

Decolonial Approaches to Teaching Art History

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Abstract

Originally presented virtually, this paper introduces pedagogies, strategies, and topics that facilitate the decolonized teaching and learning of art history and aesthetics. The presentation draws on the author's experience as an educator in Canada, in both traditional academic and polytechnic institutions. Topics to be discussed include decolonizing the classroom and the museum. As we work towards 'decolonizing the classroom,' we consider the responsibility that educators have to the curation of their materials. After all, the history of visual culture is so vast, one cannot teach everything. In the presentation, we are invited to consider whose voices are we elevating when we teach. Whose art are we sharing? Which authors are we assigning in our reading lists? We also consider how we teach, the pedagogical choices that we make, and how we can emphasize community building and discussion in the teaching of art history.

Keywords: Decolonizing, Art History, Pedagogy

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Introduction

Originally presented virtually at the Paris Conference on Arts and Humanities in June 2024, this paper identifies decolonial approaches to the teaching of art history and aesthetics. I argue that the to *decolonize*, or at least, to employ effective decolonial practices in the fields of art history and aesthetics, educators must embrace both practical pedagogical changes as well as the broader paradigm shift required to question the limitations and harm perpetuated by certain subject matter and practices. The practical and structural approaches outlined in this paper are drawn, in part, from the author's experiences as an educator in Canada—namely in the Ontario public college system—and are partly guided by such frameworks as the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. However, the aim of this paper is to present decolonial strategies, including crafting effective acknowledgements, best practices for including and speaking about indigenous material culture, and becoming culturally-responsive educators by employing Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being to an international audience of arts educators from all institutional backgrounds.

Land Acknowledgement

As this paper was presented virtually from Canada, it begins with a territorial acknowledgement from Humber College in Toronto:

Humber College is located within the traditional and treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit. Known as Adoobiigok, “the place of the Alders” in Michi Saagiig language, the Humber River watershed has historically provided an integral connection for Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples. Now home to people of numerous nations, Adoobiigok continues to provide a vital source of interconnection for all. (Humber College, n.d.)

What is Decolonization? Frameworks for Educators

To begin, let us establish what is meant by *decolonization*, particularly when applied to education. The Keele University Manifesto for Decolonizing the Curriculum, defines decolonization thusly:

Decolonization involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems. It is not “integration” or simply the token inclusion of the intellectual achievements of non-white cultures. Rather, it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to making space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems. It’s a culture shift to think more widely about why common knowledge is what it is, and in so doing adjusting cultural perceptions and power relations in real and significant ways. (Gokay, 2018)

Just like colonialism is a *structure* rather than an *event* (Wolfe, 2006), decolonization is not a single action, but a process of unlearning. In the Canadian context, there remains a significant work to do in reconciliation with atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples and the continual harm of colonial policy. There are however, national frameworks here to help guide educators (including those outside of Canada) in the process of decolonizing. The best known is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and Calls to Action, created as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. This agreement began the process of validating the trauma experienced by Indigenous students, brought financial compensation to

survivors, created a national research centre, and laid out 94 calls to action for the Canadian government to guide the process of reconciliation. Several of these calls to action specifically address museums, libraries archives, and other researchers on topics including archival best practices and accessibility to the public as well as the importance of art and martial culture to commemorate reconciliation (Government of Canada, 2024). Another essential framework is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly Articles 11—16, which address the rights to protect and preserve culture and cultural expressions, media and languages, the right to education, and the teaching of indigenous art and culture (United Nations, 2007).

In adopting a commitment to truth and reconciliation as educators, our classes can confront colonial truths and can work towards reconciling some of the harm perpetuated by Eurocentric curriculums. While increasing the representation of writers, artists, and scholars from equity-deserving groups in our courses is an important first step, this act alone does not amount to decolonization. Instead, decolonization involves an ongoing commitment to pedagogical change. It is the active process of identifying and challenging the colonial attitudes and practices that have historically shaped, and continue to shape, academia. We will establish specific actions we can take as educators to improve our cultural sensitivity *and*, we will think as well about the broader paradigm shift that is required to prompt a reconciliation of power imbalances, in our field, classrooms, and in our education systems.

Land Acknowledgements & Other Acknowledgements

The inclusion of certain kinds of acknowledgements relating to your educational instruction, nation, or subject matter can signal to your learners that you are a culturally-sensitive educator. In addition to being important acts of reconciliation, when used effectively, these acknowledgements can spark discussion, encourage students to consider their positionality, and highlight knowledge gaps. Firstly, we will explore land acknowledgements for those teaching in colonized or formerly colonized parts of the world. This will be followed by alternative acknowledgements for those living in countries whose histories and institutions have been, or continue to be, complicit in colonial systems.

As a first step towards reconciliation, many institutions across Turtle Island—North America—have created land acknowledgements. They are often read aloud before meetings or appear in email signatures, and are sometimes even read aloud at the beginning of some sporting and cultural events. Shared at the beginning of this paper was the author’s institutional land. Shared now is the rationale for the inclusion of that statement:

Beneath the contemporary surface of any territory, histories of belonging have been erased, overlooked, contested and forgotten. Land acknowledgments provide a simple, yet powerful way of recognizing histories that reach beyond colonization and the establishment of the Canadian state. Additionally, they increase awareness about the unique and enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and traditional territories, including practices and spiritualities that continue to develop in relationship with place today. (Humber College, n.d.)

While I lead a territorial acknowledgement at the start of each class, simply reading the institutional statement quickly becomes automatic, robotic, which in turn becomes tokenistic or performative. In addition to my institution’s rationale, shared above, land acknowledgements are important pedagogical opportunities. When used effectively, they

signal to learners a commitment to the cultural shift required for decolonial teaching and learning. In looking at this Humber College's best practices for crafting land acknowledgements (shared below), one sees that effective acknowledgements should be grounded in truth, relationship building, and importantly, *action*. The engagement should be authentic, reflective, and demonstrative of a commitment to meaningful action.

Acknowledgment - and the relationship development required to do it with integrity - should be an invitation to deeper analysis, relationship, and action. Indeed, due to their nature, land acknowledgments should be grounded in authentic reflection, presence, and awareness of the territories, peoples, and histories being named. They should build relationships centred in action, so that we ask ourselves: How can I move from acknowledgment into relationship? What can I do to ensure that my work represents a commitment to Indigenous voices, stories, and perspectives, now and in the future? (Humber College, n.d.)

In the virtual presentation, the author shared an example slide of a land acknowledgement from an introduction to aesthetics course. On it, one could see the institutional land acknowledgement, in addition to three other resources meant to stimulate a more meaningful conversation with learners. Firstly, the slide includes a link to Native Land Digital, an app that maps the history of Indigenous lands (Native Land Digital, 2024). This nonprofit organization also has a teacher's guide which should be consulted prior to using this resource, since mapmaking and the drawing of borders have been essential colonialist tools. A second link is a resource to educate students on the thousands of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada and the United States, which a national report describes as a "multigenerational genocide." (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). It is important as educators to emphasize the ongoing violence and trauma caused by settler colonialism.

Finally, the land acknowledgement slide includes an image by the contemporary Cree painter, Kent Monkman, entitled *Clouds in the Canyon* (2008, private collection). It depicts a white male artist painting the Grand Canyon, his composition ignoring the three "dandies" (the name given by the painter George Catlin to *Two-Spirit* people, non-binary individuals honoured in many Indigenous societies in North America). In this painting, Monkman illustrates how the histories of indigenous peoples, and specifically queer and Two-Spirit peoples, are excluded, literally painted out of art history. Through the inclusion of an example by a living artist, we reinforce that indigenous cultures continue to thrive, despite attempted genocide and forced assimilation, and connects the acknowledgement back to visual art and segues into our class topic.

Another approach to territorial acknowledgements would be to discuss your own positionality and relationship to the land, to state whether you are a settler and to acknowledge your privilege. As part of your acknowledgement, share your actions, for instance your decolonial perspective and pedagogy, and acknowledge how cultural hegemony and our own positionality affect our ways of seeing. Below is an example of such an approach from Amnesty International.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish First Nations on which we are learning, working and organizing today. I think it's important to acknowledge the land because growing up as an immigrant here, I never heard the traditional names of the

territories. Indigenous people were talked about in the past tense and all the struggles they faced were in the past tense as well. It is easier to deny Indigenous people their rights if we historicize their struggles and simply pretend they don't exist. As an activist, I would like to take this opportunity to commit myself to the struggle against the systems of oppression that have dispossessed Indigenous people of their lands and denied their rights to self-determination, work that is essential to human rights work across the world. (Amnesty International, 2017)

For educators whose institutions are not on traditional, treaty, or unceded Indigenous lands, there are other forms of acknowledgements that can be incorporated into the classroom as acts of reconciliation. These would include, for instance, acknowledgements of your institutions' financial and material investment in colonialism, slavery, and genocide in both the past and present. A subject-matter specific acknowledgement could include a discussion of how your institution may choose to celebrate or commemorate—for instance in paintings or public art—the achievements of individuals complicit in colonialism, slavery, apartheid, and genocide. One can also educate students on the Indigenous art and material culture that may be a part of your institution's, or related institutions', holdings. What is the provenance: were these objects looted, seized, or otherwise unethically acquired under colonialist policy or cultural genocide?

A case study would include First Nation totem poles conspicuous in UK and European museums and universities. These poles were 'acquired' during a genocide and there are ongoing demands for them to be re-matriated to their communities of origin. The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm and National Museum of Scotland have been the only institutions to return their poles. The unwillingness by many institutions to return not just totem poles, but the myriad looted culture in institutional holdings exemplifies how so many of our educational and cultural institutions have a living legacy of colonialism from which they have not yet fully divested. Frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (particularly Article 12, relating to human remains as well as cultural and religious sites, objects, and practices) as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action (particularly Calls 67—70, relating to museums and archives) can be used here to integrate discussions of repatriation and material culture into your existing curriculum and acknowledgements.

Importantly, in having these conversations with learners, ensure that Indigenous people and other equity-seeking groups are included in meaningful ways and as living cultures. There is a tendency, for example, to speak about and include indigenous peoples only in the past tense, rather than as resilient, surviving, and varied communities with distinct and sophisticated material cultures. Remember as you craft your acknowledgement that it should be grounded in both authentic reflection and in a call to action.

Culturally-Responsive Education

In approaching decolonization as a paradigm shift, one should think more fundamentally about pedagogical approaches and becoming a culturally-responsive educators. Starting broadly, one should consider the powerful ways in which schools, museums, and educational systems have perpetuated and benefitted from colonial systems, policies, and attitudes, and participated in cultural genocide. Returning to the Canadian context, we can examine the case study of the Canadian Indian Residential School System, which operated from the 1880s to the 1990s. This government and church run system of boarding schools was designed for the

purpose of assimilating indigenous children by removing them from their communities and thereby depriving them of their languages, cultures, and families. Children were physically and sexually abused and suffered from starvation and disease while at these boarding schools. The schools have death tolls potentially into the tens of thousands.

Today, colonialism in education is more subtle, but insidious in curriculum, power dynamics, and institutional structures. To be culturally responsive is to consider how education is not neutral, but selected, curated and compartmentalized. As educators we should consider how *cognitive imperialism* affect the knowledge-sharing in your classroom and how the Euro-centric curriculum relies on assumptions about the learners' lived experiences and prior knowledge, often to the detriment of equity-seeking learners.

As arts educators, we should look specifically at the fields of art history, archaeology, and aesthetics to consider *whose* art, knowledge, views, experiences, and standards we are perpetuating, and *how*. We should acknowledge the racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist attitudes held by certain foundational figures in our field and invite students to consider how such attitudes may inform their writings on art or beauty. Moreover, students should be educated on the living legacies of racism and sexism in art history, and how some of the artworks they study are still used by white supremacist groups today.

Finally, to be culturally responsive requires a re-consideration of one's teaching methods. Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being provide pedagogical alternatives or supplements to the lecture format. There are many groups offering micro-credentials or other training in this approach. One can think about this pedagogical approach through the Ojibway principle *Naawsidoong Mino Nawendiwin*, translated as 'building good relationships.' Indigenous pedagogical approaches are learner-centered, holistic, and acknowledge the power dynamic between teacher and student. This approach favours discussion, learning by doing, and can include practices like un-grading.

In recognizing the power imbalance between instructor and learner, instructors promote culturally sensitive learning spaces. Here, instructors value student's opinions and interpretations, and are open and accepting of our ability to learn from students. A culturally-responsive instructor has awareness of the diverse positionalities, obligations, and experiences of their learners, is compassionate in their course policies such as granting extensions or accommodations, and is proactive in identifying religious and cultural obligations outside of the academic calendar so as to support all learners, without their having to ask. For example, at Humber College, over 70% of learners in my classrooms are racialized, and approximately 35% hold beliefs other than Christian or non-religious (Humber College, 2023). Consider the demographics of your own classroom, and ask how your demographics might affect, among other factors, prior knowledge, absences, and obligations.

Reflection Questions

To encourage the practice of decolonization as a continual process, I conclude today with a series of reflection questions to support your journey. As you work to decolonize, ask yourself:

- Am I decolonizing or just diversifying? Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are given priority?
- How do I assess knowledge? Frame my own knowledge? Which experts do I draw on?

- Does my material acknowledge contemporary Indigenous/colonized/formerly colonized groups as living cultures?
- In what ways can my material help to restore lost or stolen cultural knowledge? What actions towards reconciliation am I taking in my classroom?
- Does my curriculum consider my discipline holistically, placing it within the context of the Western European academy, settler colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, etc.?
- Do I understand how educational systems have been used as a method in attempted cultural genocides? In what ways might my discipline, institution, or my own materials still hail back to colonialist policy?

Conclusion

Decolonizing the fields of art history and aesthetics requires not a one-time action, but an ongoing pedagogical commitment. By creating more inclusive course materials and crafting effective territorial acknowledgements, educators can signal a commitment to a decolonized approach to teaching these subjects. To more robustly reconcile the colonial harms perpetrated by the Eurocentric educational model, and in appreciation for the responsibility that educators have as knowledge-sharers, we must also commit to a broader paradigm shift. Educators can improve their cultural sensitivity by incorporating Indigenous pedagogy, by understanding the demographics and circumstances of our learners, and by incorporating frameworks such as the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* calls to action to guide the decolonization of subject matter.

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