

How *Not* to Write an Article on Native Artists

Advice to Journalist X

By Melissa Melero

YEARS AGO, I was anticipating one of the first serious articles written about my work in a major publication. I got my copy and casually (okay, maybe frantically) flipped to my interview. They spelled my name right—yahoo! I thought the worst had passed; then I read that I was born somewhere I wasn't, I was raised somewhere I wasn't, and there was an out-of-context quote so humiliating that I contemplated suicide (of the journalist that is). Unfortunately, I was not reading about someone else; my life was being recreated before my eyes. I thought back to the hour or more of the interview where the journalist and I had a great conversation about my work, my passions, and where I come from—all of this while he scribbled away on his little pad of paper, pretending to be taking notes. How does something like this happen? How did he not realize how important this is for me, for my Native background, for the world to learn about what is going in this little space of Native America?

Don't get me wrong—at that point in my art career the old saying rang true, "Any press is good press," and one must simply roll with the punches. I promised myself that I would never put my life in the hands of another journalist, unless I was completely comfortable with what he or she was going to write. I have broken that promise to myself over and over again; I still get excited when I am asked to do an interview—I just can't help myself.

The pressures of deadlines can make getting every detail perfect difficult, but how does one get almost every detail wrong? As badly as I wanted to write a revenge article on this particular journalist, I will take the high road and create a helpful guide, so the journalists don't have the bad luck of some such artists approaching them in a dark alley (or Trader Joe's) after writing a ridiculous and completely false article about them.

First, there is this thing called the Internet. It's a pretty neat gadget where you can look things up to confirm information. Please take the time to check the interviewee's name, where she comes from, what tribe she is and how to S-P-E-L-L all of that correctly. Getting the tribe and its spelling is just as important as the name. To most Natives, where you come from *is* who and what you are. It is essential.

Thinking back to what I thought was a fantastic conversation between artist and journalist, I remember him asking where I was born and where my family came from. One would just assume, you tell the journalists information about yourself, you give them

written documentation and access to confirm that information on a website, so they would have unlimited ways to check all of those facts before reporting it to the public, right? Well, we would hope.

One of my best interviews was done by e-mail. I was sent a set of questions and had the opportunity to deliver well-thought out answers that I felt conveyed my work and me adequately. There is a rising controversy in the journalistic field about email interviews, but so far I am all for it. Especially if that is the only way information can be somewhat accurate.

Journalists I polled for this essay mentioned that sometimes they have no control over what finally gets printed. One journalist said sometimes information gets twisted around in editing, and the journalist not made aware of the mistakes until after printing. It happens.

For many Native artists, what you say about your work, your culture, and your home is crucial because we are representatives of our people. Readers will take that information at face value. Indigenous people are so rarely represented in mainstream media that many Americans believe that we are extinct. No joke! As a representative of my Native people, I try to get as much valuable information out there as I can. I don't often read or

hear about my tribe, or Natives for that matter, in mainstream media. When I do see that bit of Native news written or broadcast, my first thought is, "How will mainstream America perceive this?" Where I come from, Natives are often viewed and treated negatively. I am rooting for a better day. Things are getting better since I was a child or when my parents were children, but when you mention "racism," people get too defensive and want out of that conversation as quickly as possible. That is too bad because there is still so much to talk about and understand between Native and non-Native peoples.

Is there any accountability for journalists or editors who simply do not care about facts? Other Native artists weighed in on the subject, and several have been the subject of a make-believe fairytale. Misspelled names and tribes top the list of complaints. No fact-checking leads to random, wild storytelling. Humiliating, out-of-context quotes are disrespectful. I still hope for a front seat when karma comes back for that dude. Ultimately, my advice to Journalist X, it is a precious package you carry to the world, so it is imperative you get it right! Oh, getting the images of our artwork right side up would be awesome too.



Your interview should look nothing like this. Photo: A. Meredith