Non-Colonial Indigenous Public Art and Memorials

[Collaboration and Co-Creation in Museums, Heritage, and the Arts. (forthcoming, 2025). Anna Edmundson and Maya Haviland editors.]

Following final reports from The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), and ongoing revelations of unmarked graves at former Indian Residential School sites, Canada blooms with Indigenous memorials and public art. Too often, however, these works, and the committees that select them, reproduce colonial habits. They present Aboriginal appearance rather than embody Indigenous engagement. Methodologies to assist folks develop Indigenous public art as a form of conciliation exist. For example, Dawn Saunders Dahl and Candice Hopkins' generative labour with the Edmonton Arts Council that resulted in the Indigenous Art Park ᐃᓂᐣ (ÎNÎW) River Lot 11∞ (2016)[i] and protocols which continue to inform that city's policies. However, these concepts and practices are not well known or universally applied. Devising non-colonial Indigenous public art and policy is as much a challenge for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists as it is for the organizations who commission them.

This chapter outlines three recent public art eras—colonial, modernist, and emerging non-colonial Indigenous practices—and three varieties of Native creative production—customary, Aboriginal, and Indigenous. This mapping is useful for Indigenous artists and public art committees wanting to understand how these forces shape their work and how they might navigate toward processes and projects that are closer to Indigenous principles. The paper then applies these concepts to a reading of Djon Mundine's *The Aboriginal Memorial* (1987) and pictures future possibilities for Indigenous public art works and memorials.[ii]

Colonial, Modernist, and Non-Colonial Indigenous Public Art

There is an eleven-foot high statue of Chief Sitting Eagle (1988) in downtown Calgary. Sitting Eagle, also known as John Hunter (1874-1970), was chief of the Stoney Nakoda and deeply involved with the Calgary Stampede. Despite Indian Act restrictions on people's ability to leave reserves and prohibitions on displays of culture and ceremony, the Euro-Canadian organizers of the early Stampede vigorously defended Blackfoot Confederacy inclusion.[iii] Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Tsuut'ina, and Stoney-Nakoda families continue to be proud of their sovereign cultural spaces at that annual event. Unfortunately, Don Begg's sculpture does not do the man and this significant relationship justice. The awkward gray-green bronze looks like an enlarged toy. Far from home and his people, Chief Sitting Eagle shivers in the shadow of office towers. Posed with his raised right arm like a cigar store Indian, he shades himself from the perpetually blocked sun. Perhaps he is looking for a more suitable place to be.

Begg's statue is Settler colonial art. It is the representation of a Native person by a Settler artist following Settler conventions for a Settler space and interests. It conforms to what Euro-Canadian's raised on non-Indigenous popular culture in the mid-20th century expect an Indian Chief should look like. Imagine how different the sculpture would be if made by a First Nations artist from that territory. Would Faye Heavy Shield, for example, abandon Sitting Eagle in these office canyons or carry him to the real canyons of his home territory? Would Star Crop Eared

Wolf dress him in regalia as Begg has, or, because he was also a businessperson and rancher, in a suit or his everyday western wear? Would Adrian Stimpson place him on a pedestal or on the earth? Might Joane Cardinal Schubert have wondered about the wisdom of elevating one person above others? Would Terrance Houle advocate for representing bison instead, and have commissioners rethink using bronze or any permanent material? Might these artists have questioned their invitation to do this commission and not a Stoney Nakoda artist? Each resistance you may feel reading these suggestions is a thread tethering you to a public art convention. If you feel a slight release with each suggestion, perhaps you are already a resident of the non-colonial Indigenous art period.

Settled Settlers[iv] find Native presence irritating and permanent exhibits of government-funded Native pride especially aggravating. Native displays in transit spaces—airports, malls, parades—places that are passed-through or that pass by, are tolerable because they are contained, celebratory, and/or fleeting. They accent rather than disturb the social order. Settled Settlers consider clichés such as Begg's benign, especially if on private property and paid for by private money. Public property and money imply public sanction. Statues, plaques, and memorials in the slow commons—parks, plazas, schools, libraries, and other civic buildings—are official expressions of the dominant culture's history and ideals. In an era when statues of John A. Macdonald and other colonial symbols are being removed from these sites, and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis art is being installed, it is understandable that settled Settlers perceive a threat to what they thought was their territory, history, who counts as the public, and even their position in the Canadian caste system.

Indigenous Peoples are not (currently) the ruling class. Inviting us to occupy sites reserved for the dominant order appears to signal the power shift known as reconciliation, decolonization, even Indigenization. Some settled Settlers feel such occupations as a humiliation designed by aesthete elites to elevate select Native folks and histories above them and theirs—a betrayal of the social contract promised by prior dominant orders. A central strategy of social dominance is for the ruling and management classes to adjust values and terminology, and alter the criteria for the distribution of petty privileges and awards, restlessly. While many of these adjustments engineer positive social change, they also destabilize lower caste members. If regular folks do not keep up and adopt the new terms and styles, they risk losing their legibility, currency and status. Public art operates as a tool of oppression when its processes are inaccessible, unnegotiable, and rushed. When Native public art is a collaboration between Settler and Indigenous elites and their managers, rejection may be less an issue of race than class. Understanding Settler anxiety are important aspects of non-colonial public art practice. However, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis art should not primarily be a salve for Settler dis-ease. Post TRC, Settlers race to 'make space'. It is appreciated, but Indigenous artists should not rush to fill this void with generically exotic, cosmetically Native, and safely celebratory art. Our public art and processes must embody conciliation, Indigenous sovereignty, creative, critical, and cultural excellence. Civic spaces should host Indigenous art not as an expression of state power, benevolence, or grief alone, but because it is wanted, needed, and loved.

Colonial public art amplifies Settler colonial ideology and reinforces the status of its preferred members. Military memorials, statues of political leaders and heroes, murals with hints of the favoured religion, public art about victory, capital and progress abound. In Canada, these stone,

metal, and painted faces are mostly white. Non-Euro-Canadian folks are included as foils of whiteness or if they represent the ideals of their dominant culture commissioners. Modernist public art, on the other hand, expresses a distaste for the political, preferring to celebrate individual creativity. Modernist public art works are often enlarged versions of studio art—inflated Moores, Oldenbergs, Picassos, etc.—or anti-social, non-objective refusals in polished, painted, or rusting steel: Calder, Caro, Serra, etc. Typically chosen by studio artists, curators and patrons, rather than by committees trained in the public art genre, they may be fine works of art but less successful as works of *public* art.

Canada is slowly shifting from colonial and modernist public art to non-colonial and Indigenous public art. In cities with diverse populations, with 1% programs and arms-length arts councils, civic art is increasingly a collaboration of artists and citizens. Rather than install international art star trophies that claim universal qualities (or at least have brand recognition), these projects value site specificity and community engagement. While 'art by committee' can result in inoffensive placeholders (rather than place makers), technovelties, design team art, and populist pleasures that could come from anywhere and be placed anywhere else, with deep community engagement and leadership, we can nurture art that expresses meanings dear to a specific region. Such art does not impose a 'universal', nationalist, or colonial aesthetics and ideology on locals. Locals generate the work with artists to express meanings unique to them and their site. This strategy requires special and on-going training in advancements in civic art and community building. Public art in this vein emerges from the land, from the people who live there. While informed by academics, the art world, and Indigenous communities, these gatherings and works include but exceed their sources.

Hiring an *Indigenous* artist expected to make *Indigenous* art, violates the modernist centering of individual expression. Some resistance to Indigenous public art may be less about embarrassment concerning the publication of previous repressed histories of national oppression than it is a distaste for art that engages the political and the particular rather than the abstract and universal. Modernist art and artists are supposed to be above all that. To those invested in modernist aesthetics, *Indigenous* art represses the individual for the sake of the group. It is a return to tribalism and nationalism—concepts anathema to the universal brotherhood of Man school of Humanism. While much Aboriginal art is in accord with Modernism, Indigenous art is less so.

Customary, Aboriginal, and Indigenous Art

I distinguish customary/traditional cultural production from Aboriginal art and from Indigenous art. Customary creative work is rooted in a specific traditional culture and that community regulates its production, circulation, and meanings. Aboriginal art is art made by Native people primarily for the non-Native art world and that market regulates its production, circulation, and meanings. Indigenous art is relatively new category. It emerges from, and circulates among, traditional cultures and the mainstream art world, but it also has its own international web of curation, scholarship, criticism, and publics that include and exceed its sources.

These distinctions are important when navigating the nuances of Native public art. For example, if a Haida person makes art for art's sake—that is, Euro-Canadian art in the modernist mode, with no Haida content—then they are an artist who is Haida, not a Haida artist. 'Haida', in this example, qualifies heritage, not art. To claim you are a Haida artist is to claim that both you and your art have discernable Haida qualities. Such claims are subject to Haida critical discourse. Just as Haida determine who is or is not Haida, so too can they figure whether an object is Haida or not. Haidaness, whether applied to an individual or an object, is not personal property. It is a social designation managed by a closed group. Haida artists are beholden to their communities as surely as modernists are to their tribes. Therefore, if a Settler community commissions a Hadia artist to make public art, the engagement is not with that person alone. The qualifier 'Hadia' presumes the artist has access to knowledge, modes of expression, lived experience, and relationships unavailable to non-Haida. Whether that person actually has this content, and to what degree, is determined and acknowledged by that named nation's knowledge keepers. Similarly, if a public art committee invites Indigenous artists—that is, not from a specific First Nation—then they must engage the Indigenous art community. Those knowledge keepers can determine the level of Indigenous public art currency candidates possess and mentor them from 'Call' to research, community consultation, creation, installation, opening, reception, and on-going community engagement.

Many folks who make customary creative work are uncomfortable calling themselves 'artists.' Not out of modesty, but because the word implies Euro-Canadian traditions of display and disuse that are antithetical to their traditional modes. First Nations languages have words for individual creative practices but not for the meta-concept 'art'. Many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people comfortable with the title 'artist' have adopted and adapted Western art traditions. They use European tools and techniques and participate in mainstream art economies. They make Aboriginal art. Aboriginal art is post-contact creative work made by Natives for the non-Native market. The form, subject matter, and/or content of Aboriginal art may derive from the artist's nation, or not. Unregulated by their home community, they often 'borrow' form and content from other First Peoples' cultures. Because they swim in the mainstream art world, they are subject to Settler control and criticism.

Indigenous art exists in a third space among and apart from customary culture and mainstream art worlds. Indigenous artists belong to traditional communities but are also cosmopolitan. They strive to access their home community, language, customary creative practices, mediums, and knowledge. However, they also connect with other Indigenous folks within the state that colonized them and with Indigenous people around the world. While most train in non-Indigenous institutions, a growing number go to First Nations art schools or cobble together an Indigenous art education within dominant culture institutions. The Indigenous art world is a local, national and inter-National web of artists, curators, writers, professors, galleries, publications, and virtual spaces. Though Indigenous cultural workers often work with dominant culture institutions, they are committed to their transformation. Others prioritize sovereign Indigenous display territories. All strive to manage the means of production, display, and critique of their art (Indigenous creative sovereignty). Indigenous public art, then, is not just public art made by Indigenous artists. Indigenous art is inseparable from the maker's networks of traditional and Indigenous thought, experience, communities, teachings, materials, and methods.

The colonial modernist art world encouraged Native artists to free themselves from the material specificity of their nation. They were to be world citizens, free-floating signifiers, picking and choosing images of Indianess from their own and from other cultures and weaving them into a personal style (Pan-Indianism). Following Euro-Canadian training, they granted themselves 'artistic licence', the (imperial/colonial) authority to 'borrow' and adapt imagery from other Peoples without permission or protocol. The assumption was that because they are Aboriginal, they have licence to every cultural property under that category. This is the quantification fallacy. A logical error that assumes that a part possesses the qualities of the whole or another part. What looked to some like creative liberation was inauthentic, cliché, even assimilation for others. Settler public art committees perpetuate this habit when they commission an Aboriginal artist rather than an artist from a specific First Nation, or when they engage an Indigenous artist but not the network of Indigenous cultural managers needed to support them. As Indigenous folks increasingly engage the academy, art galleries, heritage museums, public art committees, and other cultural management spaces, they rethink and remake these institutions. They also look inward and homeward to challenge Native art production. While customary cultures promote conservation and reproduction, Indigenous art promotes innovation and experimentation while in relation to tradition and community.

Inuitness is a birthright. Indigeneity, however, is an (ad)option. Membership requires conscious choice, abiding by collective agreements, and providing and receiving critical care. For example, Indigenous protocols prohibit cultural misappropriation—taking without permission from cultures not your own.[v] Indigenous protocols honour the pro-democracy and disability activist slogan "nothing about us without us."[vi] [vii] These agreements apply to Indigenous artists and the Settlers who wish to engage them. Prior to these guidelines, Settler somebodies would invite Aboriginal any bodies to install art on territory belonging to neither. The classic case is totem poles planted beyond their homelands. As a centennial project (1967), British Columbia gifted totem poles to cities in every province and territory. What looked like Haida cultural imperialism was actually Settler co-option of Haida symbols for their own nationalist purposes. When totem poles waned in popularity, inukshuks took over. They sprouted across Northern Turtle Island like mushrooms following the Vancouver Olympic rain. Canada routinely deploys traditional Native art as its visual brand, as markers of Settler, not Native, sovereignty. In the non-colonial Indigenous period, it is unthinkable to install a Haida sculpture in, say Toronto, without the permission and cooperation of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. Selecting a work of First Nations, Inuit, or Métis art for a civic space is only easy when you choose not to comprehend its extra-aesthetic meanings.

The surge in demand for Indigenous public art is not an aesthetic drive. It is political. Cities, libraries, universities, and other civic institutions race to install Indigenous art as a self-conscious form of (re)conciliation. It is a broad social movement supported by private individuals and corporations, numerous public institutions, the Canada Council for the Arts, and every level of government.[viii] In a deep sense, any Native presence in public space is always already political. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis public objects and bodies are land claims reminding everyone who the original keepers of these territories are. We are the unturned pages of Canada's "dark chapters." From a Settler point of view, almost any Native authored artwork could fill the reconciliation bill. Organizations wanting only to (virtue) signal 'Native' rather than more deeply engage First Nations, Inuit, and Métis ways of knowing, being, and doing often choose

customary art. Customary/traditional art works have meaning for its makers and nations; however, when removed from their context, they may only signify, for example, Deneness, Haudenosauneeness, or Mi'kmaqness to non-Indigenous people. Customary work is an excellent way to flag whose territory you are on, but, on their own, they are muted warriors. They need extensive display cards, websites, curatorial programs, and visiting, to release their deeper meanings, to activate their agency. Customary art is a safe strategy for Settlers because they rarely raise difficult contemporary issues. It is a means for Settlers to 'make space' for Native display without disturbing either the source culture or their own.

A more contemporary choice is to "call" explicitly for Indigenous contemporary art. Problems arise and opportunities squandered, however, if the contracted artist does not also have access to Indigenous critical care. Native authorship does not guarantee traditional and Indigenous knowledge. If a Native artist produced a sculpture identical to Begg's "Chief Sitting Eagle" for the same location, her heritage would not rescue the statue from Indigenous critique. Most of us are bicultural and as distorted by non-Indigenous culture as Settlers are. Great effort is required to decolonize our imaginaries, learn our traditional knowledge, and develop Indigenous contemporary art. Artists cannot do it alone. If our work is to be more than red washing, if there is a genuine desire for conciliation and to include First Peoples and sensibilities in the public visual vocabulary of these territories, then First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists, communities, Settlers, and public art committees, need resources, mentorship, and time.

Capitalism aspires to frictionless flow. The mainstream favours the able-bodied, the untraumatized, those with identities, appearances, and minds the can slip easily into the current. Those who cannot or will not go with the flow create resistance. Rivers change their course all the time. Each shift begins with a small difference—a log, a boulder, a depression. Dawn Saunders Dahl and Candice Hopkins' work with the Edmonton Arts Council was so successful because they slowed the process and funded it generously. They took years rather than months to nurture the Indigenous Art Park ᐃᓂᓯ (ÎNÎW) River Lot 11∞, and directed half the budget to artist and community development. They understood that the expanded field of Indigenous public art includes communities. It is about capacity building and not just about building the next big thing. Rather than have the usual open call, sift through proposals and pick a winner, Saunders Dahl, Hopkins and the Edmonton Arts Council brought prospective artists from across Canada to meet with each other, Elders, and other community partners. I attended. We heard stories and histories on the land where the sculptures would abide. Even though I was born and raised there, and my family's river lot (#7) was nearby, most of what I heard was new. Many of the artists described the process as transformative. One explained that they came with an idea in mind similar to what they had made elsewhere. After two days of listening, however, many more and site-appropriate concepts arose. A few years later, I won the public art commission for the nearby Tawatina Bridge. Visits with Elders, knowledge keepers, and other community members fueled the 543 paintings my team and I made for the Bridge. The community connections I made during the Art Park visits made these visits easier. Because of their experience with Saunders Dahl and Hopkins, the Edmonton Arts Council folks, and visiting artists from across Canada, local Cree, Métis, and Settlers felt listened to, respected and useful. They also had confidence because they understood something about contemporary public art, and the special challenges of Indigenous public art. They were eager to assist a new project.

Stronger Than Stone

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission *Calls to Action* #81 and #82 call for "a publicly accessible, highly visible, Residential Schools National Monument in the city of Ottawa [and in each provincial capital,] to honour Survivors and all the children who were lost to their families and communities." This is important work. The record needs to be set straight. Does it need to be set in stone? Many First Nations are erecting Indian Residential School monuments. All those I have seen are conventional. That is to say, they follow Euro-North American conventions—names on metal plaques mounted on, or names carved into, displaced rocks—rather than First Nations conventions. Permanent memorials are not Indigenous in the sense of having a cultural continuity with our ancestors. I am writing from the Plains, but this is true throughout Northern Turtle Island. In 2014, for four days and in two cities (November 21-24), dozens of Indigenous cultural workers and thinkers and allies gathered in Calgary and then in Saskatoon for "Stronger Than Stone: (Re)Inventing the Indigenous Monument."[ix] We collected to rethink colonial modernisms' influence on Indigenous public memorialization. In the words of the organizers:

> Indigenous cultures have maintained ties to the same lands since time immemorial. Human-made physical markers have not always been necessary to preserve the history of a place and people. Rather, natural places have been regarded as calling forth stories, so that the landscape provides a practical and moral guide to the culture. The symposium explores the contributions that traditional and contemporary Indigenous approaches to memorializing and place-making have made and continue to make to the contemporary art world, as well as to the fields of urban planning, geography, education and more. It aims to establish models for the commissioning and production of new, "Indigenized" memorials which will help all people to better understand the nature of collective or cultural memory and human interdependence with the land."[x]

Conversations there made an indelible impact on me. In particular, I saw how Native folks succumbed to colonial Modernist modes of memorialization and that it is up to Indigenous artists and educators, and public art commissioners, to provide examples of Indigenous memorials that combine traditional ways of knowing, being, and making with contemporary materials and methodologies. Three years later, Djon Mundine (Bundjalung People), invited me to give the keynote talk at The National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra for the thirtieth anniversary of his collaborative work, and national treasure, *The Aboriginal Memorial.*[xi] While honoured by the invitation, I was surprised. When I asked Djon why he wanted me to address his work, he said he thought that I could bring something to it that local folks might not be comfortable saying. I am concluding this chapter by revisiting part of that talk as an example of where Indigenous public art might go.

The Aboriginal Memorial

The Aboriginal Memorial (1987) consists of 200 decorated poles inspired by the hollow

mortuary logs of central Arnhem Land. Conceived by Band-ja-lung curator and scholar Djon Mundine as a project for the bicentennial of Australia's "discovery" by Captain Cook, each pole represents a year of colonization. He explains that the poles represent those denied a proper burial.[xii]

> More than 600,000 people died as a result of white settlement. Murdered in many incidents over these years, unsung and without any other ritual, their bodies were frequently burnt to hide the evidence or simply cast into dry creek beds or unmarked graves. It is for these unnamed, unrecognized, peaceful, normal, average Aboriginal victims – men women and children – and not just warriors, that this memorial was created.[xiii]

Mundine, who from 1980 to 1994 was an Arts advisor in Ram-ing-in-ing, produced the installation with 43 local men. He pitched the idea to Nick Waterlow, then Director of the Bicentenary Biennale of Sydney, who accepted. Financial support came from the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council and the National Gallery of Australia, who acquired it. Russia's Hermitage Museum exhibited *The Aboriginal Memorial* in 2000. A National Gallery of Australia (NGA) video describes it as a "war memorial,"[xiv] emphasizes its anthropological aspects, but does not discuss it as contemporary art even though the NGA is an art gallery and its former director, James Mollison, hailed it "the most significant contemporary artwork produced in Australia."[xv]

The Aboriginal Memorial appears customary. Yol-n-gu men made the poles according to traditional family designs. However, because a Bandj-a-lung man conceived and managed the project for non-customary reasons and uses outside the community, we can say that the poles are a Yol-n-gu expression but the *Memorial* is an Aboriginal work of art. Customary poles are logs hollowed by termites and painted with totemic clan designs. Yol-n-gu men dig up and paint the bones of an ancestor with red ochre, then place them in one of the decorated logs, and plant the log upright on the edge of the village. Boneless, *The Aboriginal Memorial*'s poles are not ossuaries but representations of ossuaries. They are unsanctified versions offered to non-Yol-n-gu peoples. However, as they are not trade goods, not orphaned commodities, but accompanied by Indigenous intent, protocols, and occasionally by ceremony. They have a unique status.

Before they were Aboriginal, Yol-n-gu were Yol-n-gu. They became Aboriginal when so named by colonial authorities. Later, Aboriginal sometimes signaled sovereignty and treaty—when Yol-n-gu allied with other tribes to build a web of support and resistance. Aboriginals produced new modes of inter-tribal being in order to be legible to Settlers. Aboriginal is a crisis identity co-created by tribal societies and colonial institutions. Colonization creates double consciousness. The residence of the second consciousness is Aboriginal. When tribal people make aesthetic things that echo pre-contact customary creations but non-Indigenous forms and content heavily influence them, and if Settlers administered and circulate these things and meanings, we are right to recognize them as bi-cultural co-creations, and to call them Aboriginal art. That Settler money financed *The Aboriginal Memorial*, and The National Gallery of Australia later adopted it, suggests an Aboriginal status—that it is a crisis object. However, because Mudine conceived of it *prior* to state funding, that he conceived it as contemporary art, and as a political provocation, *The Aboriginal Memorial* exceeds easy containment.

Settler Anxiety

As genocidal truth slowly roots into Australian and Canadian public consciousness, it disturbs the foundations of Settler culture. Truth and Conciliation is not about historical injustice alone. History telling is always about the present and the desire to form better future selves. It is about looking at was lost and can be resuscitated to serve the living. This second Enlightenment, Indigenization, recognizes colonial ways of being as no longer morally, ethically, or environmentally tenable. It requires the remaking of us all. If Truth and Conciliation between Settlers and First Peoples is to succeed, it must recognize the past but not be beholden to it. Non-colonial, novel and hybrid forms are required. Alongside political debate and scholarly intellection, our moment craves enigmatic public objects with and through which we can express and comprehend our unsettled states. *The Aboriginal Memorial* is a bezoar, a concretion found in the gut, an indigestible thing, prized from a dead body, prized as a medicine, a catalytic; an object/being that creates a reaction without itself changing.

At present, the National Gallery of Australia houses *The Aboriginal Memorial*. This home shifts the *Memorial*'s use from centering Aboriginal remembering and toward offering form and focus for Settler contemplation of their anxiety. Settler anxiety is the creeping horror of gradually awakening to the murderous history and continuous scapegoating upon which contemporary Settler privilege rests. Settler anxiety is the dread, paralysis, or reckless altruism that arises when—by force of argument, lived experience, conscience, or other form of enlightenment—you become decentered in what you thought was your territory and rank. As social medicine for Settler anxiety, *The Aboriginal Memorial* is less cure than diagnostic instrument.

Having 200 Aboriginal coffins at the entrance to one of Settler Australia's most important public memory houses, in the nation's capital, amounts to a land claim; an occupation of Settler space by permanent Aboriginal presence. It is also a public shaming and possibly an owning of that shame. *The Aboriginal Memorial* reminds me of Tsimshian shaming poles. In April 2017, in Saxman, Alaska, Tlingit artist Stephen Jackson installed a carved pole representing a middle-aged, stern-faced white man. It replaced a weather-beaten version erected in the 1940s, which replaced an original from the 1880s. The poles ridicule Secretary of State William Seward, who did not reciprocate gifts he received from Chief Ebbits in 1869.[xvi] The community rebuilds the shame pole until their subject pays their debts.

Cree artist, poet, oral historian and theorist, Neal McLeod, explains that there is no equivalent in the *nêhiyawak* (Cree) language for the Western notion of an apology. The closest phrase to "I am sorry" is *nimihtatân*, which means 'I regret something'. McLeod explains that the word used in reference to the Indian Residential School experience is *ê-kiskakwêyehk*, "we wear it."[xvii] The image is of non-verbal redress. A visual and haptic performance rather than a verbal or textual explanation. Recognition and regret are worn as a choice, a penance. While Settler displays of Native art can feel like trophies of conquest, to place *The Aboriginal Memorial* in the face of the National Gallery, to wear it so publicly, feels like an honest attempt to bear shame and witness.

The Aboriginal Memorial could be a more Indigenous work. It could be a sovereign Indigenous space within occupied territory. Sovereign Indigenous display territories are sites where Indigenous people manage the care and exhibition of their belongings. These may be in our own spaces, or in borrowed spaces. Indigenous artist-run centres in Saskatchewan, Sakewewak and Tribe, do this all the time. The most powerful example, however, is a mobile memorial called *Walking with Our Sisters*—the most important Indigenous curatorial project in Northern Turtle Island since the Indian Pavilion in Expo 67.

In 2012, Métis artist Christi Belcourt put out a call on social media for folks to make beaded vamps for an exhibition commemorating murdered and missing Indigenous women of Turtle Island. The initial call was for 600 of the moccasin tops. A year later, she received more than 1,600 and had to stop receiving them. Submissions came from all over, from, women, men, children, people of all ages and races. Beading circles erupted; many continue. The exhibition toured Northern Turtle Island, stopping in more than two dozen communities big and small. In each case, female keepers installed the vamps and managed the space. Because there was no gallery or traditional protocol for this unprecedented work, organizers worked with each gallery and community to adapt local custom. Organizers transformed Setter spaces from secular to sacred through ceremony and smudge. Elders were continuously present. You smudge before entering and take tobacco to lay where you feel the need. In some iteration, men tended a sacred fire nearby, supporting but not interfering with the central, all-female site. *Walking with Our Sisters* is exemplary of Indigenous public art. It is collective, temporary, about activating objects through visiting and storytelling. It is mobile and adaptive to the needs of each host community. It exists only as long as needed. It is a dependent, not an independent, being.

How might *The Aboriginal Memorial* become more Indigenous? Some Aboriginal Australians suggested that, like their customary kin, they should rest out of doors and deteriorate naturally. This makes sense. Tribal memorials, like the bodies they represent, are meant to erode. They do not impose themselves on future people by becoming permanent. The arrest of Native cultural belongings in museums follows a western need for preservation, rather than Native need for renewal for some things and decay for others. An Indigenous Memorial would deteriorate if untended, or its parts renewed as needed. Non-colonial Indigenous practice, however, requires the constant nurturing of cultural things and people equally. Mundine has argued against letting *The Aboriginal Memorial* rot: "it would be too convenient for "white Australia" to forget its existence (and the crimes it refers to)."[xviii] Point taken. It is not a tribal work, perhaps not quite and Indigenous one. In its present form, *The Aboriginal Memorial* ceased its count of people killed by colonialism thirty years ago, as if colonization and its casualties stopped at that time. A living memorial would have a new pole each year until Aboriginal people feel they have their territory and selves back.

The foundation of public art in the non-colonial Indigenous era is the understanding that Indigenous public art commissions are not favours granted to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists and communities by a benevolent Settler society. This era appreciates that First Peoples are members of the public. Underserved and misrepresented members who deserve to publicly represent their history and culture according to means, methods, and materials that best express those ways of knowing and being. I am advocating for Indigenous public art that if durable is neither a work of customary tribal culture nor western modernist art by an Aboriginal artist, but

hybrids that resist easy categorization and capture. Following the TRC's 83rd Call to Action,[xix] I advocate for collaborations between Indigenous people of diverse nations, and between Natives and non-Natives, especially other-than-European folks who can perhaps better help us see our way through to non-colonial futures. I am especially suggesting that we need to rethink permanence, and embrace Plains traditions of the temporary and renewable, of performance and ritual, visiting and revisiting, and to see public art as a relationship between people and special things.

---

[i] https://www.edmontonarts.ca/public-art/about-public-art
Christine Sokaymoh Frederick and Dawn Saunders Dahl. "River Lot 11∞." Studio: Craft and Design in Canada. Vol. 15. NO. 1 Spring/Summer 2020. 34-41.https://www.craftontarioshop.com/a/downloads/-/5847b45cde170dd6/b8ad04ab413fbf22 Also see Dawn Saunders Dahl's work with the Ottawa Public Library and other Indigenous public art projects. https://www.dawnsaundersdahl.ca/biography-cv

[ii] Parts of this paper were first presented in two unpublished keynote talks--"Uncommon in the Commons: Non-Colonial Public Art" (2019). *The Alberta Public Art Network* conference. Medicine Hat Alberta, Sept. 14-15. "Indigenous Contemporary Memorials: Art as Social Medicine" (2018). *The Aboriginal Memorial 30 years On*, The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Oct. 10-12—and in "Indigenous Public Art and Conciliation." *Rungh magazine*, Vol. 10, # 1, 2023.

[iii] Joe, Stephanie. "The Story Behind Elbow River Camp." June 14, 2019. https://www.avenuecalgary.com/calgary-stampede/the-story-behind-elbow-river-camp/

[iv] Folks from other places who now live in Indigenous territories are Settlers, as are their descendants—though the term usually excludes the descendants of enslaved and transported Africans. The term is fairly neutral and assumes that these people recognize that they share the land according to treaty obligations and live in right relations with their host First Peoples. Settled Settlers, on the other hand, are visitors who continue to identify with Settler colonial ambitions. They have settled into this role rather than live in continuous conciliation with First Peoples.

[v] Most appropriations of mainstream culture by Indigenous folks is sanctioned if the artist is bi-cultural, raised in their culture and in the dominant culture.
Garneau, David. "Apropos Appropriate Appropriations: After the Apologies." *Art Monthly Australia*. #229, Dec. 2009. 27-9.
Garneau, David. "Thoughts on Inappropriate Appropriations." *Contemporary Visual Art and Culture: Broadsheet*. Parkside, South Australia. Volume 38:2. June-Aug. 2009. 132.

[vi] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothing_about_us_without_us Accessed Nov. 10, 2023.

[vii] The Canadian Artist's Representation/Le Front des Artistes Canadiens (CARFAC) recently published, *Indigenous Protocols for the Visual Arts,* a guidebook on this subject https://www.indigenousprotocols.art/ Accessed Nov. 10, 2023.

[viii] Examples abound. For example: https://canadacouncil.ca/initiatives/reconciliation Accessed Nov. 1, 2023.

[ix] For a thoughtful account of these complex events and the organizers names, see Tarin Hughes' account for *BlackFlash* magazine: https://blackflash.ca/2015/08/10/stronger-than-stone/ Accessed Nov. 7, 2023.

[x] https://thelproject.ca/2014/11/stronger-than-stone-reinventing-the-indigenous-monument/ Accessed Nov. 2, 2023.

[xi] "Indigenous Contemporary Memorials: Art as Social Medicine." *The Aboriginal Memorial 30 years On*, The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Oct. 10-12.

[xii] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-LSea6zAqo Accessed Sept. 5, 2023.

[xiii] https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4277/the-aboriginal-memorial-to-australiaE28099s-forgotten-w/ Accessed Sept. 5, 2023.

[xiv] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-LSea6zAqo Accessed Sept. 5, 2023.

[xv] For a correspondence with Ian McLean, Oct. 24, 2017.

[xvi] Moore, Emily. "The Seward Shame Pole: Countering Alaska's Sesquicentennial." Alaska Historical Society. https://alaskahistoricalsociety.org/about-ahs/special-projects/150treaty/150th-resource-library/new-articles/the-seward-shame-pole-countering-alaskas-sesquicentennial/ Accessed Nov. 13, 2023.

[xvii] Neal McLeod. Poetry reading, Saskatchewan Writer's Guild, Regina, SK. May 4, 2012.

[xviii] Djon Mundine interview, Defining Moments: Australian Exhibition Histories. July 27, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=606437406681804

Garneau, David. "The 83rd Call to Action: Indigenous/Settler Art Collaborations explored." *Rungh magazine*, Vol. 9, # 3, 2022. https://rungh.org/the-83rd-call-to-action/