Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization

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For several years I have been disturbed by memories generated by three artistic actions: a yell by Rebecca Belmore as a prelude to a panel discussion; Guillermo Gómez-Peña's threat to decapitate a woman during a work of performance art; and Terence Houle's 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 non-pedagogic art works 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 a provocateur, an unreliable but necessary agent who plays between and among disciplines and cultures to create startling, non-beautiful, needful disruptions and build hybrid possibilities that resist containment by either the colonial or the traditional. Before getting to these works, the concept of "decolonial aesthetics"[i] 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."[ii] In Canada, this is a permanently unfinished project. Canadians believe they live in a post-colonial 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 lives governed by Canada. And Canadians are not leaving any time soon. As a result, decolonial theory and practice developed in truly *post*-colonial countries needs to be adapted to suit the lived reality of this place. In the absence of self-determination and the restoration of Indigenous 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. Decolonization (particularly among the non-Indigenous) 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 pedagogic enterprise, a cultural decolonization consisting of practices ranging from assimilation to adaptation to productive co-existence.

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 post-colonial state—where the colonizers and their institutions return home—but toward a non-colonial 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 non-colonial persons within Indigenous spaces. More ambitiously, it is also about First Nations, Inuit and Métis people becoming themselves neither by assimilating into 'Western' 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 pedagogic. It seeks to educate people and 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, sensual and intuitive study and 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, the 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, non-instrumental and overwhelming. Beautiful art is non-propositional. 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 in so far 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 an essay, is its availability for multiple and even contrary projections 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. In works of art, the greater the beauty, the lesser the conceptual load the object can sustain. In addition, 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, 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, there is a shift in contemporary art and cultural studies from a taste for objects to a preference for performance; from art works 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 multi-authored 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.[iii]

This sounds like a thoughtful and just rebalancing. However, this phrasing and general way of thinking might actually inspire practices that continue the Modernist and colonial traditions they seek to undermine. Setting the site of authenticity in the past tense, "were," emphasizes "ways of being" that are prior to contact and focuses on cultural recovery projects. While this is essential work for Indigenous people, it is only one aspect of cultural decolonization, and to concentrate on these practices is to re-inscribe colonial romanticism.

As with beauty, the revival of customary Aboriginal practices is, because of its adherence to an alternative to the dominant code, already and always a site of resistance. But this difference is a general and diffused one. In terms of resistance and survivance,[iv] what is true of one object is more or less true of all members of that class. All these things—from the point-of-view of the gaze of the dominant—embody their difference but few posit a critique. Specific resistance, pointed critical engagement with power, is rarely perceptible (to the dominant gaze) in traditional practices. Those objects are held within that 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 *non*-colonial practice. *De*colonial practice is a more direct challenge to colonial habits.

Emphasizing cultural revival is to claim as the site of authentic the re-production a static prior moment 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 metissage, and make this the basis of at 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 aesthetics, wish to nurture are identified as the sensual, emotional and intuitive (aesthesis),[v] as opposed to intellection and instrumentalist preference of 'Western' and other imperialisms. This may also signal a healthy reorientation, but to the Indigenous ear it sounds like familiar Modernist dichotomous logic: the 'Western' is logocentric, so the 'other' must be passionate, sensual and non-rational. While the manifesto authors do call for a polyphony of difference, their preferred differences are those that seem other than European. There is a tendency in decolonial aesthetics to essentialize non-dominant 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 "Euro-centric" Canadians—no matter how reformed—this looks less like a new turn than as just another cycle in a continuous revolution in Western arts, thought and sentiment since the Romantics: disenchanted 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 are 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. So-called 'Western' cultures 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 the dominant discourse is far from unified and

oppositional discourses are not merely repressed supplements of the colonizer. If rationalism is flawed because it marginalizes feeling and sensation, aesthetic action based on feeling and sensation is equally flawed in the other direction if it marginalizes intellection. The lesson western identified persons and institutions should be taking from Aboriginal cultures, is their emphasis on holism, not the exchange of one partial worldview for another.

In respect to the holistic attitude, I will conclude by counter-balancing 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),[vi] 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 Terrence Houle—Rebecca 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, cleared the space from anything other than immediate, visceral attention and presence. It demanded a transition from a space of many too a moment of unified attention and communion.

The sound was outside 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 either rushing forward or away.

A year earlier, March 17th, 2011, at Neutral Ground,[vii] I attended Guillermo Gómez-Peña and James Luna's *La Nostalgia Remix*; an assemblage of their performance pieces generated over 14 years of collaboration. The night was chaotic, crowded, 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, wondering whether he ought to decapitate her with his machete. The theatrical 'fourth wall' had disappeared much earlier in the night when audience members were dressed in stereotypical cowboy and Indian and other costumes and were frequently 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 played. I wanted to fight or flight in a non-thought response. I felt a visceral thrill/horror that linked in my gut this event with the history of human violence and bloody spectatorship that is barely suppressed by a veneer of contemporary 'civilization'. But I also become 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/through my body in a much more

convincing and unforgettable way. It was deeply frightening and made me rethink how important 'the passions' and their control still rule our lives.

Terence Houle's thick belly is a feature of many of his photographs and performances.[viii] It is not a pleasing sight. It is in most settings within 'western' cultures the sort of thing hidden away; because of the flesh's association with sex but, in this case, because it is not attractive according to the conventions of ideal male beauty. Non-disciplined bellies are to be secreted. Houle's exposed paunch—and his indifference to it, his 'naturalness' with his body—contrasts Aboriginal norms with the colonial normative that always has had anxiety about the naked body and sexuality, but especially with Native nakedness and sexuality. Houle's exposure calls such colonial tastes and previous attempts to control Aboriginal flesh into question.

> I really relate to the ideas of Gandhi and clothing shedding one's clothes. Showing the body and not being repressed. Growing up in sweats and going to substances and ceremonies the male body was always exposed and not frowned upon.[ix]

Belmore's shout, Gómez-Peña's threatened decapitation, and Houle's belly are aesthetic in that they trigger affective responses. They stimulate the senses. They are not lovely gestures, though, but nor are they quite sublime or ugly. Their power comes from their not-quite participation in a Kantian aesthetic and their not-quite engagement in didactic 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 re-invigorate and re-balance 'western' aesthetic practices, even to the point of de-westernizing them. While non-colonial practices, such as perpetuating traditional Indigenous cultural activities, is 'Indigenous', decolonial aesthetic activism could not be similarly described. Especially in the Canadian/Aboriginal context, decolonial activity is inscribed in relation to the dominant discourse. It seeks to change the orientation of the discourse but not eliminate it, re-form individual members, not ship them off. It is a dialogue between Indigenity and Canadianism in a field that belongs exclusively to neither. Traditional Aboriginal culture before contact was, of course, not decolonial or 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 metissage that needs interrogation, not the fetishization of just one half of its roots. Aboriginal artists like Rebecca Belmore and Terrence Houle, and a Chicano artist such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, are bi-cultural, creating work in the space of cultural overlap. And what they produce there belongs to not-quite one space or the other, but to the third space of art.

David Garneau
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[i] http://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/. Accessed May 3, 2013.
[ii] Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society*; vol. 1, number 1. http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/18630 Accessed, May 6, 2013. Quotation from the abstract.

[iii] http://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/

[iv] Gerald Vissenor. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance.* Nebraska University Press, 2008.

[v] "***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." http://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/

[vi] On May 4-9, 2012, Rebecca Belmore and Adrian Stimson conducted concurrent workshops titled *Contemporary Indigenous Performance Art: "Where it's Been, Where it's At and 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 Terrence Houle. I moderated the panel. The events were produced by Tomas Jonsson for the Mountain Standard Time Performative Art Festival Society's *Making Way* series.

[vii] *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 1997). Co-presented by Tribe, Neutral Ground, and Sâkêwêwak, the performance I attended was at Neutral Ground (Regina), March 17th, 2011.

[viii] Examples of Houle's near naked, self-portrait photographs and performances include: "Remember in Grade…" (2005). Standing in a backyard garden, an unhappy Houle is dressed in shorts and a paper bag, school project regalia that covers his chest. "Trails End/End Trails" (2007). Dressed only in a breech cloth and roach, a near naked Terence Houle slouches on a metal playground horse in imitation of James E. Fraser's iconic "End of the Trail" (1915). In the performance *Saddle Up* (Vancouver 2010), once again wearing only breech cloth, Houle stands in a fake, old timey movie set—complete with scaled down teepee—and invites passers-by to have themselves with him, a real-like Indian.

[ix] In an email from Houle, summer 2013.