

Settler Decolonialism and Indigenous Non-colonialism in the Visual Arts

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Most Canadians and Americans believe they live in post-colonial countries, independent since 1867 and 1776, respectively. However, First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and American Indians living in these same territories remain under imperial control. Their lands are occupied, not by Britain, but by Canada and the United States. There is a growing drive to decolonize art exhibitions, museums, universities, and most everything else. If these efforts are predicated on ideas and practices from states where imperialists have actually left, they must be re-tooled to be meaningful in places where settlers have no such plans. This work must also be informed by Native worldviews, history, local experience, contemporary needs, desires, and agency. Settler decolonization must center the Indigenous, must become non-colonial if it is to be useful for Native people.

Mid-twentieth century decolonization was revolutionary. Colonized majorities revolted against imperial minorities and regained control of their territories. Because Native populations in Northern Turtle Island are small, settler state overthrow is unlikely. Besides, since contact, through treaties and into the present, First Nations have agreed to share the land. The agreement being, as symbolized by the Two-Row Wampum treaties, both parties will keep to their own spaces, not interfere with each other’s governance, and respect the environment. These covenants have been violently disrespected. Change is urgent. Modernist decolonization was premised on Enlightenment models of time, of history as a linear unfolding of evolutionary progress. In the Native worldview, time is cyclical. There are daily, yearly, and life cycles. Linear time runs from yesterday to tomorrow. In Native experience, the past, present, and future flow through each other. As a result, Indigenous non-colonial action is less occupied by imagining utopias than on restoring pre-contact life ways and adapting them to present realities. Resuscitating non-colonial epistemologies and ontologies are essential, not only to Native continuance, but to the endurance of us all. These ways of knowing and being are more sustainable than the modes that led to our present era of environmental and ethical calamity.

For some Great Plains Elders, to decolonize is to return to pre-contact conditions. They prophesize a great vastation in which settlers and assimilated Natives are removed by extra-natural forces. Survivors restore harmony with their environment and themselves. More pragmatic folks concede that occupation is permanent and struggle to establish or maintain separatist sovereign nations within settler states. The remainder negotiate degrees of assimilation, resistance, and treaty. We participate in the dominant culture but press to exorcise colonialism’s more pernicious institutions: racism, imperialism, patriarchy, predatory capitalism, and environmental degradation. In each case, Indigenous non-colonial futurisms feature a return to collective sovereignty and the restoration of natural law.

Any form of decolonization that is not premised on the return of Indigenous lands, restitution, political and cultural sovereignty, and the restoration of natural law, continues the colonial

project. While non-Native allies and assimilated Natives can participate in non-colonial action, deep modes are practically inconceivable because they seem to require the surrender of unearned privilege, and a degree of self-erasure and re-formation. Most choose instead to perform settler decolonialism. When deployed by non-Native, non-Black, and non-Brown people, *decolonize* signifies a recognition that one's privilege is based on the exploitation and suffering of racialized humans and other than human beings. The word announces a desire for release through atonement, reconciliation, and reform. Settler decolonialism centers the settler subject. It endeavours to tease colonial attitudes from settler minds while leaving the body intact on First Nations territories. It is beyond the settler colonial imaginary to picture a future in these places without themselves present and centered. Settler decolonialism's preference is for personal and institutional reform, and its mode is primarily rhetorical and visual. Settler decolonial institutions may include Indigenous bodies and teachings that align with, or that challenge but not fundamentally disturb, settler interests. Settler decolonialism focuses on education, awareness, protest, or any other mode of display that centers white bodies (all the brighter when contrasted with of-colour foils) and assures white endurance.

What does *decolonize* mean for Indigenous contemporary art and curation? Art, in the sense of special, human-made things removed from daily life and touch and placed in separate rooms for ocular contemplation, is a non-Native concept. Art is colonial when it apprehends traditional cultural objects never intended for that discourse and its institutions. Works of culture have their meanings in the societies, territories, and in proximity to the bodies that produce and use them. Abducted by a colonial art context, their meanings are displaced by the meanings of curators and consumers. Most contemporary Native creative production does not fit into this traditional, separatist category. Since contact, First Peoples have produced trade goods, things that reflect their culture but correspond with the needs of their new consumers. Aboriginal art is Native produced things primarily intended for non-Native consumption and managed by non-Native people in non-Native spaces.

A third, emerging category of Native aesthetic production is Indigenous contemporary art. There are three varieties: they either employ 'western' aesthetic forms and styles to, for example, critique anti-Indigenous racism or tell counter colonial stories; they revive traditional forms to carry contemporary content from an Indigenous point-of-view; or they engage both traditional and dominant cultures to inform syncretic art forms. While most of this work is exhibited in non-Native spaces by non-Native curators, this is changing. The most significant feature of Indigenous contemporary art is that these folks understand themselves as not only belonging to a particular tribe and location, or to a larger Aboriginal polity within a colonial nations state, but as allied with other Indigenous peoples around the world. This consciousness has led to the formation of an Indigenous art world that circulates in, through and apart from the dominant art worlds. It is an international network of artists, curators, and critical art writers primarily from former British, English-speaking, colonies (Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand), but growing to include Sami, and First Peoples throughout Asia, Africa, South and Central America. The Indigenous contemporary art world includes Indigenous only exhibitions and issues in art magazines, artistic and curatorial collectives, conferences and other gatherings, informal and online exchanges. While traditional cultural production endeavors to separatism, and Aboriginal art is an epiphenomena of colonialism, Indigenous art is the creation of Sovereign Indigenous display territories.