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Skateboarding and Indigenous Education

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Introduction

This chapter aims to demonstrate how skateboarding can function as a site of Indigenous education. Theorizing the social practice of Apache Skateboards through seminal and emerging literature on Indigenous education, this chapter aims to illuminate the informal, collective and embodied dimensions of place-based and culturally sustaining modes of teaching and learning that are difficult to encapsulate in classrooms. Indigenous education refers to an approach to teaching and learning that engage traditional and cultural knowledge systems and teaching methods to preserve Native languages, lands and lifeways. Indigenous education is an integral component of self-determination, sovereignty and resistance, as it holistically prepares community members to confront, analyse and address Indigenous communities' historical contexts, contemporary conditions and future aspirations. Generally speaking, the relational perspectives and collectivistic goals of Indigenous education depart from Western conceptions of educational attainment, which centre individual success within extractive economies or the acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake (Cross, Pewewardy and Smith 2019). Indigenous education thus refers to a vast array of pedagogical efforts to foster reparation, reciprocity, connectedness, balance, healing, the rematriation of stolen lands and the resurgence of Indigenous lifeways upon those lands. This chapter deepens scholarship on Indigenous education by examining the ways in which Indigenous communities have utilized skateboarding to advance tribal sovereignty, anti-colonial resistance and Indigenous futurity.

The first section of this chapter will anchor it thematically by examining the resonances between scholarship on skateboarding and Indigenous education. Literature that frames skateboarding as an emancipatory form of learning is deepened by an understanding of skateboarding's broader socio-cultural and -political significance, as it serves creates a new context for expressing Indigenous knowledge and anti-colonial resistance. The subsequent section applies this analytical framework to a reflection on the art and work of Apache Skateboards to show how skate pedagogy can help enrich our understanding of how Indigenous education is practiced in real time and in real life.

Skate Pedagogy

To foreground the discussion that follows, I clarify that *skate pedagogy* refers to the educative dimension of skateboarding culture. Skate pedagogy entails the iterative and entangled physical and cognitive processes involved in learning to ride a skateboard. Skate pedagogy also involves the process of learning skateboarding's values, which broadly prioritize autonomy, rebelliousness, anti-authoritarianism and an anarchic understanding of who gets to define, use and control public space. Skateboarding, however, exists in relation to dominant culture, and institutionalized versions of skateboarding, like competitive, Olympic, and trick skateboarding are critiqued for the ways in which they allow skateboarding to adhere to rules, standards, protocols, gender binaries, nationalism and capitalism. Such impositions can be externally mandated by corporations, advertisers and governing bodies, but they can also be policed by skaters who insist that competitions (and skateboarding itself) should be adjudicated according to pedantic precepts. When placed in conversation with Indigenous education, skate pedagogy can also help us understand how Indigenous philosophies of education can be practiced in dynamic and unexpected ways. To conduct such an analysis, however, requires an overview of Indigenous education and the philosophical literature that underpins its practice.

Skate Pedagogy, Indigenous Education and Indigenous-rooted Direct Action

In his seminal work *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*, Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete's (1994) foundational characteristics of Indigenous education 'wherever and however it has been expressed' (29). These include:

- the view that Nature is integral to all aspects of education,
- that all learning takes place in relationship,
- that pedagogic processes must assure reciprocity between people and all our human and non-human relations,
- that Indigenous languages contain sacred expressions of truth and must be revitalized and incorporated into all learning activities
- that art is a means of connecting people with their inner life force and ancestral vitality
- that learning unfolds within an 'authentic context of community and nature'
- that individual aspirations and talents are integrated with communal needs, protocols, and values
- that meaningful learning occurs through a process of observing, doing, participating, and reflecting
- that there is no separation between mind, body, and spirit
- that '*Story*, expressed through experience myth, parables, and various forms of metaphor' is integral to Indigenous forms of learning
- that learning requires a scaffolding in upscaling in which knowledge is refined and iterated, but 'the basics are always honored'

- and that everyone, regardless of age, status, or ability is always and already a teacher and a learner (see Cajete 1994, 29–30).

Cajete's (1994) foundational characteristics describe a vision for teaching and learning that he argues are not only applicable to all Indigenous communities but are also necessary for the maintenance of a just and sustainable world. Notably, this vision stands in opposition to the orthodoxies of Western schooling, which has historically relied upon the separation of individuals from communities, knowledge from experience, bodies and minds and civilization from nature to prepare young people for a putatively productive life within industrialized capitalism (Giroux 2001).

Haudenosaunee scholar Sandra Styres (2017) explains that Indigenous perspectives on education eschew competition and the pathologization of difference in favour of a circular and reparative process of (re)cognizing, (re)generating, (re)centring and (re)membering. Eschewing reduction to linear processes, Indigenous education is an unceasing experience in which community members (re)cognize the importance of storytelling, traditional teachings, and embodied experience in order to (re)member that our very selves are constituted in relation. Our relations are moreover deepened through observation, modelling, community involvement, and listening to our elders. Indigenous education also (re)centres our engagement with the lands that birth these knowledge systems in order to (re)generate dynamic understandings of our entangled relationship with (and responsibility to) nature and the spirit world, thus sustaining balanced and harmonious ecologies that extend in all directions and dimensions.

While their ideological aims and pedagogic strategies shift according to historic and geographic contexts, Indigenous education initiatives often share overlapping aims. One overarching aim is to resist Eurocentrism while acknowledging the inherent sovereignty of Indigenous, oppressed and colonized peoples. Another is the resurgence of Indigenous teaching, ways of being, modes of governances, and understandings of community, the environment and the self. While every Indigenous community will have distinct understandings of the concepts and collective strategies for pursuing these goals, it is important to note that Indigenous philosophies reflect different ontological and epistemological foundations from non-Indigenous philosophies of education, including those that espouse equity, criticality and social justice. Centring Indigenous knowledge eschews the assimilative mandate of belonging within extractive systems in favour of building reciprocal and sustainable worlds in which many worlds fit (Cadena 2015; Pewewardy, Lees and Minthorn 2022). Indigenous education's emphasis on place-based learning enables communities to heal according to the original instructions provided to them by the land and their ancestors, facilitating braided kinship relations between peoples. Bringing skate pedagogy into conversation with Indigenous education, in turn, helps us understand the depth, dynamism and contemporaneity of Indigenous knowledge systems, showing how (re)cognizing, (re)generating, (re)centring and (re)membering those original instructions of sustainability, healing, balance, connectedness, resiliency, respect and critique can help us sustain our communities without mediation, charity or force.

Scholars of Indigenous education have continued to identify an ongoing need to theorize Indigenous education in ways that are not tied to schooling and formal instruction, given the colonial provenance of classroom-based and teacher-centred pedagogies that predominate educational practice (see Ormiston 2019). Diné artist, activist, land defender and ancestor

Klee Benally's (2023) reflections on the pedagogic nature of Indigenous-Rooted Direct Action (IRDA) reflect this need for a deepened understanding of Indigenous education's multitudinous forms:

IRDA directly challenges and disrupts the ideas, institutions, and behaviors that maintain colonial power. IRDA is about directly (*without a mediating entity*) asserting and maintaining Indigenous lifeways and power to inform and shape the relationships and narratives that impact our ways of being.

(Benally 2023, 167, emphasis added)

Benally's (2023) further explains that IRDA, unlike non-Indigenous anarchism, is not underpinned by analyses of class struggle or anti-capitalist ideologies. IRDA instead emanates from and is accountable to the Diné concept of *k'é*, or the actively maintained kinship ties that bring balance and reciprocity to all of our relations (Romero and Yellowhorse 2021). Embedded in this assertion is that Indigenous modes of collective liberation will necessarily emerge out of responsible and reciprocal relationships with community and nature, making it impossible to meaningfully *teach* IRDA in a decontextualized environments like a classroom or even activist workshops (except as an object of ponderance).

Like IRDA, skate pedagogy defines learning not as the memorization of facts but the embodied learning processes that emerge out of acts of courageous engagement with community, nature, and ourselves. Echoing Benally's insistence that IRDA 'facilitates warrior morale and power for fighting forward and back' (168), learning to skate requires thinking analytically and iteratively while persevering through constant physical, mental and emotional adversity. Skaters regularly drill the same techniques for years, and competency only comes from sustaining high level of effort and attention over prolonged periods and even lifetimes (Willing et al. 2019). The physical education of skateboarding also tends to upscale towards political awakenings, as the self-directed impetus of skate pedagogy instils the community's 'most cherished values' (Kassel 2016). These values include orientations towards an appreciation for consent and bodily autonomy and healthy scepticism towards all forms of authority and imposition, whether they take the form of a police officer, a teacher, a tricky obstacle or an imposing hill (Beal 1995; Chiu 2009; Lombard 2010).

Skate pedagogy reflects Cajete's (1994) contention that Indigenous education centres observation and doing, as its divergent ways of knowing emerge largely in the absence of instruction. While formal skateboarding lessons exist, skaters largely learn to skate *by skating*, and they come to embody the subculture's values through their interactions with one another along with the built and natural environments, other skaters and the regimes of regulation that map the contours of dominant culture. Indigenous skaters, onto-epistemologically, cannot be dismissed as uncritically reacting to external stressors or rebelling against oppressive circumstances. Rather, they call attention to the iteratively unfolding decolonizing education that develops when they take unmediated action to contest dominant colonial power relations and the politics of place. Still, theorizations of skateboarding that portray it solely as a rebellious act overlook the fact that the ultimate purpose of skateboarding is simply to *have fun*. Using the liberatory praxis of Apache Skateboards as an analytical point of departure, the next section aims to contribute another foundation of Indigenous education – that it too can be fun.

Apache Skateboards as Indigenous Education

Apache Skateboards is the world's first Native American-founded skateboarding company, founded by San Carlos Apache and Akimel O'odham artist Douglas Miles Sr, and his son, professional skateboarder Douglas Miles Jr. Apache Skateboards promotes a skate culture whose legitimacy is derived not from the state but from the entangled relationships between people, matter and land. The entanglement of skateboarding and Indigenous ontology is showcased in *The Mystery of Now*, a documentary on the history of Apache Skateboards. In addition to tracing the growth of skate culture in Apacheria, the film introduces audiences to the educative settings that uplift Indigenous ways of knowing and being through skate culture. *The Mystery of Now* situates Miles' work with Apache Skateboards within the broader collective endeavour of securing the rematriation of Indigenous lands and the preservation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Alfred and Corntassel 2005).

Historically native to Southern Arizona, the Apache Nation was forcibly exiled and removed to reservations as a result of the US military invasion of their land in the late 1800s. But displacement and genocide have not diluted the Apache sense of kinship with their lands, which becomes more intricate over time (Laluk 2017). An Apache skateboarder skating on Apache land is an outward manifestation of the right relationships that emerge out of interconnected agencies. This respect for the unfolding bond between land and human vitality underpins Miles' art and is printed on every Apache Skateboards deck:

When I look out at San Carlos, I see the power of the past. I see
the way Native American people resurrected themselves and why.
Because the land is forever. And when you realize the land is
forever you realize you are forever. We are forever.

(Buchanan 2019, n.p.)

Now in its third decade, Apache Skateboards combines skateboarding, art and community building to dynamically practice and preserve Apache knowledge while affording varied educational, economic, creative and pro-social opportunities to Native youth. Apache Skateboards began when Doug Jr. began skateboarding as a teenager but noticed a lack of Indigenous representation in commercial skate culture, apart from a small number of boards bearing harmful and stereotypical artwork. Activating his artistic training and repertoire, Doug Sr. sought to address this lack to paint and design custom skateboards for his son and other Indigenous skaters. Over the next twenty years, Apache Skateboards would grow their operations to include consulting on the design and construction of skateparks throughout Indian country. They also embarked on public health, voter registration and public education campaigns, along with supporting Indigenous youth in developing skills in filmmaking, photography, marketing, social media and art. Apache Skateboards also founded the Apache Skate Team, the world's first all-Native crew of professional skaters. Miles' art combines themes of Indigenous resurgence with bright colours, warm textures and human figures in perpetual motion. Taken together, Miles' work defies the anthropological gaze and the settler imaginaries that are often brought to bear on the collection, exhibition and production of Native American art. Miles' joyfully radical negation of colonial conquest, cultivated in part

through his deep enmeshment with skateboarding culture, assails stereotypes of Indigeneity as unidimensionally stoic, aggrieved and encased in amber.

Skateboard decks and other *merch* (like keychains, T-shirts, sweatshirts and stickers) can serve as powerful material and documentary attestations of the subculture's values and aesthetics. Merch and decks comprise some of the key curricular tools of anti-colonial skate pedagogy. Decks, hoodies, T-shirts and stickers bear slogans like *Skate and Destroy* and *Skate or Die* accompany drawings of monsters, aliens and grotesqueries like Santa Cruz's screaming hand logo. Apache decks, shirts and stickers pay similar homage to the anarchic preoccupations of skate culture's prevailing aesthetic but augment the assertions of Indigenous sovereignty and existence. The brand's most recognizable board, recently featured in an exhibition at the Phoenix Arts Museum, combines a historic photo of Apache warriors, with a grinning Apache skull, and a prescient reminder: *You're Skating on Native Land*.

Many of Miles' other designs – like *Apache Presidents* (inspired by the Hughes Brothers' seminal heist film, *Dead Presidents*) and *Apache Skateboards Is a Love Machine* (which blithely winks toward 'Love Machine' The Miracles) – highlight his appreciation for Black creatives and communities. These works showcase how anticolonial skate pedagogy might inform horizontal solidarity building, thus defying the racial technologies of categorization and segregation imposed on nonwhite peoples under the rubrics of colonial statecraft. Apache's Skateboards artistic catalogue can be appreciated as a congealment of reflection, practice, community-building and agency – material testimonies to the complex educative processes in which individuals and collectives critique conditions rooted in cultural genocide before asserting their vitality and survival in direct and intentional ways. In other words, Miles founded Apache Skateboards as a means of connecting Apache understandings of the interconnectedness of human beings and nature, or what Styres (2019) terms *literacies of Land*, with the contemporary priorities of Apache youth, or their need for 'access to goods and services like everyone else' (Buchanan 2019, n.p.).

Miles' own analysis of decolonization reminds scholars and skaters that resisting colonial imposition requires an understanding that the front line is everywhere, not only in the classroom:

There are a lot of ways to talk about decolonization. The word decolonization is really just a fancy way to talk about the deconstruction and/or disruption of old and tired systems ... you know, [systems] that don't have much diversity – like skateboarding, they need a brand like Apache Skateboards to talk about that. And we're not just diversity, we're not checking a box – this is our life.

Apache Skateboards' work does not aspire to the crude and fleeting gains associated with profit-generation, representational balance or purporting to liberate peoples' minds by introducing them to academic jargon. Rather, the mission of Apache Skateboards emerges out of the celebration of Indigenous autonomy and is actively accountable to the needs of Indigenous communities. While Apache Skateboards' ongoing practice began and remains grounded in the San Carlos Apache reservation, it has since expanded to enfold all of Indian country and other communities of colour. The rhizomatic and relational nature of Apache Skateboards' anti-colonial skate pedagogy

accordingly demonstrates how fragmented communities can bond over shared experiences and agitate together towards collective liberation.

As Apache Skateboards becomes more visible to academic audiences and non-Indigenous communities, Miles has noted the need to assert authorial vigilance over how the organization is perceived. Miles warns academics, gallery owners and white-owned skateboarding companies against reducing the organization's impact to victim-centred narratives or as purely recreational. As such, we cannot understand Apache Skateboards simply as a skateboarding company – it is a comprehensive and multi-faceted creative movement rooted in responsibility to Indigenous communities. To this, Miles states:

Due to its love affair with Eurocentricity, academia is oblivious to why Apache Skateboards is important. They can't conceive how Apaches in community could lead, create, build impact on Indian country outside of academia, media or 501 C-3 culture (for 20 years).

Pale attempts to whitewash or exclude our contribution to art, community and culture in favor of gimmickry, trend or spectacle is apparent. We make observations too: Academia doesn't make new cultural shifts, we do.

At the same time, Apache Skateboards cannot be pigeonholed as a narrow operation that serves a comparatively small community. Apache Skateboards' diverse team represent numerous Indigenous nations along with gender identities and ages, effectively negating the stereotype that skateboarding is a subculture that belongs solely to the disaffected white men that populate the casts of popular media like *Jackass*. In Miles' words, 'I decolonized the skate industry. We wanted to create a brand that Indigenous kids could be proud of. Representation matters but good representation matters even more' (60 Second Docs 2019).

Co-founder Douglas Miles Jr. exhibits a similarly relational understanding of his numerous roles as a skater, community leader and subcultural insider. Instead of focusing on individualistic pursuits like securing lucrative sponsorships from skateboarding companies, Miles primarily uses his status as 'the rez skateboarding expert' to create opportunities for Native youth. Miles' ASP underpins the *Apache Passion Project*, a grassroots initiative he leads and whose mission is to expand skateboarding on the rez:

Skateboarding is the fastest growing 'sport' on Native reservations. Most of our communities do not have spots or parks we can skate. We are taking the initiative and raising funds to build skate parks and ramps in our communities and neighboring towns.

These funds will go directly to building skate parks and DIY skate spots for the younger generations to come. Most people continue to leave us out because we are not into mainstream sports but we love what we do and want help others too.

(Miles 2020, n.p.)

The Apache Passion Project demonstrates Miles' priorities: he leverages his standing to create pathways for Indigenous youth, a mission that notably extends beyond skateboarding:

When kids go here to skate, this isn't only going to create skaters.
This park is going to create filmmakers and it's going to create
photographers, it's going to create business owners, it's going to
create social media people

(Lerner 2021, n.p.)

Miles recognizes that the skate park's communal functions might also offer Apache youth the resources needed to pursue self-defined learning goals and a wide array of creative, social and professional competencies. Miles' version of skate culture transforms it from a largely solitary pursuit into a catalyst for systemic change that emerges out of the self-directed actions of Indigenous youth.

Through skateboarding, art and activism, Apache Skateboards and its founders demonstrate how Indigenous pedagogies trouble 'the ways colonist ideologies become normalized within national discourses and internalized among minoritized peoples' (Styres 2019, 32). In a recent interview with *Devoid Magazine*, Miles asserts that what makes Apache Skateboards revolutionary 'is the fact that the skate industry is pretty much a white dominated industry, but we are the longest standing Native American skate group, skate brand and skate company ... we are constantly working, doing demos, consultation events, community building, skate park planning, art projects, design projects, branding and co-branding – all in the last 20 years' (Koelkebeck 2024, n.p.). To this end, Apache Skateboards informs and supports the work of organizations like Unity Skateboards, Skate Like a Girl, Skateistan, Pushing Boarders, Slow Impact and other Native-owned brands like Lakota Skateboards and Wounded Knee Skateboards, all collectives that create space for people from under-represented communities in skateboarding. For Douglas Miles Sr., skate pedagogy means staying engaged and providing opportunities for Apache youth to advance the goals they create for themselves, in real time. For Douglas Miles Jr., ASP is a means for safeguarding and sustaining Apache futures. While the photographers, researchers and curators will come and go, both will continue skating, creating art and securing Apache self-determination on Apache terms. Apache Skateboards, by decolonizing the skate industry, speak to the fact that the Apache people *have been and always will be*.

Conclusion

Apache Skateboards, above all, should be appreciated as a sustained collective and community-embedded effort to exercise sovereignty and self-determination in ways that are reflexive to the expressed and evolving needs of Indigenous communities. This framing informs the basis of understanding's skate pedagogy's contributions to Indigenous education, as it suggests that teaching and learning to preserve and protect Indigenous lifeways will require unceasing resistance along with respectful engagement with one's community, surroundings, and self. The underlying pedagogy that informs Apache Skateboards' art and social practice also attests to the diverse ways in which Indigenous modes of teaching and learning encourage us to work

for *people* over power. Finally, Indigenous skate pedagogy shows us that developing a critical consciousness about oneself, one's people, and the sacred requires a continued willingness to come into relation, an engaged process in which allowing skateboards might serve as a facilitative role. On two feet, it is easy to dismiss a handrail as just a handrail, a curb as just a curb and a human being as just a human being. Indigenous skate pedagogy shows that on four wheels, each of those things has the capacity to become a formidable obstacle, a catalyst for growth and an agent of change.

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