Non-colonial Indigenous Art Gallery and Museum Displays

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Art galleries and museums were never public institutions in the sense of "standing outside of the state and functioning as a means of criticizing it,"[i] explains Tony Bennett. They were and are state organs designed to produce meanings that serve the needs of the nation and those citizens who most benefit from it. They perpetuate national ideology especially in the middle and professional classes who engage cultural institutions to learn what is expected of them. These publics go to absorb the cultural competencies necessary to reinforce and secure their social status and distinguish themselves from the working class. Considering this critique, what are First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people to make of the current push to Indigenize art galleries, museums, the academy, and country? Is Indigenization stealth assimilation or a crucial step toward a non-colonial society?

If we consider Bennett's critique in terms of 'colonization', and transpose 'working class' with 'Indigenous people,' we get some insight into why, while these storehouses hold tons of Indigenous objects, they notoriously attract few Native audiences. Simply put, they are not for us. To paraphrase and repurpose Bennett, art galleries and museums are designed for Settler audiences to absorb the cultural competencies necessary to reinforce and secure their colonial status and distinguish them from First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. Can Native curators transform these institutions or are we merely redecorating them? Can Indigenous people participate in state-sponsored art galleries and museums without becoming agents of assimilation?

Canada is in the midst of a makeover regarding its relationship to Native peoples. In the official government apology to survivors of Indian Residential Schools; in the Truth and Reconciliation gatherings and report[ii]; in non-Native participation in Idle No More; in recent books by non-Indigenous public intellectuals such as John Raulston Saul, David Suzuki, and many others; in new and increased funding for Indigenous initiatives in health, the arts, culture, social science and humanities granting agencies; in increased Indigenous performances and exhibitions; in Indigenizing university and school policies and curricula; in the City of Vancouver's formal recognition that it occupies unceded Coast Salish territory; and in other recognitions by the courts, many Canadians and their institutions profess a desire for better relations with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people.

The evolution from genocidal dispossession to conciliation[iii] is part of an international social justice movement codified in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007). This proposed shift recognizes, and would attempt to ameliorate, past and current injustices. But, scholars, environmental, and other activists go much further. They find in traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being an antidote to the colonial, capitalist, patriarchal, and racist traditions that have engendered intolerable social injustice and environmental calamity. This turn is called anti- and de-colonization, reconciliation, but especially, among Canadian academics, Indigenization. If enacted, rather than simply entertained, Indigenization upends the conceptual basis of the Canadian state and requires true conciliation between the Settler nation and Indigenous Nations in a shared, *non*-colonial territory.

I am Métis, an academic, artist, and curator, and sceptical. First, whatever happens because of de-colonization/Indigenization the results will not be a classic postcolonial state. Postcolonial states are those in which, after widespread and usually violent resistance by an oppressed native population, the minority invaders go home. With less than 4% of the population, an Indigenous revolution and Settler expulsion is unlikely. In this sense, Canada is not a post-colonial country and is not likely to physically de-colonize. Whatever decolonization Canadian-style is, it includes Canada. Therefore, we must achieve autonomies within these shared territories or witness the slow, clever destruction of our Nations and assimilation of our people.

Second, whatever Canadian-style decolonization or Indigenization turns out to be, these systems will best serve those who imagine, produce, and manage it. If, as it seems, Indigenization springs from the intellectual and political classes, these changes may improve the lives of the Indigenous elite but not necessarily the Native majorities who do not participate in our class (and classes) and who only marginally engage the institutions that support us.

I propose that Indigenous academics and curators, like art galleries and museums, are not necessarily and only propaganda machines compromised by their/our engagement with the state. We are all compromised, of course, in the sense that whether we promote, resist, or simply benefit from it, colonization engages us all. However, not all engagements are equal or complete, and not all compromises are pernicious.

Contemporary capitalist states require novelty for propulsion. Select institutions, then, tolerate, encourage, and even employ dissent because it is the source of novel production that can be exploited or dismissed as required. Contemporary capitalist states also require cultural institutions for the production of consciousness. The state cannot reliably know itself from within its own systems. It requires dissenting thought to improve its self-consciousness and learn its limits and possibilities. Criticism is difference made conscious. Exposure to profound difference always reveals internal inconsistencies, intolerable indecencies, corruption, and other design flaws that could result in catastrophes that threaten the state. This engenders either repression—the destruction of dissent and dissenters, in our case, Indigenous assimilation or genocide—or in corrections that can be profound. Employed dissent is not necessarily assimilation. To retain its instrumental value and novel possibilities, cultural institutions will protect difference…. so long as its agents are deemed valuable.

Art galleries, museums, and universities engage the Indigenous precisely because First Nations, Inuit, and Métis—to once again retool Bennett—"stand[ ] outside of the state and function[ ] as a means of criticizing it." Indigenous people embody the tragic consequences of colonization; they/we are living critiques of the system. Engaging Indigenous people and ways, some argue, is a means out of not only colonialism but also capitalism and other faulty ways of being that threaten everyone's happiness, even existence. Art galleries, museums, and universities do not simply reflect state ideology but produce it, and one of these (re)productions could be the Indigenous (re)turn.

It can be argued that in a colonial state there are no positions beyond colonization and any participation is unacceptable. Such an imaginary sees colonization as a totalizing system and its

total destruction and replacement by another total system as the only antidote. Things appear to me much messier, more unconscious than conscious. The very ability to picture an alternative to a seeming total system from within that system is evidence of a position 'outside'. The alternative is that the system produces its own dissent. If true, this is evidence that the system is not total but has multiple consciousnesses, and not all are known to each other. That's an interesting model. And one of those different minds is Indigenous. Put another way, the Indigenous is Indigenous only so long as it/we are autonomous, and Indigenous sovereignty is in the best interest of Native and non-Native alike.

There is a real danger that Indigenization will serve Settlers and Indigenous elites better than the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people who produce and embody these productive differences, and who suffer dispossession and oppression most. That Indigenous art and ideas might circulate in the Settler rhetorical/symbolic economy, and not reach the test of application among Indigenous communities is, I think, on the minds of most Indigenous academics. Indigenous scholars and academic artists—when we identify with the Indigenous and are in relation to our communities—are held to kitchen-table account. We are duty bound to make our institutions and ideas more accessible and relevant to our communities. We struggle to insure that Indigenization isn't only a Settler, academic, and middle-class thing. That it doesn't become the means by which Settlers reconcile themselves with(in) colonization and produce the visual and narrative means necessary to live comfortably in these territories and with their awakened consciences.

For example, while there are grassroots collaborations among Natives and non-Natives concerning the environment and non-democratic federal governance (Idle No More), this is not necessarily Indigenization. It is Settler solidarity with Indigenous people so long as their agendas match. Non-Indigenous support quickly fades when solutions that directly and positively transform the lives of Indigenous people and Nations are raised. Serious decolonization/Indigenization cannot be fully engaged by those (Indigenous and not) who are bent on maintaining their colonial status and privileges, and their alienation from community.

In pessimistic moments, I accept and extend Bennett's description to see Indigenization as primarily a non-Native attempt for colonial managers and elites to maintain control of national and local narratives in order to reproduce Settler power. Colonial displays participate in the larger project of apprehending and assimilating Indigenous knowledge, things, persons, and resources. Indigenization, under these conditions and within art galleries and museums, is the production of new and adaptable narratives and displays that take the Indigenous as subject matter but not as an in-formative force that could reform the institution in purpose, methodologies, body, and the publics they engage. It follows, then, that if First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people work within this system, while we will earn individual rewards, we cannot effectively advance general Indigenous sovereignty and well-being because to do so violates the basis of the colonial order[iv]. If this critique were correct, the only ethical way for Indigenous people to participate in museums would be in their own sovereign Indigenous display territories.

Sovereign Indigenous display territories are keeping houses for Indigenous objects and meanings that are owned and managed by Indigenous people. Ideally, they exist on sovereign Native land and are independent from Settler discourses.[v] In their most radical form, they address and serve only the members of their own Nation. However, because the function of art galleries and

museums is not just to reinforce national hegemony among their own people, but display and explain themselves to non-citizens, Sovereign Indigenous display territories—like powwows—would welcome respectful visitors. However, their primary functions would be cultural renewal and renovation. They would be sites of Indigenous aesthetic sovereignty where people would practice and display customary forms but also develop new works and curatorial methodologies.

We are not there. We live in the meantime. Being Métis, I support the development of sovereign Indigenous display territories. As an artist and curator, however, I do not want to turn my back on Indigenous participation in the wider world. Interruption of the dominant narrative and engagement with international art and culture is also a necessity if we are to be contemporary and adaptive peoples.

I am both trepidatious and excited by the possibility of Indigenized art galleries and museums. Unlike Bennett, I don't see these as strict sites of propaganda. Not all their contents can be corralled by national ideology; and the subjective use of these works by individual viewers cannot wholly contained. Public art galleries and museums are interstitial spaces where academic thinking meets the public in an aesthetic medium. They are where ideas about nation and First Nations are not just disseminated but debated, and where Indigenous scholarship and critical creation can disrupt and improve mainstream narratives and methodologies. There is room for non-colonial[vi] aesthetic activity that fosters critical thinking, behaviour, and transformation; that welcomes dissident voices and bodies, and that critiques the state that supports them, and communicates the mixed meanings of non-colonial futures.

I would like to take Indigenization seriously as the renewal of Indigenous aesthetic sovereignty and the transformation of colonists into neighbours. But if we are to participate in mainstream institutions the terms of engagement need to be non-colonial. We need a few rules. We can perhaps best picture a positive model of an Indigenized art gallery or museum by starting with an image of a sovereign Indigenous display territory and then work down through various compromises to the point of intolerable oppression.

The hallmark of colonial curation is the collection, display, and narration of Indigenous art and culture by non-Native people in non-Indigenous spaces. Axiomatic to non-colonial curation, then, is: 1) The curation of Indigenous art or culture will always engage First Nations, Inuit, or Métis curators, or appropriate Indigenous community knowledge keepers. 2) During their display, the exhibition space will be recognized either as a sovereign Indigenous display territory or as a neutral (treaty-like) ground, but never as colonial territory.

When a person identifies not just as a curator but as an Indigenous curator, they signal that they are not just individuals but are also formed by and have allegiances with their First Nation, Inuit, or Métis community, as well as the larger interests of Indigeneity. This means that we have responsibilities that will conflict with the institution (as it slowly exorcizes its colonial habits). The pressure Indigenous curators face cannot be underestimated. The Indigenous curator's 'community' is not just their Nation, but also the inter-National network of professional Indigenous scholars and fellow curators—for example the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective[vii]. Non-colonial cultural institutions will support their Indigenous colleagues by striking Indigenous advisory boards and 'duty to consult' policies.

If we are to exceed Bennett's critique, we need to ensure that Indigenization does not simply mean that the Indigenous is a novel subject/object, some thing accommodated among others in the art gallery or museum. Indigenization must be fundamental institutional change. A simple test of the success of Indigenization is how many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people participate in these places. If art galleries are to exceed their colonial function as places that collect Indigenous cultural artefacts, art, stories, etc., as a means of memorializing the displaced, and celebrating Settler supremacy (no mater how melancholic that triumph is presented), they must become places that are for living Indigenous people as demonstrated by their use.

David Garneau

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[i] Tony Bennett. "Difference and the Logic of Culture." *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*. Edited by Ian Karp, et al. Duke University Press: Durham. 2006. 50.

[ii] Included in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report is a special call:
"67. We call upon the federal government to provide funding to the Canadian Museums Association to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of museum policies and best practices to determine the level of compliance with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and to make recommendations."

[iii] I differentiate conciliation from reconciliation. Please see: David Garneau. "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation." *West Coast Line*. #74. Jonathan Dewar and Ayumi Goto, editors. Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC. 2012. 28-3.

[iv] In short, the colonial project is the domination and dispossession of Indigenous people so that our territories and resources can be exploited.

[v] The Sncəwips Heritage Museum is a sovereign Indigenous display territory. It is a modest cultural museum situated on Westbank First Nation land in a Native-owed building. Most staff is Native and while the gallery follows some mainstream exhibition habits, there are Indigenous elements, such as the presence of the Nsyilxcən language, the importance of story and of Indigenous facilitators.

[vi] "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 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…. being creatively ignorant of conventional boundaries and restrictions, including the designation of what is animate and what is not; acting the contrary —and waiting to see if these transgressions attract repression or if your territorial claims to aesthetic space go uncontested." This is from one of my unpublished and, as of yet, untitled papers.

[vii] These peer collectives offer opportunities for networking and professionalization, but also insure that we are agents of adaptation, not assimilation. We are just beginning to develop a cohort of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis curators who are theorizing and producing Indigenous display methodologies that differ from colonial ones.