

Still Here: The story behind the woman on the wall



It is said that a picture is worth 1,000 words, but in the case of the “Still Here” mural in downtown Providence, the paint adorned on the east wall of 32 Custom House Street speaks to 10,000 years of cultural continuity and dogged adaptability in the face of six centuries of genocide. Lynsea Montanari, 24, overlooks the Providence River as a symbolic representation of the present and future of RI’s original inhabitants, the Narragansett. I spoke with Montanari to learn what the mural means to her and to the Indigenous community as a whole.

Amadeus Finlay (Motif): How does it feel to be the face of a celebrated mural in downtown Providence?

Lynsea Montanari: People will compliment me on the mural, but I am just “in there”; the mural is meant to be a representation of an entire community that still exists. And when people do come up and talk to me about it, many of whom I have not had a prior encounter with, it shows that it is making an impact, and that makes for a topical conversation. In that way, the mural is great for what it represents for the Indigenous community, as well as what it means for the Indigenous people in the present day. I

am surprised they put me on the mural at all, but what is most important - visually - for me is that I am an Indigenous person in modern day clothing, rather than just in regalia which we only wear for short periods of time during the year.

AF: So, what does the artwork mean to you, and why is it important? Are there symbolic elements that we should pay closer attention to?

LM: The idea was to capture our community and create a piece that wasn't about me, but something our community can be proud of and represent us as we are today. If there were two Indigenous people in their regalia, community wouldn't see us in the present, it would leave us in the past as that is what people associate with the people. Which means we provoke a conversation and a dialogue in itself without saying a word.

Some of the choices made in what to include were very deliberate. We talked about some changes in the original layout of the mural, and that the modern dress that I am wearing should include subtle touches of our culture. People consider "tribal prints" as Indigenous, but that is a generalization. Eastern woodlands peoples like the Narragansett are known for our floral work, and so I have a floral skirt with a number of different designs representing my family, and my earrings were beaded by a community member, Quai Perry. So, in that way, not only was I carrying my family, but my community. These touches are important. We are known for earrings made from Quahog shells, but instead we chose the beaded earrings that they are becoming a cultural norm across Indian Country today, rather than in history.

You'll also see a photograph of Princess Redwing right at the center of the image. We knew she was going to be the first person on the mural, even before I was chosen, that was a no-brainer. And that is because Princess Redwing was a strong Indigenous educator, and the Indigenous community and the wider Rhode Island community always talk about how good a person she was. She helped to found Tomaquag Museum and was a believer in activism through education. It really is an honor to have her on the mural. Even when we opened the mural, someone none of us knew came up and exclaimed, "Princess Redwing!" or people who come to the museum who remember her from a school visit. She really was, and is, instrumental to who we are today.

AF: Do you feel Rhode Island supports and nurtures Narragansett culture, or is there more to do? And if so, what?

LM: As a rule, I don't like generalizations; as individuals, there are people who would like to do more both in Rhode Island as well as across the country. But America, as a whole, needs a psychological change on how it deals



Lynsea Montanari in front of the incomplete "Still Here"

with matters such as Indigeneity, race and traditional cultures. Many Rhode Islanders are well-intentioned, but they've been taught what they "know" about Indigenous people by what they hear in pop culture, what they've been taught by miseducation. People are still shocked to hear that Native people still exist in Rhode Island. You've all met Indigenous people, but you didn't recognize us. So, the mural brings the awareness that we still exist, that we are here and that we aren't confined to the western reservation systems.

In the case of the Narragansett, we were excluded from a very early point in colonial history, and in larger textbooks we only get a handful of mentions. We speak about wars in American history, but Indigenous people have represented the country more per capita than any other community. So why aren't we in those conversations? If a commitment to understanding Indigenous people truly exists, it is time to acknowledge the real history; failing to do so simply places a cultural divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities not only in the past, but in the present by how people are being taught to see us. Most importantly of all, Indigenous people should be included in all aspects of education, not just the historical record. We were here before America, and we still remain.

Bringing things into the present, we never experienced land ownership, but the fact that we are being charged to access our waterways by current state government has to stop. It is unacceptable. You've taken our land and we don't get it back - got it. But minimally, we shouldn't be charged by the state to have access to our tribal homeland. It comes down to local matters such as those who can afford a beach pass in Narragansett, the very town that has taken the name of our people!

And part of this new way of thinking about the land is because we were assimilated by American culture, and people are surprised that we do things that are part of this way of life. But being surprised that we aren't stuck in the past in itself erases part of our history, as it disconnects from how our culture was stripped through colonization and we were forced to evolve. All cultures evolve; it's crazy to think we would not. Think about this: There was a time when it was illegal for us to speak our language! When our people had to experience that trauma, it was impossible not to be impacted by American culture.

Let's look at the hot-button topic of the Washington "Redskins"; there is a difference between offensive and oppressive. For instance, "The Chiefs" and "The Braves" are crass, but Redskins is another story. It comes from the scalping of Indigenous people for bounty money, with the "red" skin of the scalp lock being how the individual was identified. Some like it because it is a little bit of representation, something to cling on to. And that is why the mural is important. Here is a visual statement, a representation that the community can get behind and be proud of.

Because we are so often an afterthought. We are often written about through archives and good-intended research, but individuals aren't considered at the forefront. I'm in the City Hall archives, and they don't really have anything about Indigenous people, so researchers continue to write the same non-inclusive narrative that is written over and over again. And then they tell us, "You're welcome," without properly representing people. Also, Indigenous people are not representatives for the entire community; taking the token Native person into a scenario does not help us. The everyday person should not be dragged out and asked to defend complex, multilayered issues. It is simply unfair, and rather than act as a voice, are manipulated into tools to further a larger, cynical non-Indigenous agenda.

And all this understanding must begin in the school systems, but even today students are not being taught how to acknowledge Indigenous people, thus creating and perpetuating the cycle. They are taught about the Holocaust, but not the massacre of 95% of the original inhabitants of North America. So, it is not the individual we need to consider, but the realignment of how people see us as a whole. Which means if you're reading this article, and these points are resonating with you, take this as the starting point and let's grow the discussion from there.

AF: Finally, with all eyes resting on you as the young Indigenous girl on the mural, what plans do you have to harness that intrigue and translate it into support for the Narragansett people as a whole?

LM: My thing is empowerment. I want to help people succeed in the community. If people have a vision for the culture, let's make those things accessible to them. I am currently attending a tribal youth initiative, and my goal is to get it set up in a way that is going to be beneficial for future generations. It's not for me to tell people what we need to do, but to stay behind the scenes and help people find their own.

Building my own foundations, I am currently attending College Unbound and getting my bachelor's in organizational leadership and change, focusing on project work on Indigenous empowerment. I intentionally kept it broad because empowerment and leadership encompass many different things. For example, being at Party City and seeing somebody lift the "Indian costume" and having that conversation, or getting involved in language reclamation projects. Our language was stripped from us, and while I don't want to say we don't have it in our culture, different individuals have different levels of knowledge of our cultural language. Whether it is just through traditional names or using what they have with their families. At this point most of us are not speaking with fluency. Which is my personal goal trying to bring fluency back to our community.

When I go to visit my cousin working in Cumberland Farms I would always say, "Asco weequasín," hello in Narragansett. He never would respond, but I kept saying it as he wasn't at a point where he was speaking the language every day. As I said different families hold different traditions. But one day, I heard a voice calling to me That is empowerment, and it is happening today. The Indigenous voice must be heard in 2019 and beyond. And that is because I've been in a room where I am the only Indigenous person, and when I leave, the representation is gone; we don't have a place anywhere where we are the

majority culture. I didn't realize how much it impacted me until I went to a Native college, and it was the first time I was surrounded by exclusively Indigenous people. Sure, there are small reservations, and even today the government is actively trying to take those away.

But it all comes down to education. There's not a lot of good online information, so I encourage people to stop by Tomaquag Museum. That is where Narragansett people go to learn about the community, so go on down and gain some exclusive information from a cultural hub that welcomes all researchers and those who want to learn.