

FUSE

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States of Coloniality

ART / CULTURE / POLITICS /

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FUSE MAGAZINE



DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS

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EDITORIAL

STATES OF POST COLONIALITY/ DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS

This issue of *FUSE* was produced collaboratively with the e-fagia organization. Based in Toronto, e-fagia was founded in 2004 with the mandate of promoting digital art, focusing on Latin American and Canadian artists. A generous presence on the Toronto art scene, over the past decade e-fagia has produced dozens of publications, exhibitions, festivals and workshops. When they approached *FUSE* in late 2012 to discuss collaborating on their ambitious symposium, Decolonial Aesthetics from the Americas, we were immediately excited about the thematic crossover with our States of Postcoloniality series. A year later, we are proud to present to you the results of this partnership, which also serves as a reader for the Decolonial Aesthetics symposium, scheduled for 10–12 October 2013.

Decoloniality is cast, by Walter D. Mignolo and other members of the Transnational Decolonial Institute, as the radical other of modernity-coloniality. Throughout a diffuse and influential body of work, they write of a decoloniality of knowledge, being and aesthetics. Within this framework, decolonial aesthetics acknowledges and subverts the presence of colonial power and control in the realm of the senses. A decolonial approach refers to a theoretical, practical or methodological choice geared toward delinking aesthetics, at the epistemic level, from the discourse of colonialism that is embedded in modernity itself.

With the symposium and this issue of the magazine, e-fagia and *FUSE* set out to explore the resonance of decoloniality in aesthetic practice across the disparate geographies of the Americas and the Caribbean. This proposition has been particularly stimulating because in the Canadian context, for the most part, vocabularies of decolonization and settler colonialism have been more prevalent than those of decoloniality. As such, we present here something of a fresh encounter, a new stimulus to ongoing and robust public discourse in Canada regarding the role of aesthetic practice in a decolonial era. Two contributors in particular, David Garneau and Gordon Brent Ingram, explicitly grapple with the relevance of a decolonial framework for Indigenous decolonization and settler colonialism in Canada.

Produced by

The Short *FUSE* section provides us with a sampling of aesthetic practices that conjure decoloniality—from Indigenous site-based and public art in Vancouver, to the use of the *Khabu* or *Tama* (bastón de mando, “the stick”) by the Colombian Kiwe Thegnas (the Indigenous Guard), to ingenious and incessant culinary innovations with the ñame (yam), to the oeuvre of the late painter Denyse Thomasos. This issue also brings you rambunctious artist’s projects by Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa and Julie Nagam, and a collaborative offering curated by Gita Hashemi with Tannis Nielsen and Maryam Taghavi. Leah Decter and Carla Taunton present a feature-length conversation about their respective engagement of critical settler positions in their practices as artists, instructors and activists. In another feature article, Kency Cornejo presents the recent work of several young Indigenous Guatemalan artists.

In his review column, Richard William Hill offers a thoughtful assessment of the curatorial premise and theoretical underpinnings of the National Gallery’s massive international exhibition of Indigenous contemporary art, *Sakahàn*. Maiko Tanaka, member of the Read-in group, reflects on their recent public reading of Sojourner Truth’s speech “Ain’t I a Woman” (1863).

Finally, we wrap up the issue with reviews of Gita Hashemi’s exhibition *Time Lapsed*; Srimoyee Mitra’s group exhibition curated for the Art Gallery of Windsor, *Border Cultures: Part One (homes, land)*; two recent exhibitions by Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen; and Gael García Bernal and Marc Silver’s *Who is Dayani Cristal?*

Next up will be an issue that looks at the role of artists and creative practice in the Idle No More movement. In the meantime, please join us for the Decolonial Aesthetics from the Americas conference in Toronto.

Gina Badger

with e-fagia and the *FUSE* Editorial Committee

This issue is dedicated to Arlan Londoño (1962–2013), co-founder of e-fagia, artist, curator and thinker.

We are deeply saddened by the loss of this exuberant and generous co-conspirator, from whom we have all learned so much, and we dedicate the present work to his memory. We have included a project of Arlan’s alongside a text by Miguel Rojas-Sotelo and an obituary on pages 52 and 53.

FUSE MAGAZINE 36–4 / Decolonial Aesthetics / Fall 2013

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A New Ñame

An Exploration of Decolonial African American Food Culture and Cuisine

Berlin Reed

When gastronomy, the study of food culture, began as a concept in France 200 years ago, the Atlantic Slave Trade was still depositing Africans about the Americas in exchange for exotic ingredients bound for the kitchens of rich Europeans. As colonies across the Eastern Hemisphere likewise bulked up and diversified their pantries, elitist epicurean culture spread across the world with the French (and other colonizing nations) values of exacting standards. Dining and food culture became the ultimate exercise in capitalist elitism, and in turn traditional food cultures across the globe were devalued and dismissed while European tastes became known as “classic” and “refined.” Today, through the bustling growth of upscale comfort food in newly gentrified neighbourhoods across the Americas, descendants of colonizers are profiting from the appropriation of Soul Food, Afro-Caribbean and other African-influenced food cultures. These establishments, predictably, succeed at the cost of those who created these food cultures in areas of cities once deemed too dangerous (read: black and poor) for moneyed diners. As so-called urban renewal pushes poor people out of their homes and businesses to make room for people who will pay higher rent, the subsequent effects of prolonged cultural suppression and subservience are often overshadowed by the more obvious issues of food justice. Contemporary culinary culture is a perpetuation of the colonial ideal of perfection, even as the gleaming façade crumbles before us.

As generations of African slaves hid their gods and masked their dances, when left with refuse to fill their bellies they created dishes as heartwarming as mofongo and chit’lins to heal and restore their bodies from the harsh realities of slave life. Many of these dishes still nourish their descendants, who continue to suffer under the weight of a more covert master. One simple ingredient, the yam, tells the delectable story of a resourceful and defiant resistance that has fed us since the Middle Passage. The yam (*ñame* in Spanish, *inhamé* in Portuguese, *yamn* in Haitian Creole) may be the most ubiquitous food transported with, by and for African slaves, from their homes throughout Africa to the American plantations and townships to which we, as slave descendants, now trace our lineage. The many ways that this simple food has been used is inspiration not only for the kitchen, but for an exploration of our varied colonial histories and our unified decolonial future.

African-born slaves were faced with a range of influences on the cultures they brought with them. They were displaced and dispersed across lands and subject to various slavery systems with specific colonizing methods of assimilation. They found differing climates and native plants, and encountered Indigenous peoples who were struggling with the same colonizers. African slaves across the Americas and the Caribbean used a lot of yams in their cooking and these influences contributed to the development of varied food cultures and traditions. In the Southern US, slave owners’ dependence on natural-born replacements for their labour force—as opposed to continually importing new bodies like most colonies did—meant that slaves lost their connections to African traditions quickly and formed a cuisine that was much more dependent on the practices of their colonizers. Accordingly, sugar-sweetened pies and casseroles reflect the typically sweet-leaning Southern palate. Hotter climates, higher rates of slave importation and later abolition dates led to a much closer connection to African roots and a diet more heavily influenced by African traditions throughout the Caribbean and the Americas. As a result, we find savoury yam-based stews such as the Haitian bouillon, a succulent mix of beef, chicken and a range of vegetables, and Jamaican Saturday soup, a brightly coloured, golden chicken and squash combination, both of which capitalize on the sweet earthiness of the yam. The myriad versions of sancocho, a stew found everywhere from the Dominican Republic to Colombia, often begin with a base of yam and plantain or cassava, and the Brazilian Bobó de inhamé similarly builds flavours of seafood, spices and tomato on a foundation of yam. Drawing on their familiarity with the yam, African-born slaves were able to make use of new and unfamiliar foods found in the Americas to create hearty meals.

Just over a century since the last emancipation in the Americas (Brazil in 1888), we have reason to celebrate the postcolonial identities of Afro-Cubans, Texans, Haitians and Palenqueros, but those identities also reinforce our separation. Marcus Garvey is often quoted as saying “a people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” Decolonial thought connects the tree to the roots severed by the Atlantic Slave Trade, used to colonize the Americas. The yam is but one root among the many we have to thank for our survival of this atrocious and long-lived offense of the Western capitalist, imperialist system. Two equally satisfying bean dishes, the American Hoppin’ John and the Brazilian feijoada, would usually be seen as unrelated within current food culture that encourages a postcolonial identity in its definition of traditions by nationality. However, an Afro-futuristic concept of decolonial lineage extends from Africa across the Atlantic, and touches every port from Halifax to Buenos Aires. Since decolonial African American cuisine rejects delineations created by colonizers, those two bean dishes are, in fact, of the same culinary repertoire.

When we begin to see our seemingly disparate present-day cultures and political and socioeconomic realities through a decolonial lens, we can reclaim traditions by reconnecting our endurance of five centuries in the Americas to our future, ultimate liberation. Decolonial African American cuisine is an ownership and a repossession of African food history, and it unapologetically positions the Atlantic Slave Trade and its pervasive legacy as a central point of the global decolonial discourse.

Yam Biscuits with Ginger Syrup

Yams are a sweet, nutritious relic of our history. With so many uses, it was difficult for me as a chef to choose just one recipe to share. This is my favourite weekend treat. Don’t worry, it’s easy to change to fit all sorts of food sensitivities we’ve developed in the “New World.” Feel free to experiment with cow’s milk, gluten-free flour or sugar alternatives!

Ginger Syrup

Combine two parts maple syrup, one part blackstrap molasses and one part lemon juice in small pot over low heat. Add a pat of butter and a generous amount of grated ginger. Keep warm while biscuits bake.

Biscuits

3/4 c cooked mashed yam (or sweet potato)
1/2 c whole milk
1 1/2 c all-purpose flour
1 tbsp sugar
1 tbsp baking powder
1 tsp salt
6 tbsp cold unsalted butter, cut into small bits

Preheat oven to 425°F. In a small bowl, whisk yams and 1/3 c milk. Set aside. Combine dry ingredients. Cut in butter. Add yam mixture to dry ingredients. Mix together using splashes of remaining milk as needed until dough is thoroughly moistened. Knead biscuits two or three times on floured surface. Cut with floured cutter or rim of cup. Bake on greased baking sheet for 11–14 minutes.

Serve with syrup and soft butter.

Berlin Reed is a food warrior, radical food theorist and queer artist bent on decolonizing cuisine. After training as a butcher in Brooklyn in 2008, he began a life of continuous travel, bouncing around the continent as a community chef/butcher, before finally settling in Montreal in June 2013. He shared his experiences as a nomadic ex-vegetarian butcher and renegade chef in a food memoir titled *The Ethical Butcher: How Thoughtful Eating Can Change Your World* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2013). He has written for *OP Magazine* and is currently working on his next book, a decolonial cookbook.

Indigenous Guard(s)

Decolonial Performance, Re-Existence, Cultures of Survival

Miguel Rojas-Sotelo

Recently, in Cauca, in the highlands of Southern Colombia, the Nasa people called on the Kiwe Thegnas (the Indigenous Guard) to protect their communities from the aggression of armed state and private forces looking to promote and develop resource extraction megaprojects on their ancestral territories. The Indigenous Guard is an expression of Nasa organizing to defend their rights of autonomy and their social and communitarian control over their territories. Today, armed only with the symbolic bastón de mando (a wooden stick), the Indigenous Guard fights the heavy weaponry of armed actors in the Colombian conflict, in many instances literally clashing as a collective body against them. Between bullets, mortar fire, air bombings and guerrilla and antiguerrilla tactics from the National Army, paramilitaries, guerrillas and organized crime squads, the Guard symbolizes centuries of resistance to the war-machine of modern actors.

The genealogy of decolonial thinking and action is plural, *not* universal, and situated. As such, each knot on the web of this genealogy is a point of delinking and opening that reintroduces languages, memories, economies and social organizations. A collective voice, body and expression is rising as a chain of events—actions bringing the actual to the table of the global. Their call touches the colonial wound and rephrases the neocolonial moment that is progress in the form of peace treaties, public policies, drug wars, never-ending paramilitary/guerrilla and mafia presence, democracy and a popular culture that enjoys the spectacles of narcotelenovelas, news shows and futbol while others extract massive amounts of natural resources.

Historically, the Nasa and Guambiano peoples of Southern Colombia were some of the last to be integrated by European colonialism in the region. Names such as La Cacica Gaitana and Juan Tama represent Indigenous resistance and territorial gains of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. [1] Simón Bolívar’s program recognized Indigenous resguardos and would have been conducive

to the return of lands usurped. This program, however, was not met, and Cauca landowners harassed the Nasa for land, reducing their territories through institutional corruption and violence.

During the twentieth century, Manuel Quintín Lame (1883–1967), Nasa and Guambiano, became the reincarnation of Tama. He directed the struggle by using official documents and laws as well as occupation; these actions usually began peacefully, but often ended in confrontation and violence. The leader was imprisoned 108 times in his lifespan, persecuted and exiled from Cauca, and died in poverty as a landless exile. [2]

Álvaro Ulcué Chocué (1943– 1984), was the first Indigenous priest in Colombia, a Nasa, an outspoken advocate for the Indigenous cause, who in many instances suffered discrimination in order to demand the dignity of his people. **Ulcué** was murdered by paid assassins, “sicarios,” in November 1984, after meeting with military leaders the day before and after members of his family were injured and killed by the police in a peaceful occupation of Indigenous lands in 1982. He created the Proyecto Nasa (Nasa Project), in the framework of Catholic utopianism, which was a process of thinking, asking, deciding and acting. His death has not been resolved.

In the 1970s, the Nasa organized the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) to recover and defend the land, and to achieve cultural autonomy. At the time, the reclamation took on two faces: community organization and guerrilla tactics. On the one hand was the CRIC; on the other, a guerrilla commando named after Quintín Lame led the MAQL (or “Quintineros”) front. [3] Their struggle, marked by repression, massacres and the assassination of leaders, has recovered 544,000 hectares in Cauca.

The Nasa are strategically located in a corridor that connects the isolated western piedmont plains and Amazon jungle—where illegal crops (coca and poppy) are cultivated—and the Andes and Pacific coast, where illegal drugs are processed and shipped to global markets. In addition, in their ancestral territories old and new mining resources (gold and copper) are in line to be absorbed by local and transnational companies that with new technologies such as open-pit and top removal practices, are the new frontier of development in a state with a lack of regulation.

Today, there are no individual leaders like La Gaitana, Tama, Quintín Lame or Ulcué. The Nasa understand that a vertical organization is easily destroyed, that modernity has created a cult of individuals, and that basing their struggle around a single person is too fragile a foundation. That is why they have called upon the Kiwe Thegnas, which is composed of about seven thousand Nasa, young males and females. They are in a constant process of learning and sharing their history and struggle. This collective body is the most visible image of a community organized by the deep roots of communal, spiritual and political vision. They work voluntarily for two years at a time, and during that time are trained culturally to be the collective voice of their people, spiritually to represent the values of Indigeneity and the protection of Mother Earth, and politically to understand and share their rights and obligations as Indigenous citizens. While the Thegnas is not a military organization, it has recently been involved in the dismantling of military posts in their

territory, the expulsion of military and guerrilla forces and the political mobilization across Cauca.

The *Khabu* or *Tama* (bastón de mando, “the stick,” in Nasa language) is not only a symbol of power but also carries the spirit of the community, and the ability to govern is transmitted to the wearer. It commands respect towards the commoners. Usually the Khabu is made of black wood from the Chonta Palma and is decorated with braids of wool or coloured ribbons (it formerly also bore a silver handle). To hold a Khabu is a commitment to and with the community; rather than granting power over others, it orients subjectivity toward a higher cause. Today as before, the Khabu symbolizes a connection to nature. The fruit of the chonta palm, chontaduro, is a staple of the Nasa diet, and its power is vested in rituals performed by traditional healers in the lakes, where the sticks are washed in sacred waters and given to the bearers to decorate, as bonding in a relationship. They become the common object that replaces weapons as a symbol of pride. Even small children are vested with them, to start a process of training and responsibility to the community. That is how the long temporalities of Indigenous struggle in Colombia, as well as in the rest of the continent, are actualized.

It is by accessing ancestral knowledge, delinking from a linear history in a clear, transmodern move, and keeping autonomous organization (i.e., the cabildo and the resguardo) that communities such as the Nasa share decolonial strategies. The Guard has been stigmatized by the Colombian broadcast and print media as barbaric, uncivilized and uncooperative in the fight against terrorism in which the country is so invested. They ask why Indigenous people have to be treated with exception, if what they need is to be considered and treated as normal Colombians. Violence is still directed at the Nasa’s most visible leaders and aims to dismantle their organizations. What the local and central governments as well as technocrats and the military do not know about the Nasa is that they have been involved in a process of empowerment in their communities that can teach us more about participatory democracy than any other experience in contemporary Colombia.

A Khabu, a ceremonial staff made of black wood, decorated with braids of wool and feathers, and a silver handle.

Miguel Rojas-Sotelo is an art historian, visual artist, activist, scholar and curator. He holds a doctorate in visual studies, contemporary art and cultural theory. Rojas-Sotelo worked as the visual arts director of the Ministry of Culture of Colombia (1997–2001) and independently as an artist, curator and critic ever since. He currently works and teaches at Duke University for the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. Rojas-Sotelo is the director of the NC Latin American Film and New Media Festival.

A Khabu, a ceremonial staff made of black wood, decorated with braids of wool and feathers, and a silver handle.

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defensa de mi raza (In Defense of My Race). It immediately became the “red book” of political organization for Indigenous peoples in Colombia.

[3] Some followers of Quintín Lame, after the

assassination of Father Ulcué, joined the Ricardo Franco guerrilla group (a former FARC platoon) to form the MAQL. It was demobilized in 1991 thanks to the new Constitution in Colombia, which recognized the fundamental rights of

Indigenous peoples. Just four months after the signing of the new Constitution, on 4 July 1991, twenty Nasa people, including children, were massacred by paramilitaries over a case of recovery of lands.

Repopulating Contentious Territory

Recent Strategies for Indigenous Northwest Coast Site-Based and Public Art

Gordon Brent Ingram

I figure as long as we keep speaking then we still exist.
—Marianne Nicolson [1]

Despite the rising profile of indigenous [2] artists in contemporary Canadian art in recent decades, significant blind spots and conflict zones remain. On the West Coast of Canada, the direction of photographic portrayals of communities and lands by First Nations artists remains negligible, even after Vancouver’s decades of photoconceptualism and that movement’s theories of social engagement. Similarly, interventions in public space outside of reserve lands by First Nations artists, even where land claims are well articulated in the courts, continue to be rare and difficult on the West Coast. The fallout of lost lands, resources and livelihoods continues to dominate the lives of the generation previous to today’s emerging First Nations artists. Documentation of and interventions in traditional territories outside of the Indian Act continue to be fraught with obstacles for First Nations artists on the West Coast. The exceptions are well-managed commissions that rely on traditional practices, with the effect of suggesting a modicum of social inclusion and respect for local indigenous cultures, while avoiding acknowledgement of unceded lands and stalled treaty processes.

[1] Marianne Nicolson, personal communication with the author, 3 June 2013.

[2] “Indigenous” is not capitalized in this essay and capitalization is reserved for

local groups or organizations that use “Indigenous” in their name or in self-reference.

An example of how difficult it remains for indigenous artists to engage in contemporary practices of transforming public space on the West Coast is the saga of the work *Native Hosts* (1988/91) by Cheyenne and Arapaho artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds. *Native Hosts* is, so far, the most widely viewed piece of contemporary public art by an individual indigenous artist permanently installed on the West Coast of Canada. Originally exhibited in 1991 at the Vancouver Art Gallery, its permanent installation on the University of British Columbia campus took another two decades and only thanks to the artist’s *donation* of the work (as in, exceptionally discounted labour) to one of the most highly funded universities in the world.

Against this backdrop of chronic devaluation of and persistent obstacles to indigenous artists engaging around photographic investigations and site-based interventions in disputed territory, aesthetics of indefinite decolonizations involve engaging around communities, spaces and resources in ways that necessarily contest older notions of the public, of propriety and of the fair distribution of wealth. In order to envision new strategies of contemporary Northwest Coast indigenous art focused on reoccupation and ease for intervention, a phase of remapping, testing and repopulating has been necessary (especially after two centuries of extreme demographic declines). Over the last decade, some new practices and strategies, contesting obstacles to indigenous transformation of public space, have emerged at a time when many treaty negotiations, for local First Nations, have reached dead ends.

Rebecca Belmore, Terry Haines and Marianne Nicolson were based on the West Coast over the last decade, while exploring critical strategies for postcolonial interventions. Together, their selected works provide a sketch of the kinds of reassertion and testing necessary for the more ambitious and indefinite transformations of sites and the public sphere that could be considered occupation, or rather reoccupation.

The most influential and symbolic indigenous work produced in Vancouver in the first decade of this century is Rebecca Belmore’s performance *Vigil* (2002), during which she evoked the names of dozens of murdered and missing aboriginal women. While reciting their names, Belmore repeatedly nailed a red dress to a telephone pole and tore it off down to her undergarments. As a first gesture of repopulating, Belmore acknowledged individuals and populations disappeared through institutional racism, misogyny and neglect. Belmore’s subsequent *Launch A Feast For Scavengers* (2007), performed in Victoria, explored the cusp of land/sea art and the rich cultural tropes around European marine contact. As another strategy for repopulating public space, Belmore illustrated the deteriorating states of traditional fisheries and the respective precarity and deprivations around traditional foods. In *Launch A Feast For Scavengers*, Belmore literally waded into a tangle comprised of a raft, nets and herring roe as intended bait and a reticent seagull. The scavengers, in this work, were as much those who came through imperial intrusion as any seagull. One of the last of Belmore’s performances on the West Coast, *Worth* (2010), alluded to a well-publicized civil claim by a Toronto-based art dealer. As another practice for repopulating, Belmore, who is now based in Winnipeg and closer to her traditional communities, confronted an economy of cultural production still largely stacked against the autonomy and prosperity of indigenous artists.

Over the last decade, video installation has been the least constraining venue for indigenous artists on the West Coast, especially for transforming public memory and reimaging public space where aboriginal sovereignty was fully established. *Coyote X* (2013) was completed earlier this year by Terry Haines, only weeks before he died. The work focuses on both the coyote in urban Vancouver, an

^[1] La Cacica Gaitana was Yalcón from Huila, who in 1540 led a united Indigenous force to resist the Spanish colonizers. Juan Tama de la Estrella, a Nasa from Cauca, stopped violent confrontation and used colonial law and

^[2] documents to negotiate autonomous Indigenous territories.

^[3] Quintín Lame developed a system of sharing political knowledge called proyecto de vida, which is described in his

^[4] manuscript El pensamiento del indio que se educó en las selvas colombianas (The thoughts of the Indian educated in the Colombian forests). The text was completed in 1939 but published only posthumously in 1971 as En

animal of great importance to the artist’s Secwepemc and Tsilhqot’in communities of central British Columbia, as well as a range of experiences of insecurity and mortality, including living with HIV. At one point in the video, Haines spray-paints red “positive” symbols on rocks at a public beach near Vancouver. Here, the artist/video documentarian intervenes in the world, taking on the wily characteristics of the canine that is reasserting itself in Canadian cities. *Coyote X* is a koan for survival. The practices for repopulating in *Coyote X* are evocative of the nineteenth-century Witsuwit’en prophetic movements around Bini [3] in the Northwest Plateau territories of Haines’s communities. But in contrast to the various ghost dance cultural movements that persisted in Far Western Canada, *Coyote X* is more about a symbolic renewal and persistence through the immortality of video.

The work of Dzawada’enuxw artist Marianne Nicolson of the Kwakwaka’wakw Nation centres on her traditional territory in Kingcome Inlet. Over the last decade, Nicolson created a number of conversations in urban areas. Her site-based *Cliff Painting* (1998) contemporized traditional copper designs on a large surface above the sea as part of reasserting natural landscapes as spaces for Kwakwaka’wakw culture and sovereignty. The practices for repopulating in *Cliff Painting* are subtle and powerful adaptations for cultural renewal. A more urban step in these practices was developed by Nicolson in *The House of the Ghosts* (2008), installed for a month on the north side of the Vancouver Art Gallery. This large, site-based work was part of an intercultural conversation between two kinds of public space: that of Nicolson’s traditional Dzawada’enuxw territory and the multicultural and globalizing Vancouver, which is on unceded territory. The repopulating in *The House of the Ghosts* was infused with the joy and expansive optimism of having access to and creative control over a large, highly visible swath of public space. Nicolson’s 2013 video, *Wel’ida Pa’a (The Flood)* explores the vulnerability of her family’s village to disaster and climate change, combining documentary practices with an adjacent installation of orca whales, sometimes thought to have the power of prophecy. The repopulating in this installation loops back, both in the documentary and in the reworking of sculpture through adjacent edged glass installations.

Any kind of decolonial aesthetic anywhere in Canada must initially acknowledge the specificity and the full extent of the losses of local indigenous communities, populations, economies and cultures. These tentative beginnings of decolonial aesthetics on the West Coast have centred on the acknowledgement of the unresolved indigenous experiences of depopulation, displacement and loss of sovereignty, combined with still largely symbolic efforts to return to, intervene in and repopulate still-contested lands as safe and multicultural public spaces. Such emerging aesthetics acknowledge the specificity and multiplicity of contestations over traditional sites, resources and cultural spaces in the context of departures from traditional media and cannons. What distinguishes the development of decolonial aesthetics on the West Coast of Canada, is how few indigenous public art interventions have been successfully carried out.

[3] See James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and Wounded Knee* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1896; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1973); and Wayne Suttles, “The Plateau Prophet Dance among the Coast Salish,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1957): 353–396.

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Denyse Thomasos

→
Denyse Thomasos, *Babylon* (2005). Acrylic on canvas. Donovan Collection at St. Michael's College (University of Toronto). Image courtesy of Olga Korper Gallery.



Heidi McKenzie

Denyse Thomasos’s art is her vehicle of resistance to the global marginalization of people of colour. Her work voices her specific subaltern locus of enunciation – woman of colour, descendent of slaves, indentured workers and Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. Thomasos (1964–2012) was a Trinidadian-born, Toronto-raised, New York–based abstract painter, whose passion and rarefied zeal for life catapulted her and her work to international recognition and acclaim, and whose life was tragically abridged. This paper grapples with the context, both social and personal, that propelled Thomasos’s artistic trajectory, using the Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo’s theories on aspects of modern colonialisms and colonial modernity. [1]

Mignolo describes the coexistence of modernity/coloniality, where modernity, as constitutive of the Americas, does not exist without coloniality. [2] Mignolo offers us an alternative methodology for embracing a totality of paradigms, at once dominant and subjugated, mainstream and repressed, where all coexist at a crossroads of local histories enunciated from the place of the Other. The subaltern is the Other, as distinct from the merely marginalized, insofar as violent oppression is implicated by colonial difference.

Thomasos’s work challenges the coloniality of power

[1] See Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 22.

[2] Ibid. 43, 50.

[3] In 1997, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship and was invited into the stable of the Lennon, Weinberg gallery in New York, as well as the Olga Korper Gallery in Toronto. Other notable awards include the Canada Council Millennium Grant

(1999), a Pew Fellowship, a Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Grant and a travel residency at the American Academy in Rome.

through local histories of modernity/coloniality that extend beyond her own ethnic heritage. Thomasos was born in the West Indies on the island of Trinidad in 1964. She came to Toronto at the age of eight. By 23, she had her BA in art history and painting from the University of Toronto, and by 25, an MFA from Yale. [3] Thomasos’s first solo show, *Scratch* (2001), delved deeply and personally into her Caribbean roots. In 2004, Gaëtane Verna, then Senior Curator of the Foreman Gallery at Bishop’s University, along with Ingrid Jenkner of Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, co-commissioned a multiwall mural installation. *Tracking* (2004) consists of ephemeral wall paintings that track Thomasos’s life, according to their respective titles: *Tracking: Thirty Years in Canada*, *Thirty Years in Trinidad*, and *Tracking: Bombings, Wars and Genocide—A Six Months’ Journey from New York to China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia*. The works address themes of migration, displacement, nostalgia and war. [4]

Thomasos’s work revolves around a number of ideas that converge in a key set of themes. For example, her insistence on referencing boats and travel in her art, and her treatment of “unspeakable acts,” architectural structures and cages (and by extension, jails) are all derived from Thomasos’s core sense of identity as a woman of colour who is descendent from slaves. This is the lens through which she established and asserted her voice as the subaltern. By using the term “people of colour,” Thomasos was also careful to embrace an inclusive subaltern voice, as opposed to identifying solely with the Black community.

The system of slavery is a matrix that is intrinsic to her art. While Thomasos was heir to African (from her slave lineage), Asian (from her South Asian grandmother) and Indigenous cultures (from the Nepoya, Suppoya and Yao peoples of the Arawak and Carib peoples purported to be in her bloodline), she contended that her work is ultimately rooted in her history, which began, ostensibly, with slavery. [5] Thomasos’s incorporation and integration of slavery in her work was her way of expressing colonial difference, and thereby mitigating the vulnerability of space where the coloniality of power is enacted.

Slave boats are near-ubiquitous in Thomasos’s post-MFA work; her fascination with boats began after being transfixed by a well-known cross section drawing of a 1788 slave boat. The image had a profound impact on the artist: “I saw things broken down into an economy. People no longer existed as human beings. They existed as numbers and measurements and money – as products... The boat was a vessel, a container that symbolized that concept and facilitated the system.” [6]

By their very presence, boats introduce the idea of journeying. Thomasos had an insatiable appetite for travel. Between 2002 and 2004, Thomasos travelled to China, Mali, Senegal, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam and India. Thomasos travelled in order to make contact with what she believed to be her family’s different points of origination. [7] Part of her personal contract with herself as an artist was to live as full a life as possible and to energize her art through her lived experience. Travel was a way of discovering and documenting unfiltered original source material from which to work. This comprehensive way of seeing the world at a

[4] These works were arguably pivotal in bringing Thomasos’s career to the next level and were key to her being selected for a significant AGO commission. Along with Thomasos, artists Karen Henderson, Ingrid Calame, Julian Opie,

Chris Ballantyne, Raymond Pettibon, Lawrence Weiner, Christine Swintak, Sol LeWitt and Fabian Marcaccio were included in the AGO’s Swing Space Transformation commission. Ben Portis, interview with the

author, 18 March 2013.

[5] Milena Placentile, “Social Consciousness in Canadian Art,” *Justina M. Barmicke Art Gallery* (2002; online).

[6] Ben Portis, “Denyse

confluence of geopolitical crossroads is Mignolo’s *border thinking* methodology put into practice. For Thomasos, the overriding theme was not so much the journey or the act of travelling, as the documentation of unspeakable acts that humankind invariably perpetrates on itself.

Curator Ben Portis notes that Thomasos “developed a distinctive mode of *representational abstraction* stylistically derived from New York school abstract expressionism – particularly attentive to Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline – and informed by artists of the intervening years from 1950s to present such as Brice Marden, Richard Serra, Richard Long and Michael Heizer.” [8] Toronto-based African Caribbean Canadian writer M. NourbeSe Philip reflects on Thomasos’s aberrant relationship with abstraction: “In signalling her history, she subverts the conventions of abstract art... history becomes the subtext, the baseline... which remains in tension with the abstract nature of the work.” [9] By bringing something new to the genre – a programmatic dimension that speaks to slavery – Thomasos is playing out a colonial semiosis that underscores her moral compass regarding coloniality of power. In her words, “What I’m painting about is the structural psychology of a mind that has been disrupted and distorted through the Black experience in the Western world.” [10]

Thomasos birthed her own movement, representational abstraction, where out of a sense of displacement from her own culture, she incorporated material from a foreign country, and the result is the creation of a new cultural phenomenon – a colonial semiosis. Thomasos’s resistance to the colonial oppression and the global marginalization of people of colour demonstrates a postcolonial self-reflexivity that extends beyond Thomasos’s Caribbeanness, and constitutes an additive identity and aesthetic that claims its space within the transcultural. As Verna underscores, Thomasos’s range of thematic strategies “evinces an ongoing postmodern obsession with both her personal history and a broader political memory” [11] The legacy of Thomasos’s work remains a provocative questioning of complacency as it pertains to race and representation. With respect to injustice, inequality, racism, war and other unspeakable acts, Denyse Thomasos’s work calls on each of us to account for our complicity as citizens in the world in which we live.

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Thomasos Interviewed by Ben Portis,” in *Wallworks: Contemporary Artists and Place*, ed. Catherine van Baren (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2007), 72.

[7] Portis, interview with the author, 18 March 2013.

[8] Portis, “Justification for Acquisition,” in *Wallworks*, 2.

[9] M. NourbeSe Philip, “Form and Improv,” in *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings by Denyse Thomasos* (Lennoxville: Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop’s

University, 2006), 39.

[10] Franklin Sirmans, “In the Citadel of Modernism,” in *Epistrophe*, 51.

[11] Gaëtane Verna, “Acknowledgements,” in *Epistrophe*, 6.

Decolonial Aesthetics

Modernity-Coloniality Working Group of the Transnational Decolonial Institute

A transmodern world has emerged, reconfiguring the past 500 years of coloniality and its aftermath – modernity, postmodernity and altermodernity. A remarkable feature of this transformation is the creativity in/from the non-Western world and its political consequences – independent thoughts and decolonial freedoms in all spheres of life. Decoloniality of knowledge and being, two concepts introduced by the modernity-coloniality working group in 1998, are encountering the decoloniality of aesthetics in order to join different genealogies of re-existence in artistic practices all over the world.

Decolonial aesthetics and decoloniality in general have joined the liberation of sensing and sensibilities trapped by modernity and its darker side: coloniality. Decoloniality endorses interculturality (which has been conceptualized by organized communities) and delinks from multiculturalism (which has been conceptualized and implemented by the State). Multiculturalism promotes identity politics, while interculturality promotes transnational identities-in-politics. Multiculturalism is managed by the State and affiliated NGOs, whereas interculturality is enacted by communities in the process of delinking from the imaginary of the State and of multiculturalism. Interculturality promotes the re-creation of identities that were either denied or acknowledged first but in the end were silenced by the discourse of modernity, postmodernity and now altermodernity. Interculturality is the celebration by border-dwellers of being together in and beyond the border.

Decolonial transmodern aesthetics are intercultural, inter-epistemic, inter-political, inter-aesthetical and inter-spiritual but always from perspectives of the global south and the former-Eastern Europe. Massive migration from the former East and the global south to the former Western Europe (today the European Union) and to the United States have transformed the subjects of coloniality into active agents of decolonial delinking. “We are here because you were there” is the reversal of the rhetoric of modernity; transnational identities-in-politics are a consequence of this reversal because they challenge the

Editor’s note: This text is an abridged version of the original, published and available on the website of the Transnational Decolonial Institute. The signatories of the manifesto are Raúl Moarquet, Dalida María Benfield, Michelle

Eistrup, Marina Grzinić, Pedro Lasch, Alanna Lockward, Tanja Ostojic, Walter Mignolo, Teresa María Díaz Nerio, Miguel Rojas-Sotelo, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, Nelson Maldonado Torres and Rolando Vásquez.

self-proclaimed imperial right to name and create (constructed and artificial) identities by means either of silencing or trivialization.

The embodied daily life experience of decolonial processes within the matrix of modernity defeats the solitude and the search for order that permeate the fears of postmodern and altermodern industrial societies. Decoloniality and decolonial aesthetics are instrumental in confronting a world overflowed with commodities and information that invade the living space of consumers and confine their creative and imaginative potential.

Within different genealogies of re-existence, artists have questioned the role and the name that have been assigned to them. They are aware of the confinement that Euro-centered concepts of art and aesthetics have imposed on them. They have engaged in transnational identities-in-politics, revamping identities that have been discredited in modern systems of classification and their invention of racial, sexual, national, linguistic, religious and economic hierarchies. They have removed the veil from the hidden histories of colonialism and have rearticulated these narratives in spaces of modernity such as the white cube and its affiliated branches. They are dwelling in the borders, sensing in the borders, doing in the borders, they have been the propellers of decolonial transmodern thinking and aesthetics. Decolonial transmodernities and aesthetics have been delinking from all talks and beliefs of universalism, new or old, and in doing so have been promoting a pluriversalism that rejects all claims to a truth without quotation marks. In this regard, decolonial transmodernity has endorsed identities-in-politics and challenged identity politics and the self-proclaimed universality of altermodernity.

Creative practitioners, activists and thinkers continue to nourish the global flow of decoloniality towards a transmodern and pluriversal world. They confront and traverse the divide of the colonial and imperial difference invented and controlled by modernity, dismantling it, and working towards “living in harmony and in plenitude” in a variety of languages and decolonial histories. The worlds emerging with decolonial and transmodern political societies have art and aesthetics as a fundamental source. These artists are operating in what can be seen as the conceptual legacies of the Bandung Conference (1955).

Bandung united 29 Asian and African countries and was followed by the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which included former Eastern Europe and Latin America. The legacy of the Bandung Conference was the possibility of imagining other worlds beyond capitalism and/or communism, to engage in the search and building of a third way, neither capitalist nor communist, but decolonial. Today this conceptual legacy has been taken beyond the sphere of the state to understand creative forms of re-existence and autonomy in the borders of the modern/colonial world.

The goal of decolonial thinking and doing is to continue re-inscribing, embodying and dignifying those ways of living, thinking and sensing that were violently devalued or demonized by colonial, imperial and interventionist agendas as well as by postmodern and altermodern internal critiques.





Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action

and Cultural Decolonization



←
(top left)
Guillermo Gómez-Peña
and James Luna,
La Nostalgia Remix
(March 2011).
Performance.
Produced by
Heather Haynes.
Copresented by
Tribe, Neutral Ground,
and Sâkêwêwak.
Image courtesy of
Ian Campbell
and the artists.

(top right)
Terrance Houle,
detail from *Remember in Grade...*
(2004) in *First Nations Now*,
Burnaby Art Gallery, BC.
Image courtesy of Jarusha Brown
and the artist.

(bottom)
Rebecca Belmore, prior to
closing panel discussion for
“Contemporary Indigenous
Performance Art: Where it’s
Been, Where it’s At and Where
it’s Going” at the Southern
Alberta Art Gallery
(Lethbridge),
9 May 2012.
Image courtesy of Mountain
Standard Time Festival
and the artist.

For several years I have remained disturbed by three aesthetic actions: Rebecca Belmore’s yell as a prelude to a panel discussion; Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s threat to decapitate a woman during a work of performance art; and Terrance Houle’s presentation of his naked, fleshy belly in photographs and performances. Most days the images, sounds, thoughts, sensations and feelings engendered by these scenes course through my mind and body as a prickly trickle undisturbed by analysis. Other times I slow the flow and attempt to discover why they stick around, what they want. These sticky memories will not leave and I cannot assimilate them, so we negotiate a cohabitation agreement. Art’s power as a spur to personal and collective transformation is slight: a caressing seduction or a sliver working its way under the skin.

What follows is an exploration of the role of nonpedagogical artworks in cultural decolonization; in particular, aesthetic manifestations that go for the gut before the mind, the senses rather than the sensible. Works that are fuelled by an extra-rational aesthetic that endeavours through visceral and intuitive means to provoke change in other bodies—to alter moods, attitudes, dispositions and sensibilities first, in the hope that arguments, reason, judgment and minds will follow. Of particular interest is the special role of the artist not as teacher or perpetuator of customary culture, but as provocateur, an unreliable but necessary agent who plays between and among disciplines and cultures to create startling non-beautiful, needful disruptions, and to build hybrid possibilities that resist containment by either colonial designs or Indigenous traditionalism. Before getting to these works, the concept of “decolonial aesthetics” [1] needs some fine-tuning if it is to make sense in the Canadian context. And we should also consider the

tyranny of the beautiful, how aesthetic excellence constrains the expression of dissent.

The goal of decolonization is to bring “about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.” [2] In Canada, this is a permanently unfinished project. Canadians believe that they live in a postcolonial country, more or less free from British rule since 1867. But First Nations, Inuit and Métis remain in a colonial state; most of our lands are occupied, and our lives governed by an invasive authority—Canada. And Canadians are not leaving any time soon. As a result, decolonial theory and practice developed in truly postcolonial countries needs to be adapted to suit the lived reality of this place. In the absence of self-determination, and the restoration of Native territories to Indigenous stewardship, artists, curators, educators and other cultural workers engaged in what they describe as decolonization, are usually doing something a little different. Particularly among the non-Indigenous, decolonization is never imagined as the actual withdrawal of Canada from Indigenous territories. It is sometimes performed as activism promoting treaty rights, but it is usually expressed as a pedagogical enterprise, a cultural decolonization that consists of practices ranging from assimilation to adaptation to productive coexistence.

Cultural decolonization is the perpetual struggle to make both Indigenous and settler peoples aware of the complexity of our shared colonial condition, and how this legacy informs every person and institution in these territories. The soft hope is that education will lead to improvements in the lives of Aboriginal people—as Canadians. The more radical desire is that Canadians and their institutions will Indigenize. Due to its oxymoronic paradox, cultural *decolonization* in a still *colonial* Canada is not about working toward a classical postcolonial state, where the colonizers sail home, dragging their institutions behind them, but toward a noncolonial society in which Aboriginal nations and settlers share Indigenous territories. This sort of decolonization is about First Nations, Inuit and Métis restoring and strengthening our different ways of knowing and being, and requiring our guests to unlearn and disengage from their colonial habits. Cultural decolonization in the Canadian context is about at once unsettling settlers and, ironically, helping them to adapt, to better settle themselves as noncolonial persons within Indigenous spaces. More ambitiously,

[1] “Decolonial Aesthetics (I),”
Transnational Decolonial Institute
(22 May 2011; online).

Indigeneity, Education & Society 1,
no.1 (2012; online). Quotation
from the abstract.

[2] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang,
“Decolonization is not a
Metaphor,” *Decolonization:*

David Garneau

it is also about First Nations, Inuit and Métis people becoming themselves neither through forced assimilation into non-Indigenous modes, nor by retreating to a reconstructed, anachronistic Indigenous cultural purity, but by struggling to make new ways of being Indigenous within the complex of the contemporary negotiations of Aboriginal/settler/international Indigenous identities.

Most cultural decolonizing work in Canada is pedagogical. It seeks to educate people and to help them gain the tools to teach themselves. A popular way to decolonize minds is to introduce settlers to their hosts' ways of knowing and being. This is usually done gently in a safe environment and in translation. This is a very reasonable approach. It is rational, polite and sound pedagogy. However, it is less transformative than immersion in difference. Immersion is a shock to the mind through the senses. Its weakness as a tool of decolonization, though, is that it can be overwhelming and provoke retreat and entrenchment. Between these two approaches is a wide space for art.

Art is a strange supplement. It is not essential to our survival but is integral to our humanity. It is the ornament, the flourish, the extra effort, the unpredictable addition, the unnecessary necessity. Good art is not always good design. Unrestrained by craft, art can so embellish an ordinary function as to make it useless; render a vessel, for instance, so beautiful that we feel the need to protect it from its intended service. Art is the site of intolerable research, the laboratory of odd ideas, of sensual and intuitive study, and of production that exceeds the boundaries of conventional disciplines, protocols and imaginaries. Art is a display of surplus, of skill, ingenuity, knowledge, discipline, time, labour and wealth. It embroiders status, disguises corruption and celebrates power. But art is also the stage where other surplus finds expression. It can be a way for the marginalized, refused and repressed to return.

Few are immune to what beauty stirs in us. Beautiful nature stimulates a pleasure that defies reason and seems to embody timeless being apart from ideology. In some it evokes the spiritual. Even materialists are arrested by nature. While they do not look for metaphysical authorship, they too are awed by the order, complexity and beauty of natural processes that exist independent of human hands and consciousness. Formal excellence in art is similarly inspiring. Many find in human-made things the expression of creative perfection, of a genius so wonderful, complete and novel that they feel compelled to ascribe its power to a source beyond the human. Others see in beautiful works of art evidence of a humanness freed from the grasp of the conventionalizing power of a momentary regime. In the making and appreciation of art there is a space of difference, even resistance, where people can find refuge from the ideas that otherwise rule them.

The feelings produced by the beautiful are extra-rational, noninstrumental and overwhelming. Beautiful art is nonpropositional. Such objects do not make logical claims that can be tested for truth value. They show, they embody; they simply are. People preoccupied by a utilitarian worldview, who are possessed by the attitude that sees real value only in an object or person's use, can find beauty disturbing. Beauty is subversive insofar as it makes us aware that there is more to life than utility, reason and pragmatism. Beautiful human-made things are passionate evidence that

people desire and perform at least part of their lives in excess of the instrumental.

However, the weakness of beauty as a tool of decolonization, or any other form of political use, is that it is a poor vehicle for conceptual content and critical engagement. Differences and dissent from the dominant order are tolerated, even celebrated, if they are attractively adorned and remain incomprehensible. What separates beautiful art from, for example, illustration or essay, is its availability to multiple and even contrary interpretations, and its resistance to didacticism. From a political point of view, beauty is unreliable. Beautiful works of art perform, display and embody worldviews but they do not explain them. The fact that it is possible to read anything politically is not the same as claiming that *that thing* is the best means to stimulate social action. If we want to design effective decolonizing tools from art, we ought to look beyond sensual allure alone. Beauty represses discordant human experience. While it is right and good that most works of contemporary but customary First Nations art are beautiful, we have different expectations of art, for example, about residential schools made by survivors. Robert Houle's recent paintings of his residential school experiences are rough, sketchy and unlovely, and bring the viewer a little closer to truth and empathy than visually pleasing images of the same events ever could. Beautiful works of art are utopic spaces that refuse the ugly, painful and unresolved. The discipline of the beautiful and the formally excellent is often used to repress unpleasant and dissenting truths (under the claim of quality), and is regularly employed to exclude those whose cultural practices are deemed outside of the dominant aesthetic regime.

As this issue of *FUSE* attests (and perhaps, indeed, much of the magazine's oeuvre), there is a shift in contemporary art and cultural studies from a taste for objects to a preference for performance; from artworks to aesthetic practices; from criticism to reception; from private intellection and toward the sensual and socially engaged. And some artists, curators and others committed to social justice see potential tools for decolonizing practices in this turn. For example, the Transnational Decolonial Institute's multiauthored manifesto, "Decolonial Aesthetics (I)," explains that "the goal of decolonial thinking and doing is to continue re-inscribing, embodying and dignifying those ways of living, thinking and sensing that were violently devalued or demonized by colonial, imperial and interventionist agendas as well as by postmodern and altermodern internal critiques." [3]

This sounds like a thoughtful and just rebalancing. However, this phrasing and way of thinking might actually inspire practices that perpetuate the modernist and colonial traditions they seek to undermine. "Were" here assumes that we live in a post-colonial environment. It also sets the site of authenticity in the past tense and valorizes "ways of being" that are prior to contact. While cultural recovery projects are essential work for Indigenous people, they are only one aspect of cultural decolonization, and concentrating on these practices may re-inscribe colonial Romanticism.

The revival of customary Aboriginal practices, because of its adherence to an alternative to the dominant code, is seen as already and always a site of resistance. But this difference from the dominant code is a general and diffused one. In terms of resistance and survivance, [4] what is true of one object is more or less true

of all members of that class. All these objects—from the point of view of the dominant gaze—embody difference, but few posit a critique. Specific resistance, pointed critical engagement with power, is rarely perceptible (to the colonial gaze) in traditional practices. Those objects are held within their community's circuit of meaning and are designed to perpetuate the identity and structures of the society they belong to, not deconstruct them. Reviving customary practices is *noncolonial practice*. Decolonial practice is a more direct challenge to colonial habits.

Emphasizing cultural revival is to claim the reproduction of a static, prior moment as the site of authenticity, rather than recognizing the complexity of Aboriginal adaptation during colonization and the fact that both settlers and Indigenous peoples have been transformed by their entangled histories. Room needs to be made, especially due to the continuous nature of Canadian colonialism, to recognize our mutual adaptations, our métissage, and to make this the basis of a significant part of decolonial strategizing.

In addition to recovering and supporting traditional Indigenous cultural practices, the other "ways of being" that the Transnational Decolonial Institute, and others promoting decolonial

other than European. There is a tendency in decolonial aesthetics to essentialize nondominant cultural contributions and to find value only in what they are thought to have possessed prior to contact/colonization. And those attributes are constructed as the lacks of Western ideology and imperialism. If the Canadian branch of this movement is managed by "Eurocentric" Canadians (no matter how reformed), this looks less like a new turn than as just another cycle in a continuous revolution in Western art, thought and sentiment since the Romantics: disenchanting with the society of their fathers, Western artists seek personal and cultural renewal, re-enchantment from the work and lives of those supposedly uncontaminated by their patrimony, the Indigenous.

A preference for intellection, for thinking, for scepticism and experimentation is not the genetic inheritance of European peoples alone. There are Cree philosophers and Anishinabeg scientists, German mystics and Hungarian witches. Reason is not a cultural attribute of the West alone, and spirituality and other forms of extra-rationalism are found in every culture. These are human qualities. European colonialism was as much fuelled by a desire to save souls as it was motivated by material greed. Western cultures



↑
Terrance Houle, *Saddle Up* (2010).
Performance, Vancouver.
Image courtesy of Jarusha Brown and the artist.

aesthetics, wish to nurture are identified as the sensual, emotional and intuitive (aesthesis), [5] in opposition to intellection and the instrumentalist preference of Euro-American and other imperialisms. While this may also signal a healthy reorientation, to the Indigenous ear it sounds like familiar modernist dichotomous logic: the West is logocentric, so the other must be passionate, sensual and nonrational. While the manifesto authors do call for a polyphony of difference, their preferred differences are those that seem

and individuals are replete with contradictions, especially foundationally conflicting beliefs about materialism and metaphysics. All this is to refresh the warning against essentializing colonized people and projecting upon them only the attributes that are contrary to the current dominants' preference. By troubling both categories just a little, we can see that mainstream discourses are far from unified and that oppositional discourses are not merely the repressed supplements of the colonizer. If rationalism is flawed because it

[3] "Decolonial Aesthetics (I)," Transnational Decolonial Institute (22 May 2011; online). *Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln & London: Nebraska University Press, 1999).

[4] Gerald Robert Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on*

[5] "Aesthesis or Aiesthesis, generally defined as 'an unelaborated elementary awareness of stimulation, a 'sensation of touch,' is related to awareness, sense experience

and sense expression, and is closely connected to the processes of perception." "Decolonial Aesthetics," Transnational Decolonial Institute (22 May 2011; online).



←
 Rebecca Belmore,
 prior to closing panel discussion for
 “Contemporary Indigenous Performance
 Art: Where it’s Been, Where it’s At and
 Where it’s Going”
 at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery
 (Lethbridge), 9 May 2012.
 Image courtesy of Mountain Standard
 Time Festival and the artist.

marginalizes feeling and sensation, aesthetic action based on feeling and sensation is equally flawed in the other direction if it marginalizes intellection. Gut feelings do not always lead to right action. Feeling is often just embodied culture. Racism is a feeling; so is sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and all deep values that guide us without thinking. We need internal and discursive dialogues between intellection, intuition, sensation and feeling if we are to reduce the imbalance that comes from both over-rationalization and affective error. The teaching that Western-identified persons and institutions should learn from Aboriginal cultures is our emphasis on holism, not the exchange of one partial worldview for another.

In respect to the holistic attitude, I will conclude by counterbalancing my intellection with an affective account of my experience of the three aesthetic actions alluded to in the introduction. In May of 2012, at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (Lethbridge), [6] I moderated a discussion about contemporary Indigenous performance art. Once the formalities were out of the way but before the first question was asked of the panel—Adrian Stimson, Rebecca Belmore and Terrance Houle—Belmore stood before the crowd and let out an aural avalanche. It was a deep, sustained yell, a loud, long and unexpected monotone. Too low for a scream, too attenuated to be a shout, without an external stimulus to suggest it was a reaction, a response, a reply. The soulful exhalation seemed deliberate but perhaps without deliberation; an unconscious intention instantly manifesting itself as an act in advance of mind and meaning, a body responding to an unfamiliar environment, sounding the space, inhabiting it with breath and a vibrating presence before words. The muscular push forced chatter and thought from the crowded room, and cleared the space from anything other than immediate visceral attention and presence. It demanded a transition from a space of many to a moment of unified attention and communion.

The sound was outside of language. It was not an utterance, a request, an assertion, a claim, a communication in any ordinary sense. It broke with the protocols of such gatherings. It was shocking and yet because the issuing body seemed in control, it did not seem symptomatic of distress or a prelude to violence. Even so, the surprise of the sonic rip excited in me a primal response. Only an act of will prevented me from rushing either forward or away.

A year earlier, 17 March 2011, at Neutral Ground (Regina), [7] I attended Guillermo Gómez-Peña and James Luna's *La Nostalgia Remix*, an assemblage of their performance pieces generated over fourteen years of collaboration. The night was chaotic, crowded and noisy, and engendered a tense participatory fun that at several points tipped toward shock. In one scene, while gripping the long hair of a young female audience member, a menacing Gómez-Peña, costumed as I remember it in an amalgam of Mayan and contemporary military gear, mimed to the audience whether he ought to decapitate her with his machete. The theatrical fourth wall disappeared much earlier in the night when audience members were dressed in stereotypical cowboy and Indian and other costumes and were invited to participate in various scenarios.

This one began as more serious fun but soon edged toward horror. I felt like I was about to witness a murder. The possibility of violence felt actual, not acted, and it generated a complex series of feelings then and now. I was surprised that some people shouted for him to do it. I was surprised that I did not rush forward. I honestly felt that this stranger (to me) might not have been acting, that he was possessed by the character he was playing. I wanted to fight or flight in a non-thought response. I felt a visceral thrill and horror that in my gut linked this event with the history of human violence

↓ →
Guillermo Gómez-Peña and James Luna,
La Nostalgia Remix (March 2011).
Performance. Produced by Heather Haynes.
Coproresented by Tribe, Neutral Ground, and Sâkêwêwak
Image courtesy of Ian Campbell and the artists.



and bloody spectatorship that is barely suppressed by a veneer of contemporary “civilization.” But I also became aware of my own colonized state, my desire to correct and control this other. For me it was a profound physical revelation. While I knew these concepts as ideas prior to that night, this sight brought it home to and through my body in a much more convincing and unforgettable way. It was deeply frightening.

Terrance Houle's thick belly is a feature of many of his photographs and performances. [8] It is not a pleasing sight. It is the sort of thing that in most settings within Western cultures is hidden away, because of the flesh's association with sex and, in this case, because it is not attractive according to the conventions of ideal male beauty. Non-disciplined bellies are to be concealed. Houle's exposed paunch—and his disinterest in shame—contrasts Aboriginal norms with the colonial normative that has had great



anxiety about the naked body and sexuality, but especially with Native nakedness and sexuality. For Houle, his frequent near-nudity in performance is a form of purification—a being in the world as you came into the world, naked—that was modeled for him by men in the sweat lodge. [9] Houle's exposure calls such colonial tastes and previous attempts to control Aboriginal flesh into question. I have been using the words “taste,” “preference” and “habit” when examining colonial cultural strategies, and in order to denaturalize these opinions-backed-by-force. But Houle's visceral actions establish the point much more memorably.

Belmore's shout, Gómez-Peña's threat and Houle's belly are aesthetic in that they trigger affective responses. They stimulate the senses. They are not lovely gestures, nor quite sublime or ugly. Their power comes from their not-quite participation in a Kantian aesthetic and their not-quite engagement in pedagogic theatre. They are intuitive disruptions of the repressed real into the aesthetic arena. These unexplained, extra-rational, undisciplined irruptions of not-quiteness intrigue the mental/sensual system more perplexingly than beauty or didacticism alone. They are mentally indigestible. Rather than teach, they encourage people to puzzle with them and learn what they need of them.

I think that what excites decolonial activists is less the radical possibilities of traditional Indigenous cultures than the radical possibilities of contemporary art. Few decolonial aesthetic activists advocate for the revival of traditional Indigenous cultural practices alone. Rather, they are enthusiastic about how Indigenous ways of knowing and being can reinvigorate and rebalance Western aesthetic practices, even to the point of de-Westernizing them. While noncolonial practices, such as perpetuating traditional Indigenous cultural activities, are Indigenous, decolonial aesthetic activism could not be similarly described. Especially in the Canadian/Aboriginal context, decolonial activity is inscribed in relation to the mainstream. It seeks to change the orientation of the discourse but not eliminate it, reform individual members, not ship them off. It is a dialogue between Indigeneity and Canadianism in a field that belongs exclusively to neither. Traditional Indigenous cultures before contact were, of course, neither decolonial nor activist. Art as a form of decolonial activism is the result of contact; it emerges from cultures in collision. Decolonial aesthetics, then, is a hybrid; neither fully Indigenous nor Western. It is this new site of métissage that needs interrogation, not the fetishization of just one half of its roots. Indigenous artists like Rebecca Belmore and Terrance Houle, and a Chicano artist such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, are bi-cultural, creating work in the space where Indigenous/colonial culture overlap. And what they produce there belongs to not-quite one space or the other, but to the third space of art.

David Garneau (Métis) is a visual artist, curator and critical writer teaching at the University of Regina. His work engages issues of nature, masculinity and contemporary Indigenous identities.

[6] On 4 and 9 May 2012, Rebecca Belmore and Adrian Stimson conducted concurrent workshops titled Contemporary Indigenous Performance Art—Where it's Been, Where it's At & Where it's Going... at the University of Lethbridge

(hosted by Tanya Harnett). The last day featured a formal discussion held at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in which Belmore and Stimson were joined by Houle, moderated by the author. The events were produced by Tomas Jonsson for the

Mountain Standard Time Performative Art Festival Society's Making Way series.

[7] *La Nostalgia Remix* was the last in the Shame-man meets El Mexican't series of performances by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and

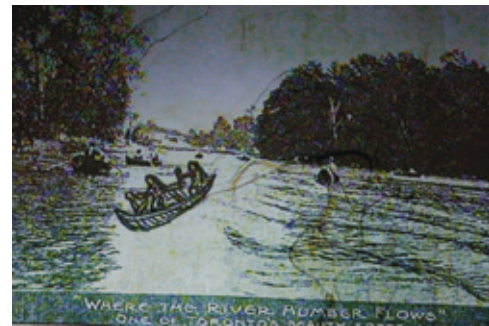
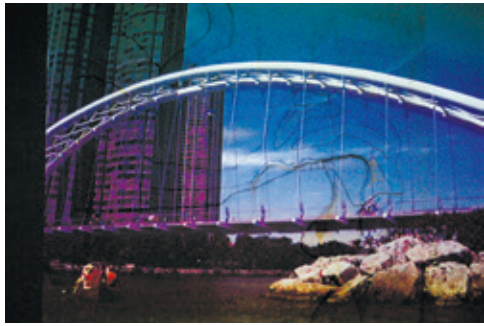
James Luna (begun in the early 1990s). Copresented by Tribe, Neutral Ground and Sâkêwêwak, the performance I attended was at Neutral Ground, 17 March 2011.

[8] Examples of Houle's near-naked self-portrait photographs and performances include: *Remember in Grade...* (2004) in which an unhappy Houle, standing in a backyard garden, is dressed in shorts and a paper bag, school project regalia

that covers his chest; *Trails End/End Trails* (2007) in which a near-naked Houle, dressed only in a breechcloth and roach, slouches on a metal playground horse in imitation of James E. Fraser's iconic *End of the Trail* (1915); and in the performance *Saddle Up*

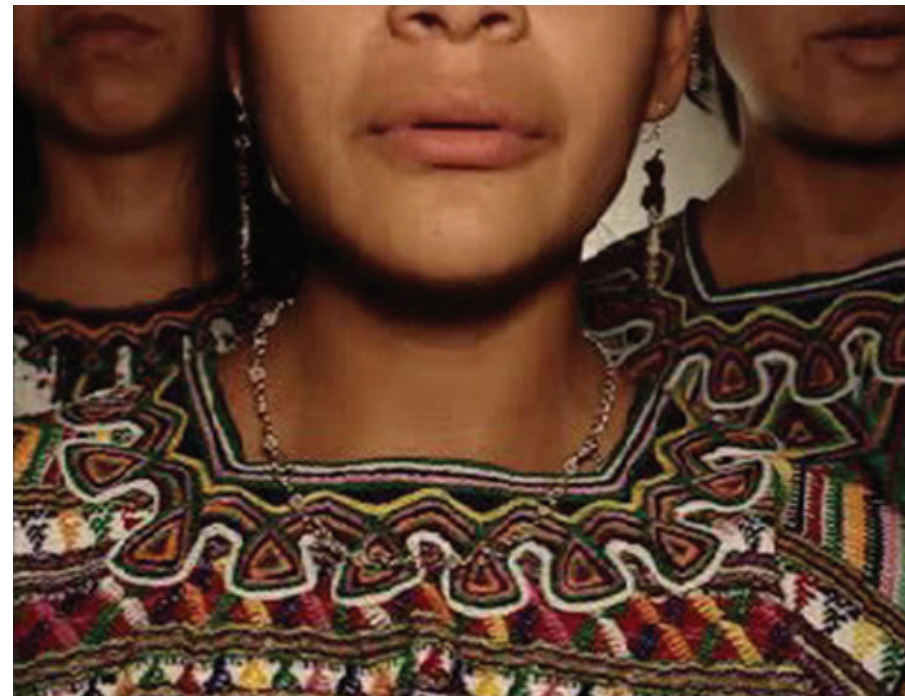
(Vancouver, 2010) in which once again wearing only breechcloth, Houle stands on a fake, old-timey movie set—complete with scaled down teepee—and invites passersby to photograph themselves with him, a real-like Indian.

[9] Email exchange between the author and Terrance Houle, 10 June 2013.



Indigeneity and Decolonial Seeing

in Contemporary Art of Guatemala



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Fernando Poyón,
Contra la Pared, 2006.
Digital video still.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Kency Cornejo

Introduction

In the early twentieth-century modernist art of Latin America, Indigeneity became a popular theme with which to strengthen nationalist discourse, one that relegated Indigenous being to a romantic past. With the emergence of a Latin American modernism, artists who had recently arrived from studies in Europe introduced avant-garde trends reminiscent of an Indigenous aesthetics and style from centuries ago: flat spaces, decentering of linear perspective, use of saturated bold colours, anatomically abstracted bodies and overlapping representations of space. While these stylistic choices echoed prequest modes of representation that were forcefully prohibited during colonization, they were now credited to European artists and labeled cubism, expressionism, fauvism, surrealism and other European modernist styles supposedly inspired by non-European cultures.

Simultaneously, while such artists celebrated and elevated an imagined Indigenous identity, the brutal repression of Indigenous peoples residing in Central America was taking place under various government-led military campaigns. In depictions of these brutal periods – such as La Matanza, the massacre of 1932 led by General Hernández Martínez which left 30,000 Salvadorans dead, or the more recent genocide in Guatemala led by ex-dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, which resulted in over 1,771 Mayan-Ixil killed and 29,000 displaced over his seventeen-month rule—the Indigenous

body remains the object of violence, historical discourse and sociopolitical analysis, and is rarely acknowledged as a *voice* or enunciation of visual epistemologies. In some cases, well-respected and well-intended artists in Central America addressed the Indigenous plight in contemporary artworks, but the Indigenous body remained a representation from the gaze of another. It appears that unless an artwork figuratively depicts village life, customs or landscapes (subject matter that fits within an already accepted folkloric style), Indigenous artists are disqualified from art narratives as *creators* of contemporary or experimental art, much less as contributors to an intellectual or philosophical artistic debate. Why is Indigeneity relegated to a romantic past, one that is to be depicted, that serves to inspire artists and that is only *to be seen*, while Indigenous peoples in the region are continuously subjected to racist and colonialist treatment, dehumanization and murder?

Today in postwar Guatemala, the flourishing contemporary art scene consists of several artists who employ experimental art practices to address the current state and violence within a greater system of coloniality. I here refer to the term the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano introduced to describe a system of domination in which the European/Western colonization of political and economic spheres continues to be intricately linked to the colonization of knowledge systems at the world scale: Coloniality is not synonymous with colonialism, though their historical relationships are the same. Rather, coloniality extends beyond the removal

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Fernando Poyón,
Contra la Pared, 2006.
Digital video still.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Decolonial Aesthetics

of previous colonial governments and administrations, and persists as an ideological and epistemic tool of domination embedded in systems of power brought about by the history of colonization. [1]

For years, artists Benvenuto Chavajay, Sandra Monterroso, Ángel Poyón, Fernando Poyón and Antonio Pichillá have challenged colonialist notions of Indigenous peoples as mere silent sources of inspiration. Similar to what Walter Mignolo has termed a “locus of enunciation,” these artists create and articulate knowledge from a specific place—a colonial wound—visually

and through the body. [2] From an Indigenous embodiment of knowledge and cosmologies, they critique coloniality as they observe and live it in contemporary Guatemala. What issues do these artists bring to the forefront of decolonial visual thinking and critiques of coloniality? And how do these artists negotiate contemporary art practices with a colonial legacy of Indigenous repression, as they engage in creative decolonial strategies? How do their works delink from Eurocentric notions of the Indigenous body as one to be seen, and not as one who sees?

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Sandra Monterroso,
Rakoc Atin, 2008.
Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.



↑
Sandra Monterroso, *Rakoc Atin*,
2008. Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Corporal Critiques of Coloniality

Just this year, unprecedented in the Americas, the Guatemalan ex-dictator Efraín Ríos Montt was put on trial in a national court and found guilty of genocide for his deliberate attack on the Mayan-Ixil population. [3] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported that up to eighty percent of deaths during the conflict were of Mayan Indigenous peoples, who were also raped, tortured and disappeared. Through earth scorching, sacred lands and resources were destroyed, ensuring that those who escaped direct military death still had very little chance of survival. And while the military rationalized killing Mayan children during the conflict by labeling them “consequential victims,” it is now known that government forces perceived Indigenous children as “bad seeds,” directly ordering their execution. [4] But what happens when these “bad seeds” grow anyway?

In the capital city of Guatemala, an Indigenous man dressed as the elders of his Mayan-Tz’utujil community intervened in the chaotic urban space, making all nearby stop and take notice of his performance, *El Grito (The Scream)*, 2002). The artist, Benvenuto Chavajay, paced back and forth on the busy sidewalk while swinging a matraca around and above his head. With the matraca, a religious instrument and symbol of Guatemalan identity for the artist, Chavajay echoed the sound of gunshots—a very familiar sound to his community during the armed conflict. By projecting this sound onto the city and its pedestrians he evoked a memory, reminding citizens of the 36-year war and of all its unresolved injustices. Chavajay evaded the limits of a sound associated with repression, and with his bodily presence transformed this sound into a visual and corporal scream of resistance, of condemnation—one that cannot be expressed

or experienced in the same way with a word or through text, as it requires the full embodiment and presence of both the artist and the viewers. His gesture evoked the sound, and his traditional dress and Indigenous body prescribed its meaning.

Chavajay’s action in *El Grito* draws from an ancient tradition of performance as an essential mode of cultural, spiritual and social representation and transmission of knowledge. From a Euro-American geopolitical perspective, however, grand histories of art locate performance art within a European and US tradition of experimental art in the 1960s. These histories of linear and unilateral development value concepts like originality, and identify Western art as authentic and all others as derivative. As a decolonial strategy, delinking from this Eurocentric perspective requires shifting the geographies of reason, and rewriting from colonized, erased histories and ways of knowing to bring forth other possible points of departure.

While Chavajay engages in performance art as a sociopolitical critique, he also draws from an Indigenous tradition that precedes twentieth-century Euro-American art movements, in which the body, uses of space and the ephemeral entail a system of knowledge production and transmission. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor coined a pair of terms, the *archive* and the *repertoire*, to elucidate how performance in the Americas, inclusive of its aesthetic and political aspects, can be understood as a system of knowledge. Unlike the archive (that is, memory and knowledge as it exists in documents, maps, bones, videos, film and anything else resistant to change), the repertoire enacts embodied memory (gestures, performances, orality, movement, dance) and includes ephemeral acts thought of as non-reproducible knowledge. [5] The irreproducible testimonial embodiment of Chavajay’s protesting scream (the repertoire), along with its visual documentation (the archive), challenges Western ways of knowing as solely textual, and roots the performance in an epistemic system deriving from ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. From that geography of reason, Chavajay evokes the thousands of visual and corporal screams that since colonization have resisted and condemned the prior genocides. *El Grito* therefore reveals that genocide within a neoliberal context is merely a contemporary manifestation of coloniality.

Along these lines, in a performance titled *Rakoc Atin* (2008), the artist Sandra Monterroso occupied the public space in front of the Supreme Court of Guatemala both as condemnation and healing process. During her performance, she wrote out in large scale the words *rakoc atin* with sea salt on the ground. In Maya Q’eqchi’, *rakoc atin* means “hacer justicia,” or “to make justice.” Under Ríos Montt’s rule, military forces would blatantly dispose of Indigenous peoples by throwing them from helicopters into the Pacific Ocean. [6] Some bodies returned with the tide, but most were never to be seen again, preventing both a proper burial ceremony and rituals of mourning. By using sea salt, Monterroso condemned the inhumane military practice, while simultaneously calling on the significance of salt in many Indigenous rituals and practices of healing and cleansing.

As the performance progressed, various intravenous machines, normally used to transfer blood, medicine or drugs into a main artery as a form of medical treatment, slowly leaked

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(paper presented at the conference Coloniality and Its Disciplinary Sites, Binghamton University, NY, April 1999).

Colonial Difference,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2002): 56–96; and Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[1] Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Its Institutions”

[2] See Walter Mignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the

[3] For information on the developments of the trial and links to other sites, see www.riosmontt-trial.org

children “was not a secondary casualty of state terror, but a clear object of destruction within the context of genocide.” Mayan babies, toddlers and children were defined by the state as “bad seeds” for being children of the

“internal enemies,” a term defined in the 1983 Manual of Counter-Subversive War by the Center for Military Studies of the Guatemala Army. See Eglá Martínez Salazar, *Global Coloniality of Power in Guatemala:*

Racism, Genocide, Citizenship (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 103.

[5] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham:

Duke University Press, 2003).

[6] See Guatemala, Memory of Silence: Tz’inil Na’tab’al, Report of the Commission for Historical Clarifications, Conclusions and Recommendations (2000).

liquid onto the words, consequently diluting them. This subtle watering down of the phrase rakoc atin spoke to the fact that when victims or their families reported crimes of violence in their Native languages to police authorities, these reports often went undocumented due to a lack of translators—not to mention all those who never reported at all. The same occurred during a peace process that sought testimonies to initiate healing and reconciliation processes. In simulating a disintegration of words by a machine intended to keep people alive and to heal, Monterroso implicated language not only within the power of coloniality, but also with the failures of a symbolic healing process designed to only superficially maintain a people and culture alive.



↑
Benvenuto Chavajay, *Suave Chapina* series, 2007–2008.
Object, intervened rocks.
Image courtesy of the artist.

←
Benvenuto Chavajay,
El Grito, 2002.
Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.

This becomes all the more relevant considering that ten days after the historic guilty verdict for the US-backed military dictator Ríos Montt, by which he was sentenced to eighty years for genocide and crimes against humanity, the Guatemala Constitutional Court annulled the jury's verdict. [7] Chavajay and Monterroso, who embrace Indigenous identities and consider their actions decolonial strategies, bring the issue of race to the forefront of Indigenous genocide in Guatemala. Through their performances, they recognize how sound and language remain implicated in coloniality, and intervene in public spaces with their bodies to enact visual and corporal screams of denunciation. Their interventions can be understood as corporal critiques of contemporary systems that continue to uphold notions of race, superiority and inferiority to deem a group of people nonhuman. There are no *representations* of Indigenous bodies here; rather, the active presence of the artists' own bodies are decolonial gestures of embodiment and knowledge, not represented via the gaze of another, but enunciated and spoken in public space.



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Antonio Pichillá,
Ku'kul'kan, 2011.
Installation.
Image courtesy of Maria Victoria Véliz and the artist.

Objects and the Underside of Modernity

Away from the city, in more remote areas of Guatemala, artists are using object-based art to address the violence of modernity on Indigenous communities, linked to coloniality as the underside of modernity. San Pedro La Laguna is one of several Indigenous towns located at the edge of Lake Atitlán in the department of Sololá, Guatemala. [8] It is home to the Tz'utujil community, one of twenty-one ethnic groups in the country that make up the ancient Mayan civilization. Today, an influx of foreign travelers has turned the town into a tourist site with an overflow of backpackers, hostels and restaurants run by foreign retirees. [9] While the town is known for its strong artistic community (in particular, paintings of quotidian life in a traditional folklore style made for tourist consumption), a new generation departs from this artistic tradition to engage in practices still rooted in Indigenous ways of seeing. [10]

Chavajay, who resides in both the city and San Pedro La Laguna, links the environmental deterioration of the lake to the arrival of a foreign modernity. In his *Suave Chapina* (2007) series, the artist transforms rocks, stones and other objects from Lake Atitlán by attaching to them the plastic straps of the popular Suave Chapina brand of sandal. The brand's name merges *suave*, "soft," and *chapina*, the informal name used to refer to a Guatemalan woman. As Chavajay has noted about plastic: "This material marked Guatemalan society, above all the Indigenous world. With its arrival everything changed. Modernity *inplasticated* our culture." [11] This brand of sandal became both an inexpensive commodity of desire and an alternative to going barefoot. While the lightweight material of the sandal should project comfort and convenience, Chavajay has replaced the "sole" of the sandal with the natural rocks from San Pedro La Laguna, bringing forth the weight, heaviness and plight of the Tz'utujil community. This juxtaposition and relation between materials, in which plastic represents a foreign modernity and the rocks represent the lake and the Tz'utujil, goes beyond a critique of environmental destruction of land brought about by the tourist invasion of San Pedro. Modernity as inplastication of Indigenous culture summons in the artist's own terms what scholars have noted to be the underside of modernity. [12] That is, the conquest of the Americas was the constitutive element of modernity, and coloniality its counterpart—both mutually dependent phenomena. The series, however, is not a rejection of modernity but rather a reassertion of resistance and survival. Chavajay recognizes in much of his work the process of transculturation so pertinent to the Americas, but maintains a Tz'utujil epistemic connection through the base and sole of the artworks—pieces of earth that have existed for centuries as witness to Tz'utujil journeys.

The stones, moreover, are infused with a definition of art and the sacred that delinks from Western definitions of art. In the Tz'utujil community the word *art* or *arte* in the colonizing Spanish language emerged only fifty years ago. [13] For artists like Chavajay, the closest equivalent to art in Tz'utujil is *the sacred*, which implies a notion of valorization and significance applicable especially to nature, from the tallest trees to the smallest rocks. [14] This notion extends beyond mere belief and into a daily praxis and relation with the Mother Earth based on respect, sustenance and reciprocity. The Indigenous relation to nature continues to contrast and challenge the dominant ill-treatment and violent disregard of nature prominent in the coloniality of power, capitalism and Western ways of living—especially as they entail the destruction of Indigenous lands, sacred plants and, of course, bodies. The sacredness of life in nature's objects, as the most accurate definition of art, challenges the notion of art-commodity while maintaining a fundamental spiritual connection to visual culture and life that has survived for over 500 years.

By contrast, the Kaqchikel artist Ángel Poyón, who also makes object-based artworks, is more interested in conveying the failures of modernity for Guatemala. Poyón is from San Juan Comalapa, a town inhabited by the Indigenous Maya Kaqchikel located in the department of Chimaltenango, and widely known for a tradition of folklore painting that extends back to the 1940s with the master Andrés Curruchich. [15] In *Estudios del fracaso medidos en tiempo y espacio* (*Studies in Failure Measured in Time and Space*, 2008), Poyón recovers old-fashioned twin-bell alarm clocks by eliminating the numbers (references to Western concepts of time) and replacing them with paths of movement, migration and displacement. The lines—evoking one of the most notable modernist artists in the West, Piet Mondrian—offer a contradictory journey, with overlaps, repetitions and an unclear directionality that proposes an oppositional framework of time and space brought on by the failures of modernity. As the Guatemalan curator Rosina Cazali has argued, "these studies suggest a useless pathway, as was the project of modernity." [16] The vintage clocks proposition an element of nostalgia to the passing of time and movements in space, but in the context of Guatemala, nostalgia is offset by recent memories of forced migration—either rural to urban, or across national borders, as a result of the Guatemalan conflict. Like the *Suave Chapina* series, Ángel Poyón's *Estudios del fracaso medidos en tiempo y espacio* exposes the relation between an imposed modernity and its underside, coloniality. These nonfigurative, object-based works bring forth current issues of environment, space and migration; but unlike in the traditional style of painting practiced by local artists in their hometowns, Chavajay and Poyón eliminate representations of Indigenous bodies, allowing the ideas

[7] As these events are developing, we have yet to see the outcome of the annulment.

[8] For more on the Indigenous communities surrounding Lake Atitlán, see Morna Macleod, *Santiago Atitlán, Ombligo Del Universo Tz'utujil: Cosmovisión Y Ciudadanía* (Guatemala: Oxfam Novib, 2000).

[9] Away from the shore, or what art historian Maria Victoria Véliz has called the "downtown" of San Pedro, and up the steep slope of the volcano, tourists become less visible and the Tz'utujil

community becomes more present. See Maria Victoria Véliz, "Seguir Hacia Delante, Volver la Mirada hacia Atrás" in *Suave Chapina: Benvenuto Chavajay* (Ciudad de Guatemala: Centro Cultural Metropolitano, 2007. Exhibition pamphlet).

[10] See Roberto Cabrera Padilla, "Artistas Guatemaltecos Kaqchikeles y Tz'utujiles: Una Nueva Visión" in *Otra Mirada: Atitlán + Comalapa* (Guatemala: Embajada de Mexico, 2007. Exhibition pamphlet).

[11] Benvenuto Chavajay, "A los

chunches no los transformo. Los transfiguro. No hay nada que hacerles," interview by Beatriz Colmenares, *El Periódico* (12 May 2013; online at www.elperiodico.com).

[12] See Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" in *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580.

[13] Benvenuto Chavajay, interview by the author, San Salvador, El Salvador, 29 May 2011.

[14] Ibid.

[15] As a young boy, when Curruchich worked as a farmer, he acquired an interest in painting objects and local scenes onto feathers, wood, jicaras (gourds), and later cloth panels. Once "discovered" by a local priest, he gained international recognition and went on to exhibit in the United States, initiating the tradition in Comalapa, where he taught others his style of painting. Today there are hundreds of artists in Comalapa, including his daughter Maria Curruchich along with several women artists, who continue to paint in the tradition of daily scenes through oil painting.

[16] Rosina Cazali, *Migraciones: Mirando Al Sur* (Ciudad de Mexico: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación, AECID, 2009. Exhibition catalogue).

and discourses in their works to convey Tz’utujil and Kaqchikel understandings of modernity/coloniality. This way of seeing materializes through a resignification of objects, which in the case of Chavajay, reinscribes Tz’utujil ways of seeing the sacred in the earth.

Spirituality and the Hidden

Studies have shown that Indigenous artists trained in Western styles of art during the colonial period inconspicuously incorporated symbols and imagery of Indigenous significance unknown to the Spanish colonizers and priests who supervised the works. While Christian religious practices were taken on, they were also subverted to incorporate and preserve Indigenous cosmologies and spirituality. [17] Today,



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Antonio Pichillá, *Lo Oculto*, 2005.
Installation.
Image courtesy of the artist.

artists like Fernando Poyón and Antonio Pichillá depend less on figurative associations to address the spiritual, instead using installation and video to critically reflect on the consequences of Christianity for Indigenous peoples in Guatemala and to reinforce notions of an Indigenous spirituality in the present day.

In the fifteen-second video *Contra la Pared (Against the Wall, 2006)*, Kaqchikel artist Fernando Poyón presents a close-up shot of three Mayan women in their traditional dress. Poyón frames the lower half of the women’s faces while they speak words inaudible to viewers. The only sound heard is the classical Catholic hymn that plays throughout the duration of the video. Once the camera zooms out, never showing the women’s faces but expanding the frame to their torsos, one sees the women repeating a gesture customary of the Catholic prayer I Confess to You. In the Spanish version of this prayer, to accompany the phrase “por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa” one repeatedly

takes the right fist to the heart as a gesture of guilt and remorse. Poyón associates this act with being “backed against the wall,” as the title indicates. In removing all contexts and isolating the act of self-blame as the focus of the video, the artist highlights that there is no justification for the confession, portraying the robotic gesture of guilt as an internalized colonialist act. Rooted in the imposition of Christianity as a method for colonization, and specifically the slaughter of those who refused conversion, Poyón points to this self-blame as a forced yet internalized mode of survival to coloniality. The lack of facial expression, the deliberately hidden eyes, and the mechanical manner in which the women repeat the gesture, conveys a dissociation from the prayer’s meaning that highlights a difference between performing a compromise in order to evade death and that of complete submission. In this manner, the artist reveals the role of Christianity, extending from initial colonization into contemporary coloniality manifested through self-blame. For Indigenous communities, the concepts of blame and self-blame remain prevalent concerns considering the continued lack of outside accountability for the oppression and injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples, and in particular by women as the main victims of physical and psychological violence.

Conversely, Tz’utujil artist Antonio Pichillá departs from a Mayan-Tz’utujil spirituality in his installations and videos. In the large-scale installation titled *Ku’kul’kan* (2011), Pichillá utilizes massive amounts of red cloth in a sculptural representation of the ancient fire serpent god Quetzalcoatl. The serpentine form is made up of a series of large knots, and the sculpture is placed across the wall to simulate its movement. Visually, Pichillá works with the concept of the knots or *bultos* (bundles) in relation to a strict Tz’utujil spirituality and energy. In the Tz’utujil community of San Pedro La Laguna, the artist is also known as a spiritual guide (or what some term a shaman) called upon by the community to heal individuals on matters of the spirit. Thus, his artistic practice explicitly departs from the notion of “experience from life” and into “life is spiritual” [18] By incorporating knots into his installation, Pichillá embodies notions of the body, spirit, mind and energy into the sacred.

Pichillá’s *bultos*, furthermore, allude to private, domestic space as a reference to the safeguarding of the valuable and the sacred. This idea is present in the installation *Lo Oculto (The Hidden, 2005)* consisting of two *bultos* in a triangular shelf. Common in Tz’utujil homes, items of value are hidden in tied bundles, kept veiled for protection in various locations throughout the home, or at times on the body. For Pichillá, in addition to the sacred and domestic, knots are symbols of Tz’utujil aesthetics and concepts of beauty, and recall the braided hair of an Indigenous woman secured with cloth and knots as a visual sign of attractiveness. [19] Gesture becomes equally important for the artist as he compares the process of creating and unraveling a knot (like covering and unraveling a bundle) to the continuous cycle in life. In the process, one knot leads to another, like a cycle of time that intersects states of knowing, being, and the sacred, where an end is actually a beginning. [20] With this idea, Pichillá references the Mayan calendar and the Baktun 13—while many inaccurately interpreted this as the Mayan prediction of

apocalypse, it in fact indicates an end to a Mayan era and the beginning of another rooted in Mayan cyclical concepts of time, and in opposition to the linear notions of time in Western thought.

Poyón’s *Contra la Pared* video raises the question of an internalized colonial mentality made possible through religious conquests and the persistence of coloniality; from extreme impoverished conditions to the lack of education resources, to rape, torture and genocide, the Guatemalan government constantly evades responsibility for the plight of Indigenous peoples and attributes responsibilities to notions of ignorance, uncleanness and promiscuity, resorting to colonialist racial discourse for impunity. Pichillá, from a direct Tz’utujil spirituality, points to the hidden and the sacred as an entry point to resistance and survival for an Indigenous episteme, with a critical awareness that like Christianity and modernity, disciplines of Western knowledge have sought entry into Indigenous cosmologies under the guise of objective research. [21] Key to the concept of the hidden is that which is being protected: Indigenous cosmologies and ways of knowing, which have historically become the desires of Western studies. In conversation, Poyón’s video and Pichillá’s installations make a clear distinction between the role of religion in coloniality and the protection of spirituality as a decolonial strategy.

Conclusion

In Mesoamerica, visibility has been a carrier and transmitter of histories, identities, thoughts, scientific discoveries and concepts of time and space even before coloniality/modernity became the global model of power. It is no surprise, then, that in an attempt to eliminate a population’s ways of being, the colonization of ways of seeing would be yet another strategy for the repression of other bodies and cosmologies. This suggests that a decolonial approach to visibility, art and visual thinking requires an unveiling and decentering of Western perspectives and their monopoly over meaning, beauty and art, and a visual rewriting from a position of colonial difference. Recognizing Indigenous visual theorization as part of ongoing political and artistic debates is key, and is distinct from addressing it as subject matter, as has been common in Western art where the Indigenous body is treated as a mere source of artistic inspiration.

Belonging to the generation that the military government termed “bad seeds,” and now to a so-called postwar generation, these artists enact decolonial gestures, and create objects to convey decolonial ways of seeing, in the contemporary art of Guatemala. From visual/corporal screams and object-based critiques of modernity and its underside, to the power of preserving the sacred, these selected works are based on rigorous investigation, on notions of the spiritual and in consideration of current political issues. They reinforce the epistemic aspect of art that goes beyond expression and into reflection and the production of knowledge. As such, they reiterate that intellectually inspired creative works are not limited to an Indigenous romanticized past, but are continuously present today, just as colonialist structures remain intact within current systems of power, demonstrating the need for decolonization as an ongoing project.



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Angel Poyón. *Estudios del fracaso medidos en tiempo y espacio*, 2008.
Object, intervened clock.
Image courtesy of Andrés Asturias/RARA and the artist.

[17] For example, the pre-Columbian goddess Coatlicue was secretly worshipped via the sanctioned figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This imagery has been especially central to Chicana/o artists in the United States who root their spirituality

through the incorporation of pre-Columbian imagery in their artwork. For a study on this relation between spirituality and Indigeneity in Chicana/o art, see Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham and London:

Duke University Press, 2007); and Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

[18] Antonio Pichillá, interview by the author, 29 November 2012.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1999).

Addressing the Settler Problem

Strategies of Settler Responsibility and Decolonization

Leah Decter and Carla Taunton

As white settler women we are beneficiaries of colonialism and as such we recognize our privileged identities in Canada. Through our artistic, academic and writing practices we both pursue personal and professional decolonizing processes, actively working in alliance with Indigenous decolonization. Drawing on Paulette Regan's [1] calls for settlers to take responsibility for their decolonizing work, beginning with transformative actions that interrupt colonial forms on the individual level, we put forward the urgency for creative and critical settler-driven interventions. We are wary of the space that settler decolonization has and could potentially claim, and are aware of the potential risks of becoming another colonizing discourse and aesthetic. With this in mind, our conversations are framed by the following question: How can the practice of decolonizing settler colonialism work in productive ways that do not co-opt or de-centre Indigenous decolonization and political and cultural sovereignty? Through each of our personal and professional experiences we have witnessed the potential for creative practice to function in this way, to stimulate the decolonization of the settler imagination. It is important to recognize that approaches to arts-based decolonial strategies vary. In the following conversation, we

We are caught up in one another, we who live in settler societies, and our interrelationships inform all that these societies touch.

—Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*

focus on the strategies that we have undertaken and speak from the grounding of our respective positionalities. We begin by framing some background about our practices and discussing how we each came to work through a critical settler lens.

Carla—The development of my critical settler lens began through my work as a non-Indigenous scholar of Indigenous art histories and anticolonial discourses. During my PhD course work, which focused on Indigenous women performance artists, I had a transformative moment of settler self-reflexivity. I realized through engagement with the artists' stories and performative research, that in order to productively contribute to Indigenous art histories, to social justice and to decolonization I had to first start the process of decolonizing myself. At this time, I had a critical understanding of settler colonialism and was already working within a politicized anticolonial framework; however, these ideas were at times abstracted from my own family history. I came to ask myself, how can I discuss the performance of Indigenous memories, arts-based resistance strategies and anticolonial interventions if I do not know my own history of colonialism?

I returned home to unceded Coast Salish territory to talk and listen to my grandmothers' stories about my family, embarking on a research project to understand how and why I was implicated in the colonial project. I became aware of how my family members, including myself, are beneficiaries of colonialism who continue to be part of settling, and thereby occupying, Indigenous territories. The stories told by my grandmothers were indicative of the invisibility of colonial violence felt by many white settlers, and the ways in which Canadian nationalistic narratives can indoctrinate individuals and families into a hegemonic colonial society. I became aware that I am a fifteenth-generation settler of North America, am part of a British Empire Loyalist family, and had a great-grandfather who negotiated land title for CN railroads and purchased land for CN hotel estates. This process of recovering settler experience revealed narratives of settler labour, hardship, community, loss and love.

By mapping the immigration histories of my family in conversation with my knowledge of the colonial project and Indian Policy in Canada, I encountered an uncomfortable and profound conclusion: my family's economic development was buttressed by

violent assimilationist and ethnocidal policies. Fundamentally, this process of uncovering my settler families' histories (Scottish, English, Irish and Welsh) activated an unlearning of Canadian national myths and encouraged a learning of my personal and familial privileges as white settlers.

The processes of unsettling my settler identity and unsettling my conception of home were significant both personally and professionally. I came to the realization that in order for me to contribute in productive and meaningful ways to the communities that I lived and worked in I had a responsibility to clean up some colonial debris, as it were. I conceive of my work as a settler scholar to participate in the dismantling of nationalist narratives that bolster and perpetuate white settler dominance and complacency in colonization. I do so through activating a politic of remembrance, which in the context of settler colonialism can mean, but is not limited to, the recognition and unearthing of seemingly invisible colonial agendas, apparatus and narratives.

Leah—In my practice as an intermedia artist and in the research I am undertaking as I begin a PhD, it has been crucial for me to develop critical examinations of both personal and historical narratives in order to articulate colonial truths that counter dominant mythologies, and to analyze their excision from the mainstream national imaginary. I came to the imperative of confronting my own complicity, and by extension that of larger white settler culture, through examining the conditions of my maternal grandfather's immigration and his experiences prior to coming to Canada, as well as the way the (in)visibility of that story functioned in my family narrative. My ancestors, all Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia, came to Canada in the first quarter of the twentieth century. My maternal grandfather was the last to arrive, reaching the port of Quebec City in 1925 at the age of 22. Travelling with false papers, he immigrated after eight years of displacement following the destruction of his village in which his family perished. Through my art practice, I mined elements of his story in order to look at broader historical and contemporary intersections of place, identity and (dis)location—the idea that making place is a human imperative and at the same time, a potentially destructive force. In 2005, while developing *here* (2006), the body of work that evolved from this research, and while preparing to relocate from Vancouver to Winnipeg, I began to ask myself ques-

tions about my relationship to place and place making, given the violence of settler colonial practices. This, together with further explorations of my grandfather's story in relation to the global movement of people through several iterations of *imprint* (2006–2010), led me to consider the program of Indigenous displacement as intrinsically tied to the attainment of refuge and advancement on the part of those arriving and their descendants.

Drawing on these underpinnings, my art and research practices are directed towards "the settler problem" as characterized by Roger Epp, Taiaiake Alfred, Paulette Regan and others. As such, my work contends with settler resistance to and involvement in decolonizing processes, and renders counternarratives that seek to disrupt dominant understandings of settler identity as articulated within the history and contemporary conditions of settler colonialism in the Canadian context. It is carried out through a practice that intertwines self-reflexive creative production, Indigenous-settler collaboration, critical intercultural social engagement and an operational strategy that positions settlers as the subject under scrutiny. [2] By centering colonial truths with respect to settler culpability, colonial myths can begin to be unravelled, and the ways we

are implicated can be uncovered. Further, by harnessing the significant capacity for creative practice to generate productive entry points for critical engagement with contentious issues, the settler imaginary, long stagnating in a self-imposed "narrative deficit," [3] can be influenced to dislodge entrenched colonial attitudes and open up to the potential of decolonizing imperatives.

Leah and Carla—We came to investigations of our personal histories through discrete paths, and the immigration histories and lived experiences of our ancestors differ. However, we recognize that understanding these personal histories, and thereby how our ancestors are implicated in the colonial project, is crucial in recognizing both how we continue to benefit from colonial policies, and what our responsibilities are with regards to decolonial work. As so many non-Indigenous Canadians clinging to the perception of impunity derived from dominant narratives of Canadian identity, it is important to recognize that the complicity of our ancestors in the colonial project is not necessarily dependent on their having been active within mechanisms readily understood as colonial in mainstream portrayals of Canadian history.

Canadian immigration policy has an indisputable history of supporting white

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Leah Decter,
Castor Canadensis: Provokas (2013).
Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.





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Leah Decter,
Castor Canadensis: Provokas (2013).
Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.

dominance, the occupation of Indigenous land and the erasure of Indigenous cultures. Yet mainstream immigrant narratives of economic advancement through labour and of imbrication into “Canadian” culture through the standards of liberal multiculturalism, serve to efface a settler identity that would account for the ways non-Indigenous Canadians benefit (unequally) from past and present colonial forms. It is challenging to parse the complexities of settler histories and acknowledge our families’ implication in colonial processes while simultaneously honouring individual and collective family stories. As such, in both pedagogical and contemporary art contexts, making counternarratives visible and tying them directly to personal narratives and present-day accountability constitutes an important strategy in decolonizing the passages of settlers.

Leah – In your classroom you create conditions of exploration in which your students can grapple with difficult knowledge [4] and move, through creative practice, into a reflexive decolonizing process. By holding a safe yet challenging intellectual, emotional and creative space you provide the framework through which people can enter into the kind of

informed inquiry that is so lacking in most pedagogical contexts in the country. As a white settler educator, your strategy of teaching Indigenous art centres Indigenous lived experience and knowledge in order to be respectful of Indigenous students, while providing a way into critical reckoning for non-Indigenous students. Can you elaborate on your approach to teaching Indigenous art as a decolonizing practice?

Carla – In my position as an assistant professor of Art History and Critical Studies at NSCAD University, I develop and teach Indigenous arts-focused curriculum as well as contemporary Canadian art courses. My recent experiences working with art students around issues of Indigenous art practice and methodologies, art and activism, colonial histories and social justice have been both humbling and inspiring. Our classroom spaces have become a site from which to activate decolonizing pedagogical models of unlearning and relearning, listening and remembering. My classrooms are presented to my students as sites for decolonization, and as a space to evoke and actualize the statement that we, as a collective of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples hosted on

Indigenous territory in Canada are “Treaty People.” By acknowledging Indigenous sovereignty and foregrounding Indigenous self-determination within the space of the university classroom (a colonial institution), together with my Indigenous and settler students we practice the simultaneous projects of cross-cultural decolonization. As a collective practice at the beginning of each class we acknowledge the Mi’kmaq Nation as our host, and students are invited to share the responsibility in stating this declaration of Indigenous sovereignty.

My pedagogical strategies of decolonizing the classroom mirror my research and curatorial practices, which are informed by the politics of settler responsibility and are grounded in critical Indigenous methodology, foregrounding the necessity of privileging multiple Indigenous systems of knowledge and activating Indigenous methods of collaboration, community engagement and mentorship (with an intergenerational focus). I present a conceptual, or rather imagined, conversation with the artists and writers, explored in each class in order to foster the centrality of Indigenous art practice and to work against the marginalization of Indigenous perspectives in Canada. What has occurred in my students’ writing and discussions has been profound. Many have embarked on familial research projects through class assignments that have resulted in, but are not limited to, reclamation of Indigenous identities and histories as well as realization of settler narratives, relationships and implications within colonialism.

I aim to maintain transparency and to provide contextual information for the students as to how and why I bring strategies of decolonization into play. An instrumental facet of engaging students in colonial histories (at times, difficult knowledge) is to acknowledge each student and their diverse subjectivities. In an attempt to create a supportive space based on principles of respect and collaboration I bring forward politics of anticolonialism and anti-oppression, and together we set expectations based on both individual and collective responsibility. Activities that support self-reflexivity and personal and/or familial relationships to colonialism are key to the dual processes of Indigenous and settler decolonization. In the process of decolonizing the self as well as decolonizing settler colonialism, many potential phases or experiences are bound to occur, many of which can be traumatic.

For my white settler students, feelings of apathy, guilt and anger can be activated into knowing and owning their histories,

developing awareness of their responsibility and privilege, and understanding the erasure of violent acts of genocide and ethnocide from national imagination and narratives. I remind my settler students that in many ways, they were not supposed to know about the deliberate histories of colonialism and the fact that colonialism is an ongoing process. Throughout my classes, many Indigenous students ask, why is this the first time in a classroom that Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are central? And repeatedly, settler students ask, why didn’t I know this? Why didn’t I learn about this in high school or from the media? As an educator of settler ancestry I feel it is my obligation to teach settlers about colonization and the histories of oppression in this country without overshadowing the learning environment of Indigenous students.

In dialogue with Indigenous art practices I am able to foster conversations that expose how all in the room, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are implicated in the colonial project that is Canada. Learning difficult knowledge that reveals the contemporary presence of colonial trauma has had profound impacts on my students. A fundamental reason that I can decolonize settler colonialism and invoke Indigenous decolonization strategies such as remembering, reclaiming, rewriting and storytelling [5] into my classrooms is due to the powerful, poignant and transformative work of Indigenous contemporary artists and writers. These artists and writers activate Indigenous perspectives and visualize politicized frameworks of self-determination, agency and sovereignty. Art-based and writing-based work has inspired, mobilized and challenged my students to engage in a process of decolonial politicization.

For the past few years I have been searching for more work that could visually articulate the politics of settler responsibility. I recently developed a new course on contemporary Canadian art, where the students and I explored examples of Indigenous and settler collaborations, and specifically, Leah, your collaboration with Jaimie Isaac (*official denial*) *trade value in progress* (2010–). The impact of your work, alongside Sonny Assu’s *Chief Speaker* (2011) in the Ottawa Art Gallery installation of Heather Igloliorte’s exhibition *Decolonize Me*, which includes the infamous G20 quote by Prime Minister Harper, “We also have no history of colonialism,” [6] was a catalyst for productive and transformative dialogue. Many students, both Indigenous and settler, were enraged by the statement, but empowered by the incorporation of the quote

into your installation. The class engaged in critical responses about the ongoing invisibility and lack of knowledge around settler colonialism in Canadian society. Leah, your work initiated a space for dialogue where all in the classroom were invited to participate, and to consider their implications in and experiences with colonization. It was a powerful and transformative moment – a moment of participating in the pedagogy of hope. *official denial* is an example of what I would call decolonizing aesthetics. Since viewing the piece in Winnipeg at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) national meeting in 2010, I have had many questions about how it came to be and was hoping you might discuss its connection to your broader *trade value* (2009–) series?

Leah – The *trade value* series emerged from the critical inquiries of *here, imprint* and the early *Castor Canadensis* (2008) work, as well as my research in the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) archives in Winnipeg and engagement with Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholarship and activism. A series of distinct but connected works, *trade value* includes digital prints, animation and textile, as well as performative and relational works. In *trade*

value, my interest was to probe how our colonial history has shaped both the Canadian state as well as dominant conceptions of Canadian identity and citizenship in the service of reinscribing colonial forms in the present. Extending my strategy of tampering with iconic elements of Canadian visual culture as a means of disturbing these entrenched paradigms, this work enlists the HBC’s point blanket as a material and conceptual source. I was drawn to the HBC blanket for a number of reasons. The HBC had a prominent role as a primary economic engine of the colonial project in its early stages, through the fur trade and its land holdings. HBC point blankets have an iconic presence in contemporary culture and an equally powerful historical resonance. They can be understood as a colonial currency in the fur trade, and as an object of trade, were integrated into Indigenous life. Used as a means of spreading disease in Indigenous communities, they are implicated in the violence of colonial practice. In contemporary consumer culture where their complex historical implications are neutralized, the blankets are highly visible as luxury items. The multistripe version that I use in my work serves as the HBC brand in the guise of housewares, fashion

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Leah Decter,
Castor Canadensis: Provokas (2013).
Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.





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Leah Decter,
Castor Canadensis: Provokas (2013).
Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.

items and furniture and as a sanitized icon of nationalist identity. In *trade value*, their contentious genealogy is redeployed through various disruptions to the whole.

As in much of my work, in order to interfere with the blanket, I utilize labour-intensive everyday processes. In this work, such practices reflect both the way colonial design is naturalized in the actions of our everyday lives as well as the potential of our individual and collective agency to disrupt such assumptions. Radically altering and recontextualizing the blankets through material, digital and relational strategies brings the past and present into collision, solicits active participation, and speaks to the construction of colonial myths and logics while dismantling them through strategies of decolonization. I identify my work with the HBC blankets within a lineage of Indigenous and settler artists such as Bob Boyer, Rosalie Favell and Marianne Corless, who have all actively subverted the trade blanket.

Carla—Your use of the HBC blanket, a highly iconic symbol of Canadian identity and an emblem of colonial trade relationships, disrupts the celebratory tone of Canadian visual culture and is a clever and sophisticated way of turning the colonial gaze back onto the histories and visual representations of colonialism. Can you talk further about some of your objectives and/or strategies in working with a critical settler lens within your art practice?

Leah—As a white settler artist, I take a different approach than one would in a classroom context that focuses on centering Indigenous art production and Indigenous knowledge. I make work from a critical settler perspective that focuses on examining colonial mythologies, histories and presents, and articulating settler accountability with respect to the current state of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, governments and communities in Canada. Inverting the colonial gaze is a strategy I have used throughout this work. My intention, in part, is to manifest decolonizing counternarratives from a settler perspective, in conscious alliance with Indigenous decolonization. My aim is to speak to and with settler communities, but not to the exclusion of Indigenous viewers or participants. For settlers engaging in decolonizing work, it is equally crucial to take on the responsibility of speaking with other settlers as it is to work in collaboration with Indigenous people. My work enlists both of these strategies, at times manifested

through informed self-reflexive works such as *Five Blanket Suite* (2008–2013) or (*official apology*) *trade value unknown* (2008), and at others through collaborating interculturally and engaging diverse voices, as in the *Human Billboard Project* (2010–) and *official denial*.

Carla—Recently, I've come to conceive of my curatorial strategies as participating in a politics of remembrance, strategically intended to push against the forgetting of Canadian colonial histories within nationalist narratives. I really appreciate, Leah, what you said about ensuring that your work “speaks to and with settler communities, but not to the exclusion of Indigenous viewers or participants.” This is such a significant statement and relates to our concerns about settler colonial discourse, which has the potential to *take up* space rather than *contribute* in solidarity to Indigenous decolonizing processes. In my curatorial work I also aim to engage both Indigenous and settler audience members in different but equally urgent ways. My curatorial strategies are informed by concepts of community engagement, conversation and cross-cultural dialogue. To this end, many of my curatorial and academic projects are collaborative initiatives. In 2010, for example, Daina Warren and I co-curated a performance art series in Kingston, Ontario. For this series, *Acting Out, Claiming Space: Aboriginal Performance Art Series*, we invited Skeena Reece, Terrance Houle, Tanya Lukin Linklater and Jordan Bennett to respond to the histories and spaces of the city. Ultimately the series, which ran in conjunction with Queen's University's Aboriginal Awareness Week, mobilized Indigenous perspectives and voices. As curators, we asked both the artists and audience members to consider the following: How does an Indigenous voice contend with these overarching histories and extreme social conditions that have formed this urban space, and what constitutes Indigenous space(s)? The series created a space for gathering, and the performances mediated dialogue about Indigenous histories, representation and settler colonialism. As a decolonizing strategy, the act of gathering is significant in igniting the sharing of ideas and of potentially new and difficult knowledges across settler and Indigenous divides.

Aspects of *official denial* that I find particularly exciting, in terms of activating decolonial aesthetics and strategies, are the collaboration with Jaimie Isaac and the workshop component in which you invited audience members to participate

and respond to the official statement made by Canada's prime minister (about the denial of colonial violence and histories in this country). Can you discuss your interest in Harper's statement and expand on your conception of collaborative arts practice with respect to *official denial*?

Leah — *official denial* began with the intention of using Harper's 2009 statement "We also have no history of colonialism" as a mirror of mainstream Canadian denial that might engage settler Canadians in confronting and reflecting on personal and political accountability. A more complex dialogue was launched when Jaimie Isaac curated the project for the inaugural Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Winnipeg National Event in June 2010. Through its inclusion in the TRC exhibition and Jaimie's ongoing involvement as co-activator of the project, it has become an intercultural dialogue and a cross-cultural collaboration that apprehends denial through depiction of colonial truths and considerable decolonizing vision. In parallel with the transformative learning space of your classroom, where all are in conversation together, *official denial* mobilizes a dialogue and transformative decolonizing space in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices are represented in layers of critical exchange. It is this dialogue, with all its dissonance, ruptures and alliances, that is centered; and the participants are able to engage from and express their positionalities, stories and convictions. This project has presented an unequalled learning experience for me as a settler artist. The collaboration with Jaimie, the interaction with hosts and participants, and the reflection entailed in my ongoing analysis of the project continue to inform how I move forward in my art, research and teaching.

Carla and Leah — In the classroom, one can be direct and clear about what is conveyed and what is being asked of students, without being didactic. Working through a creative platform, and an aesthetic of cultural production that leaves more space for the viewer to enter, necessitates a balance between creating openings for interpretation through individual subject position and lived experience, and conveying enough lucidity for the work not to be (mis)interpreted as reinscribing colonial forms that one is trying to disrupt. A critical practice of learning and listening is crucial in developing this balance, as is the recognition of a level of productive discomfort in articulating these kinds of difficult knowledges. An imperative question that needs to guide

the conception of productive discomfort in creative, curatorial and pedagogical models is: Whose discomfort is it, and for whom is the discomfort productive? In relation to processes of unsettling settler identities, discomfort is a valuable and necessary component. A productive relationship with discomfort produced through creative practice can apprehend the ways in which *settler comfort* has perpetuated colonial agendas of settler privilege, occupation and Indigenous oppression. Of course, contemporary Indigenous artists have been taking these kinds of creative risks for over four



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Leah Decter,
Castor Canadensis: Provokas (2013).
Performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.

decades, exemplified in the reclaiming of stereotypical representation, embodying of colonial trauma, revealing of personal lived experience, remembering erased histories, and celebrating survival, resilience and cultural continuance through artistic practice.

Carla — In the Canadian context, several settler artists such as yourself, Leah, have engaged in imagining aesthetic strategies that create space for cross-cultural discussions about the entangled histories of colonialism, immigration and nation building. In this kind of work, there is an inherent risk of reinscribing colonial power relationships, and for misunderstandings of strategic subversions and critique. At the

same time, it represents a vital practice that can contribute to the potential of enacting settler resistance to entrenched narratives, symbols and ambivalences.

Your strategic creative interventions, which employ nationalist iconic imagery such as the HBC blanket, or the beaver in your recent installation *Castor Canadensis: Provokas* (2013), arguably create space to dismantle the myths and nostalgia connected to Canadian identity, as well as for the (re)writing of a more multilayered history of Canada. Can you discuss your decision to incorporate the iconic image of the beaver

in your work?

Leah — *Provokas* is the third in the *Castor Canadensis* series and is part of an ongoing practice of enacting interventions into romanticized tropes of Canadian land/scape. Taking its title from the Latin term for "Canadian beaver," the *Castor Canadensis* series enlists the iconic rodent as an avatar of Canadian history, trade, commerce and constructed settler identity. The beaver is intrinsically linked to the inception of Canada through the fur trade, has featured prominently as a symbol of Canada, and is ubiquitous as a nationalist representation of Canada in consumer culture.

The beaver's symbolic status was initially engendered through its role in the

fur trade; however, the resilience of its position as a Canadian icon is also tied to the anthropomorphic characterization of its instinctive habits as decidedly industrious. Although not wholly inaccurate, this invocation of diligence and hard work nonetheless serves to affirm the colonial project's model of emplacement through the enactment of labour. With the limits of this comparison in mind, it could also be argued that the beaver's instinctual habits echo intentional human practices of place making, which can be both affirming and deleterious. In subverting the beaver as Canadian icon, I am interested in the ways that all of these underlying connotations can be interrupted and mobilized to examine and disturb aspects of colonial nation building.

As a co-production with the beaver and as an intervention into the land/scape, *Provokas* considers the layering of complicity and brings into play notions of territory, home, occupation and labour. A week-long performance, it consists of the physical relocation of the residual material from the beaver's alterations of the land/scape — the tree stumps that are left behind when beavers make their lodges and wear down their teeth. Through the process of locating, cutting, removing and relocating approximately 300 stumps with the labour of my body, this piece offers a meditation on the con/de-struction of home in the colonial context, speaking to individual culpability and the ways labour legitimizes settler entitlement.

The stumps are reconfigured in the field, replicating the footprint of a skeletal timber-frame construction [7] reminiscent of a pioneer-style house or barn, itself a ghost of colonial occupation. The twelve-by-eighteen-foot rectangle is also reminiscent of the perimeter traced with my footsteps in the *imprint* performance and videos, and as such recalls a recurrent theme in my practice which contends with settler attachment to Indigenous land and the entitlement of settler desire. My interest

in this work was to transverse visible and invisible evidence, marking and enacting the labour attached to colonial place making *and* practices of decolonization. As has been suggested by Patrick Wolfe, settler colonization is structural. [8] All the labour of colonizing will only be undone through attention, intention, commitment and effort.

Leah and Carla — Our work is informed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Paulette Regan, whose work has clarified the necessity of the simultaneous projects of Indigenous and settler decolonization. We understand the strategies we use in curating, writing, teaching and cultural production to be part of an ongoing process through which we are committed to advancing a decolonizing imperative. This calls us to actively listen, learn, question, enact and evolve. We recognize that our statement of commitment towards settler decolonization (on individual, collective, national and institutional levels) is a privileged declaration insofar as we, along with other settler academics, artists, curators and activists, have *chosen* to engage in these conversations, whereas for many individuals of Indigenous ancestry it is part of a politics of *survival*. [9] Further, while knowing that it is crucial for settler individuals and collectives to make their decolonizing work visible, we recognize the danger of a settler focus occupying space in a manner that reinscribes colonial logics.

We contend that the practice of decolonizing the self as well as settler colonialism necessitates a commitment to a personally grounded process that is always in development and flux. It is not a prescriptive or formulaic practice, but can be productively informed by the politics of listening, questioning and remembrance. By remembering the policies and myths that legitimated colonial expansion and settlement in Canada, by probing our personal histories and the reified stories

of settler entitlement that have been built around settler individuals and collectives, and by listening to Indigenous voices and knowledge, we can actively engage in politicized conversations of settler colonialism, responsibility and decolonization. Just as Canadian visual culture and aesthetics have clearly played a powerful role in perpetuating colonial paradigms, they have significant potential to contribute to these conversations as a vital catalyst in encountering and unsettling settler colonialism.

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Carla Taunton is an assistant professor of Indigenous arts and visual culture at NSCAD University. Completing her PhD in Indigenous visual culture at Queen's University in the department of art in 2011, her dissertation explored Indigenous performance art as acts of resistance and self-determination that participate in the project of decolonization. Her current research investigates the projects of Indigenous sovereignty and settler responsibility. Dr. Taunton is an alliance member of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and an independent curator.

[1] See Paulette Regan, "A Transformative Framework for Decolonizing Canada: A Non-Indigenous Approach" (paper presented at IGOV Doctoral Student Symposium, University of Victoria, 20 January 2005), available online; and Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

[2] See Roger Epp, "We Are All Treaty People: History, Reconciliation, and the 'Settler

Problem,'" in *Dilemmas of Reconciliation: Cases and Concepts*, eds. Carol A.L. Prager and Trudy Govier (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003), 223–244.

[3] See Lorenzo Veraconi, "Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation," *borderlands e-journal* 6, no. 2 (2007; online).

[4] Deborah Britzman first defined the term "difficult knowledge" in *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New

York Press, 1998). For further investigations of difficult knowledge, see Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert, eds., *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000); Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton and Monica Eileen Patterson, eds., *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Past in Public Places* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and "Reconcile This!," *West Coast Line* 74, vol. 46, no. 2 (Summer 2012; online).

[5] See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books Limited, 1999).

[6] David Ljunggren, "Every G20 Nation Wants to Be Canada, Insists PM," *Reuters* (25 September 2009; online).

[7] Titled *Part Lot 18*, Concession 6 (2012), this structure is a semipermanent installation on Susie Osler's *fieldwork*.

[8] See Patrick Wolfe, *Settler*

Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event (London: Cassell, 1999).

[9] Gerald Vizenor argues that Native stories are stories of Native survival, which he defines as being "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survival are an active presence." Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Post-Indian Warriors of Survivance* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 15.

CLOSE READINGS

Richard William Hill

→
Brian Jungen, *Court* (2004).
Sewing tables, painted steel, paint, basketball hoops
and backboards, 2500 × 300 × 250 cm.
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Gift of the Rennie Collection, Vancouver, 2012
© Brian Jungen Studio
Image courtesy of © NGC

A column of frank reviews of recent exhibitions of Indigenous art.



*Sakahàn: International
Indigenous Art*
National Gallery of Canada
17 May–2 September 2013

→
(facing page)
Jimmie Durham, *Encore tranquillité* (2008).
Fibreglass stone and airplane, 150 × 860 × 806 cm.
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Image courtesy of Roman März.

I was going to say that *Sakahàn* is the most important exhibition of Indigenous art since *Land, Spirit, Power and Indigena* in 1992. But then I stopped myself. Not because I doubt the importance of *Sakahàn*: it is hugely important. I'm just not sure that I would even be comparing the same category of things. We may be in entirely new territory here. For those who don't recall, the 1992 exhibits were the most prominent first attempts by major Canadian institutions to acknowledge and survey what we would now call contemporary Indigenous art. At that time, the term Indigenous was not in wide use and the curators explored the field within the geographic boundaries of two settler colonies: Canada and the United States. Since then the rise of the term Indigenous has coincided with a history of international relationship building and political action that has led to an expansion in the scope of our field to the global scale. The curators of *Sakahàn* showed up ready to take on the world (and institutionally, positioned to take over most of the National Gallery as well).

I headed to Ottawa for the exhibition's opening confident of my expertise, and left it humbled and exhilarated, a novice once again with many new issues to work through and much to learn. I will therefore begin with a few caveats. This is an enormous exhibition featuring over eighty artists from sixteen countries. Along with Canada and the US, there are artists from India, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, the

Pacific Islands, Northern Europe, Japan and Taiwan. I am intimately familiar with much of the work coming out of Canada and the US, but my ignorance of the specificities of culture and historical circumstance of many of the other artists in the show is profound. I take some comfort knowing that one of the purposes of this show is for us to get to know each other. For the sake of brevity in the face of a huge exhibition I will depart from this column's usual focus on artworks in order to address the important meta-issues posed by the exhibition. That said, I want to acknowledge at the outset that the work in the show is, with only a few exceptions, very strong and represents a stunning range of intellectual inquiry.

At the heart of *Sakahàn* is a question the curators have wisely chosen not to definitively answer: What does "Indigenous" mean in an international context, and therefore, who is and is not Indigenous? Under that question is another: What social and political work are we trying to make this concept do? Are we attempting to define an essence, or construct a series of political affiliations? Despite the curators treading lightly around a definition, their comments in the catalogue essays and their selection of artists do provide provisional suggestions. The exhibition had three curators: Greg Hill, Candice Hopkins and Christine Lalonde. There were also a number of advisors and catalogue essayists. [1] Many emphasized the fluid and multiple character of the term Indigenous

while also suggesting provisional definitions. Hill mentions diverse but shared experiences of colonialism as a key element, while catalogue essayist Jolene Rickard points us to Ronald Niezen's reference to "peoples who have 'existed (presumably in a particular territory) since time immemorial!'" [2] This makes me wonder about who isn't in the exhibition. The Irish, for example, could meet both criteria without a stretch. Why exclude them? Are they too European? Not "tribal" enough? Any answer we give leads to more questions. What about Africa? Should the term Indigenous be confined to peoples of settler colonies that didn't decolonize? One of my favourite proposals is Jimmie Durham's suggestion that the category Indigenous could include all the peoples of the world who have had nation statehood imposed on them overtly of their existing forms of social and political organization. [3] This could then give us common cause with the Rommany, for example, and many others.

However we probe the term Indigenous it becomes clear that it is a big sticky mess—a heuristic rather than an essence. This is why I have always gagged over the derivative term, indigeneity. The suffix "ity" is added to words to suggest being in a state or having a quality of the word that it is applied to. To me this suggests some sort of "Indigenosity," but what could that possibly be? Imagine if we tried to move back and forth in the same way between the term feminism and femininity, as though they were synonyms? Or if we described Canadian studies as the study of "Canadianity" or Canadianness? In both cases it would be immediately recognized as a limiting essentialism. If it is too late to come up with a better term than I think we ought to at least be clear that by indigeneity we mean something like "anything having to do with one or more Indigenous peoples"; an aggregate rather than an essence.

Rickard proposes that we deploy the term Indigenous as a strategic essentialism, and Hill refers to and echoes this position in his essay. [4] Rickard is a scholar of particular intelligence and commitment

who understands that these issues really matter, and I was not at all surprised to find myself constantly circling back to this claim and trying to decide whether I agreed. I concluded that I'm not convinced of the need for strategic essentialism, but I think that my disagreement here is more a matter of language and emphasis than substance. Let me walk you through my thinking and you can judge for yourself.

Rickard draws explicitly on the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who introduced the idea of strategic essentialism in her book *In Other Worlds*. Rickard quotes a key passage, defining it as "the ways in which subordinate or marginalized social groups may temporarily put aside local differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity through which they band together in political movements" [5] What has always confused me about this concept is where essentialism enters into it; that is, who is it for and how does it help? After all, it is commonplace for people to put aside differences to align themselves politically. Many people join political parties and identify themselves as leftists, liberals or conservatives knowing that they share a roughly common purpose but no definitive essence.

Essentialism can only be "strategic" if an imaginary essence motivates people to do something they couldn't



otherwise be convinced to do. But Spivak makes clear that the group deploying strategic essentialism should be aware of their ironic relationship to the notion of essence. It should be "ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized...The critique of the 'fetish character' (so to speak) of the masterwork has to be persistent all along the way... Otherwise the strategy freezes into... an essentialist position." [6] If the essentialism isn't to motivate us, it must be to motivate others, as a way of playing into expectations to get what we want. That's a dangerous strategy for us. We have long been the victims of Romantic essentialism—to the point that we often internalize it without the benefit of strategic irony—and I would only hazard to rely on it in the most temporary and urgent circumstances. Spivak also urges us to remember that strategic essentialism is a strategy and that "a strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory." [7] It seems to me that our situation in the art world does not require an essentialist strategy, but even if it did, we would still also need a theory to address the actual complexities of our position.

Returning to Rickard's essay, it seems to call for the use of strategic essentialism in advocating for several things that are quite different. For instance, toward clear legal definitions in international law as well as distinct Indigenous spaces in the international art world. I don't know enough about international law to say whether there is a case for strategic essentialism in that context, but I think that the art world would be more receptive to a non-essentialist position. [8] We can be explicit about our lack of essence and still find many valid reasons to talk to each other, build networks and advance shared political positions.

We can also take Spivak's distinction between strategy and theory further. One of the things that often happens in writing on Indigenous culture is a slippage between discussions and language associated with capital-P politics, and language used to articulate small-p political and cultural theory. This gives us phrases like "cultural autonomy" and "cultural sovereignty";

[1] The advisors were Jolene Rickard, Yuh-Yao Wan, Irene Snarby, Arpana Caur, Lee-Ann Martin, Brenda Croft, Megan Tamati-Quennell and Reiko Saito.

[2] It is important to note that in the source that Rickard cites, Niezen refers to this definition as a means to point out the problem of expanding it to the global scale: "The same sense of permanence easily transposes onto the global

category 'indigenous,' acting to conceal the fact that the term and the international movement associated with it are of very recent origin." Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2003), 201.

[3] Jimmie Durham, "Binnenlandse zaken" [Internal Affairs],

Metropolis M, no. 6 (2003): 86–93.

[4] See Jolene Rickard, "The Emergence of Global Indigenous Art," in *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, eds. Greg A. Hill, Jolene Rickard and Christine Lalonde (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013), 58; and Greg Hill, "Afterword: Looking Back to *Sakahàn*," *Sakahàn*, 138.

[5] Rickard, "Global Indigenous

Art," 58. Quote originally from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 209.

[6] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 4–5.

[7] *Ibid.*, 4.

[8] Rickard's argument is directed, in part, at Bill Anthes's suggestion that Indigenous artists adopt a cosmopolitan rather than a nationalist approach at international biennials. See Bill Anthes, "Contemporary Native Artists and International Biennial Culture," *Visual Anthropology Review* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 109–127.

These terms worry me because they seem to lose track of the distinction between institutional arrangements, which are inevitably blunt instruments, and the more subtle and promiscuous movements of culture. Rickard is right to be concerned with working out international legal definitions of terms like Indigenous in order to protect Indigenous rights in international law, for example. But let's not confuse those sorts of legal definitions with the kind of work we want to do as artists and cultural theorists, which should be a more subtle form of inquiry open to ambiguity and internal differences. If by "cultural sovereignty" we mean that we want Indigenous-controlled spaces at international biennales, that's one thing. This would in fact be an administrative autonomy, an explicitly political construct. But it is all too easy to interpret "cultural sovereignty" as the idea that our cultures stand alone in pristine isolation or that somehow we are the only ones who should be able to speak about them. The first is empirically false, the second a recipe for self-inflicted marginalization.

But I should move on to the show itself. The curators used a light hand in arranging the exhibition and guiding our experience of it. There is an introductory didactic panel at the entrance that tentatively describes themes the curators have noticed, including tendencies amongst the artists to "question colonial narratives, present parallel histories, value the handmade, explore relationships between the spiritual, the uncanny and the everyday" and to present "highly personal responses to social and cultural trauma." The rest of the didactic material focuses on individual artists, and we are left to our own devices in figuring out why works are grouped together in particular galleries. In some cases this is not too difficult. Perhaps the most obvious is a room of works by Sonny Assu, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Nadia Myre, which all respond to Canada's Indian Act. Other galleries seem to take up themes of violence and trauma or the relationship to handcraft, while many others remained a mystery to me. This may be because some of the juxtapositions were more visually poetic than explicitly thematic and I was searching in vain, or perhaps it is just that I have trouble processing a lot of information at once and never made all the connections.

I suspect the curators took this

more subtle approach because this is an exercise in getting to know one another and they wanted to leave things open. Aside from the room exploring the Indian Act, the other spaces tend to mix artists of diverse backgrounds together, and it was fascinating to try and sort through and make sense of both the connections and differences. Although the curators' decision to hold back is legitimate—and certainly preferable to a heavy-handed didactic approach—I still would have liked to see a bit more reflection in the exhibition itself on what they believe they have learned in the process of putting the show together. That said, the work in the show tends to be strong and engaging in its own right and can hold up without explicit explanation. It is also worth noting that two of the most impressive works in the exhibition, Brian Jungen's *Court* (2004) and Jimmie Durham's *Encore tranquillité* (2008), are almost alone in the exhibition in not directly addressing questions of identity politics or Indigenous representation. The fact that both works and many others in the exhibition are now part of the National Gallery's permanent collection is yet another sign of the effect Hill and his colleagues have had on the institution.

The most visible distinction between artists across the exhibition is not the result of their traditional culture but rather their colonial circumstances; that is, between those artists who have been art school trained and function (roughly speaking) within the conventions of the mainstream international contemporary art world, and those who are working in parallel art worlds, with markets aimed at outside consumers. Lalonde notes this disparity in her essay and argues, "The challenge became not so much a matter of masking an inequality of means in the exhibition but of understanding how the artists could be on equal footing and what happens when they are seen side by side." [9] This is a productive first step, but there is still a lot of unpacking to be done. Among other things, it means that those of us with nice, middle-class first-world careers—institutional curators and academics, say—need to begin thinking about how we navigate our own privilege as these relationships develop.

Lastly I would like to speculate about what we might look forward to in five years when the next iteration of this

exhibition is scheduled to roll around. As a curator, I have always been grateful for advice, and have taken much of it to heart; but in the end I have followed my own inspiration and judgment. So I will suggest some things as an intellectual exercise, while remaining happy in the knowledge that the curators of the future will likely have other ideas that better suit their muses. It strikes me that one way to manage the scale and create more focused dialogues across cultures, now that we know each other a little better, might be to break up the exhibition into distinct (perhaps even individually curated) sub-exhibitions. For example, it may be slightly outside the contemporary remit, but after the event's symposium I found myself very curious about how Indigenous artists from around the world grappled with international modernism. I'd love to see a section of a future exhibition explore that question. Another possibility would be to think of "Indigenous" as a theme rather than the identity of the participants, and open it up further to potential non-Indigenous allies whom we would like to bring into the conversation. We'd still be in charge and would dominate things, but we'd be expanding the dialogue at the same time. To my mind this would be an extension of the interest Hopkins expresses in her catalogue essay regarding "the 'contact zones'—the in-between and tentative connections created to bridge the gap between peoples and cultures—areas rich with story and potential knowledge." [10] We might not feel entirely comfortable there yet, but it is the territory most of us have inhabited for some time.

Richard William Hill is an independent writer and curator and Associate Professor of Art History at York University. He gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for assistance with travel expenses related to this review.

MAKING IT WORK

Did You Do the Reading?

Maiko Tanaka

Read-in at Shifts in Time: Performing the Chronic

Produced by PhD in Practice, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna

Location: MUMOK Kino, Museum of Modern Art, Vienna

8 May 2013

A column on the political economies of discursive events in the contemporary art world.

Reading groups are common in the contemporary art world. Their legacy stems from self-organized, non-hierarchical formats such as 1960s Marxist study groups and second wave feminist consciousness-raising groups. Some of today's reading groups (such as the recently initiated Social Practice Study Group in Toronto) resemble these older formats in their intention to create informal spaces for close readings with rotating facilitators. Other groups, like No Reading After the Internet (Vancouver/Toronto), experiment with reading as a medium in itself, not requiring participants to prepare readings in advance and reading out loud together instead. Some reading groups have been initiated by art institutions themselves, such as the Amsterdam-based curatorial platform, If I Can't Dance (IICD), whose monthly reading group has sprouted satellite locations for its thematic sessions, which include Toronto.

On a practical level, reading groups, with their attention to accessibility and openness, are relatively light organizational structures that fit well alongside exhibitions and performance events, and with educational mandates within art institutions and alternative spaces. For instance, they are often open for anyone to join, there is usually either no fee or a pay-what-you-can approach to cost, and they tend to take place under informal conditions, such as in people's homes or during the after-hours of artist-run spaces and offices. For arts organizations, reading groups can also be appealing as parallel spaces for thinking and reflection out of the limelight. The first item listed in a description of the IICD reading group reads, "There is no audience. We

do not need to 'perform' this reading group," [1] hinting at the potential for more informal conditions of knowledge production.

In fact, these days reading groups of the art world seem to move rather fluidly between institutional and private self-organized spaces, which raises some concerns. While there is mobility and autonomy when self-organized groups direct their learning collectively and draw from their own practices and experiences, reading groups cannot be considered critically without looking into how they may privilege individualized, competitive modes of knowledge acquisition. How might reading group practices be implicated in the operations of a neoliberal knowledge economy? Is the critical edge of reading groups dulled when they are brought into institutions of art which are being rebranded as a sector of the knowledge economy?

Just because reading groups may present an alternative to top-down structures doesn't mean they are egalitarian by nature. As with any collective structure, it takes work and time to pay attention to and negotiate tensions that pull between openness and exclusivity, institutional and grassroots approaches, authority and amateurism, and all the spaces in between. Such tensions can be productive if space and time are given to grapple with and test out alternative formations, but without concerted effort we can blindly reproduce disempowering standards for some that rarely get called into question.

The questions above are actually ones I discuss and struggle through with a group called Read-in. Indeed, most of the questions I have posed have been devel-

[9] Christine Lalonde, "Introduction: At the Crossroads of Indigeneity, Globalization and Contemporary Art," *Sakahàn*, 18.

[10] Candice Hopkins, "On Other Pictures: Imperialism, Historical Amnesia and Mimesis," *Sakahàn*, 27.

oped with other members and through my ongoing activity with this collective over the past three years. [2] We struggle with the question of how to keep theory, location, bodies and action together, as an explicit part of our practice. Read-in functions simultaneously across the variety of institutional relations I described above: as an independently artist-led vehicle, as constituted in collaboration with an art institution which first commissioned it for a long-term curatorial project [3] and as an artistic work curated by other institutions for various programming events and exhibitions. Each iteration tends to open up different and challenging new questions.

This past March, three members of Read-in (Annette Krauss, Serena Lee and I) orchestrated a reading group of over 75 people at the Museum of Modern Art (MUMOK), Vienna. We guided the public audience in simultaneously reading out loud and collectively memorizing three different transcriptions of the speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” by Sojourner Truth, abolitionist and self-emancipated African American former slave. Questions around embodied and collective reading were entangled with gender, race, memory and language in this twenty-minute reading session, and were facilitated later in a smaller group discussion with interested participants. The event was unique as this was the first time Read-in had manifested our experimental reading sessions for a formal performance event, as opposed to the more informal and “backstage” spaces we normally worked within, opening up an opportunity for insight into a movement from “supplement” to “content.” In order to keep with a critique of the “un-innocence” of neoliberal life-long learning ideologies and the elitism that reading groups can reproduce even in non-institutional contexts, I’ll attempt to critically assess a few moments that stood out from the event, structured around the following question: What, how and for whom do we read?

We chose the speech by Sojourner Truth for its potential as a counter-memory to colonial histories, for those in the audience who may not know of her inspiring story and for those who might welcome a revisiting of this piece from a

different approach. The text was also in affinity with a legacy that Read-in gains insight from on an ongoing basis, the history of second wave feminist reading and consciousness-raising groups, whose members created conditions to discuss topics that women could speak to from their own life experiences with political analysis. However, Sojourner Truth’s speech seemed to embody the presence of a personal and political testimony in a way that seemed to demand the presence and locatedness of the reader. The speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” was never written down by the celebrated orator. The printed handouts that we passed around to the audience were three of several transcriptions that exist of the speech, written from memory by white abolitionist journalists who witnessed the event. Of the versions we used, two took the racialized and politicized words and phrases spoken by Truth (who was born in New York and sold to a Dutchman) and falsely attributed an imaginary accent of a universalized Southern slave in its transcription. [4] The third transcript we gave out was written in “standard” late twentieth-century American English, [5] removing the trace of any accent at all. [6] Right off the bat, the text already offered a complicated matrix of relations for us and our fellow readers. The *what* to read in this case included contested authenticities, multiple versions inflected with different accents, racist appropriations and projections and the utterly undeniable physical body which Truth constantly makes present in her spoken words.

There were several problematic power relations we left critically untouched in terms of what we read. For instance, to present such texts in Vienna, an environment in which English is not the primary spoken language, reproduced the dominance of English as the standard language for the Western-centric contemporary art world. This blind spot emerged in a conflict between the members of Read-in during our rehearsals as well as after the event when one member expressed frustration with the speed and aptitude of English speaking members such as Serena and I and the difficulties this presented for non-

native listeners. It was a moment when collective listening was highlighted as a crucial aspect of collective reading.

Another unintended effect was the power of novelty in the experience of reading a text out loud with a large group of people. Reading out loud is a consistent strategy for Read-in, as a way to stay with the physicality of reading, and to have participants engage with the texts in the present rather than prepare them individually in advance. This *how* to read, for the Read-in collective, has been our way of trying to counter the urge to “go solo,” virtuoso contributions of something smart or performing one’s expertise in the presence of one’s peers. Curiously, however, our collective reading out loud at the MUMOK in some ways created a new distance from the content of the text. People enjoyed the experience of reading together, which seemed to induce nostalgia for the last time they read out loud with others (as a child, at church, at school, &c) so that we lost the focus on the actual words of Sojourner Truth. One participant who joined our breakout session afterwards took this further, reducing the role of content to nil in such an affective performance, proposing that it wouldn’t have mattered if we had collectively read a speech by Hitler, since the affect of the experience would still dominate the content. As shocked and skeptical as I was at this participant’s proposition, it affirmed that the choice of subject matter for a text doesn’t necessarily affect pedagogical structures. If a dominant mode of reading is approached with the premise of neutrality, the critical intervention of racialized and politicized words such as those of Sojourner Truth may fall flat. In fact, this problem brings to the fore the impossibility of separating content and context.

There were other, and potentially more productive, experiences of this novelty of reading out loud together. One male colleague found it quite transformative to recite out loud the phrase “Ain’t I a Woman?” over and over with other people, creating a gendered affinity that could not have happened if he had read the text in silence and on his own. Read-in member Annette Krauss shared with me that it was the mo-

ments in which we repeated certain parts of the text out loud that were inspiring for her, and that she wanted to think more about the questions raised by the “experimental moment when reading turns into memorizing” – what is the potential of this moment, why try to invest in memorizing, how and with whom?

Our experimental reading session also generated other disruptive moments that connect to *how* and *for whom* we were reading, as well as *where* and *why*. Participants later questioned why Read-in would choose to read in such a spectacular format. This was in fact the first time Read-in facilitated something so public and with such a large number of people reading simultaneously. We often operate as many typical reading groups do, gathering in small groups in far more modest conditions and in less staged and timed situations. But this decision on format had to do with the place and the purpose we were there for in the first place. Our twenty-minute session was part of a series of evening performances, readings and screenings by twelve artists as a collaboratively programmed public moment for the PhD In Practice course at Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts, of which founding Read-in member Krauss is a participant. The event, “Shifts in Time: Performing the Chronic,” consisted of thirty-minute sessions for each artist’s performance.

Normally the conditions for reading are very important for Read-in, as we are used to testing out different sites for our sessions in order to call attention to the role of place in reading. Previous practices include going door-to-door to ask strangers to spontaneously host our reading sessions in their own homes, as well as reading while walking. However, although our reading sessions normally last three to four hours, we agreed to the strict performance time frame we were given in Vienna. We negotiated the addition of a breakout session for anyone interested in joining, although it ran parallel to the programmed works that followed. Nevertheless, the experience brought into relief an example of different pressures and stipulations that come into play when activities usually taking place on the margins of discursive programming become the main event.

In considering the *for whom*, perhaps the most challenging aspect of collective reading in a highly public environment is that aside from the people we invited to join, we had no idea who would be participating. By taking on a practice that calls into question the borders between public and private spaces, as demon-

strated in our door-to-door activities, this was perhaps the most generalized public environment we had encountered. The usually small size of the spaces we read in limits the possibility of greater attendance. Our regulars, and most other people who join our sessions, find out about them through our mailing list, or through common networks and personal or institutional invitations, depending on our hosts. As much as such a “self-selecting” audience can create an enriching and productive reading group environment by constituting a group whose members share critical questions, political trajectories and/or living and working lifestyles, these conditions can also produce more homogenous profiles than open and diverse interactions and at worst, they reproduce elitist segregations. The *for whom* for Read-in is thus confronted directly in this more general public moment at the MUMOK, and even more so since the event took place on the museum’s free admission night.

We decided to address the short time frame and accommodate a more intimate discussion through the facilitation of our breakout session. We planned this in order to attend to any disturbances or questions that emerged in the main session and to allow us to unpack the highly contentious reading of “Ain’t I a Woman?” together. For instance, one of the colleagues from the PhD program expressed her disturbance at seeing a mostly white, European audience recite the imposed Southern slave accent of the speech. However, the breakout proved to occupy a very marginal place in the event, as it took place during a break in the program and spilled over into other performances, which limited its access. Other questions were raised with respect to the Viennese audience’s assumed lack of knowledge of North American histories of race and gender politics.

Our group reflected later that it would have been productive to seek out a second session in the main program for another large group event, to touch base on what we had already read. I’m sure there could have been many other approaches to dealing with this, but this confrontation with our public audience brings out more questions about the *for whom* in our practice: Is it for fellow Read-in members or for more general and diverse public participation? For the principles of representing legacies of radical pedagogies? To experiment with new artistic discursive forms? Just as my analysis here is particular to my experiences as one member of Read-in at this particular time and for this particular column, the *for whom* would indeed be

specific to any other Read-in collective member being asked in a certain time or place. My perspective is inflected by my own commitments to public programming in curatorial practice. Nevertheless, the question was perhaps most significant in confronting the public responsibilities and ethics of our reading practice, and it will take time for us to work through this.

To unpack the reading group, exposing its affinities with intellectual economies, colonial histories and disciplinary pedagogies, is not an easy or straightforward endeavour. As might be expected for any experimental practice, accessing new sites to inhabit across dichotomies will always open up a new can of worms. But this can be great fun to work through together. We also need many more options, problematizations of our reading material and approaches to reading that produce different intellectual, affective, social and economic constellations and that open new pathways of practice for group reading that recognize the political nature of knowledge and all knowledge-making practices. What comes up when the intersections are entangled and made more intense and embodied? There are many experiments out there already, such as the groups in Toronto mentioned earlier. Another might be the Occupy Amsterdam Artists Reading Group, who gathered in common interest to unpack the politics of location and occupation in relation to the historical positions of artists within movements, by contending with relevant texts on art, economy and politics. Such practices suggest ways to work through the reading group as a medium for unlearning reading as an innocent activity, whether through political and re-embodied confrontations with texts, or towards undermining competitive relations and performances of expertise. How can we critically investigate alternative practices to draw out different potentials, and in what ways might such an investigation play out in the form of a reading group?

Maiko Tanaka collaborates on curatorial projects at the intersection of art, pedagogy, cultural politics and collective action. She is currently a member of the Gendai Gallery Programming Committee and is working towards completion of a Master in Visual Studies at the University of Toronto.

[2] Current active members of Read-in include Hyunju Chung, Annette Krauss, Serena Lee, Laura Pardo, Marina Stavrou and Hilde Tuinstra.

[4] Sojourner Truth’s speech “Ain’t I a Woman” was originally delivered at the Women’s Convention, Akron, OH, 1851. The first two transcriptions reprinted in the Read-in handout were both authored by Mrs. F. D. Gage and published in the *National Anti-Slavery*

Standard newspaper (2 May 1863) and in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1 (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1882).

[5] Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t

I a Woman,” *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*, archived by Paul Halsall (online).

[6] Further, Donna Haraway suggests about the standard English translation, “Perhaps this language seems less racist,

more ‘normal’ to hearers who want to forget the diasporas that populated the New World.” Haraway, “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: the Human in a Posthumanist Landscape,” in *Feminist Theorize the Political*, eds.

Joan Scott and Judith Butler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 97.

Gita Hashemi's
Time Lapsed

Solo exhibition at
A Space Gallery, Toronto.
1–30 March 2013

Review by Haleh Niazmand

Gita Hashemi's *Time Lapsed* analyzes principal historic events in Iran and channels them into insights that are as personal as they are political. In this exhibition, Hashemi's mindful strategies engage the audience in an inclusive experience. Consisting of three substantial artworks, *Time Lapsed* situates current Iran-US relations in the context

of a history of violence and trauma, and its cascading effect on individual and collective psyches.

A site-specific installation, *Headquarters: Pathology of an Oyster* (2013), was completed during the course of its exhibition. The project draws on recently declassified CIA documents which chronicle the masterminding of Iran's 1953

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Gita Hashemi,
Ephemeral Monument, 2013.
Image courtesy of the artist.



coup d'état and the overthrow of Mosadegh's populist government. In an immersive installation, on sixty sheets of paper, Hashemi painstakingly debossed the CIA text by hand, and revealed it through the application of drawing material. In doing so, she not only embodied the text, but also editorialized it through the selective application of colour, facilitating a new reading of the narrative. The piece also included a live reading performance of the CIA text, interwoven with revisionist analyses and eyewitness accounts from a volunteer cast whose personal histories have been tarnished by the traumas of colonialism. Thus, while the intensely lit installation invited visitors to become immersed in reading the shimmering text, the voices coming from the nearby video disturbed this process. In effect, the performance innovated a form of revisionist history, first by contesting the singularity of the CIA account, and then by interjecting an emotional dimension rarely felt through historical analysis or in written text.

This performance, which took place on the opening night, was webcast live and later incorporated into the exhibition as a video entitled *Oyster Remixed* (2013). Hence, with nuanced attention to historical revelations, *Headquarters* as a whole examined the events of the past with retrospective reflections. The cast of performers connected with the audience by revealing their scars and post-traumatic reflections, paving the way for the audience to engage as witnesses in the process of decolonizing and healing.

Ephemeral Monument (2008) is a video and performance installation using a selection of underground dissident literature from the Iranian Student Association of Northern California (1964–1984) as well as pre-1979 Iranian resistance poetry. For this installation, Hashemi created a performance ritual

on two adjoining walls—writing, erasing and rewriting selections of the archival texts with chalk. The process was captured on camera and projected on the third adjoining wall, and a dedicated website collected contributions in English and Farsi, which were then incorporated in Hashemi's performance.

Dimly lit and colourless, *Ephemeral Monument* stood in stark contrast to the brightness of *Headquarters* in the adjacent space. This installation had an immersive quality as well, enhanced by the ambient sound of the artist's footsteps entering and exiting the frame, and the sounds of writing and erasing. The selected texts, which ranged from political to personal and poetic, were significant in the Iranian dissident movement against the Pahlavi regime, both in their origination and influence. Recording the ritual on video, a medium of documentation and evidence, spotlighted the forgotten texts in new, dynamic contexts. In this way, *Ephemeral Monument* was not a mere tribute to once-influential writings; instead, it opened up a space to reflect on the ideals that emerged from and influenced a history of turmoil.

The lowbrow medium of chalk not only allowed the artist to informally lead into weighty philosophical implications, it also carried a plethora of psychological associations. These associations began in our youth, where chalk was the authoritarian medium in schools, delivering what was deemed important to educate or indoctrinate. Chalk also allowed the young a public voice, as a mischievous vehicle of self-assertion. For Hashemi, the ritual of writing, erasing and rewriting with chalk pays homage to her personal involvement with the dissident movement and the collective uprising that profoundly influenced her generation.

Ephemeral Monument invited the audience to write about friends and family who

were killed for their acts of dissent, which resulted in contributions from many parts of the world. The website remains open for participation, collecting and expanding a living oral history, while embodying a monument for reflection and recovery.

Of Shifting Shadows: Returning to the 1979 Iranian Revolution through an Exilic Journey in Memory and History (2001), is a multichannel narrative that interweaves animated text, video, audio, graphic frames and archival and reconstructed stills. *Of Shifting Shadows* narrates the story of the Iranian Revolution through the voices of four fictional female characters, connecting actual events with their subjective, psychological and sensory impressions. The semi-private viewing arrangement of this work creates a relationship between the observer and the characters, where the viewer becomes a listener and a witness to their experiences and traumas. Thanks to this intimacy, the observer is provided with the opportunity to understand the events of the Iranian Revolution—a movement for democracy and independence—through the perspective of secular women, whose voices have since been largely silenced. *Of Shifting Shadows* also highlights the singularity of its characters' copings, and the varying lives they created in exile. By doing so, it illuminates a complex narrative that is contrary to the West's stereotypical rendition of the revolution as an Islamist uprising. As a work of art, *Of Shifting Shadows* emphasizes the subservience of technology to content and the marriage of intellectual awareness and emotional imprints while innovating a mode of storytelling that defies the masculine linear process that has dominated the narration of history and the history of narration.

Each coherent on its own, the artworks in *Time Lapsed* not only reflect upon traumatic

oppressions and resistances in Iran, but also tie these events to other lives similarly injured around the world. Hashemi's seminal artworks in *Time Lapsed* create a venue for collective remembrance, understanding and solidarity. They chart new, inclusive, mindful and empowering territories in (hi)story telling, revealing the shared humanity that connects us regardless of locality, national identity or geopolitical struggles.

Finally, to fulfill her intentions for the project, Hashemi facilitated a discussion circle that engaged artists and activists in a conversation about decolonizing—subverting the gallery space to one of collective reflection and empathy, further connecting her art with the communities that she is invested in.

Haleh Niazmand is an artist and curator who has exhibited widely in venues including the San Diego Museum of Art, the Center for Contemporary Arts Santa Fe and Des Moines Art Center. She has published in *ART PAPERS*, *US Art*, *X-TRA*, *Radical History Review*, *FUSE Magazine*, *the Washington Post* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. During a 1998–2000 residency at Des Moines Art Center, Niazmand designed and implemented numerous collaborative projects and workshops with marginalized communities, including residents at a state mental hospital and children's homes. She founded Gallery Subversive in 2003 and from 2005 to 2011 directed Modesto Junior College's art gallery.

Border Cultures: Part One
(homes, land)

Group Exhibition
Curated by Srimoyee Mitra
Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor ON
25 January–31 March 2013

Review by Sasha Opeiko



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Ed Pien. *Memento*, 2009.
Installation view in group exhibition *Border Cultures: Part One*
(homes, land), 2013.
Curated by Srimoyee Mitra for the Art Gallery of Windsor.
Image courtesy of the Art Gallery of Windsor.
Photographed by Frank Piccolo.

Border Cultures: Part One (homes, land), the first in a three-part annual exhibition series, brought together an ambitious combination of ten projects, including works by artists from the local border region of Windsor/Detroit alongside others from Canada, US, Mexico, Ireland and Palestine. Concurrently on exhibit were *The Border Bookmobile Public Archive and Reading Room* (2009–2013), an ongoing project by Lee Rodney in collaboration with Mike Marcon, and *A River That Separates? Imagining the Detroit River, 1804–2001*, an AGW collections exhibit curated by Catharine Mastin. Panel discussions and a conference introduced a variety of themes, viewers, speakers, artists and images from regional and global contexts. The conversation revolved around nationhood, migration and the politics of exclusion, with the objective of using the local border culture

as a stage for activating new intersections. The exhibition can be thought of as a curatorial experiment, consisting of a modular collection of rhizomes. Like a microcosmic culture of cells, it is contained together not for any useful end but as a kind of means or model.

As an object, a model is externalized, much in the same way that the imposition or intent of a border at the point of conception is already appended with organisms external to the mechanics at play. I borrow the idea of appropriated exteriority from Deleuze and Guattari's chapter "1227: Treatise on Nomadology: – The War Machine" in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The war machine refers not so much to mechanical processes of war as it does to formlessness and force as general principles that can be adopted by mechanical means. Defined by Deleuze and Guattari as pure exteriority, the war machine is

outside of the state apparatus, or society as we know it, which is made interior, named and given points. The nomad is described as existing between points, reterritorializing on deterritorialization itself. [1]

The *Efflorescence* (2012) series by Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi (US) demonstrates this kind of exteriority. The series consists of neon lights shaped as flowers, referring to national symbols: the magnolia for North Korea, the clover for Ireland, &c. Each is a boxlike unit holding its emblem, but the light infects and spills over like a species. It is difficult to distinguish whether the edge is at the origin of light or at the farthest periphery of the fade. The outline pollinates the surrounding space in the same way that the interior bulbs pollinate into each other. The light extends rhizomatically, “between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*,” [2] always resisting its points of origin as well as its destination, but contained and constant.

Walking through the gallery, *Efflorescence* is always glowing in the margins, reflecting off the floor or signalling from across the expanse of the exhibition space. It charges and breaks up the narrow linearity of the other horizontally arranged displays, such as *Postcards from the Edge* (1990–) by Marcos Ramirez Erre (Mexico/US) and the *Minoru* (2012) series by Christopher McNamara (Canada/US), which are placed directly across each other. While one might expect this specific reflective arrangement to be restrictive (like a corridor), these works, along with the other projects in the exhibit, are conceptually autonomous. The space between is filled with perceptual intersections, and the viewer is guided to look in all directions, activating movement while searching for

semblance. The curatorial composition is not so much about reciprocity between the works as it is about the modeling of unclaimed space between territories.

The installation *Memento* (2009) by Ed Pien (Canada), like the *Efflorescence* series, also integrates light as an agent of structuring ambiguous space. *Memento* is drawn from research into the precariousness of illegal migrants, whose social legitimacy is as illusive and unmapped as their migratory transgressions. The installation uses video projections that are reflected in hanging round mirrors, which rotate organically and displace the static entity of the images into fluid suspension. In the video, drawings of Pien wading through a torrent of waves are used to metaphorically model the fragility of the human body in the face of boundless exteriority. A network of ropes is hung and tied into a web throughout the room, casting shadows and entangling the viewer in a bifurcation of dark interior and luminous exposure. This creates a spatial effect that entices the viewer to negotiate pathways through the netting, in a confusion of inside and outside space.

The more socially activated projects, which are most effective outside the gallery setting, are appropriated into the exhibition model. *Remapping the Illegitimate Border* (2012–2013) by Dylan Miner (US/Canada), for example, is a mobile serigraphy project that requires the participation of Latino and Indigenous communities on both sides of the US/Canada border. It is here presented as a sculptural installation, a static residue awaiting re-deterritorialization. Similarly, *The Border Bookmobile Public Archive and Reading Room* brings the bookmobile

indoors. Temporarily immobilized, the van-based archive becomes a fully equipped interactive library of books, images, interviews with local residents and other cross-border artifacts. Territorializing on organic flows of storytelling, the *Bookmobile* devises a linguistic anthology, classifying to internalize while simultaneously renouncing ownership for public accessibility. The *Bookmobile* is nomadic both inside and out because it is not geographically or socially specific. It is not oriented in either Windsor or Detroit, and contains material relevant to other border regions in the world. The *Bookmobile* documents the evolution of international border fortification and its influence on cultural and existential exchange.

The *School in Exile* (2011) project presented by Campus in Camps (Palestine) is likewise translated in the gallery as an open propositional document, represented photographically, textually and as a plastic, three-dimensional, interactive model. *School in Exile* is an education and architecture experiment in the Shu’fat refugee camp, a deterritorialized in-between area that is neither inside nor outside the boundaries of Jerusalem. Attempting to build on this vulnerability, the architectural design is based on circularity without an authoritarian agenda. An interlocking arrangement of identical hexagon-shaped classrooms gives “a spatial tension between an inside and outside, the camp and the home village, life in exile and the desire of return.” [3] The three-dimensional interactive model of the campscape incites the viewer to manipulate the hexagonal shapes into new configurations of space as they fit into a mapped pattern. Each figure could be set into a static point gridded on the platform, but could potentially fit into any

one of the hexagons. At the moment of placement, then, the forms are already defined by the active potential of being elsewhere and outside themselves, while they are simultaneously dependent on the limitations of their framework, regardless of situation.

The incongruous effect of *Border Cultures* lies in assuming a conventional contemporary art gallery method, which is a form of colonial territorialization, as an attempt to decipher a much greater reality that repels classification. This is modulated in an externalized construction that is in turn internalized and reterritorialized, becoming a self-reflexive cluster of mock-ups that cross compares and cross-pollinates within itself.

“It is in terms not of independence, but of coexistence and competition in a perpetual field of interaction, that we must conceive of exteriority and interiority, war machines of metamorphosis and State apparatuses of identity... The model in question is one of becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant. It is a ‘paradox’ to make becoming itself a model, and no longer a secondary characteristic, a copy.” [4]

Sasha Opeiko, with her post-Communist Belorussian roots, has never fully adjusted to postmodern Canada and continues to question the etymological function of objects. She received her BFA (Honours) in Visual Arts from the University of Windsor in 2009, followed by an MFA in Visual Arts from the University of Victoria in 2012. She sustains an active artistic practice in Windsor, Ontario, while maintaining an avid interest in critical writing, poetry, academic incoherence, alchemical philosophy, modern psychoanalysis, vital materialism, thing theory, entropy and other mechanics of ephemeral knowledge.

On Resisting: Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, the Archive and Why the Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction

For An Epidemic Resistance in <laughter>
organized by Kari Cwynar
apexart, New York
23 May–27 July 2013

Space Fiction & the Archives
AXENÉO7, Gatineau
27 March–21 April 2013
Traveling

Review by Amber Berson

I’ve wanted to write something about the work of Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen for a long time. Since before I saw her show at AXENÉO7 (Gatineau, 2013), and even before *Space Fiction & the Archives* was shown at VOX (Montreal, 2012). In my curatorial capacity, I had tried hard to program her work *For An Epidemic Resistance* (2009), about a laughter epidemic which took place in 1962 in Kashasha, Tanzania. On her website, Nguyen states that the piece was influenced by social and cultural historian Marjolein Hart’s assertion that laughter “functions as a true ‘weapon of the weak.’” With that statement, and her interest in how the weak fight back and resist, I became irresistibly enthralled by Nguyen’s work.

It is Nguyen’s assertion of the power of resistance that draws viewers into her practice. In *For An Epidemic Resistance*, a 25-channel sound installation in which each speaker, hung from the ceiling, plays a laughing voice, the audience is

lured into a laughing fit amidst the artwork. The actual laughing epidemic took place in 1962, in a remote village in the north-eastern edge of modern-day Tanzania. The town was part of the Republic of Tanganyika—a sovereign state that existed for only two years in Eastern Africa. Tanganyika was formed following independence from the United Kingdom a year earlier. The outbreak of laughter, or mass hysteria as it is sometimes described, lasted for six months and first occurred at a mission-run boarding school for girls, then spread to surrounding villages. If we follow Hart’s thesis that laughter “functions as a true ‘weapon of the weak,’” we can choose to read the girls’ laughter as a form of resistance against their patriarchal society and the colonizers at their mission-run institution. While the Republic of Tanganyika was a free state, the influence of the colonizer was still present by way of the mission school and other institutional programs. Very little is known about the Kashasha laughing epidemic,

and little more about the girls who started it. What has been written has almost exclusively come from the point of view of the colonizer. Yet the girls’ weapon—laughter—eventually shut down the school (and other institutions), proving it an effective means of resistance, which Nguyen celebrates in her piece.

Fast-forward a few years to 1967. Canada is poised to celebrate its centennial and all across the country citizens and institutions are creating projects in honour of their colonial history. We are in an age of heterochrony: while Canadians were celebrating 100 years of sovereignty from the Crown, First Nations people were formulating the Brown Paper in response to Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau’s infamous 1969 White Paper, which proposed dismantling the Indian Act and breaking down established legal relationships between First Nations people and the Canadian government. While millions of people were flooding Montreal’s Expo 67—whose motto “Man and His World” was meant to symbolize multiculturalism, openness and world harmony—the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the American civil rights movement, global student protests, Che Guevara’s death and other

events were illustrating that we can’t all just get along.

In *Space Fiction & the Archives*, which is comprised of historical artifacts and documentation as well as a video titled *1967: A People Kind of Place* (2012), Nguyen shows the audience another break in the weave of national narrative. In 1967, the residents of St. Paul, Alberta, were building the world’s first UFO landing pad “to welcome everybody from this earth, and also extraterrestrial beings, if there are any.” Meanwhile, Trudeau, in an effort to render immigration policy free of racial discrimination, introduced the “points-based system,” which attempted to relieve the pressures of sponsored immigration, and which tallied a hopeful immigrant’s worth on the basis of personal qualities, education, training, age and occupational demand in Canada. In short, Canada was theoretically open to everyone, even if you had no prior ties to the country. This sentiment is echoed in the UFO-oriented welcome message of St. Paul’s mayor, even if it did not reflect the actual reality of immigration in Canada.

In watching *1967: A People Kind of Place*, it becomes clear that the Martian landing pad built in Alberta is symbolic of the blind spots in

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Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen,
Space Fiction & the Archives (2012).
Film and installation of archival material.
Image courtesy of the artist.



[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1987;

repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011), 381.

[2] Ibid., 25.

[3] Alessandro Petti, “Shu’fat School,” Campus in Camps website.

[4] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 360–361.

the Canadian national narrative, and that it was a project celebrating settler colonial history. In the text that accompanied *Space Fiction & the Archives*, Liz Park mentions that the town of St. Paul, Alberta, had once been named St. Paul des Métis. In dropping “des Métis” from their official name, the town of St. Paul attempted to erase its colonial history. This exhibit challenges these types of erasures. Nguyen’s work, which she aptly names “space fiction,” is not about telling fantastical stories or even about altering perceived truths—it is about making space for heterochronic fictions, even the difficult ones.

Despite her attention and care for the research, the artist states that she does not feel burdened with the need to tell the truth. She believes that her role as artist is to find new truths, to disrupt the dominant narrative without necessarily relying on pure facts. Nguyen’s work is about difficult subjects—she disrupts the dominant narrative of our culture to destabilize colonial discourse. Her aesthetic choices—clean lines and smooth forms—are informed by our expectations of what belongs in a museum or archive, but her works resist the whitewashed stories that are customarily presented there.

While Nguyen tackles new research with the same methodological drive as historians and anthropologists do, she is also deeply invested in storytelling. *Space Fiction & the Archives* is the result of a two-year research project that had her digging in archives and speaking with residents of St. Paul as well as with a UFO study group and

with then Minister of National Defence Paul Hellyer. In her film, Nguyen invites Hellyer to reread his 1967 speech for the opening of the launch pad, and then reflect on whether his opinions had changed over the course of 45 years. Hellyer, a long-time advocate of declassifying government documents about aliens, [1] had run for the Liberal candidacy against Trudeau during the era that saw the creation of the point system, and his opinions on immigration (extraterrestrial or otherwise) might have altered the centennial narrative away from multiculturalism as a state policy that erases, or voluntarily forgets, the process of colonization in Canada.

Amber Berson’s current research focuses on artist-run culture and she is working on a PhD in Art History at Queen’s University. She works in and with artist-run centres, notably Eastern Bloc and articule, and most recently curated the *Wild Bush Residency* in Val-David, Quebec, and Amden, Switzerland, *In Your Footsteps* at VAV Gallery, *The Magpies Nest* at Wenger Homestead in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and *We lived on a map...* at the Centre for Ethnographic Research and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Violence (CEREV). She is also on the editorial committee of *.dpi*, a feminist journal of digital art and culture.

[1] Hellyer also famously accused Stephen Hawking of covering up alien contact, stating “the reality is that [aliens have] been visiting Earth for decades and probably millennia and have contributed considerably to our knowledge.” (“Ex-Defence Minister Defends Aliens, Says Hawking Wrong,” *The Canadian Press* [2 May 2010] online); Hawking suggested that if

human beings tried to contact aliens, they could invade us and take away our most important resources, and warned that aliens might be here try to conquer and colonize Earth. See Pay Schlesinger, “Stephen Hawking: Earth Could Be at Risk of an Invasion by Aliens Living in ‘Massive Ships,’” *MailOnline* (26 April 2010; online).

Who is Dayani Cristal?

Who is Dayani Cristal?
Film (86 mins), 2012
Directed by Marc Silver
Canadian Premiere at Hot Docs, Toronto
27 April 2013

Review by Amber Landgraff

The documentary *Who is Dayani Cristal?* follows staff at the Pima County morgue in Arizona as they go through the process of identifying the body of a migrant worker who died attempting to illegally cross into the US. Unlike many of the other bodies that end up in the morgue, this particular body had a unique and identifiable tattoo across the chest which read “Dayani Cristal.” This was the first clue in the search for his identity, and in the journey to return him to his family.

With immigration a hot-button topic in the US, focus is often placed on the image of the border wall between Mexico and America, the best protection against the so-called never-ending threat of nameless, faceless enemies sneaking into the States. In mainstream discourse, migrants attempting the crossing are too often discussed in the abstract and en masse, while the individual reasons that drive them to undertake the dangerous crossing in spite of the risks are boiled down to the cliché of the American Dream.

The documentary plays an important role in bringing real

attention to the sheer number of deaths that the war on immigration has caused over the last decade; over 200 unidentified bodies are found each year, many of which will never be identified. Policies around cremating unidentified bodies had to be changed in 2005 because there wasn’t enough space to store such large numbers of unidentified remains. The result is that people who are dehumanized in life remain dehumanized in death, scores of John Does who will never make it home. By focusing on the man with the tattoo, and following the process of finding out who he was and what led to his body being left in the desert, the film does a masterful job of providing an intimate glimpse of the tattooed man (nicknamed “Yohan”) and his life.

What stayed with me most are the interviews with Yohan’s family—his wife, brother, mother and father. The unconventional format of the documentary places these interviews alongside the investigation, so that the audience knows all along that he will eventually be identified. These interviews reveal much about Yohan long before



the audience ever sees his face, from descriptions provided by the people who love him, including how he courted his wife and his relationships with his mother, father, brother and three young children. What emerges is a picture of a loving husband and father, who made the difficult decision to leave his family because of the circumstances of his youngest son suffering from cancer. The film follows the process of Yohan’s body being returned to Honduras, and it is only then that the audience finally sees his face, as family members place his photograph on the coffin during his memorial.

The moment that Yohan’s face is finally shown is also the moment in which the meaning of his tattoo is revealed to the audience in voiceover: Dayani Cristal is his daughter’s name, tattooed across his heart. This narrative choice is significant, as the film consistently asserts the importance of Yohan’s personhood, and builds audience investment in the particularity of Yohan’s story and his return home. Yohan’s brother

argues that much money is invested in the wall, yet the wall is only ever going to be a dead investment. He questions what could be accomplished if the same money was instead invested in people. With so many related deaths every year, this is a simple and powerful question—and a strong statement in support of immigration reform—that asks how many lives have to be lost before we begin to see it as too much to lose. This is also highlighted by the fact that Yohan’s body was found only a thirty-minute car ride away from Tucson; if the crossings hadn’t been made more difficult by the federal government’s crackdowns, which included more investment in high-tech surveillance equipment and building harder-to-cross fences, Yohan’s death could have been prevented.

The third narrative thread in the documentary is a re-creation of Yohan’s journey as undertaken by Gael García Bernal. While some reactions to the documentary criticize this re-creation for not accurately capturing the reality of crossing

illegally—how could it possibly capture the experience with a well-known actor and a camera crew?—this complaint partially comes from the overall cinematic quality of the film. Following the Hot Docs screening, several questions were asked about the veracity of García Bernal’s journey, whether the people seen and interviewed were also actors and what kind of crew was required for the filming. Director Marc Silver pointed out that despite the stunning cinematic quality of the film, it was actually made with a very small crew, and often shot with only one camera, operated by Silver. While this re-creation may seem an awkward choice, García Bernal is intended to function as an audience surrogate, providing a stand-in for an audience who will likely never undergo such a trip, in order to see and feel what the experience would be like from the position of an insider rather than an objective observer. Given the film’s goal of humanizing migrants, this becomes a striking, if potentially unsuccessful, choice.

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Migrants resting at the “Brother of the Road” shelter, Ixtepec, Mexico.
Film still, *Who is Dayani Cristal?*
Film (86 mins), 2012.
Directed by Marc Silver.

Amber Landgraff is a Toronto-based curator and writer. She has an MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice and is one of the organizers of FEAST Toronto, an ongoing community dinner and microfunding event. She writes, often about art, politics and labour, for both *FUSE* and *C Magazine*.

In Memoriam: Arlan Londoño (1962–2013)

When I first met Arlan, he was more of an anarchist and more confrontational, although always friendly and with his measured way of seeing, thinking and acting. It was 1996 and Colombia was in the midst of devastation, bloodshed everywhere, paramilitaries and guerillas kidnaping and killing, corrupt governments focusing on their pockets and image, and we art professionals still somehow transfixed by contemporary art, the white box and the international scene. Arlan's contribution to the national Salon of Colombian Artists that year was a kettle of black vultures, which he painted on the cornices, corners, borders and edges of the exhibition space. The title of the piece was Phoenix, 1995-1996.

A few years later, we saw each other again in Manizales, a small colonial city (in every sense of the word) embedded in the central mountain range of the Colombian Andes. Arlan was a professor at the National University there. He was still the same, dressed in black, as anarchist as ever and even more outspoken politically. His light came on when he was in good company. Surrounded by brilliant minds, many of whom he helped polish, Arlan was, as much as anything, a jeweler, with great intuition and always in search of raw gemstones. Always sharing everything and committed to his gregarious role, he worked for the benefit of the crowd so that others would shine, while he remained behind the scenes.

We met again in Havana in 2006. Both of us had been expelled from Colombia. He had served tables, washed dishes and done odd jobs in NYC until he grew tired and moved, undocumented, to Toronto. I had learned carpentry and plumbing amongst other

On Thursday 23 May 2013, Arlan Londoño, the co-founder and curator of e-fagia organization, passed away suddenly in his home in Toronto. Arlan has been one of the pillars of our organization and an inspiration to all of us. As an artist, curator and activist, he struggled everyday in the arts to create projects at an impossible rate; projects that established a dialogue with their social context and were rooted in the real experiences of daily life. He was a friend like no other – always acting as a bridge, linking diverse communities, artistic disciplines and activists around his projects.

His activities in these last few years are almost too many to list: co-founder of e-fagia; co-founder of No Media Collective; originator of interdisciplinary art

projects like *DystoRpia*, *Sub_version*, *In_dependence* and *Displacement*; organizer of new media exhibitions like the *Digital Event series* (2006–2013), *Videophagy* (2009) and *Pan-Americas* (2010); editor of numerous publications with e-fagia and of the web issue of *Disfagia Magazine*; photography and video workshop facilitator; web developer; member of the board of directors and programming committee of the aluCine film and media festival; collaborator of the Colombia Action Solidarity Alliance, to name only the most significant ones.

As the architect for the symposium on Decolonial Aesthetics of the Americas, Arlan was deeply invested in thinking through the meaning of decolonization as linked to culture, politics and

things, which I never had a use for in the arts, but proved useful for life. In the heat of Cuba, Arlan never stopped wearing black, not there nor in Merida, Yucatan, at 40 degrees in the shade (although he did take off his Converse, replacing them with Mayan sandals).

I think that it was in Toronto where Arlan perfected his method. He couldn't have been in better company: Julieta, his brightest star, a piece of the Caribbean in the cold North. He rapidly built a network. Exile brings about the best of you (sometimes also the worst). His America became clearer, his interests expanded: New media, art that is socially and politically committed, work that is carried out in networks, horizontally and collaboratively. Along with Julieta, he founded e-fagia. These spaces that were created digitally (with one's fingers, as we say in the south to underscore an element of precarity in this work) are testimony of his commitment.

After our encounter in Havana, we saw each other repeatedly. Always with clear objectives, without excuses, we would act, build, collaborate. Arlan was clear about something: the ones who have survived and have possibilities are in debt to the ones who have none, who have no voice. We dedicate our efforts to the ones who have been made subordinates. With humility, without mediation, with the heart.

Compa, as the Phoenix – until next time,

– Miguel Rojas-Sotelo

aesthetics. We watched his enthusiasm in initiating this project, and it is in his honour that we bring it to fruition.

As his friends, we will always remember him as a generous, endless conversation partner, a frustrated dancer, a polemicist, a drinker of coffee with rum, a music and film enthusiast, an insatiable and imaginative reader, a joker, a confidant. We will miss his smile, his laughter and his way to challenge us with his honest criticism. Goodbye, Arlan. You will always be in our hearts.

– e-fagia organization



↑
Arlan Londoño, *Fénix (Phoenix)*,
1995–1996.
Vinyl paint on wall.
Variable Dimensions.
Image courtesy of the artist.

PROJECT STATEMENTS

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa

The Soiled Queen (2010). Photo credit: Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa in collaboration with Projectos Ultravioleta and Juan Brenner. (pages 11 & 13)



Collages from the series *La Reina Ha Muerto, el Alce la Mato* (2010). 16.5 x 23 inches each, from a series of 23. Photo credit: courtesy of the artist. (page 12)

In the double performance photograph *The Soiled Queen* and its series of accompanying collages, *La Reina Ha Muerto, el Alce la Mato*, artist Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa guts the imaginary space of the Commonwealth, figuring the colonial relationship between Guatemala and Canada. Lush, playful and macabre, the works were conceived for his first solo exhibition in Guatemala City. The images are loosely based on childhood memories of standardized cultural assimilation for newcomers through the persistence of colonial iconographic tropes in the Canadian educational system. The artist translates this iconography for a Guatemalan public by embodying the Queen, decolonizing her image through a queer re-staging. The selection of images from the series of collages presented for this feature evokes history and landscape: violence past and present against racialized bodies in direct relationship to the domination of the landscape.

These brutal appropriations appear in stark contrast with the pastoral fantasy of the untouched wilderness suggested by the image of Rigoberta Menchú riding a sleigh. Rather than merely inverting colonial iconographic logic as a way to seek legitimation by reversal, Ramírez-Figueroa inhabits this fraught repertoire of images, turning them inside out. The trace of this habitation is a figure/ground dynamic splashed with snow, blood, grass and shit.

— Francisco-Fernando Granados

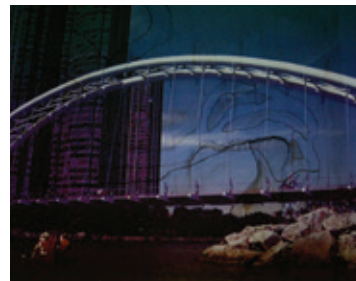


Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa

lives and works between Guatemala City and Vancouver. He holds a BFA from Emily Carr University and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The Guatemalan civil war (1960–96) is a recurring subject in his work. Although often softened by an absurd and humorous approach, the work fails to conceal the force of history that precedes it. Ramírez-Figueroa has participated in various solo and group exhibitions including

the 53rd Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen (Oberhausen, Germany), Home Works IV (Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, Lebanon), TEOR/ética (Costa Rica), and Casa América (Madrid). He is a recipient of a 2011 Guggenheim fellowship and was recently awarded the illy Present Future prize at Artissima 19, which will result in an exhibition at Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in November of 2013.

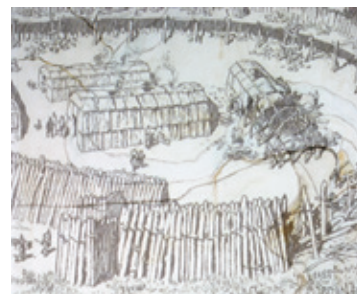
Julie Nagam
(pages 3, 22, 23)



The sound and new media installation *where white pines lay over the water* is an exploration of different methodologies in cartography and geography that bring forth different epistemological views. The focus of this artwork has relied on the importance of orality and embodied knowledge that is a part of Indigenous theory, knowledge and praxis. The purpose of this installation is to narrate Indigenous stories of place in the city of Toronto through an Indigenous perspective, which challenges linear, fact-based settler accounts of the history of the city. Searching the land for an Indigenous history in a city that perpetually transforms is a daunting and difficult task. To further compound the growing cityscape, the Indigenous history of the land is situated in many conflicting stories from historians, archeologists, Indigenous nations and competing ethnic groups. All of these associations want to lay a claim to the area and link their knowledge to the territory. As well, there are numerous groups of people who seek to create an exciting, exotic and romantic history in order to satisfy tourism and promote interest in the city. This installation encompasses Indigenous living histories that are linked to the land, water and people. In this issue of *FUSE*, *where white pines lay over the water* is retold through a selection of layered imagery drawn from the installation.

Julie Nagam, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at OCAD University in the Indigenous Visual Culture program and her research interests

include a (re)mapping of the colonial state through creative interventions within concepts of native space. Current SSHRC research projects include Canadian performance and political theory and Indigenous digital and new media. Nagam's creative practices include working in mixed media, such as drawing, photography, painting, sound, projections, new and digital media. Her work *where white pines lay*, was shown in San Paulo, Brazil, and Lyon, France, in 2013. Her installation *singing our bones home* is part of LAND|SLIDE (Markham) and Ecocentrix (London, England), both 2013.



Why we write for *FUSE*



FUSE is one of the few Canadian magazines I honestly want to support. Taking bold editorial choices that puts politics and aesthetics first, I believe in their integrity and their ability to adapt and survive in the face of 21st century journalism.

Amy Fung



I write for *FUSE* because it creates a critical space for articulating a contextual, politicized engagement with the expanded field of the visual.

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Ron Benner's *Trans/mission: Insubstantial Equivalence*, detail, 2013. Photo: Natalie Boterman

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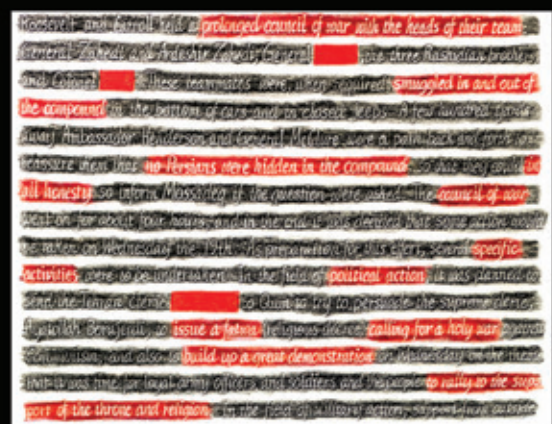
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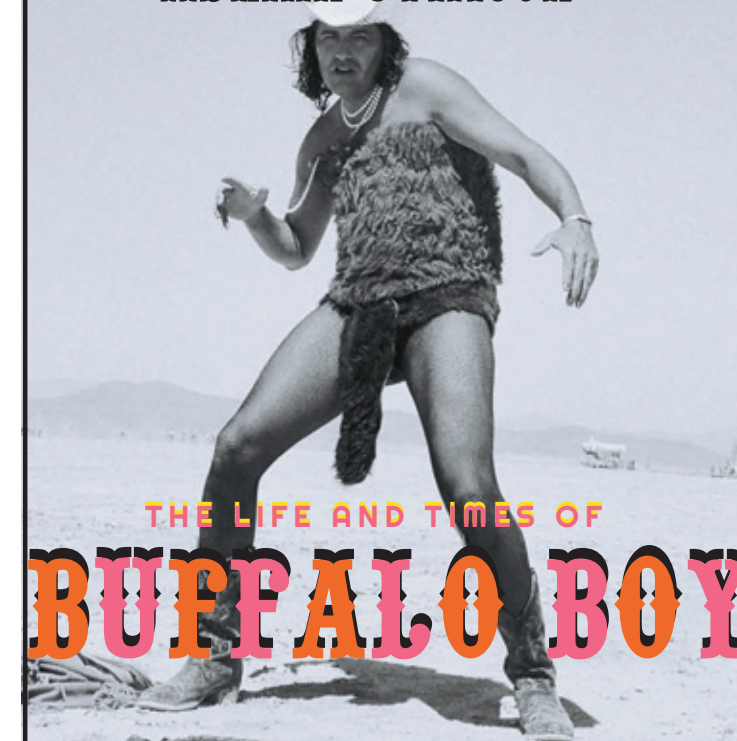
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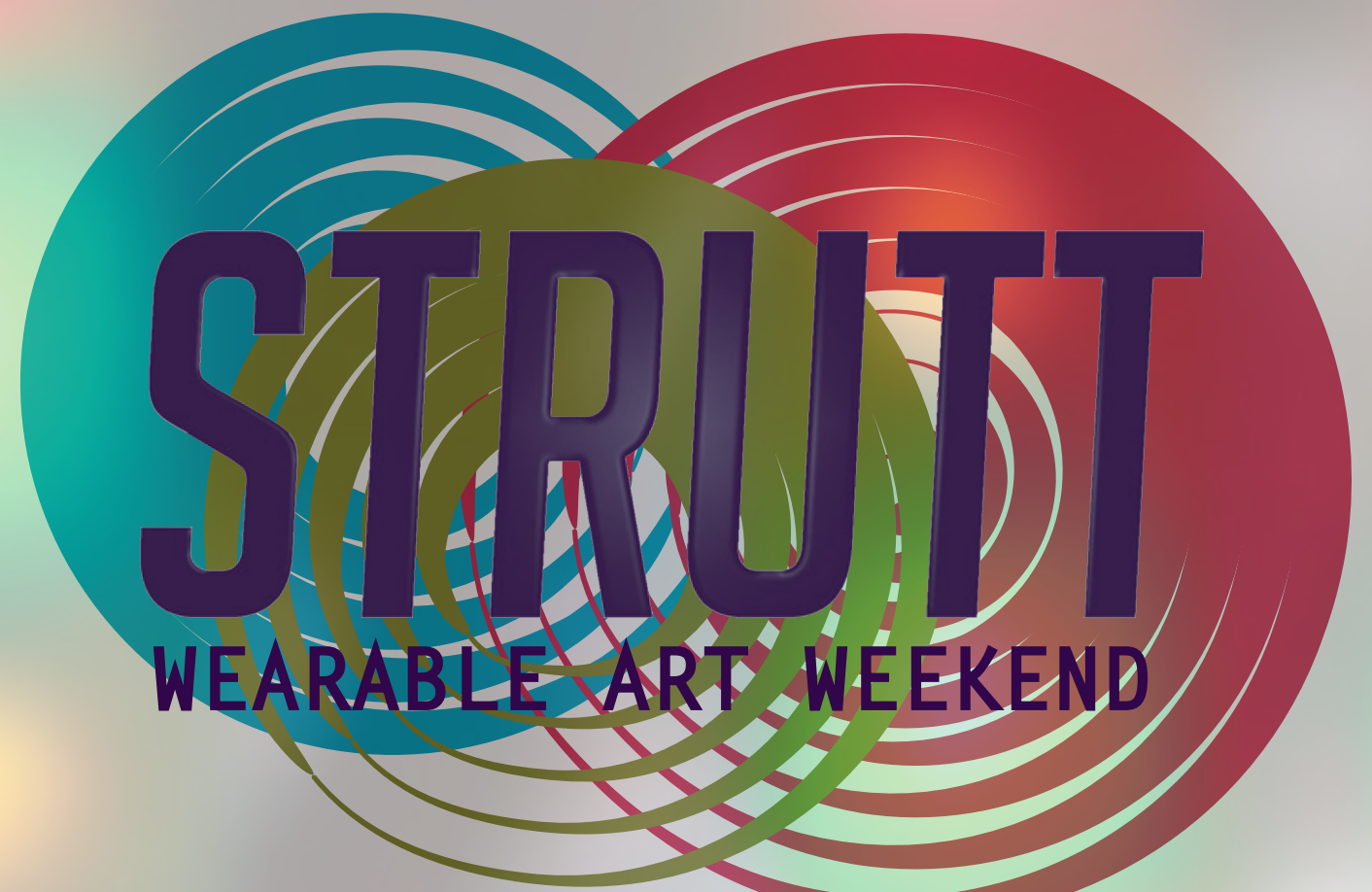
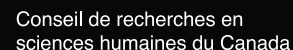
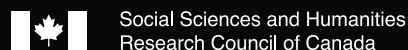
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