

LES BEGAY

## NATIVE ART AND COMEDY FROM A DINE' PERSPECTIVE\*

My experience and expertise with Native art is limited but I understand Dine' art which is my Tribal Nation.<sup>1</sup> Drawings, paintings, and pottery all contain an element of art and a way to communicate, tell stories and interpret traditional stories. Their art was originally traditional, meaning it was created as a method to pass on traditions and history. The Dine' did not have a written language and art was used to record their history and traditions. Their art which tells traditional stories leave a portion or element untold in the pottery, painting, or drawing. The reason for this omission is to keep the tradition intact and maintained for members of the Tribe. If the complete traditional story were available in the art the Dine' believe it would bring harm to them because of the exposure to outsiders of the Tribe.

The Dine' have a rich oral history and that history and traditional stories were preserved in the art. The Dine' knew the art would live longer than

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LES BEGAY — BS in Journalism/Marketing from the William Allen White School of Journalism at the University of Kansas; e-mail: [lesb369@gmail.com](mailto:lesb369@gmail.com).

\* My text to Professor Anna Kawalec is in response to her Stand-Up Comedy article "Stand-up Comedy as a Hallmark of Western culture," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 12:1, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20004214.2020.1788753>.

<sup>1</sup> I am an enrolled member of the Dine' Nation. My educational background is a BS in Journalism/Marketing from the William Allen White School of Journalism at the University of Kansas. I currently do contract work that interests me. Most of the work I do is consulting wireless sales organizations but I also give talks and programs on Native history and contemporary issues such as land and water rights, sovereignty, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, U.S. government Native policy and systemic racism. I work closely with the American Indian Center in Chicago and recently finished five years as Board Chairman. I am a co-creator of the Indigenous Peoples Day Coalition of Illinois, we is asking the State and City of Chicago to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day.

I spent my career in the telecom sector working both domestically and internationally with manufacturers, carriers and distributors in Sales Management. I reside in Chicago, Illinois, USA.

their oral historians and was one of the reasons for creating the art. They wanted to retain their traditions to outsiders, so they were concealed within and would remain safe and sacred to the Dine'. The art has become more available and popular over time and has become less traditional. An example of that concealment is "Sand painting." It is an essential part of healing ceremonies between the healer and patient but today public displays of "sand paintings" are for entertainment and appreciation of the method and not the traditional healing story.

Native art has been plagiarized and appropriated for mainstream non-Native acceptance which has a diminishing effect on Native culture. Another issue of Native representation to Western culture is the effort to keep Native people in a time capsule of the 1800's. Western culture wants to portray Native people as the "noble savage," "disappearing Indian," "mystical warrior," and as mascots. The art created by non-Natives that is accepted and accessible to most non-Native people perpetuates this false narrative. Western culture is not as acceptable to contemporary Native art because it changes the image it is most comfortable with and maintains the stereotypes. The contemporary Native voice in art pushes that narrative aside and elevates Native people past the 1800's where Western culture expects them to remain.

Native humor is a very sharp and witty humor. The comedy aspect tends to be about Reservation life, racism, and the balance between the white and Native worlds. While non-Natives are amused by the humor, they do not understand the underlying nuances of the generational trauma or the constant struggle for recognition in the Western world. Therefore, much of the humor is directed more to the Native audience and is more of an insider's humor. Comedy among Native people is a more internal intertribal view of comedy. The humor is not mainstream enough for a non-Native audience because they have not experienced Reservation life, the racism, or the dual world of white versus Native. Their comedy spectacle is this is our Native humor, it tells our story from our viewpoint, by our people which is something Western culture will never be able to take away.

The humor is a sense of pride among Native people because Western culture has taken the land, the culture, the language, and millions of lives but it cannot take away their humor. It is a positive outlook statement that says we have survived, are surviving and are still here thriving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

NATIVE ART AND COMEDY  
FROM A DINE' PERSPECTIVE

## Summary

This article is an analysis of Native art and comedy from outside the contemporary Western viewpoint. It's an interpretation of Dine' art and comedy from the perspective of an enrolled member of the Dine' Nation. It explains why the art was created, details of the art and why it remains private. The article also illustrates the appeal of Native comedy to both Native and non-Native audiences and the differences. It's a personal observation of Dine' art and comedy, one of the 574 recognized Tribal Nations of North America.

**Keywords:** Native art; comedy; Dine' tribe.

RDZENNA SZTUKA I KOMEDIA  
Z PERSPEKTYWY PLEMIEŃ DINE'

## Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł jest analizą rdzennej sztuki i komedii z odmiennego niż współczesny, zachodni punkt widzenia. Jest to interpretacja sztuki Dine' z perspektywy członka plemienia Dine'. Wyjaśniamy powody powstania tej sztuki, jej szczegóły i prywatny charakter. Artykuł ilustruje również atrakcyjność rdzennej komedii zarówno dla rdzennych, jak i nierdzennych jej odbiorców oraz różnice w jej postrzeganiu. Analizy są oparte na osobistym kontakcie ze sztuką i komedią plemienia Dine', jednego z 574 rozpoznanych plemion Ameryki Północnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rdzenna sztuka; komedia; plemię Dine'.