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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exceeding the Limits of Reconciliation: 'Decolonial Aesthetic Activism' in the Artwork of Canadian Artist Meryl McMaster

Allyson Green

Carleton University

Corresponding author: Allyson Green: 1206 Duntton Tower 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6 Canada

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Abstract

In this paper I consider whether, and if so how, artistic creative uncertainty can facilitate processes of imagining new relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's model of reconciliation seems to promise improved Indigenous/settler relationships, yet many Indigenous scholars and allies question the efficacy of it as an approach to expedite relationship-building. For that reason, Indigenous critics like David Garneau suggest that alternate methods be deployed such as 'decolonial aesthetic activism' in order to build relationships that exceed the limits of reconciliation. Within this model, ambiguous, discordant, and indigestible artworks operate as one method by which we can become aware of how we are implicated in the structures of settler colonialism. I apply Garneau's theory by conducting a close reading of the performative self-portraits by Meryl McMaster. My analysis reveals that art can put forward critiques of settler colonialism that unsettle assumptions, thereby creating new spaces for us to imagine worlds otherwise. Accordingly, I argue that McMaster's art does have the potential to exceed the limits of reconciliation and conclude that critical engagement with her photographs is an important *first* step in the *process* that is decolonization, a process that exceeds the limits of reconciliation.

Keywords

decolonization, reconciliation, Indigenous peoples, settler colonialism, art, photography

Introduction

*"The space of art is a space of possibility."*¹

Between 2 May and 28 August 2016, the Carleton University Art Gallery (CUAG) in Ottawa Ontario, Canada, exhibited a selection of Meryl McMaster's performative self-portraits including a series of works entitled 'In-Between Worlds'. With this body of work, McMaster set out to explore 'the mixing and transforming of bi-cultural identities—Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian'.² In McMaster's words, the series 'addresses the idea of liminality, of being betwixt and between cultural identities and histories'.³ McMaster's process is layered, time consuming and includes meticulously crafted multimedia sculptural props. The artist describes her practice in the following way:

My...works take advantage of both the spontaneity of photography and the systematic craft of other media, including sculpture. This synergy allows me to create surreal or augmented imagery that – I hope – allows the viewer to become lost within their own thoughts; transported out of ordinary life.⁴

I find McMaster's dream-like and mesmerizing images to be both compelling and unsettling. Upon first entering the vernissage, my eyes fell upon 'Victoria' (Figure 1).



Figure 1 'Victoria' (2013), Digital Chromogenic Print, 36" x 50"

In the surreal image, a woman appears dressed in a blend of Indigenous and European clothing, photographed against a winter landscape. The blood-spattered snow and instruments in her hands left me unsettled. I read the juxtaposition of European and Indigenous identities, bridged by the blood surrounding the woman, as a comment on the way that colonial and

Indigenous peoples each have attributed ‘savagery’ to their Other. In yet another image, ‘Terra Cognitum’ (Figure 2), the same woman is photographed lying on a pile of fallen autumn leaves with beaded land elevation contour lines in vibrant colours placed on her body.



Figure 2 ‘Terra Cognitum’ (2013), Digital Chromogenic Print, 36” x 50”

This stark image evokes the specter of the ways in which Indigenous peoples were, and continue to be, dispossessed of their land by settler colonialism.⁵ Finally, in ‘Sentience’ (Figure 3), disembodied arms are wrapped around a tree trunk, adorned with feathers and twig claws.



Figure 3 ‘Sentience’ (2010), Digital Chromogenic Print, 24” x 24”

The ambiguity of the human versus animal sentience in this image is unsettling when viewed through the lens of the settler colonial project that denies full humanness to Indigenous peoples whose cultures and traditions differ from Western practices. In my view, McMaster’s photographs embody a discordant uncertainty that provokes the imagination and allows viewers to find new meanings each time they engage with the images. Over time, I have found new and deeper meanings in McMaster’s work which leads me to consider whether, and if so how, the creative uncertainty I experience when engaging with her artwork can facilitate

processes of imagining new relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers that exceed the limits of reconciliation.⁶

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) model of reconciliation, which puts forward the need to *establish* and then *maintain* mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers, seems to promise improved Indigenous/settler relationships, yet many Indigenous scholars and allies question the efficacy of it as a methodology to expedite relationship-building. For that reason, Indigenous critics like David Garneau suggest that alternate theories and processes be deployed in order to build relationships that actually exceed the limits of reconciliation. To this end, Garneau proposes that a method he calls 'cultural decolonization' be enacted through artwork that 'go[es] for the gut before the mind, the sense rather than the sensible'.⁷ For cheyanne turions, a scholar inspired by Garneau, a decolonial aesthetic practice also 'involves the *creation of a world otherwise*, other from the colonial forms of dispossession that have come to characterize the corrupt and sly deployment of white supremacy across the North American continent'.⁸

In this paper I argue that McMaster's self-portraits exceed the limits of reconciliation through enacting Garneau's decolonial aesthetic activism in a way that inspires uncertainty and creates a space where we can imagine a world otherwise. To construct my analysis, I perform a critique of the TRC's reconciliation model through contrasting its understanding of reconciliation against salient critiques of it by Indigenous scholars and allies. Then, I outline Garneau's decolonial methodology by conducting a close examination of his arguments while referencing the writings of turions. Following this, I consider the creative possibilities found in uncertainty that can help individuals, both settler and Indigenous, engage with challenging art in ways that allow us to imagine new ways of being in relationship in the world. I then return to personal reflections on McMaster's beautiful, yet gut-wrenching and discordant photographs as a way to anchor the theory I set out. Finally, I consider my positionality as a settler and, by extension, what McMaster's artwork has taught me about the creative potential of uncertainty in decolonization.

Overview of 'Reconciliation' as it is Defined by the TRC

*Reconciliation is about establishing and maintain a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.*⁹

The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement of 2006 gave rise to the TRC which was created on 1 June 2008 to address the ongoing legacy of residential schools. The TRC, led by Justice Murray Sinclair, spent six years travelling the country, taking testimonies from over 6,000 people in order to bear witness to the stories of survivors and to those affected by the intergenerational trauma of Indian Residential Schools. The six years of testimony collected by the TRC was transformed into a multi-volume Final Report. This report explains what the Commission did, how it did it, recorded testimonies, drew conclusions and issued 94 Calls to Action designed to facilitate reconciliation in Canada.¹⁰

The Final Report of the TRC offers important insight into the definition of reconciliation as it is now being implemented by the Canadian Federal Government in an effort to *rebuild* its relationship with Indian Residential School survivors and their descendants. The short definition offered by the TRC states that reconciliation is 'an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships'.¹¹ Significantly then, reconciliation involves *repairing* trust through actions like making apologies, offering reparations, revitalizing Indigenous

law and legal traditions, and other concrete acts that seek to implement social change.¹² Consequently, the TRC's reconciliation process requires:

*awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.*¹³ Importantly, the TRC notes that it will take years to repair the damaged relationships between settlers and Indigenous peoples: "reconciliation is not a one-time event; it is a multi-generational journey that involves all Canadians."¹⁴

Critiques of 'Reconciliation'

*Any meaningful reconciliation effort must confront colonialism not only historically but as part of an ongoing process that continues to impact present generations of Indigenous youth and families.*¹⁵

Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall explain that the concept of reconciliation is 'contested terrain in relation to Canada as an ongoing¹⁶ settler colonial enterprise'.¹⁷ They note that it is a 'problematic narrative' about Indigenous-settler relationships and argue that discourses of reconciliation often do not recognize that residential schools are only one aspect of a larger colonial process.¹⁸ Specifically, proponents of reconciliation often fail to acknowledge that the seizure of land, resources and power must be concretely addressed in order for reconciliation efforts to succeed.¹⁹ It can be argued then that Canadian reconciliation is a distraction from land issues: 'Reconciliation, with its focus on closure and a unified nation, seeks certainty by placating social unrest while simultaneously reinforcing the image of the state as making every effort to address Indigenous concerns'.²⁰ However, numerous scholars and allies have indicated that state-facilitated reconciliation is often not sufficient to address Indigenous land-based needs or concerns.

Jennifer Henderson, Pauline Wakeham and Anna Carastathis argue that within the reconciliation context 'Indigenous claims to land, natural resources, and self-determination threaten to take the open secret of ongoing colonial oppression and reconstitute it as an outright scandal for a self-proclaimed liberal democracy' that reconciliation seeks to obscure.²¹ In other words, the ongoing colonial project in Canada is revealed when Indigenous peoples focus on critical issues of sovereignty rather than processes of reconciliation, and this undercuts settler certainty. Reconciliation then, 'anesthetizes knowledge of the existence of pre-contact Native sovereignties.'²² This in turn allows Indigenous peoples to be constructed as one minority group among many, rather than the 'partners who make Canada possible'.²³ Here, a nation-to-nation relationship becomes unthinkable when Indigenous peoples are cast as one minority group rather than founding peoples with distinct claims upon the state that are at least equal to those of settler Canadians. For reasons such as these, Henderson, et al. caution against uncritically embracing reconciliation because they see it as a 'symbolic process that seems to be divorced from the material consequences of colonialism'.²⁴ Other commentators argue that it is impossible to achieve reconciliation if Indigenous peoples and settlers have not historically achieved *conciliation*. For example, Garneau argues that 'reconciliation refers to the repair of a previously existing harmonious relationship. This word choice imposes the fiction that equanimity was the status quo between Indigenous people and Canada' in the past.²⁵ Within this context, reconciliation erroneously offers a solution to *recently* troubled Indigenous/settler relationships.

Scholars and allies also address institutional barriers that curtail the potentiality of reconciliation. For instance, Jeff Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzil situate

reconciliation as a Western religious concept that is about restoring one's relationship with God: 'Given that reconciliation is not an Indigenous concept, our overarching goal as Indigenous peoples should not be to restore an asymmetrical relationship with the state [who stands in for God] but to restore [sic] our communities toward justice'.²⁶ Similarly, Garneau argues that 'it is ironic, if not sinister, that survivors of religious residential schools, especially Catholic ones, are asked to participate in a [TRC] ritual that so closely resembles that which abused them'.²⁷ Significantly, Cornthassel et al. argue that the TRC's mandate operates within a Western justice model where *individuals* can seek compensation for wrongs done to them.²⁸ Garneau also contends that reconciliation individualizes responsibility—the individual is in error, not the institutions—thereby absolving the churches of wrongdoing or the need for reformation.²⁹ It is evident from these critiques that the institutionalization of the TRC process itself may constitute a return to that which abused those who attended Indian Residential Schools.

The above critiques leveled by scholars and allies have identified multiple limits in the TRC's reconciliation model. The consequences of Indian Residential Schools are only one part of the larger ongoing colonial process and focusing on the schools alone detracts from issues of Indigenous land sovereignty. Reconciliation may also cast Indigenous peoples as one minority group within the nation that is Canada rather than founding peoples with unique claims on the state. Finally, it is impossible to reconcile if one has not been in a state of conciliation first. It is for these reasons that I now look for alternative methods to build relationships that may exceed the limits of reconciliation detailed above.

'Cultural Decolonization' and 'Decolonial Aesthetic Activism'

*The extra-rational potential of art gives us a way to consider the means of working toward a decolonized, Indigenized future other than through state sponsored and articulated processes of reconciliation.*³⁰

Garneau articulates a promising methodology that I argue can act as one alternative to reconciliation. As mentioned at the outset, Garneau asserts that 'extra-rational aesthetics' can be deployed as a tool of 'cultural decolonization'.³¹ Here, discordant and challenging artworks constitute a decolonial practice, or aesthetic activism, because they reinvigorate Indigenous ways of knowing while re-balancing Western aesthetic practices.³² He defines cultural decolonization as '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'.³³ For Garneau,

*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...cultural decolonization in the Canadian context is about at once unsettling settlers and, ironically, helping them to adapt to better settle themselves as noncolonial persons within Indigenous spaces.*³⁴

He goes on to state that cultural decolonization is about working for a 'noncolonial society in which Aboriginal nations and settlers share Indigenous territories'.³⁵ Decolonial activity, for Garneau, 'is inscribed in relation to the mainstream. It seeks to change the orientation of the discourse but not eliminate it'.³⁶ Thus, his model of cultural decolonization first seeks to raise awareness of the multiple impacts of colonialism on institutions and people within the borders of the Canadian state. More radically, however, it also looks for an infusion of Indigenous

lifeways into Canadian institutions so that settlers can become unsettled in ways that allow them to eventually live as noncolonial persons on Indigenous lands. Therefore, the resurgent goal 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’ through artistic practice.³⁷ Here, the artist plays a special role ‘as provocateur, an... agent who plays between and among disciplines and cultures to create startling non-beautiful, needful disruptions, and to build hybrid possibilities that resist containment by either colonial designs or Indigenous traditionalism’.³⁸ Cultural decolonization is significant because it potentially offers a way forward, *despite the physical constraints* of settler colonialism such as the presence of settlers on Indigenous lands.³⁹

In setting up his decolonial aesthetic activism, Garneau critiques the radical potential of conventionally beautiful artworks and instead suggests that “we ought to look beyond sensual allure alone” to the ‘discordant’.⁴⁰ These discordant works ‘stimulate the senses’ but ‘are not lovely gestures, nor quite sublime or ugly’.⁴¹ Instead, ‘they are intuitive disruptions of the repressed real into the aesthetic arena’ that are ‘mentally indigestible’.⁴² As such, ‘they encourage people to puzzle with them and learn what they need from them’.⁴³ Garneau advances Garneau’s extra-rational aesthetic methodology by arguing that ‘the TRC is itself not enough to enact the healing it points toward’.⁴⁴ Accordingly, ‘other kinds of reconciliation are unfolding’ and ‘chief among these are discourses of decolonization’.⁴⁵ Garneau implicates cultural forms ‘in the decolonial process as a measure of the undoing’ and argues that ‘aesthetic forms make important contributions to the broad project of decolonization’.⁴⁶

‘Unsettling’ Settlers

[W]e as settlers must have a very careful approach to relationships and alliances with Indigenous peoples, to be sure we don’t, with the best of intentions, reproduce colonial patterns...⁴⁷

Eva Mackey argues that settler colonialism can be destabilized by ‘unsettling’ the ‘settled expectations’ of settlers.⁴⁸ Mackey defines settled expectations as those “fantas[ies] of entitlement” that provide...a sense of certainty, and the “settled” nature, of existing property relations’ to settlers.⁴⁹ Significantly, she asserts that Indigenous peoples ‘require settlers to move beyond the sedimented [*sic*] frameworks of settled expectations of certain entitlement to land’.⁵⁰ Importantly, she goes on to reiterate that ‘fundamental shifts in settler perspectives must happen not instead of but *in addition to* serious structural, economic and political changes’.⁵¹ Here, ‘*all parties*’ must change ‘how they relate to one another’.⁵² To enact this change, Mackey states that settlers must move away from their settled expectations and adopt an air of ‘ontological uncertainty’.⁵³ Within this paradigm, ‘*uncertainty* may actually imply something positive, even necessary, for decolonization’.⁵⁴

Avril Bell offers important insight into how settlers might embrace ontological uncertainty in relation to decolonial art. Referencing Levinas, she states that conventionally ‘our relation with the other...consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension’.⁵⁵ Therefore, within this context one becomes unsettled when one respects the boundaries of ‘unknowable difference’.⁵⁶ In light of this and as a settler, I argue that the goal of engaging critically with art like McMaster’s is not to gain access to my Other. Rather, the goal is to approach challenging art with a sense of unknowingness and a willingness to learn for it is within this ambiguous space that dialogues start, discourses are disrupted, and new worlds can be imagined. This is a practice that can be repeated again and again, as the *process*

of unsettling should never be complete. Therefore, a key facet of unsettling our ontological certainty should be practices of self-reflexivity that allow us to begin imagining new ways of being guests on sovereign Indigenous territories.⁵⁷

It is my contention that the unsettling potential of decolonial aesthetic activism, in the form of McMaster's artistic interventions, contributes to uncertainty and 'fundamental shifts in settler perspectives', when settlers engage with the artwork from a place of ontological uncertainty.⁵⁸ Therefore, like Garneau and Turions, I believe that the unsettling contributions made by decolonial aesthetic activism offers opportunities for engaged audiences to learn about their relative power, privilege, and the ongoing legacy of settler colonialism in Canada. Paulette Regan uses discomfort as a generative force for provoking the critical self-reflexivity that can lead to unsettling experiences. She argues that settlers must dwell in their own discomfort if they are to successfully learn to interact 'differently' with cultural 'Others,' in this case with Indigenous peoples. Accordingly, she puts forward an 'unsettling pedagogy' that seeks to (re)connect both intellect and emotion⁵⁹ and to promote settler awareness of how they individually and collectively benefit from colonialism and a recognition of their own investment in structures of power and privilege.⁶⁰ Importantly, Regan positions critical self-reflection as 'a springboard for socio-political action', *if* that reflection is carried out with a 'willingness to stay in the decolonizing struggle of our own discomfort'.⁶¹ It follows then that this pedagogical approach places settlers in an extremely vulnerable position, a risk that settlers must take for '[i]t seems...that this space of not knowing has power that may hold a key' to settlers transforming their relationships with Indigenous peoples.⁶²

Imagining a 'World Otherwise'

*[A] radical vision of justice and social reorganization... must begin with radical imaginings of what 'could be' after one recognizes what has been.*⁶³

I argue that that decolonization requires us to radically imagine other worlds before we can take action to make them real. Therefore, decolonization is a process that must happen both on ideological *and* material levels. Taiaiake Alfred defines radical imagination in relation to settlers as a process of

*reenvisioning your existence on this land without the inherited privileges of conquest and empire. It is accepting the fact of a meaningful prior Indigenous presence, and taking action to support struggles not only of social and economic justice, but political justice for Indigenous nations as well.*⁶⁴

In other words, radical imagination is acted out when settlers strive to leave behind our unearned privilege and focus on acting 'as human beings in equal and respectful relation to other human beings and the natural environment'.⁶⁵ Imagining this different relationship dynamic between settlers and Indigenous peoples is radical because it creates an opening where material actions toward building these new relationships of reciprocity and solidarity can be taken.

Art is a particularly useful discursive and ideological space where the possibilities of decolonial relationships can be imagined, in spite of the coloniality-of-power. By coloniality-of-power, I refer to those 'ideological structures, orders, and legacies of colonialism [that] subsist even after colonial administrations [have] ceased to exist in full'.⁶⁶ Here, one must be able to imagine what could be after recognizing what has been, for 'bearing witness to violence, to the past, and even to the present, is central to achieving decolonial reparations'.⁶⁷ According

to José Esteban Muñoz, the aesthetic can offer us glimpses of utopian, or decolonial, worlds; through his queer aesthetic we can ‘dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds’.⁶⁸ I believe that elements of Muñoz’s queer aesthetic are relevant to non-queer artworks that nevertheless seek to imagine new dream-like worlds. This is because there is an ‘anticipatory illumination of art, which can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices helping us *to see the not-yet-conscious*’.⁶⁹ Importantly, like Garneau, Muñoz cautions that aesthetic beauty has its limits: ‘the utopian function [of art] is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here’.⁷⁰ Simply put, there must be certain intangible elements in artworks that challenge viewers to look beyond simple surface representations alone; in gazing on challenging and discordant artworks, unsettling and unconscious knowledge may begin to surface in the conscious mind. Affect, or an intangible, extra-emotional response that occurs beneath consciousness, may be one way to conceptualize this unsettling process. Simon O’Sullivan suggests that affect is not concerned with knowledge production, but rather, with *experiences*.⁷¹ He contends that art is an affective experience that is beyond language where the unconscious and imperceptible can become visible.⁷² One such intangible experience may be noncolonial understandings of bi-cultural Indigenous identities.

‘In-Between Worlds’

*I belong to two heritages, existing betwixt and between. My work explores ways of mixing and transforming these histories.*⁷³

For Garneau, artworks produced at the intersection of Indigenous and Western aesthetic practices constitute a new ‘third space of art that belongs exclusively to neither side’.⁷⁴ In other words, some bi-cultural artists create ‘work in the space where Indigenous/colonial culture overlap’ and are therefore potential spaces where uncertainty and ambiguity can be explored by both settlers and Indigenous peoples.⁷⁵ McMaster often works from that space where Indigenous and colonial cultures overlap; her father is Plains Cree from Saskatchewan while her mother is of British, Scottish and Dutch heritage. The tension of negotiating being ‘betwixt’ identities is evident in McMaster’s approach to her artistic practice.⁷⁶ In reference to her hybrid identity, McMaster states that:

*This always caused conflict for me and posed a challenge in how I would identify with these opposing cultures. When I started thinking about this body of work [In-Between Worlds], I wanted to transform the way I viewed the past from the perspective of the present and express my bi-cultural heritage as a synergistic strength as opposed to a struggle between opposites. In every image there are references and symbols that express my mixed cultural heritage.*⁷⁷

The way that McMaster embraces hybridity as a synergistic strength challenges traditional identity categories, revealing that they are not fixed and that one can embody multiple identities at once. As will become evident below, McMaster’s physical presence in the images that contain references to, and symbols of, her complex identity, does indeed create a ‘third space of art’ where one can imagine a world otherwise.

Returning to ‘Victoria’ (Figure 1) discussed at the outset of this paper, additional evidence that symbolizes McMaster’s hybrid identity can be found. As stated earlier, I identify a juxtaposition of Indigenous and European identities in this image, represented in the clothing that draws on both Indigenous and colonial traditions. Hybridity is further represented in ‘the white face makeup [that] calls attention to McMaster’s European heritage whilst highlighting

the ways in which “whiteness” has been imposed on Indigenous bodies and their cultures’.⁷⁸ In acknowledgement of Indigenous resurgence against state assimilation, McMaster notes that “Indigenous peoples have survived and succeeded in spite’ of Canada’s history of colonialism’ which emphasizes the important tradition of Indigenous resistance.⁷⁹ I find resistance particularly evident in this image through McMaster’s direct and unflinching gaze at the camera; she is more than an object to be ethnographically studied. She is an agentic being embodying a complexity that exists beyond binary colonial identity categories. Put differently, McMaster’s direct gaze in this captured moment of time disrupts any notion one might have about the disparateness of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and proves that ‘ancestry itself is liquid’.⁸⁰ Here, it becomes possible to imagine a world where Indigenous peoples and settlers do not exist in binary opposition to one another.

In ‘Terra Cognitum’ (Figure 2), we saw beaded elevation contour lines placed on McMaster’s body that symbolized colonial land dispossession. McMaster describes ‘Terra Cognitum’ thus:

I created a large-scale beadwork pattern...The concentric circle patterns represent a topographic map overlaid on my body and the land around me. This references exploration, colonization and my connection to the land.⁸¹

Compellingly, the land is represented on a woman’s body—McMaster’s body—in a context where Indigenous female bodies have so often been ‘violenced’ like the land.⁸² Significantly, cognitum is a Latin word that is defined as ‘knowledge gained from experience’.⁸³ I read McMaster’s direct gaze at the camera as an expression of her power and agency which is associated with an intimate and gendered knowledge of the land. Here, McMaster interrupts the myth of terra nullius by placing her body back on the land. This undoes any misconception that Indigenous peoples—particularly women—can be violently erased from it. Thus ‘Terra Cognitum’ invites viewers to recognize the ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous women and the land, and in so doing, imagine a world where that violence is no longer the norm.

In ‘Aphoristic Currents’ (Figure 4), McMaster wears an ‘exaggerated Victorian ruff’ hand sculpted from ‘carefully chosen newspapers’⁸⁴ The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology defines ‘aphorism’ as ‘[a] statement of some general principle’ and as ‘a statement expressing a universal truth’.⁸⁵ It is not surprising then, that these newspapers represent precise ‘language, technology, communication, information, and power in the past and present’ to McMaster.⁸⁶ The act of wearing the principled statements of Western newspapers around her neck suggests that colonial languages, technologies, information and power structures suffocate her. Furthermore, McMaster’s white face paint with black dots further camouflages the artist and speaks to the way she is consumed. Upon engaging with the decolonial aesthetic activism of this image, my question becomes: How can we exist outside of these colonial knowledge structures? And, can we imagine a world unstructured by principled Western statements of ‘universal’ truth?



Figure 4 'Aphoristic Currents' (2013), Digital Chromogenic Print, 36" x 50"

In yet another image, 'Viage' (Figure 5) which I understand to mean journey through life, McMaster appears at the side of an impossibly still body of water, wrapped in fabric and standing on bundles of twigs, like rafts, that are bound to her feet.



Figure 5 'Viage' (2010), Digital Chromogenic Print, 24" x 24"

Here, McMaster seems to be facing the unknown, prepared to walk into it supported by tradition and a connection to the land. The image has an otherworldly feel, as if McMaster has already taken a step onto another plain. Consequently, the everyday is left behind while the possibilities of the future stretch out before her. Accordingly, I find this image to be very hopeful.

Finally, in 'Consanguinity' (Figure 6), McMaster stands in front of a deserted expanse of water, swathed in plastic sheeting that is pressed against her body by the wind. In her hands, she holds a bow and arrows.



Figure 6 'Consanguinity' (2010), Digital Chromogenic Print, 24" x 24"

Consanguineous means 'relating to or denoting people descended from the same ancestor' which makes the paradox in this image profound.⁸⁷ I interpret the plastic surrounding McMaster as a suffocating settler colonialism, emblemized by a petrochemical product, that has sought to erase her Indigeneity, but against which she can defend herself with her bow and arrows. However, the force that she may choose to defend herself against is also part of her hybrid, bi-cultural identity. This image brings to the fore questions like, which identity should be primary? In so doing, it further challenges the viewer to question *why* one identity must be chosen over the other.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that that McMaster's haunting, dream-like, and sometimes indigestible and discordant images constitute a decolonial aesthetic activism because they deconstruct colonial constructions of binary identity. In so doing, they create a third space of art where ambiguity unsettles viewers. Accordingly, this body of work does exceed the limits of reconciliation because it exists in a third space where different ways of being and interacting can be imagined. Taken as a whole, McMaster's work illustrates the ways that bi-cultural identities can challenge taken-for-granted discourses of settler colonialism, thereby creating a space to imagine worlds otherwise.

Personal Reflection

*[E]ven small, symbolic, and everyday actions are significant.*⁸⁸

I have worked, studied and lived on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg peoples in Ottawa, Ontario all my life. I am a second generation Canadian and at first I thought that my relationship to settler colonialism in North America was limited since my family was not included in the early waves of settlement. However, that misconception quickly changed when I realized that I have benefited from numerous unearned settler privileges for my entire life.

Education—both inside and outside the academy—is *the* pivotal factor that has increased my capacity to engage in the discomfort that comes with addressing the legacy of my settler privilege. Art and culture have been particularly significant and productive sites of discomfort and disruption for me. It is in the face of unsettling artworks that I have begun to develop a critical consciousness about the privilege I hold in society due to my heritage. If anything, my settler certainty has been, and will continue to be, unsettled in the face of the complexity and plurality of truths that I have encountered in challenging artwork like McMaster's.

Before embarking on my graduate studies and being exposed to decolonial art, I had a one-dimensional understanding of reconciliation as it relates to the relationships of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. Now my understanding of (re)conciliation has expanded to include notions of decolonization, individual and collective responsibility, Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous self-determination, relationality, critical education and curricula, resurgence and Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration. Garneau writes that '[a] purpose of anti-racist work is for settlers to learn about their hosts...to move through proximity, listening, empathy, cooperative inquiry, and action to a state of racial confusion'.⁸⁹ It is through engaging with artwork like McMaster's that I am beginning to experience that productive racial confusion. Put differently, my false belief that there are discrete racial categories is profoundly unsettled when I am faced with McMaster's portrayal of her bi-cultural identity. What's more, her claim that that being betwixt and between is a synergistic strength disrupts any misconception that I might have that a bicultural identity is undesirable. From my experience and as Garneau asserts, the power of art and relationships are profound: 'It is the combination of visual art, embodied knowledge, and a gathering of engaged participants that [make] the experience significant, [that make] it exceed the colonial container'.⁹⁰ In sum, it is McMaster's visual art that depicts her embodied knowledge, combined with my engaged settler ontological uncertainty, that allows me to start the process of imagining a world otherwise.

Limits and Opportunities

*If cultural loss is one of the crucial injuries of colonialism, cultural affirmation must, according to many Indigenous theorists, be a central aspect of any process of redress or reconciliation.*⁹¹

Eve Tuck and K. W. Yang offer a cautionary warning regarding the radical potential of cultivating a critical consciousness, much as I have done when engaging with McMaster's art, as a method of decolonization. Specifically, they wonder if 'conscientization' can 'stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land', thereby constituting 'settler move[s] to innocence'.⁹² They describe 'settler moves to innocence' as 'those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege'.⁹³ Significantly then, 'decolonizing the mind is *the first step*, not the only step toward overthrowing colonial regimes'.⁹⁴ Conscientization is the first step for Tuck and Yang because 'decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life'.⁹⁵ Accordingly, they 'understand the curricular pedagogical project of critical consciousness as *settler harm reduction*'—simply put, it is a 'stopgap' measure.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, other Indigenous scholars and allies have also convincingly argued that positive radical potential can be found in conscientization activities that allow us to imagine new futurities. This is because decolonization requires critique *and* 'the constructive project of imagining and living regenerative ways of being'.⁹⁷ Garneau writes that 'we all have a part to play in understanding how our lives and privileges emerge from colonialism and how we might live' in relation to one another.⁹⁸ I contend that art is a mechanism through which we settlers can learn about our privilege. Nevertheless, art in and of itself is not decolonizing. It can be, however, part of imagining a world otherwise, and accordingly part of creating space for concrete action. This is because 'art can become a root for an idea, where the terms of its possible manifestations shift'.⁹⁹ In sum, I understand that art is not enough to facilitate settler/Indigenous relationship-building in and of itself. But I do argue that it can make an important contribution to the larger, ongoing, processes of decolonization.

Conclusion

Decolonization 'is a permanently unfinished project'.¹⁰⁰

Decolonial aesthetic activism, as articulated by Garneau and turions attempts to make Indigenous peoples and settlers conscious of the many ways that colonialism permeates all areas of life. By doing so, it seeks to develop a noncolonial society where Indigenous peoples and settlers can live on Indigenous lands in harmony. Here, ambiguous, discordant, and indigestible artworks operate as one method by which we all can become aware of how we are implicated in the structures of settler colonialism. This awareness can create psychological space where Indigenous peoples and settlers can imagine how things might be different because changes in perspective have the potential to lead to concrete, material actions.

As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, deploying art as one avenue of decolonization 'involves a complex and ongoing analysis of culture as...a medium for imagining the world otherwise'.¹⁰¹ It is for this reason that Garneau's articulation of 'decolonial aesthetic activism' offers a powerful alternative to reconciliation. As turions states, the 'space of art is a space of possibility where ideas need not be grounded in the facts of the way the world is, where ideas can be proposed aside from feasibility concerns and outside of regular protocols'.¹⁰² My reading of McMaster's artwork reveals that art can put forward critiques of settler colonialism that unsettle assumptions, thereby creating new spaces for us to imagine worlds otherwise. For this reason, I conclude that McMaster's art does have the potential to exceed the limits of reconciliation and that it is an important *first* step in the *process* that is decolonization.

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