

In a Native Key: Shelley Niro's Revisioning of the Baroque Suite Form in *Suite: Indian* (2005)

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This paper argues that *Suite: Indian*, a 2005 film by Shelley Niro (Mohawk), critiques Euroamerican art that exploits non-specific "Indian" materials to represent allegedly "universal" themes. In particular, this essay will explore how Niro's film critiques Edward MacDowell's 1896 *Second Suite*, frequently called the *Indian Suite*, an orchestral piece that MacDowell claims is based upon Native music and that is still played today. Even her title, *Suite: Indian*, reverses MacDowell's *Indian Suite* and Niro continues to counteract his vagueness by rooting her film in the culture of the Mohawk Nation as well as the larger Haudenosaunee culture (commonly but incorrectly known as the Iroquois Confederacy).

One aspect of Niro's work that sets it against MacDowell and other exploitative artists is her "communitist" commitment to a specific Native community, which models such engagement to others and helps combat the appropriation of Native cultures. Jace Weaver has coined the term "communitist" in relation to Native literature; he says "literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community" (xviii). Although Niro works in film and photography rather than literature, her work, especially *Suite: Indian*, is decidedly communitist. In the "Prelude" section of her film, Niro showcases contemporary artisans as well as Santee Smith, a dancer and choreographer, who are all not only Mohawk but also from Niro's own community, the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. Throughout this film, Niro expresses the need for creative output by Native peoples in order to survive, as the final line of her prelude declares.

As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn notes, "American writers have never hesitated to plunge into literary fields of exotic origin and call them their own," and American composers have a similar history (59). One of the most striking examples of how Niro reworks MacDowell is in her commitment to depicting and speaking to a very specific audience, while MacDowell exploited Native musical materials to speak to a Euroamerican audience. Between 1890 and 1925, so-called "Indianist" composers – American but, to a man, not Native – used Native songs and melodies in their compositions. This Native musical material was made available to MacDowell and others through the work of musicologists who studied various Native peoples. Especially important was the work of musicologist Theodore Baker, who collected Native songs for his doctoral dissertation at the University of Leipzig in the late 1880s. Michael Pisani notes that although Baker's work is certainly flawed by today's standards, it was at the time a step in the right direction for trained musicologists to "dispel the notion that Indian music was little more than noise and war whoops" (166). According to Tara Browner (Choctaw), professor of ethnomusicology, Baker's work, though pioneering, "used a German musicological

methodology layered over a non-Western repertory” and “contained little tribal-specific cultural information” (266).

MacDowell used Native musical materials transcribed by Baker in similar ways by not recognizing the need for using the materials in cultural context. As Francis Brancaleone asserts:

Though MacDowell was clearly interested in Native cultures (his curiosity about Indians had led him to Baker in the first place), he saw Indian melodies as exotic raw materials that expressed shared universal human emotions, not as products created from a specific musical tradition with its own aesthetics. (270)

Browner asserts that MacDowell’s *Indian Suite* is representative of his typical use of Native musical materials: not only is he extremely vague concerning tribal sources, but he also uses what she calls a “cut-and-paste” approach to adaptation, which nullifies any contextual or cultural specificity the source material once had.

MacDowell’s suite is in five movements, “Legend,” “Love Song,” “In War Time,” “Dirge,” and “Village Festival,” while Niro’s film has nine movements, each set off from the next by a fade to black. There are a number of correspondences between them in which Niro rewrites MacDowell’s work from a Native point of view. One of the main differences is MacDowell’s lack of specificity which is highlighted by Niro’s commitment to context. Gardner asserts that MacDowell “played Indian” by fantasizing about other times and cultures to escape his modern lifestyle; in addition to Native American cultures, MacDowell was also interested in Celtic mythology and the Arthur legends. As Gardner points out:

The idealized concept of Native American life portrayed in the *Suite* served a similar imaginative function as the Celtic poetry and natural phenomena that inspired many of MacDowell’s other works. These romantic tropes allowed MacDowell and his listeners to take refuge from the modern world that had begun to trouble them. (371)

MacDowell, following the cultural evolution theory, thought that because Indigenous peoples were at a “lower” level of development, their cultures “existed in the present as representatives of the European past” (Browner 270). Thus, it would not have struck MacDowell as jarring to conflate Arthuriana or Celtic mythology with Native cultures, as he did, for instance, in his *Second Sonata* (Browner 272). MacDowell’s work is stunningly non-specific about the Native cultures he exploits.

MacDowell’s suite begins with “Legend,” which “invok[es] a mythological past, filled with noble horn calls and wide-open string lines that portray a pure, unobstructed landscape” (Gardner 377). This movement refers to no specific legends or figures and instead is more of a tribute to the “wildness” and “freedom” of the landscape as well as the “Indians” themselves. Michael Pisani argues that MacDowell’s portrait of Indian life

in the *Suite* takes poetic sagas such as Longfellow's *Hiawatha* as its model and hits upon familiar stereotypes that would have appealed to its audience:

The first movement depicts Indian life in the wilderness, the second movement ... a wooing scene. The third movement, which ends on a tragic note, implies war and devastation, and the fourth ('Dirge') suggests the mourning for one or more fallen soldiers. The final movement, a village celebration (for the victors?), seems to conform to Oliver LaFarge's description of a 'scalp dance': light and fast footwork, cheerful 'and often beautiful' songs, and the 'rapid beat of a drum.' (qtd. in Gardner 409).

As Joe Lockard explains, however, Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" was also, like MacDowell and Baker's work, inaccurate, stereotyped, and an amalgam of decontextualized "Native" ideas worked over by Euroamerican methods and forms. Lockard further notes that "the poem's epic color, form, and meter were taken from the Finnish national epic 'Kalevala,'" itself an assemblage, which only reached Longfellow after a translation into German (110). Like his Longfellow model, MacDowell's work is a non-specific amalgamation that is at least as much Euroamerican as Native, if not considerably more.

Like MacDowell, Niro begins with a "Prelude" that calls upon the past for its material; her historical figures, however, are tribally and culturally particular. As Niro herself is Mohawk, she calls upon that cultural background. Hiawatha and Peacemaker, both featured in her film, are themselves figures from Haudenosaunee history: they traveled among the nations that would become the League of the Haudenosaunee, spreading the "Great Law of Equity" (Engelbrecht 130). Specifically, the film opens with a voice-over narrator relating that Hiawatha was in deep despair as the film shows him walking along the shore of a body of water and collapsing. The voice over then describes how Hiawatha looks at the sky, unthinking, until he notices hard shell clam shells around him, which he gathers, makes into beads, and strings. Peacemaker appears and holds the beads to Hiawatha's forehead to ease his pain.

Although Niro introduces Hiawatha and Peacemaker in her film, she does not explain their history. An audience member who is familiar with Haudenosaunee culture would instantly recognize them and be reminded of the immense change and renewal they brought. Those unfamiliar with this history, on the other hand, would be confused and, if anything, reminded of the Longfellow poem, which would not help the viewer understand Niro's point, which refers to the historical reality of Hiawatha and Peacemaker. Niro's film, then, addresses itself to a Native audience, or at least an audience aware of Haudenosaunee history and culture.

In addition to not explaining the historical significance of Hiawatha or Peacemaker, Niro alludes to a number of aspects of Haudenosaunee history and culture without explaining them explicitly. For instance, the voice-over notes that Hiawatha began collecting quahog shells and making beads from them, which he then strung. Nowhere does Niro explain that wampum was made from quahog shells and that

Hiawatha was an influential creator of wampum belts. Engelbrecht notes that the oral tradition indicates that wampum was used in ceremonies to bind the members of the Haudenosaunee League together and became a symbol of Hiawatha and Peacemaker's message (132). In fact, Hiawatha and wampum are still central to Mohawk and Haudenosaunee identity: the flag of the League of the Haudenosaunee is based on the Hiawatha wampum. Thus, unlike MacDowell, who privileges Euroamerican hearers of his piece, Niro addresses a Native audience who would recognize these historical figures as culturally specific.

Finally, the voice-over narrator ends Niro's "Prelude" by noting that "Haudenosaunee life began and remained alive through a need to express oneself in creativity," which is a key idea in the film. Like a musical suite, Niro's "Prelude" is short and introduces the major ideas that will be developed throughout, including the need for creative self expression as a means of survival. These themes are then developed in different keys and tempos throughout the rest of the work, just as a musical suite would do.

After this brief beginning, the "Prelude" moves on to a longer section depicting many Haudenosaunee artisans performing culturally significant tasks. These artists are expressing themselves and their culture through their work: Christine Skye makes cornbread; Ken Maracle makes a wampum belt; Lorna Thomas Hill does bead work; Vince Bomberry carves; Bunny Doxtater makes corn husk dolls; and, finally, Sam Thomas makes moccasins. Each of these artists display the finished product at the end of his or her segment. This section has no voice-over and the only information offered is the artists' names at the beginning of each segment. These activities are traditional and have much cultural weight. The Haudenosaunee have been cultivating and consuming corn bread (and other dishes) and making corn husk dolls from time immemorial. In fact, the origin of corn use and the origin of the early Haudenosaunee tribes and nation are "closely linked in traditional narrative," and anthropologists have found indications of extensive corn use as early as the sixth century (Engelbrecht 22). Likewise, wampum and beadwork have been central cultural tasks since before the beginning of the League. Stone and clay pipes have long been worked with designs and effigies – both human and animal – for generations; effigy pipes, in particular, "became increasingly common after the fifteenth century" (Engelbrecht 55).

Not only are these artists expressing their culture, but they are expressing themselves through their choice of materials, designs, and innovations. Such creative innovations have long have a place in Haudenosaunee culture; Ron LaFrance describes the process of adapting Haudenosaunee voices to new sounds from various cultures as well as the incorporation and innovation of new dances from other Native groups into the Haudenosaunee dance repertoire in recent years (29).

MacDowell, on the other hand, was specifically trying to avoid innovative Native songs, especially when composing his first movement, "Legend." According to Gardner, "Legend" is based on an Iroquois harvest song that Baker transcribed. Baker described the song as a particularly ancient one, and he further noted that the "Indian's aversion to

innovations, and his sturdy persistence in customs sanctified by time, are never more clearly apparent than in everything that concerns his religious music” (qtd. in Gardner 378). Thus, Baker believed that the song had changed little, which made the song particularly attractive to MacDowell, as Gardner notes, because he was attempting to represent a mythological past.

One of the clearest examples of how Niro’s film responds to MacDowell is her emphasis on blending tradition with innovation, which MacDowell assiduously avoided; the artists in her “Prelude” blend tradition with new ways of working. For instance, Christine Skye makes her cornbread flour with an electric grinder rather than a hand grinder or a corn pounder. While the activity and product are traditional, she has updated her tools, as have all the other artists as well. For instance, Bunny Doxtater uses needle-nosed pliers to shape her corn husk dolls and Ken Maracle uses electric tools in creating his wampum beads. Niro chose to showcase artists who blend traditional activities with new technologies because she is committed to depicting Haudenosaunee culture, one aspect of which is a long history of updating traditions to reflect the changing world. In the late 18th century, a Seneca prophet named Handsome Lake created a new way of continuing Haudenosaunee culture while also adapting to a changing world. He spread this “great good word,” which is practiced still today. Such a focus on preserving core cultural activities and values while adapting to a changing world certainly is shown by the artists in *Suite: Indian* and by Niro herself.

Although Niro doesn’t comment explicitly about this, her choice of Native artists who are engaged in traditional activities and who use newer tools also speaks to her own role. Niro, as a Native filmmaker herself, is engaging in a traditional activity, storytelling, while using updated tools to do so. As Carol Kalafatic argues, for Native women, storytelling as a cathartic experience should be continuous because, as she quotes Loretta Todd, “words carry the culture” (113). Storytelling for these three directors has become a way of life and helps “exorcise the colonizer” (113). Filmmaking is a way of constructing new stories. Niro’s film helps exorcise the colonizer by reversing the typical pattern of cultural co-optation by using a Euroamerican art form in order to further Native agendas and to showcase Haudenosaunee creativity.

While this essay has suggested that Niro has turned the tables, so to speak, and has reversed the direction of cultural co-optation, I’d like to end by arguing that Niro is not haphazard in her choice of materials and forms to colonize. The suite form is perhaps one of the Euroamerican artistic structures most amenable to articulating a “we” rather than simply an “I.” As crafted by Niro, *Suite: Indian* refuses the notion of an *auteur* filmmaker whose stamp on a film is unmistakable and individual. Rather, Niro makes room in her film for a number of artists, both the artists in the “Prelude,” as well as the extensive showcasing of Santee Smith’s dancing and choreography in the last several movements of the film. As such, her film is not simply the work of an individual artist, but a collaboration of Mohawk artists who all articulate various expressions of Mohawk and Haudenosaunee culture and survivance.

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