

Based in the ancient language of glyphs, the signs and symbols of ledger art are to be read and interpreted as language.

Critical Hermeneutics and Counter-Narratives of Ledger Art

Katie Fuller

Florida State University

Too often historical artworks in schools, textbooks, cultural institutions, and public spaces share a narrative that bolsters white-centered histories, but when an historical artwork is studied as text it creates room for multiple perspectives (Newfield, 2011), expanding the narrative to include subjugated histories. Looking at art through the philosophy of hermeneutics opens up questions and conflicts that arise within texts based on interpretations of those texts (Leonardo, 2003). This paper will apply the philosophy of hermeneutics to critique historical memory, and it will present ledger art as a visual text and counter-narrative to dominant white narratives. Ledger art emerged as an art form in the 19th century when Union troops traded accounting books with the Plains Indians. The storytelling aspects of contemporary ledger art provide opportunities for counter-narratives and ongoing acts of critical resistance. By engaging in inquiry and discourse with ledger art in the classroom, students learn to recognize how power structures attempt to erase contemporary Indigenous experiences and how ledger art can serve as a narrative and an ongoing act of critical resistance.

Keywords: critical hermeneutics, ledger art, counter-narrative, oral tradition, arts-based inquiry

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katie Fuller, doctoral student in the Department of Art Education at Florida State University in Tallahassee, at kgf19@my.fsu.edu.

The exhibition *Making American Taste: Narrative Art for a New Democracy* debuted at the New-York Historical Society in 2011, where, at the time, I worked as an educator. One of the paintings on view, titled, *The Last of the Race*, painted in 1847 by Tomkins Harrison Matteson, shows a family of five dressed in blankets, moccasins and the patriarch adorned in a feathered headdress, all indications that they are Indigenous to North America. They are huddled on a rock overlooking an ocean, and the man is looking out into the vastness of the horizon. The figures to his right face away from the water, one looking down with head resting on hands, and the other warily looking around. When leading school groups, I was instructed to ask students about the geography of the painting, where might these people be in the United States? Why is the father looking out into the distance but all we see is water? Why is the painting titled *The Last of the Race*? The questions that were not suggested as part of the education curriculum were: What was happening in the United States the year this was painted? How might the artist situate himself in regard to the people he painted? The exhibition title suggests that the paintings on view tell a story of what was considered American and what was considered tasteful art. What story is Matteson telling us through his depiction of this Indigenous family?

Artwork can be a form of literacy (Newfield, 2011). The language it speaks and the questions we ask of it can determine how moments, events, cultures, and peoples are regarded and remembered. Hermeneutics is a philosophy that looks specifically at questions that arise within texts and what conflicts occur within those texts based on interpretations (Leonardo, 2003). The texts we study and how we study them have far-reaching implications.

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The Last of the Race is one example of visual text with multiple interpretations, and it speaks to a larger narrative, how the United States depicts its Native history. I am concerned with what histories have been excluded from the story of the United States, especially the continued silencing of Indigenous peoples and what these omissions say about existing power structures and the language of white dominance. Contemporary Indigenous art serves as evidence of how United States power structures have perpetuated a misleading narrative of Native history. Contemporary ledger art is rooted in the past tradition of creating works on papers from old ledger books. These books were acquired by Plains Indians when Union troops stationed in the region used them as trade items. Artists, such as John Isaiah Pepion and Dolores Purdy, tell stories of resistance, resilience, and relevance through art pieces created using imagery from the present on historical texts, evidence that Native peoples are still here (Linn, 2016). This paper applies the philosophy of hermeneutics to critique historical memory by looking at how visual and written language has been used as a tool to maintain power structures that have attempted to erase contemporary Native stories, and it will contemplate how ledger art acts as a counter-narrative and an ongoing act of critical resistance.

On Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a philosophy that reflects upon the many variables of communication and meaning and is shaped by the contexts and writers who apply it. It has its origins in biblical scholarship (Kelley, 2015) because of the myriad interpretations the Bible inspires and a need to create a foundation for its teachings. Davey (2017) explained the study of hermeneutics as ongoing because understanding is ongoing;

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therefore, the study of hermeneutics is infinite. Hermeneutics considers authorship (Foucault, 1977), ideology (Leonardo, 2003), history, and culture (Roberge, 2011). A new perspective on the philosophy emerged in the twentieth century, with Heidegger and Gadamer using it to critique contemporary socio-political issues (Kelley, 2015). This relationship became central to how critical hermeneutics is used because it has the potential to find meaning between what is said and what is meant (Davey, 2017). Ricoeur, another important figure in modern hermeneutics, approached the philosophy through the distance, or conflict, between subject and object (Leonardo, 2003). This path of interpretation led Ricoeur to pursue the study of ideology as hermeneutics intrinsically bound to identity and culture (Roberge, 2011). This aspect of hermeneutics is especially important to consider when one culture seeks to overpower another, as if erasing it from the history books.

Paul Ricoeur on Ideologies and Interpretations

Ideologies are interpretations of history and culture, and they are authored, all factors that contribute to meaning making (Roberge, 2011). In other words, ideologies are designed through several interpretive factors. Since each of these influences are text based, ideology can also be understood as text. Ricoeur felt ideologies have the potential to shift when they are critically examined because historical narratives and cultures shift as our understandings of them evolve. For this reason, Ricoeur saw “text as a fulcrum between history and the author” (Leonardo, 2003, p. 331), between events as they happened and events as they have been documented. This could be interpreted as problematic when viewed through critical hermeneutics. The United States was founded on

a series of defining texts, described as such because of how they shaped the ideologies of the country. The U.S Declaration of Independence (US 1776) is a call to arms for independence from Britain’s colonial rule. The United States Constitution provides the laws of the country, and the Bill of Rights are the laws of the people. Ricoeur believed in language as a transformative tool (Kearney, 1988), and the language of these documents continue to shape the American narrative through their political and social influences. These documents have also been used as suppressive and oppressive tools, especially because of how they have been appropriated to push American ideologies into a largely Eurocentric mold of whiteness. Ricoeur refers to this as “a history taught, a history learned, but also a history celebrated” (Ricoeur, 2004/2006, p. 85). The histories presented in these founding documents also represent violence and oppression as, he suggests, most founding histories are achieved. The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence (US 1776, paragraph 2) is used to promote the promises of democracy as being free and equal. When we look at this document that celebrates the birth of democracy using critical hermeneutics, another perspective is revealed, one that proves intolerance and justification of the erasure of a people.

Critical Hermeneutics and Re-interpreting the Declaration of Independence

The United States celebrates Independence Day every year to commemorate the day the Declaration of Independence (US 1776) was signed. It is the de-facto founding document. The Preamble of this historic document is cited widely, specifically the lines, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created

equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (paragraph 2). These words encapsulate American ideologies of freedom, individualism, equality, and self-government, and as remembrance allows the dominant narrative to maintain its status (Ricoeur, 2004/2006). When this ideology is challenged, power structures ensure this historical narrative is upheld. Vattimo and Zabala (2011) wrote about framed democracy, a way of looking at history as complete, its writings and interpretations final. The inevitability of the construction of framed democracy is use of force for those in power to remain dominant. Yet, buried at the bottom of 27 grievances that follow the preamble of the U.S Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote, "He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions (sic)." (US 1776, paragraph 29) Both statements exist in the same document, yet only one of them is ubiquitous in American ideology. War and military skirmishes are rationalized because of framed democracy (Vattimo & Zabala, 2011), such as Jefferson's statement about the "merciless Indian Savages". Using critical hermeneutics, we begin to see how the language in the Preamble has been used to uphold the white dominant narrative and that the omission of Indigenous narratives is part of a larger intention to subjugate their lives and cultures.

The ideas espoused in the Declaration of Independence (US 1776) have been repeated so many times they have taken the form of fact. Critical hermeneutics looks at these seemingly

universal truths in this founding document and questions authorship, context, and outcome (Leonardo, 2003). Art and arts-based inquiry provides opportunities to challenge power structures (Newfield, 2011) through discourse and varied perspectives. When the 27th grievance is considered in relationship to the painting *The Last of the Race*, a narrative pattern of erasure emerges.

Critical Hermeneutics and Visual Literacy

Kögler (Rapko, 1998) believes that dialogue enables the potential for critical ideas. With this in mind, I revisit *The Last of the Race* and address how art, as a visual language, can be supported by critical hermeneutics. When reflecting on my time as a museum educator, I applied little critical discourse to the Matteson painting. Visual critical literacy requires me to look at what is not readily available, wonder why certain elements have been left out, and consider how these omissions reflect dominant power structures (Newfield, 2011). I thought I should invite students to consider the artist's role in developing the scene and the implications of the title, with questions like: How does this painting contribute to 19th century notions of the vanishing Indian, such as James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, published in 1826? These depictions controlled the narrative for white Americans, proclaiming erased cultures and peoples (Hurst Thomas, 2001). Newfield refers to a critical interpretation as reading against the text. Artwork of unidentified Native peoples created by a white artist in the 19th century that hangs in the oldest museum in New York City with a 20 dollar admission is weighed down by assumptions around dominant cultural narratives. Communication against the painting's more overt

Figure 1

Artist Unknown (1874). "A heavy battle in which more whites than Indians killed. Soldiers in hole." Image permission granted by Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, University of Texas at Austin.



implications open up discourse around colonial violence and Native resistance.

The Relationship Between Art and Critical Hermeneutics

Pairing the Preamble and the 27th grievance from the Declaration of Independence with *The Last of the Race* creates potential for an expansive discourse during which the audience is engaging with the events of the past and considering present interpretations of these events. Approaches could address the relationship between the artist and his subjects and whether a painting such as this is a primary or secondary source document. Applying critical hermeneutics to an historical painting and document may also reveal an unspoken

intentionality where the subject is subjugated by the artist or author and power imbalances emerge (Maitland, 2019). How does the painting connect with the Preamble, especially the lines that claim "all men are created equal"? How do the subjects in the painting fit into Jefferson's description of the "merciless Indian savages"? "Hermeneutics neither privatizes nor co-opts the Other's experience. It recognizes a small window of opportunity where two worlds do not necessarily agree but can mutually co-exist through the pane/pain of difference" (Leonardo, p. 340). A hermeneutic approach to interpretation does assume a mutual understanding but does not force a totally new interpretation. Art, like text, is interpretive, and it is made richer and more expansive by those

who dialogue with it. A new understanding should emerge, organically, through the many perspectives to consider. Applying a critical hermeneutical lens to visual literacy diminishes the existing, dominant interpretation that keeps Native arts, culture, and lived experiences stuck in that historical telling. If we take these ideas further, by using contemporary Native ledger art practices in comparison with their historical counterpart, a complex and multi-faceted ongoing narrative reveals itself.

Ledger Art: Moving Through Native History

Colonialism attempted to destroy Indigenous ontologies, including languages. Though this mission was successful in many ways, Native artists and authors subvert American writing styles by incorporating Indigenous thought into their works (Low, 2006). The English language does not communicate the totality of Native ideas, so language must be played with and reimaged. Ledger art is one such vehicle to assert Indigenous voices. Based in the ancient language of glyphs, the signs and symbols of ledger art are to be read and interpreted as language. The imagery originated on bark and animal hides. In 2016, the National Museum of the American Indian in Manhattan hosted an exhibition called *Unbound: Narrative Art of the Plains*, which was my initiation into the genre of ledger art. Art from the post-Civil War and Westward Expansion/Invasion era was displayed in context with contemporary ledger artists. The older pieces, created in nineteenth century ledger books Indigenous peoples possessed through trade (Low, 2006), displayed battles where the Union Army succumbed to the Plains nations (Brown, 2007). Unlike the imagery of *The Last of the Race*, the contemporary pieces in the exhibition totally upended notions of the dying

warrior of the past. Though they were also painted onto ledger paper, the vibrant images showed women carrying umbrellas and men on horseback making cell phone calls, as if exclaiming, "We are still here" (Linn, 2016). Low (2006), who is Cheyenne from Kansas, refers to ledger art as "vehicles of continuity" (p. 84), and they are primary source documents created by the people in and of the time period they are presenting, which makes them valuable historical texts as well as narrative artworks. When interpreted through critical hermeneutics, the art pieces relate to events and aspects of life rarely looked at in education settings. Ledger art emerged when Native lives were being transferred from independence to enclosed, fixed, and dependent, a time when Native culture was being erased by land seizures, massacres, and industrial boarding schools (Churchill, 2004). A work like the narrative from 1874 (Figure 1) becomes an essential counter-narrative to the history told and taught by dominant white institutions.

Critical Hermeneutics Applied to Ledger Art

Low (2006) explains the types of narratives ledger artists communicate in their imagery and in the text. She cites military confrontations, such as battles, skirmishes, and horse stealing to the more mundane social aspects of an Indian way of life under threat of extinction. In this section, I will use Low's writing to present the utility and storytelling of ledger art without inserting a personal interpretation of what I think the pieces mean. My voice represents the dominant white culture and has been heard too often when interpreting Indigenous stories. Indigenous nations are reclaiming their stories through decolonizing practices. Their voices should be centered in their storytelling, not mine (Lonetree,

2003). To look at these narratives critically, we must identify our subjectivities through gender identity, class, and race because of how these factors are embedded in any interpretation (Leonardo, 2003). Ricoeur referred to these interpretive biases as the 'anticipatory structure of understanding'" (Ricoeur as cited in Leonardo, p. 333). I will present the contents of the artwork and explain, through Low's writing and accompanying text, the relevance of these pieces to how art may be read as text. Then, by considering the artwork as text, re-examine it through critical hermeneutics.

Ledger Art as a Counter-Narrative to Whitewashed US History

Moving through the artwork chronologically, the drawing in Figure 1 includes text that reads, "A heavy battle in which more white than Indians killed. Soldiers in hole" and "Fight where half Indians killed." We see felled and cornered Union troops outnumbered and appearing to fight defensively. In a loose circle around the paper Indigenous men are on foot and on horseback, and their bodies are positioned towards the center of the paper. I am basing my identification of whom is Indigenous and who is a United States soldier based on the clothing each group is wearing. A limited interpretation might look at the positioning of the people and the evidence of violence and apply the label of "merciless Indian savages," but this assumption is a dominant perspective, not a critical one. Western thought has mandated interpretation to come from the top down, through experts at established institutions, such as universities, museums, law, and sciences (Campbell, 2012); therefore, interpretation is thought of as truth - not one aspect of what is, but the totality of it, leaving no room for difference. Critical hermeneutics pushes against this notion. What is

not known, and what becomes essential to the hermeneutic application is looking for what is not in the image. Low (2006) asserts the idea that "Each drawing in a ledger book is such an increment, the accumulation of moments in a multidimensional sequence. Stories remain suspended" (p. 96).

Ledger art follows the oral history tradition, one that is passed along generations and tells an overall story. The images are fragments or pieces of a larger story, not literal retellings. The artist of Figure 1 provided text that offers some concrete information, but the specifics of this 1874 encounter are unknown. The accompanying text from the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory, where this piece is archived, asserts the United States soldiers rarely fought defensively, so this scene is an unlikely reality. These are some aspects of what is known about the drawing and how it has been documented without challenging its narrative. To look at this work critically, biases must be acknowledged before looking into alternative messaging. The starting point for deconstructing the existing interpretation may be the interpretation itself. In other words, asking questions of the text creates possibilities because the questions raised work against the text. The text here applies to the drawing, the writing on the drawing, and the historian's interpretation and how it situates itself historically. An exploration based on Low's (2006) critique of ledger art as text might ask why the artist chose to document this moment, not the moment before or the moment after. Did the artist bear witness to the scene or learn of it as a story passed down from another source? What materials did the artist use and how might the materials contribute to the narrative of relationships between Plains Indians and United States military? In keeping with the

oral history tradition, what might the artist want to communicate to future generations? It is also important to challenge the Texas historian's statement regarding the soldiers' position in the drawing, such as how would he or she situate him or herself in the interpretation that claims soldiers rarely fought defensively. That statement communicates something about dominance and re-centers the narrative onto the white soldiers, making them seem too powerful to have found themselves in such a position. The fact that this drawing does depict a victory for the Native men in the scene addresses Low's claim of ledger art being a part of Indigenous historical accounts carried over from the oral tradition. Contemporary ledger art is the evidence of a rich, complicated, creative, thriving history, one that is still being written.

Dolores Purdy's painting (Figure 2) titled *The Road to Indian Market is Filled with Potholes* shows three blue, older model pick-up trucks splashed with greens and reds that may indicate rust and decay. Only two truck beds are visible, and both hold, what might be considered traditional Native artifacts. The history of the paper on which Purdy created this piece becomes a part of the narrative. We can only see three digits to indicate the paper is from the last decade of the 19th century. This clue means this artwork can teach us about the past, much like a material or textual artifact might teach us about the time in which it was created. Purdy, who is from the Caddo Nation, upends 19th century depictions of the vanishing Indian by positioning her characters in trucks. Educators might ask why Purdy chose trucks accented with rust and why the road is "filled with potholes". What might the potholes symbolize? Despite the potholes and rust, the trucks are still moving.

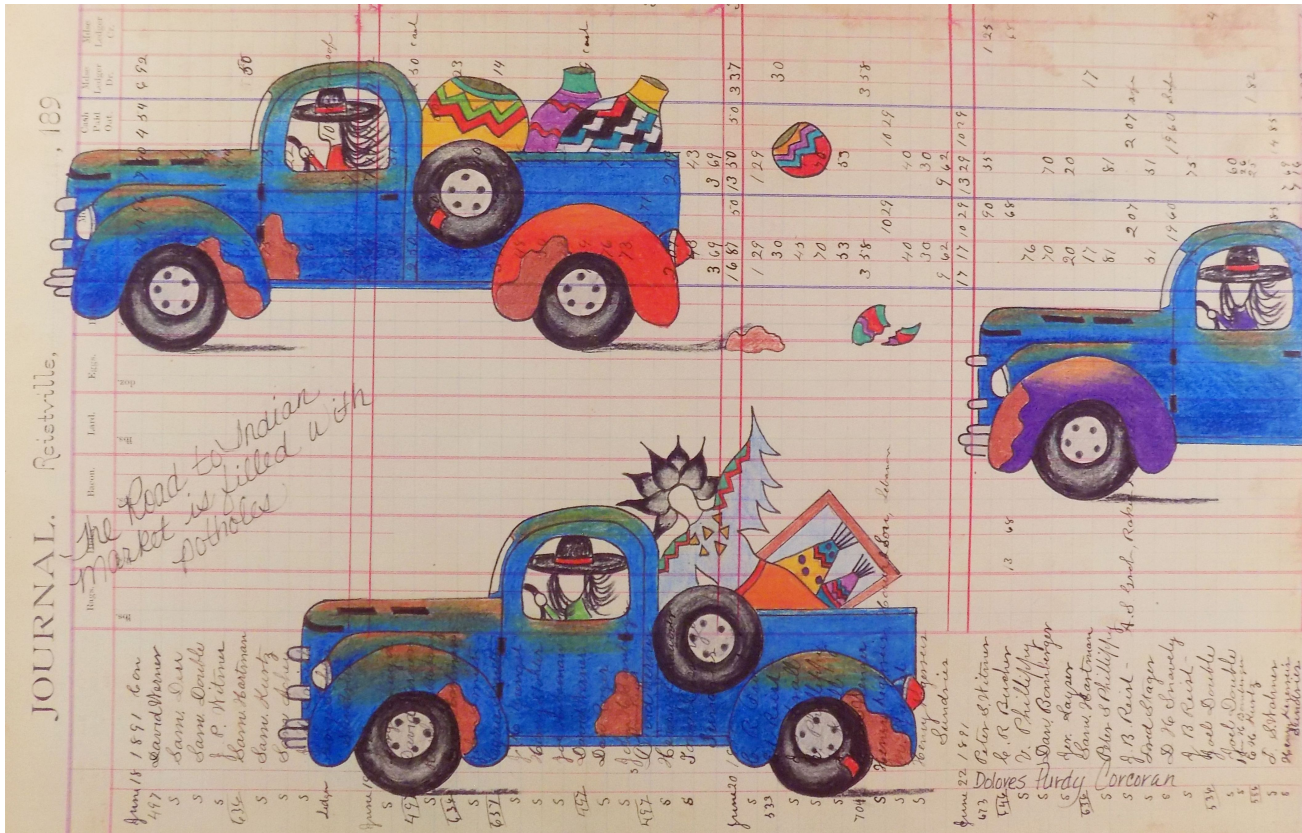
Low (2006) writes about how to read ledger art - the action flows from right to left - as shown in both works. In Purdy's painting, the trucks drive into the scene. This may make the audience wonder where the truck was before it entered the page and where it is going, supporting the notion of ledger art as a moment in an ongoing narrative. What is apparent is the driver of the truck is dressed differently from the men in the drawing from 1874 in Figure 1. All three drivers have long, straight, dark hair blowing through the open windows, and they are each wearing distinctive wide-brimmed hats. The truck beds are loaded with items, and a few have fallen out of one truck's bed. Based on the title, the drivers appear to be on their way to a market. This would leave me to believe they are going to sell these items. Another interpretation might suggest these are the same truck and driver depicted over time going to the market.

All of these indicators tell a story, but it is important to allow for the medium to speak and for the audience to ask questions of it, as opposed to imposing their interpretations. Low speaks of Indigenous authorship as different from storytelling in Western literature. Ledger art narratives are intertwined with oral histories, traditions, and communities: "the drawings served as a mnemonic device; explicit features were not needed since they would be described in the detailed narrative" (Horse Capture & Horse Capture, 2001, p. 21). This is true of the two examples, and becomes even more noticeable in John Isaiah Pepion's work, (Figure 3).

Ledger art reveals scenes from people's lives. In the past, the stories dealt with warring with United States' military over land rights. Contemporary ledger art scenes depict lived experiences, showing Indigenous peoples in trucks instead of on horseback about to sell their

Figure 2

Dolores Purdy (2012). *The Road to Indian Market is Filled with Potholes*. Image included with permission of the artist.



handmade goods instead of trading them, and the title of the work provide much of the insight.

Deconstructing the scene in Figure 2 may involve us asking if these items are for sale, and who might be buying them. What do the trucks tell us about the sellers or the artist? Why is each truck close to identical in make and model, and from where are they driving? This drawing is especially interesting as a counter-narrative to 19th century portrayals of Indigenous lives because of the independence these drivers display. Artworks like *The Last of the Race* depict a dying people, but these Indians are in trucks not on foot or on horseback. They will make

money selling goods unique to their cultures, a sovereign people. Derrida revealed how the line of inquiry one chooses reveals the desired truth, and that truth, once reached, is fixed (Campbell, 2016). This is why students should engage in discourse and inquiry with the artwork. Who will buy these pieces? Will potential buyers devalue the labor by haggling, exploiting the sellers' need to sell? Will the pieces be on display in a mansion where they will become exoticized? The narrative continues well after the market and can be pulled in so many directions. What truths will students reveal when in dialogue with the artwork? Contemporary ledger art may also deal with socio-political issues of the day, which, as a

result of colonialism, are many. One example of this offers insight into how the system of mass incarceration is affecting Native lives.

A terrifying statistic published by the Roosevelt Institute at Cornell shows that Native men under the age of 25 make up 70% of incarcerated youth in federal-run prisons, making them all the more vulnerable to be incarcerated in adult prisons (*Native Lives Matter*, 2015). *Holding On: Women are the Backbone* (Figure 3) by John Isaiah Pepion directly confronts this issue by painting on paper with a heading that reads "United States Penitentiary". Centered on the paper is a woman with no facial features; she may be intentionally anonymous or ubiquitous, leaving possibility for past and future narrations. It looks like the subject

is holding a photograph of a man standing behind prison bars. The subtitle to the painting reads, "Always holding us up. Holding our pictures while we are imprisoned. Will we ever be free?" Pepion has shared an image of continuity, like the previous two examples, but the continuity is not in the movement, nor in the

implied question of what happens next in the scene, but in a continuous cycle of systemic oppression. The woman may be faceless because of shame, or, as mentioned before, to allow the story to evolve with each telling. I wonder if the

lack of features are symbolical of how widespread the problem of Indigenous incarceration is but how little it is addressed in larger conversations about mass incarceration. Pepion asks a question within the work's title: "Will we ever be free?" This question circles back to Thomas Jefferson and the shaping of American ideologies. "Naming the specifics of the difficult history of U.S.-Indian relations, Native

Figure 3

John Isaiah Pepion, (2020). Holding On: Women are the Backbone. Image included with permission of the artist.



people and communities can begin to frame their history within the context of colonization" (Lonetree, 2012, p. 125). As I established earlier, European descendants wrote the story of the United States through their experiences as colonizers and with an ideology of white European supremacy. A critical

interpretation of Pepion's painting would consider this legacy as part of its continual narrative. What happened historically to Native men to cause mass incarceration in the present day? What would need to happen to imagine a different future? When I read the title of the painting and think about the moments in this undistinguishable woman's life that have led to this one moment Pepion expresses, I wonder if the artist chose to leave her face blank because the ideologies and practices of the United States continue to render Native women as invisible.

Conclusion

Contemporary Native art is rewriting the dominant white historical narrative by challenging depictions of bygone eras, such as in *The Last of the Race*, by centering themselves in contemporary life. Ledger art claims space through specific visual and written texts that show movement from the past through the present and into undetermined futures. Contemporary ledger artists use the historical medium to invert notions of erasure while also keeping with the historical practice of oral storytelling traditions. When critically examined as text, depth of meaning begins to emerge.

This is why critical hermeneutics provides an important contribution to how we read ledger art as text and consider what it might teach us about the past and present. Challenging what we think we know through inquiry and discourse allows for multiple interpretations to reveal new meanings, confronting previous ideas of historical content as factual and finite and creating space for inclusive futures. The discourse that emerges from art-based inquiry expands epistemologies and leads us towards reaching mutual understandings.

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