way for contemporary ledger artists such as George Flett. We can now recognize that culture, history, ritual, and creativity are living things that are passed down over time, shifting in form and function, but resilient in presence. A predecessor of contemporary ledger artists, Making Medicine (1844-1931) was a Cheyenne warrior, imprisoned at Ft. Marion, who became a well-known ledger artist. He was taken into captivity as a result of being a part of the Red River uprising of 1874-1875, where battles took place between several southern Great Plains Native American tribes and the U.S. Army (Massachusetts Historical Society's Focus On: Indian Ledger Art, n.d.). This is important to note, as it is an example of how Native Americans could no longer exist within their own cultural structures and historical freedoms.

At Fort Marion, the U.S. Army imprisoned many Indians who were considered the most dangerous (Glancy, 2014), and Making Medicine was among them (see Figure 2). The prison commander, Capt. Richard H. Pratt, was a supporter of their art. He was a proponent of Native American education and assimilation and encouraged the inmates—mostly Cheyenne and Kiowa—to depict their camp life, hunts, and battles (Massachusetts Historical Society, Object of the month: Indian Ledger Art, n. d., para 2). One anecdote to note is that Capt. Pratt was also mentioned in the late 1800s in the Art Education Association Journal published by the J. C. Witter Company, where he was lauded for giving Indian Warriors educational opportunities. This ledger art, created by Indians at Fort Marion under Capt. Pratt, hoped to foster artistic entrepreneurship and encourage assimilation (Pearce, 2013), an attempt to "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (Dickinson College, n.d., para.1). However, even more importantly, this drawing ritual helped keep cultural identity alive as a living testimony of adaptation and survival among the incarcerated warriors from stolen lands.

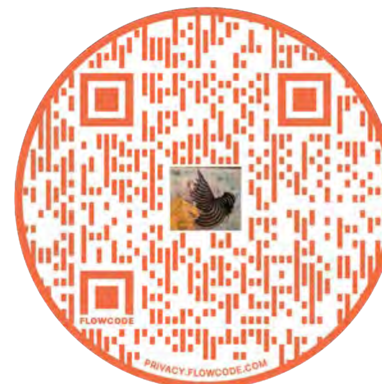

Figure 2: *QR Code for by Making Medicine (Cheyenne), US Cavalry and Native Americans Ink, watercolor, colored pencil on woven lined paper. Image: 17.5 cm x 33.3; two facing pages: 20.5 cm x 33.3 cm. Pages 18-19, Book of sketches made at Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, 1877.*

Ritual Relived in the Memory of George Flett

In my own experiences with ledger drawing—or, the ritual of drawing lives lived—I turn to memory; specifically, my memories of George Flett (1946-2013). A 20th century revival of ledger art emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. Native American artists created contemporary work using 19th century documents. George Flett became a part of this revivalist movement, having been influenced by those that went before him. Flett, a member of the Spokane tribe, was born in 1946 and recently passed in 2013. He was a skilled artist and most known for his ledger art. Flett lived on the Spokane Reservation, graduated from the Institute for American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico in the mid 1960s, attended the University of Colorado, served in the US military, was a professional bull rider, and then began working as a full time artist at the age of 37 until his death. Each ledger work he created told a story from Spokane Indian history or from a legend or cultural event (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *QR code for the work of George Flett, Prairie Chicken Dancers Grand Entry Song-White Lodge Manderee, North Dakota. Gouache and on 1891 ledger paper, 9 ½ x 16 ½ inches.*

I met George Flett in 2007 while working at a university near Spokane, Washington, where he painted as performance in a local auditorium. Surrounded by chicken dancers (see Figures 4 & 5) and a drum circle, Flett would create his ledger art with beautiful colors and expressive iconography reflective of his Spokane tribe.

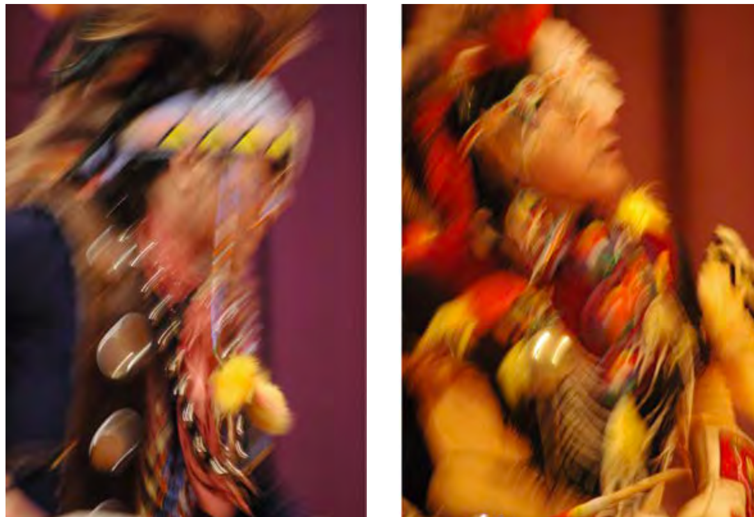

Figure 4 & 5: *Powell, 2007, Chicken Dancers in Motion, from a performance with George Flett, Cheney, Washington.*

Flett had his own revivalist style of the ritual of representing Native living through drawing. He not only created ledger art that told stories about his experiences, culture, and the history of the Spokane, but he also wanted those around him to experience the fullness of Native ritual, a place where generational memories culminated in his ledger art, dance, and music. His holistic approach, intertwined with performance, became historical autobiography. When I was around Flett in an academic setting, he was a man of few words, but his passion for telling the stories of his culture through color, line, image, and symbol was monumental in the telling. As a revivalist of ledger art, Flett created amidst the chicken dancers and drumming; I was mesmerized by how he chose to share his creative process as immersed in ritual forms of the Spokane. The drumming, the singing, the dancing, the painting/drawing—all worked together to produce these ledger paintings as storied works of art that spoke of his own journey and that of his ancestors. Through his work, he also brought attention to the chicken dance and dancers, as they helped Flett bring to life more than just art making but performing ritual through memory. Flett, the dancers, and the drummers all presented a new way to understand the creative voice by bringing attention to indigenous communities and once again transitioning pictorial storied practice to communicate contemporary contexts. The remaining artifact embodied more than just ledger artwork—it possessed cultural memories through performative and artistic knowledge placed on paper, as evidence of sharing the past in the present, realizing the past as part of present-day performance and art making.

The Present from the Past

Flett's ledger art began with rituals of the past and ledger paper infused with and influenced by the Native spiritual practices of drums and dance. What I had the privilege of observing was the spiritual manifestation in the creation of the artwork itself, seeing glimpses of the ritual of a sacred world that is still alive. The context of the work prompted me to explore ledger art further and find out how it intersected with my own Native American identity and heritage as well as gave others a glimpse into an ancient practice that is still alive in Native culture. I learned that the culture and patterns of life expressed through language, oral traditions, music, ceremony, and arts hopes to preserve Native American heritage today. This doesn't mean that Native people are "frozen in the nostalgic past, but rather that they revere and honor the accomplishments of their elders and those who came before them, living as vital members of their own communities" (Hansen, 2007, p. 253), celebrating tribal heritage, history, and traditions that provide a sense of identity, especially for future generations.

Conclusion

In thinking about the impact of my experiences with George Flett, and the history of ledger art, I realize that looking at Native American art needs to go beyond seeing and teaching about it as historical memorabilia. When thinking about other cultures and memory as art educators we must consider asking how ritual fits into the narrative turn, while looking through a contemporary lens. We must continue to endeavor to ask ourselves:

1. How do cultural memory and ritual over time serve to change and teach us?
2. How can we explore and share the stories that show Native Americans are still here?
3. How can we learn about America's past through Native American artists?

We need to go beyond the idea of collected historical objects that seem to substitute for collecting of a people—a living people and their attempted vanquishment and assimilation—to acknowledgment and recognition. Native Americans today have had to perform identity reform as cultural practice, often through adapted ritual—a way of merging old culture with new without betraying where they have come from and who they are. Today's Native American artists are transcultural, sharing their cultural practices and how they have been shaped over time in a way that echoes the past in the present through presence. Teaching about Native American art is important because it recognizes people who still exist. Art education should explore Native art as a place of cultural exchange rather than as a past culture, born from uncountable experiences and thousands of years on this continent. Native art is not created as mere metaphor but with a logic and rationale that governs their entry into history and culture—a history that has been stolen and a culture that has been trampled. We must recognize that while there are many shared cultural perspectives in today's society, the perplexing circumstances of forced assimilation versus extinction is one Native Americans still face today. However, if you are willing to look and listen to the voices of artists of Native American lineage and the rituals they still share, you will hear the symphony of voices that want you to know WE ARE STILL HERE!

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