Migration as Territory: Performing Domain with a Non-colonial Aesthetic Attitude

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De-, anti-, and post-colonial academic writing tend to concentrate on the political aspects of Indigenous being. While necessary work, prerequisite for our[1] survival, without the counterbalance of critical creativity, the visions produced in this mode are incomplete, limiting, and aesthetically conservative. The centring of governance and power in Indigenous academic thinking is a totalizing project. It applies simplified abstract principles to complex real beings and things. It endeavours to fix and manage, understand and control. Aesthetic creation, however, marvels at the particular, the exceptional, the beautiful, at the sublime, the non-instrumental, the contradictory, and the imaginary. Art pictures the whole through its many real parts. It inspires and undoes grand schemes. Artists are unreliable political allies because they resist totalizing projects. While often producing political art they nevertheless refuse to be confined by non-aesthetic principles or contained by comprehension. An Indigenous political theory that does not make room in its imaginary for unrestrained aesthetic thinking, performance, affect, and objects—does not recognize art as the embodiment of Indigenous sovereignty, rather than as a tool for political autonomy—is a system destined to repress these activities and the creative possibilities they could inspire.

Art is essential to Indigenous resurgence, and we need to take it seriously as epistemology if we are to engage its inspiring potential. While many scholars of contemporary Indigeneity acknowledge the importance of art, too often what gets celebrated in their PowerPoint's, or pictured in their texts, are examples of so-called traditional culture rather than contemporary art. And when contemporary Native art is evoked, it typically makes a brief and mute appearance: images pressed into service as illustrations of the author's conclusions rather than opened up as complimentary or competing offerings to the discourse by a colleague.[2]

Non-colonial, Indigenous aesthetic attitude engages art not only for its political meanings, but also for how it moves us beyond that preoccupation. Non-colonial, Indigenous aesthetic attitude is the refusal to see one's self as always and only a subject of colonization. It recognizes art as the name we give to those actions, objects, and spaces where we permit ourselves to produce moments of critical creative freedom. Culture is tradition. Art is something else. It is the site of cultural adaptation, of experiment, the pre-figuration of change. My contention is that by expressing their experience and sharing their knowledge through aesthetic means, Native artists—especially performance artists—have come to modes of contemporary Indigenous being that are more inclusive, persuasive, and useful than those produced by political or traditional approaches alone.

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[1] I am Métis.

[2] I am deeply indebted to conversations with Sherry Farrell Racette, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Sylvia Ziemann, Dylan Miner, Cathy Mattes, Tanya Harnett, Ayumi Goto, Jolene Richard, and Cecily Nicholson. It doesn't mean they agree with what I've written, but they were instrumental in asking questions and telling stories that occasioned some of these thoughts.

Among the things I have learned from these artists is that being Indigenous is an activity rather than a state; it is a being in motion rather than a being fixed in a place; it is an exercise of domain rather than a claiming of dominion; and that this way of being may have meaning for non-Natives who desire to home in these in these territories without trying to settle them. At some point, there will be Settlers who no longer feel like visiting strangers, no longer identify with their ancestral homelands and with colonialism, but consider themselves native to this place.[3] If there is such a thing as decolonization of the mind and body in a still colonized territory, then we—Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, as embodied theorists—must figure what non-colonial Indigeneity and non-Indigeneity look and behave like.

De-, anti-, and post-colonial academic writing take as axiomatic that Indigenous people have a special relationship to the land.[4] This association has two broad aspects. In the legal sense, as first-comers, or always-here, Native title precedes European and Canadian land claims.[5] This assertion cannot be contested, only negotiated.[6] In addition, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis have histories, protocols of use, and communion with these territories and each other that pre-date and differ from Settler ways. This "Native American paradigm"[7] is described in terms of how (some) people (traditionally/ideally/should) live on their lands and conceptualize that relationship—with an emphasis, recently, on environmental stewardship. But it also includes metaphysical connections. In a historic and abstract sense these descriptions are true, but in the lived experience of individual Indigenous persons, they are not universally or completely so. The depth of knowledge, practices' and being ascribed to Natives by these texts are fully lived by few, partially by some, and barely by most. The claim is a deeply felt sensibility, the expression of a desire, and heritage to be recovered, but not an essential quality of lived Indigeneity in our colonial period.[8] As such, contemporary Indigeneity and territory should be thought of as creative performance that exceeds traditional and colonial boundaries.

In academic and popular writing, Indigenous land is often figured as the reserve. However, most First Nations people live in cities and few Métis reside in traditional communities.[9] As Evelyn

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[33] At some point, settlers identify less with where they, or their ancestors, are from and feel themselves to be native to Native territory. This feeling is subjective, mostly self serving, and a psychological necessity. If it is to be more than a feeling, then the claim must be recognized by others. If is it to be a non-colonial feeling of being and belonging, a relationship, then those others will include the Indigenous keepers of that territory with whom they negotiate sharing these places. Such being and recognition is relational rather than a one-time pass.

[4] For example: Ibid. 19: "…we must force the Settlers to acknowledge our existence and the integrity of our connection to the land."
[5] Michael Asch. *On Being Here to Stay: Treaties and Aboriginal Rights in Canada*. University of Toronto Press. 2014.
[6] It shouldn't be contested, but of course it is. Thomas Isaac. *Aboriginal Law: Cases. Materials and Commentary,* 2nd edition. Purlich Publishing: Saskatoon, SK. 1999. 1.
[7] Leroy Little Bear. "Forward" to Taiaiake Alfred. *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. University of Toronto Press. 2009. 9.
[8] "Canada: A Half Century in Review." *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*. Vancouver: UBC Press. 2013. 29.

Peters and Chris Andersen note, "for many Indigenous peoples, ancestral homelands are not contained by the small parcels of land found in reserves […] rather, they are the larger territories that include contemporary urban settlements."[10] Landed Indigenous essentialism, the conflation of Indigeneity with certain, government-sanctioned sites, can serve to alienate off-reserve people and does not recognize the urban and adaptation as also essentially Indigenous. For instance, it forgets that many cities (Edmonton, Winnipeg, for example.) were once Native communities. In fact, some First Nations and Métis people did not migrate to urban centres but descend from families who were over-run by colonial dispossession.[11] Rather than frame unreserved Natives as necessarily diasporic, perhaps we should map how our travels rehearse and perform Indigenous territory.

Privileging the reserve as the authentic site of Indigeneity leads both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to see urban Natives (ourselves) as diluted versions of the real. For non-Natives who haven't visited reserves, Inuit, or Métis communities, the 'authentically' Indigenous is forever deferred and imaginary, rendering the actual Native people in front of them partial, if not invisible. This diminishment is felt in our bodies, minds and spirits, and we often perform accordingly.

Ironically, the conceptual delimitation of Indigenous territory to reserves makes these sites into something like property and settled (First) nation states. These are occupation narratives formed within the colonial project and in contradiction to traditional practices of territory as negotiated—negotiated in both senses: of boundaries and their crossing produced through discussion and treaty; and in the personal, embodied sense of negotiating space, finding one's way through, over, or around. This sense of domain is not as a fixed place but spaces and pathways animated by mobile, sovereign bodies that know their territory.

At a recent conference in Toronto, and following a panel that included discussion about land rights, an Indigenous scholar from Australia, Brian Martin, asked me, "Why is everyone talking about land? At home we talk about territory, which includes not just the land, but also air, stories, spirits, ancestors, everything." [12] Beyond semantics, I think he was hearing an emphasis problem, a sense that territory was being conceptually fenced from the interconnectivity of all things and settled as land/property. Indigenous territory is a claim to what you and your ancestors traverse. Use and knowing through perpetual motion and storytelling is the claim and reclaiming of this more profound sense of territory. Indigenous domain is not a political state, in the sense of a claim of property, but a state in the sense of a condition one is in. Indigenous domain is an affective and performative state. Indigenous domain is the land claiming you, your feeling that responsibility, and the need for the collective wisdom that precedes and exceeds you.

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[10] Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen. "Introduction." *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*. Vancouver: UBC Press. 2013. 8.

[11] This is so for my family. The "Garneau" district in Edmonton and the "Garneau" section of St. Paul both acknowledge my great, great grand-father Laurent and his family: the designations were made by Settlers who eventually took over both properties.

[12] Personal recollection of a conversation with Brian Martin, Deputy Director of the Institute of Koorie Education, Geelong Waurn Ponds Campus, Victoria, Australia. At the Universities Art Association of Canada,Toronto, OCAD University, 2014.

Landed Indigenous essentialism creates a hierarchy of Indigeneity in which bodies are marked as more or less Native depending on their proximity to reserves, which may be the margins of this land known as Canada but centres of, say, Tahltanness. Traditional Indigenous identities are mobile, not nomadic but not fixed in place either. Peters and Andersen recognize the essential quality of bodies in motion over territory to Indigenous being. They describe, for example, contemporary urbanites who make "frequent returns or [perform] circular migrations" to homelands. However, they caution that "privileging connections to ancestral homelands as a marker of Indigenous identities reinforces dominant visions of Indigenous peoples as authentic only if they live in remote areas and engage in the 'traditional' lifestyles."[13] Indigenous territories are spaces tra*versed* by travellers and places animated by visiting.[14] Trappers, hunters, and fishers; truckers and traders; medicine gatherers and bottle collectors; powwow dancers; storytellers; hitch-hiking cousins; drop-in elders; musicians; performance artists, and even academics are not nomads but migrators who follow and produce a circuit of embodied relations and meanings. Their paths thread places into territory, and persons into peoples.

The centring of Native territory as rural, reserved, and settled, tends to confine thinking about Indigenous persons as political beings, subjects of legislation, protocols, agency or not, and so on. This conceptual habit positions First Nations, Inuit, and Métis always in relation to the state, which in turn shapes our academic work as reactive de-, anti-, and post-colonial labour.

Non-colonial practices, while inseparable from land and the political, are not confined by concepts as fashioned within, or in reaction to, colonial thinking. Non-colonial practices are thinking, feeling, and making that focus on the body, on people in communion with each other and territory, on the objects of culture and art—especially those worn and carried, mobile, in display and in dialogue with others—rather than on settled or landed Indigeniety and political subjectivities. It is a matter of emphasis and meaning, on knowing ourselves, for instance, as aesthetically sovereign rather than only aspiring to be politically so.

The shift is from nouns to verbs. Leroy Little Bear explains that while European languages "center on nouns and are concerned with naming things, ascribing traits, and making judgements," Indigenous languages "are structured on verbs; they communicate through descriptions of movement and activity."[15] Non-colonial aesthetic attitude is a shift from claiming land to the maintaining of territory, from persons in places to bodies in motion, and from political agents to unreliable creators—affective actors who do not always conform to political agendas or reason, and do not replicate culture but express the Indigenous in unexpected ways.

Non-colonial refers to pre-colonial knowledge and the right ways of doing things in our various territories that persist into the present. It also includes warming up traditional' Indigenous practices that froze in reaction to domination, or re-conditioning practices that were, in their

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[13] ibid. 8.

[14] I am indebted to conversations with Dylan Miner and his performances of visiting as an Indigenous way of knowing.

[1515] Cited in Taiaiake Alfred. Wasáse**:** Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom. University of Toronto Press. 2009. 32

revival, re-constructed within colonial (and Christian) terms. However, a non-colonial *aesthetic attitude* also includes efforts of active ignorance: thinking and behaving *as if* not colonized; acting outside of domination; imaginative being and creating aside from empire; engaging in, for example, relationships with migrants apart from those defined by the state; being creatively ignorant of conventional boundaries and restrictions, including the designation of what is animate and what is not; acting the contrary[16]—and waiting to see if these transgressions attract repression or if your territorial claims to aesthetic space go uncontested.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle climbs buildings without touching the stairs[17] and creates tipis from flashlights, smouldering sage and a ring of singers. Many of her activities seem odd, inventive, and pleasurable, but they are also a serious performance the Nêhiyawak (Cree) worldview. She refreshes the traditional to make it useful for the present.

For her performance, "Cistemaw Iyiniw Ohci" (2001), she ran the length of the Makwa Sahgaiehcan reserve in Northern Saskatchewan following the path of Cistemaw Iyiniw, a traditional messenger of two generations earlier. He ran from community to community with tobacco and invitations to ceremony even though he could have taken a horse or car.[18] Her twenty-five km run was, from a practical point of view, like Cistemaw's, archaic, absurd, and powerful. I doubt hers was a political gesture, a call, say, to revive the moccasin telegraph, but perhaps it was a teaching disguised as an artwork. Following traditional Nêhiyawak pedagogy, her action is a non-dialogic lesson—a memorable doing and showing rather than an invitation to debate or to be followed by an explanation. She did not give a speech, did not coax people back to their traditional ways. She ran. Community members could do with the gift what they would. While unfamiliar with running as art, they knew the story Cheryl told with her body. Many were awakened to protocol. Once the marathon began, people understood their obligations. They provided water, food, and places to rest, as is customary. They also told stories of past runners and how they linked communities. Perhaps L'Hirondelle wanted them to feel what was lost in the adoption of modern, disembodied forms of communication.

For "Vigil" (2002), Rebecca Belmore scrubbed part of a downtown East side (Vancouver) sidewalk, making that space sacred or acknowledging that everyplace is already sacred and just needs to be brought to notice, attention, attended to. She lit votive candles, nailed her dress to a telephone pole and struggled to free her body. She shouted out the names of Native women who went missing from that area; names written on her body. Between shouts, she stripped roses of their leaves and petals with her teeth. Rather than appealing to the state, the police, even Aboriginal authorities to help find these women and those yet to be lost, she took it to the street, calling for them herself. She occupied this space with her body—as had the missing women who preceded her—as if to say, this territory, too, is Indigenous territory.

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[16] Much art, particularly performance art is *as if*. Peter Morin, Adrian Stimson, and I, in our individual performances with imperialist statues, perform as if these metal and stone objects have a form of life, and that they are perturbed by our communion with them.

[17] *ka amaciwet piwapisko waciya: climbing the iron mountains* (2002 8).

[18] https://hemi.nyu.edu/journal/2_1/hopkins.html Accessed June 20**,** 2015. Written by Candice Hopkins.

Belmore's performance was political both in that every artwork made by minoritized peoples can be read this way, and in the sense that it may shift political consciousness. But the success of a work of art should never be determined by its effectiveness in a realm outside of the aesthetic and the affective moment of reception. Yes, it is a political work; but it is not only this. Both L'Hirondelle's and Belmore's performances are poignantly absurd. They breach the routine and upend pragmatic action. They inhabit our imagination and do their affective work on our minds, hearts and bodies even when we are unaware of their operations. They move and persuade us through feeling rather than reason. And we are helpless before their power. Art is not politics by other means but a means of feeling our way beyond the political. Belmore's actions are not political in that they are not telling anyone what to do. They have no plan or ideology but rage and care, frustration and love—a deep sense of humanity, violated.

An unfamiliar and moving act: Tahltan artist Peter Morin and his new friends from Regina spend the day washing books.[19] The several dozen volumes contain stories about Indigenous people by non-Indigenous authors—fictional and non-fictional accounts that misrepresent and misshape real people. Eight children, women, and men cleanse each page with wet medicine. The tone is serious, mournful, joyful, loving, meditative, communal, and filled with song and drumming.

Rather than destroy the books, or engage their contents by reading and writing corrections, Morin and his friends take aesthetic action, moving themselves and observers through physical care to awareness and symbolic restoration. They embody and display a non-colonial[20] imaginary, one that is respectful of others and their objects, of work and being, but does not engage the colonial as expected—on and with their terms. The action honours the authors' work as human labour; a search for meaning, however limited and inadvertently harmful; and it honours the books as things, as once-were-trees. Each volume is carried to a large blanket in the gallery, left to dry and their transfigured meanings to be contemplated by visitors. Two months later, the texts are collected, removed and buried in sites scattered across the land.

While Peter Morin is Tahltan, and "Decolonize My Heart" is informed by his nation's worldview and some of its practices, the performance is a work of art; it is not primarily a work of (his) culture. It includes and exceeds both customary Tahltan cultural practices and dominant art world practices. Significantly, "*Decolonize My Heart*" was not performed on Tahltan land but in Southern Saskatchewan, in Treaty Four territory. We don't yet have a name for this sort of work. Because it is produced by an Aboriginal person and is in-formed but not limited by his customary culture and is presented in places other than his home territory, we can begin to understand it by recognizing it as Indigenous art.

'*Indigenous*' is not a synonym for '*Aboriginal*'. The word refers to a separate political category of persons who find they have more in common with Native peoples in other territories than they

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[19] *"Decolonize My Heart*." The performance was part of the exhibition *Moving Forward, Never Forgetting* at the Mackenzie Art Gallery, curated by Michelle LaVallee and David Garneau (Feb. x to March x, 2015), Regina, Saskatchewan.

[20] As opposed to de-, anti- or post-colonial engagement, non-colonial refers to pre-colonial knowledge, etc., that persists into the present, but also any other attempts of active ignorance of the colonial, to behave and create other-wise.

do with their colonizing neighbours. As a result, they network with each other across time zones, they produce relationships, thought, and work within a discourse that both emerges from and exceeds the imaginaries of both their individual nations and the Settler states that surround them. The word *'art'* is inadequate but convenient. I use the word here to refer to creative production that in its making or display belongs to an inter-national contemporary aesthetic discourse. These objects and actions, their use and meanings, include and exceed their cultures. They are designed to express and shape thought, feeling, sensation, and intuition in persons both inside and outside their home culture's worldview. In this sense, both *'Indigenous'* and *'art'*, and especially *'Indigenous art'*, are not land-based or primarily political; they are mobile, contingent, discursive, even virtual.[21]

I would like to conclude by considering what these Indigenous performance artists and this larger, more active sense of territory could mean for non-Indigenous co-habitants and future possibilities for non-colonial performance. On January 16, 2013, seven young men walked nearly 1,600 km from Whapmagoostui, their northern Quebec reserve, to Ottawa in support of Idle No More and Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike. They reached their destination on March 25. Later that year, in homage to the Nishiyuu walkers, Ayumi Goto performed "*in sonorous shadows of nishiyuu*'." For 105 days she ran 1568.5 km through places in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. The work might have hardly looked like art at all, just looked like a runner running, if it were not for the fact that she had a sound system strapped to her body which broadcast Indigenous singers singing, including Cheryl L'Hirondelle.

The mythology of settlement is of agents coming to tame a wild place: 'settling the West.' Those who identify with this story—Canadians who take an unproblemaitized pride in their ancestors' participation in 'nation-building'—can rightly be called Settlers. But what of recent migrants, folks who adopt the burden of Canadian citizenship; are they Settlers in the same sense? If they accept and inhabit the Canadian myth and assume the benefits of Indigenous dispossession, then, yes, they are Settlers. Are there alternatives? At least from the Indigenous perspective, the point of the Treaties was to share territory. The Indigenous signers could not have anticipated that the colonists had such a radically different sense of territory as property. To be a Settler is to see and use land as commodity. To embody territory as do Indigenous people, to co-habit space in our ways with us, is not to settle the land, to impose a will upon it that does not arise from territory or the customs of its Indigenous stewards, it is to settle oneself, accommodating one's self to territory not your own.

In the moments of her performance, in the space of art, Goto is unsettled, migrating Indigenous territory, performing domain with a non-colonial aesthetic attitude. Does she find something of

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[21] This way of thinking encourages Indigenous explorations of non-land-based exploration and construction of virtual territories. Especially check out the art and thought of Jason Lewis & Skawennati Tricia Fragnito**:** http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/canada/aboriginal-territories-cyberspace Accessed June 20, 2015.

and for herself there; does she discover herself disconnected; does she lose herself in the passage? We can only speculate. As art, it is a lesson whose definitive meaning is unknown to the viewer and performer alike. However, the attempt to home without settling, find a route for oneself without exploiting the territory, her running with Indigenous accompaniment, all suggest an empathetic relationship.

A difference in Goto's and L'Hirondelle's running concerns community. Goto takes on the nishiyuu run as a necessary, personal burden, and she wears the songs of Native others, not to become them but to enact alliance. The act is empathetic, literally putting herself in the place of others. Of course, the danger is in displacing those 'others' with your more aesthetic, articulate, and privileged self. To avoid this, Goto's gentle passage was nearly invisible; she ran as a "sonorous shadow" that does not displace those she honors or disturb the peace. The work's fuller meanings come when illuminated in artist talks or texts, where it becomes contextualized, legible, and poignant in those (mostly non-Indigenous) safer spaces. This is primarily an interior work, a novel and therapeutic necessity. Goto's run is a solo act; an obsessive performance she felt compelled to do—and its meanings are deeply personal. We are welcomed to consider this interior complexity but not to pretend to know it from the inside. A side effect of this interiority is that her relation to the communities she ran through was incidental, if not alienated, and her relation to Indigenous communities was symbolic and virtual.[22]

L'Hirondelle's run is also novel and therapeutic, but the address was extra-personal. She used her moving body to engage First Nations community directly, in their territory and in their way. The poignancy of her work is its simplicity, the elegance of her research deployed, and in the reception by her participating audience. I marvel at the confidence to go into a place not her own and to make herself at home by offering a gift to the community of some thing that was theirs all along. She embodied an aspect of their history and revived a long-buried response. She gave them what they didn't know they needed.

Both performances are non-colonial aesthetic actions. And, eventually, each will be reproduced, re-presented under the protection of the predominantly non-Indigenous art and academic worlds, and do their important symbolic work there and beyond. Not all of us need to do socially engaged work. (Academic and virtual territories can also include Indigenous domains!) But we do need to acknowledge that there is an important difference between having as a primary goal the circulation of representations of your work in academic circles and seeing such displays as necessary by-products of your aesthetic labour. In L'Hirondelle's performance the people living on the Makwa Sahgaiehcan reserve were the audience, participants, and critics of the work—their critical aesthetic engagement was the goal and meaning of the performance.

Following my earlier argument concerning the essentializing of the reserve as the prime locus of the authentically Indigenous, I am not advocating that artists descend on these communities with their art. But perhaps the future of non-colonial aesthetic work will shift from looking to the non-Indigenous academy and colonial galleries as the primary sites of Indigenous discourse and legitimation, and instead turn to Indigenous audiences, partners, and domains for non-colonial

[22] It is important to note that most of Goto's recent performances are collaborative, often with Indigenous participation.

critical aesthetic engagement. Instead of taking everything upon our individual selves we can share the burden, but also our gifts and pleasures, with our Indigenous communities wherever we find them.