

SHOW, DON'T TELL: DISPLAYING DECOLONIAL PRACTICE THROUGH
RESEARCH-CREATION

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Abstract

This transdisciplinary, research-creational project critically interrogates how colonial logics are continually reproduced and reinforced through institutional sites of knowledge-making, particularly museums, art galleries, and universities. Framed through the theme of *display*, this dissertation proposes a different mode of knowledge production rooted in liberatory storytelling, embodiment, and Indigenous epistemologies. At the heart of the project is a collaborative, process-based engagement with Indigenous visual artist Melanie de la Morandiere (Henvey Inlet First Nation). Through storytelling and artistic experimentation, we created an interactive digital output that reflects the substance of our exchanges, affirms artistic and creative practices, as well as embraces Indigenous legal orders as vital epistemological frameworks. Drawing on Cultural Legal Studies (CLS), critical pedagogy, in addition to Indigenous legal theory and informed by a deeply reflexive and embodied autoethnographic practice, this work insists on thinking outside the glass box—both literally and metaphorically—as a gesture toward decolonizing how we understand law, knowledge, justice, and the possibilities of being otherwise.

Key Words

Indigenous legal orders, storytelling, research creation, knowledge production, decolonization

Dedication

To my sister, Jessica. This dissertation would not have been possible without your love and support. Thank you for trying your best to be there for me, even while carrying battles of your own. Through every season of this journey, you have always shown up for me. Your presence, your encouragement, and your quiet strength meant more than I can ever fully express. Thank you for being my biggest supporter, not only when things were going well, but especially when they weren't. Your belief in me carried me further than you know. In English they say "bestie". But poetry says it better: "You are the laughter in my darkest days, a soul I trust in every way". For all the love, strength, and support you gave me along the way, this work belongs to you as much as it does to me.

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Preface

Introductory Thoughts

This dissertation is rooted in contradiction. It is a document that calls out the colonial nature of the university and of academic research in general, and yet it is written to conform, at least mostly, with the standards of academic research. I am not *trained* as a visual artist, and yet I engage with and write about artistic production. I write as a half-white, half-Korean, cisgender, able-bodied, straight woman living as a settler on Indigenous lands, embracing artist, curator and writer, Dylan Robinson's (xwélmexw) (2020, p. 38) definition of settler as a "statement of positionality that seeks to make visible the ways by which non-Indigenous peoples have benefitted from colonial policies such as Canada's *Indian Act* and genocidal policies of Indian residential schools" as a way to recognize my own privileges and commit myself to anti-colonial politics. In pursuit of this decolonizing goal, this dissertation insists on leaving behind traditional views of academic research as the product of an independent expert elaborating on a knowable and fixed research question in favour of open-ended, relational, embodied, and collaborative processes of ongoing learning, and yet it culminates in a single-authored *research output*. This output celebrates fluidity, creativity, and non-linear storytelling, while being structured and bound by a narrative form that has a beginning, middle, and end. It insists that the field of Socio-Legal Studies (SLST), as broad and interdisciplinary as it is, is nonetheless deeply flawed by its insistence on text-based analyses of law and its failure to engage a more transdisciplinary and open-ended research approach, even as this text-heavy dissertation is intended to grant me a doctorate in SLST. Rather than attempting to resolve these irreconcilable tensions, what follows is my attempt to grapple with them and to engage with these contradictions as evidence in and of themselves of why a new, more liberatory model of

research—research with Indigenous epistemologies, against colonial knowledge reproduction, and for a liberatory pedagogical praxis of unlearning—needs to be a primary consideration, if not especially, in the sociolegal world.

What follows does a number of things all centered around a general critique of the genocidal and everyday horrors of colonial rule in Canada. Given that colonialism is grounded equally in law and in knowledge-making, I turn my attention to the ways that colonialism is continually made in these institutional sites. Rather than look at existing texts, I shift the focus to visual practices—visual artmaking in particular—as an epistemological practice that can either work to (re)produce colonial logics or to shed light on the aforementioned contradictions at the heart of my dissertation. That epistemological practice—what I refer to here as *display culture*—is best exemplified as a colonial expression in museum practices where stolen Indigenous artefacts are displayed in glass boxes to function as pedagogical tools that naturalize and render benign the historical and ongoing practices of colonial violence.

In response to this dominant cultural practice and inspired by new museology as well as Indigenous artists who resist these colonial exhibits, I engage in a collaboratively produced visual practice and digital output to consider different ways of doing research that do not replicate and, in fact, seek to speak back to the colonial ordering of our epistemological approach to doing research as a novel praxis. It then follows that key to the dissertation is a process-based, open-ended, and deeply collaborative digital output resulting from a two-year long conversation with Indigenous artist and fellow York University student Melanie Delamoraire (Henvey Inlet First Nations). While her *authorship* is absent from this formal submission as a dissertation, this dissertation would not exist without her contributions. As will be explained in more detail below, she and I met in 2019 at the Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute (MISHI) where we

both experienced an immersive week of traditional Indigenous teachings and art-based practices of resistance, in addition to a strong connection that inspired us to carry the lessons of those teachings into our respective graduate and artistic work.

Drawing on the Indigenous tradition of storytelling as a liberatory pedagogy, we began a series of open-ended conversations about art, Indigeneity and resistance, colonial legacies, settler politics and identity, feminism and gender politics, and colonial education systems. We shared stories and artworks, and ultimately decided to collaborate on creating a digital output that reflected these conversations. It is this collaborative work that constitutes the “original contribution” that a PhD requires¹. You may access our digital output here:

<https://www.spatial.io/s/York-University-Update-6855755572cf55d3b7251e69?share=6127848914123207869>

For the easiest access, use the Spatial app, which you can download on your smartphone. For the best experience, I recommend using headphones, since the sound clips come from different parts of our conversation and vary in quality and volume. The decision to introduce the digital outputs at the beginning of this dissertation is both methodological and symbolic as it is not merely an illustration or supplementary artifact; instead, they *are* the research journey itself.

Encapsulating the evolving relationship, shared narratives, tensions, and insights that define this study, the digital output serves as an invitation to explore this project’s epistemological groundings. It is my hope that by the time you reach the full discussion of the creative and artistic approaches that went into the creation of our digital output, you will have

¹ Please see York University’s Faculty of Graduate Studies (n.d.) for the Doctoral General Requirements pertaining to dissertations, available at [https://www.yorku.ca/gradstudies/students/current-students/thesis-and-dissertation/doctoral dissertation/](https://www.yorku.ca/gradstudies/students/current-students/thesis-and-dissertation/doctoral%20dissertation/)

been afforded the opportunity to develop your own evolving engagement with our story via an encounter with the contextual and interpretive layers unfolding across chapters.

This collaborative piece stands as the core of my original contribution to the field. At the same time, the digital output's lack of single authorship, its visuality and designed interactiveness, as well as its temporality transgress the kind of *knowledge* that is traditionally anticipated with a dissertation. All of this brings me back to the contradictions with which I began this explanation. If anything, then, this dissertation is a living experiment in transgressive and critical research-creation in an era and space where a contained form of research-creation is only beginning to be recognized as a legitimate academic engagement. According to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) (n.d.), legitimate research-creation is:

An approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation. The creation process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms). Research-creation cannot be limited to the interpretation or analysis of a creator's work, conventional works of technological development, or work that focuses on the creation of curricula. The research-creation process and the resulting artistic work are judged according to SSHRC's established merit review criteria. Fields that may involve research-creation may include, but are not limited to: architecture, design, creative writing, visual arts (e.g., painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, textiles), performing arts (e.g., dance, music, theatre), film, video, performance art, interdisciplinary arts, media and electronic arts, and new artistic practices.

While the SSHRC definition of research-creation attempts to legitimize creative and artistic processes within scholarly research by emphasizing a merging of artistic expression with scholarly investigation, this framing remains bound to academic norms that privilege text-based, Euro-Western epistemologies and merit review processes. This qualification produces an (as of yet) irreconcilable paradox given that the visual is often perceived as undermining the scientific rigour of social sciences and is relegated to the realm of subjective expression or persuasion (Holliday, 2000, pp. 504–505). Universities, for instance, often uphold objectivity, merit, and rigor as neutral standards of truth, yet these Western ideals have historically functioned to marginalize non-Western forms of knowledge (Carrabine, 2017; Smith 1999). As a result, practices grounded in storytelling, affect, or artistic expression are frequently and prejudicially portrayed as persuasive rather than evidentiary and unrigorous rather than intellectual. Thus, when taken up within institutions that continue to privilege conventional methodologies, research-creation can tokenize art and fail to recognize non-Western ways of knowing as legitimate sites of knowledge production. In contrast, my research-creation project aims to disrupt these binaries by demonstrating that artistic processes can be rigorous, critical, and epistemologically productive. In this way, my arts-based research gets right to the heart of decolonization, as it goes past the *add-ons* and *extractions* by forcing a deeper reckoning with everything. Key to my project is process itself.

In the hybrid term *research-creation*, the emphasis is on research (now expanded to include artistic representation) which leaves intact the “creation” part as a matter of individual and scholastic effort that can be assessed according to standard norms of peer review. In my own work, I wish to emphasize the “creation” part which, I additionally insist, *is* research in itself. In other words, I dissolve the hyphen in this portmanteau, to insist that there are other ways of

creating knowledge. I conceptualize research-creation not as a fixed method, but as a mode of inquiry and a decolonial praxis, one that reimagines the conditions under which knowledge is presented, valued, and constituted. With this project, the hyphen in research-creation does not indicate an additive relationship between research and creative practice. Instead, it signifies their conceptual and methodological overlap, where creation functions as a mode of inquiry and research emerges through the act of making. Furthermore, my research-creation approach has been adopted to be artistically and pedagogically responsive to Indigenous communities and aims to evade the expectations and pitfalls that can arise with assimilating the visual into a textual ontology. Rooted in the processes of engagement rather than the production of a final output, my research-creation approach emphasizes the unfolding and dynamic nature of inquiry where knowledge is not static but emerges through the process itself. The process-based tenet of research-creation allowed me to learn while *doing* and *making* and to proceed from a new point of view thereby encouraging a realization of how my subjectivity is in constant flux. My ways of knowing and being were constantly shifting, particularly through dialogue with Melanie and within the unfolding event of research-creation itself. In this way, I sought to disrupt conventional orientations to research methodologies in significant ways.

The inquiry undertaken in this project does not align with pre-existing, humanist social science methodologies that rely on predefined research designs, processes, and practices. Instead, it moves toward what critical scholar Elizabeth St. Pierre² (2021) describes as a “refusal of

² In this dissertation, I identify the disciplinary locations of all scholars and make positionality visible. It is common practice to situate Indigenous scholars in relation to their communities because knowledge is understood as relational, situated, and grounded in specific responsibilities and relationships (Napoleon, 2013; Robinson, 2020; Wilson, 2008). By also naming settler scholars' disciplinary locations, I refuse the default assumption that settler knowledge is neutral, universal, or unmarked. Instead, this approach highlights that settler scholars, too, speak from particular locations. Naming disciplinary affiliations situates all knowledge producers within specific intellectual traditions and structures of accountability, making visible the ways knowledge production is shaped by institutional and historical contexts rather than emerging from a neutral standpoint.

method and methodology” altogether, rejecting the goal of simply finding or representing something that already exists in the empirical world (p. 163). Rather, research-creation, as enacted here, reorients thought toward experimentation and the creation of new forms of thought and life. This project refuses the SSHRC definition, instead centering collaboration, relationality, and Indigenous ways of knowing. Engaging in a deeply embodied and reflexive autoethnography, informed by Cultural Legal Studies (CLS) and critical pedagogy, and inspired by emerging research-creation practices that focus on collaboration, innovative methodologies, futurity, and perhaps most importantly, on Indigenous epistemologies as a long-devalued way of knowing (ourselves, the land, and the possibilities of being otherwise), my dissertation is an example of research-creation that does not fit neatly within the structures of the academy generally, or of sociolegal studies specifically. But, perhaps it should not. As I continue to reflect on where I was and where I am going, I find that this *moment* of the dissertation is best conceptualized as a point of unknowing and unlearning. I embrace the contingent, the unfinished and, even, the contradictions that have shaped my own journey. But, unlike a traditional dissertation, this journey is not, and cannot be, considered complete and, for reasons that will be explained throughout, I disavow it as a “masterpiece.” What follows instead is an opening, in what I anticipate will be a lifelong engagement with thinking outside the [glass] box.

The Impetus

For some time, I have struggled to integrate the various strands of experience and analysis that have emerged throughout my efforts to address colonial learning practices in the realms of knowledge production and pedagogy into a coherent narrative. These strands encompass my experiences studying and un/learning from diverse epistemologies, and/or

producing visual culture, teaching at the university level, embracing critical and transformative pedagogies, engaging in collaborative research relationships and reading in diverse fields such as SLST, museology, critical curatorial studies, queer theory, gender studies, anti-colonial theory, Indigenous studies, and decolonial scholarship. This dissertation represents an exploration into the relationships between these areas.

My initial motivation for undertaking this dissertation project stemmed from the difficulty I had finding a graduate-level course that aligned with my research interests. In response, I developed an interdisciplinary directed reading course titled "Colonialism and Indigenous Resistance" with Sociolegal Studies Professor Kimberley White, which focused on Indigenous knowledge concerning women and gender. The course readings drew on theoretical perspectives from SLST, anti-colonial thought, Indigenous theory, and gender studies and examined contemporary Indigenous knowledge practices and decolonizing methodologies. As I engaged with the literature, I focused on several guiding questions: What is the history of decolonizing methodologies and how are they evolving? What makes these approaches critical? What is lost when maintaining traditional research structures? How are methods adapted to fit into educational settings? How do different methods complement one another? Key texts, including those by scholar Margaret Kovach (2010) (Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux ancestry from Treaty Four, Saskatchewan and an enrolled member of Pasqua First Nation), Indigenous Education Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou, Māori) (1999), and Indigenous Studies Professor Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) (2008), which critique the extractive and harmful effects of mainstream research practices on Indigenous peoples, served as a foundation for theorizing ethical research practices. Deeply influenced by the numerous examples illustrating how the university, as a colonial institution, perpetuates colonial logic

through policies, practices, and curricula (Masta, 2019), I began to define and view settler colonialism as a structure and to recognize that universities and education cannot be viewed outside the framework of colonialism (Wolfe, 2006). As I came to understand how the university as an institution and stage for gatekeeping practices was so deeply implicated in colonialism, I began to wonder how I could engage in academic research without also perpetuating this same colonial framework.

The directed reading course further served as a point of reference from which to reflect on the experiential knowledge gained during a week-long immersive summer institute on Manitoulin Islands from August 19-25, 2019. Offered by the History of Indigenous Peoples (HIP) Network at York University, the institute brought together undergraduate and graduate students, teachers, knowledge-holders, artists, and Elders to consider the theme of Anishinaabekwe (women's) leadership. Acknowledging the complexity of gender for Anishnaabekwe, we were invited to explore a variety of themes, including "gendered meanings rooted in time immemorial, the binary of the colonial and western world, [and] individuals' own understanding of their being [and how it] can be simultaneously present (or absent) and powerfully reconfigured across time and space" (Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute [MISHI] 2019 Call for Participants, p. 1).

The scope of the institute as discussed with and understood within the six First Nation communities (Aundek Omni Kaning, M'Chigeeng, Sheguiandah, Sheshegwaning, Whitefish River, and Zhiibaahaasing) represented by the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation (OCF) was to learn, teach, and research Anishinaabe ways of knowing and the history of Manitoulin Island and its surroundings from an Anishinaabe perspective. Hosted by the OCF, an Indigenous cultural center, museum, art gallery, and healing lodge, the institute provided transformative learning

experiences where Elders, knowledge keepers, artists, curators and community members gifted participants with knowledge that highlighted teaching and learning relationships that are part of educational spaces in Mnidoo Mnising. Over the course of the week, we learned from Indigenous language speakers and historians about treaties and the significance of wampum belts, we conducted medicinal walks guided by traditional healers in order to learn from the land, and we considered the relationships that had been forged between Indigenous peoples and the land and between Indigenous peoples and colonial settlers. We also visited the OCF museum space, where we learned how curatorial and artistic practices can serve as powerful tools for disruption.

The exhibition on display *CGHI-TWA SHKAAKAMIKWE: Rekindling our Spirit and Connection to the Land*, which showcased works by Canadian Indigenous artists Christi Belcourt (apihtâwikosisâniskwêw / mânitow sâkahikanihk) and Isaac Murdoch (Nimkii Aazhibikoong First Nation), used the display case to critique the very act of display. Central to the exhibition were silkscreen banners created by Belcourt and Murdoch as part of their *Water Is Life* (2017) project, a direct response to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. In alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically those addressing Reduced Inequalities and Clean Water and Sanitation (Fields, 2019), the *Water Is Life* project underscored the urgency of protecting natural resources like water, air, and land through art. Belcourt and Murdoch's (2017) works also served as counter-narratives to those who undermine Indigenous sovereignty, using Ojibway spirit writing and bold protest slogans to advocate for environmental protection (Onaman Collective, 2014). These pieces called on viewers to engage in land and water defense, with the *Water Is Life* symbol, born from the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, evolving into a global emblem for Indigenous water protectors worldwide (Fields, 2019). The banners, made freely available for download, continue to be used by grassroots movements in water and land

protection efforts worldwide (Belcourt & Murdoch, n.d.).

As visitors navigated the exhibit, they were encouraged to touch, handle, and even carry silkscreen banners created by Belcourt and Murdoch (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). This hands-on approach starkly contrasts with traditional museum practices, where objects are typically encased in glass to create a barrier between the artwork and the viewer. According to the museum's curator and the accompanying didactic materials, this display method was designed to engage visitors in a more immersive experience allowing them to physically connect with the art and feel the resistance embodied in the banners lingering from the water fighters who carried them during protests and marches, opposed to being just *artwork*. In this way, the OCF's anti-colonial display strategy serves as a decolonizing approach to exhibition practices, challenging the imperialist histories embedded in traditional curatorial methods.



Figure 1: Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch, *Water is Life*, Ojibwe Cultural Foundation



Figure 2: Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch, Stop Line 3, Ojibwe Cultural Foundation

On the sixth day of the institute, participants were invited to take part in silkscreen printing with Jessie Purcell using designs by Belcourt and Murdoch of the Onaman Collective. By hosting the silkscreen project, the museum further questioned established notions of art and artists. The project gave MISHI participants, OCF workers and volunteers, as well as local community members, including Elders and Indigenous youth involved in a summer cultural revitalization program, a chance to collaborate in reproducing one of Belcourt's and Murdoch's silkscreen images (see Figure 3). The process began with a detailed demonstration of silkscreen techniques, including how to coat, burn, rinse, tape, set up, and print the screens. The clear, step-by-step instructions were invaluable in guiding my own creative process. Working alongside other participants fostered natural conversations and critical reflections, particularly discussions

about the deep connections between water, land, and all living things, as well as the vital role water continues to play in sustaining Indigenous knowledge and culture.



Figure 3: Silkscreen Banner, Ojibwe Cultural Foundation

When my turn came to screen print the *Water is Life* image, I pressed the design onto the cardstock as a Toronto-based Indigenous artist observed. She shared stories about the challenges her community faces in accessing clean water, describing issues such as the inadequate consultation on policies and projects affecting their lands and the contamination of water sources. She emphasized that water is more than a source of hydration; it is deeply interconnected with cultural and spiritual practices, a reality often overlooked in policymaking.

As I finished painting, our conversation expanded, with others joining in to share their perspectives on what *Water is Life* meant to them. This exchange of stories fostered a space for dialogue and mutual learning, bridging the lived experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Providing a powerful example of decolonial praxis, where storytelling served as both a pedagogical tool and a means of critical reflection (Campbell and Wasco, 2000), I came to see

how lived experiences are valuable sources of knowledge that can deepen our understanding of the natural world. These exchanges also underscored how learning often happens in unexpected moments, revealing the small yet impactful opportunities for growth in our daily lives. This rich pedagogical process allowed me to embrace the embodied experiences it offered, shifting my understanding of ‘aesthetics’ from being an exclusive domain of artistic practice to a lens through which to consider the social and political effects of art and creative processes, particularly through my affective engagement with them. Encouraging an epistemological shift from understanding learning as objective, external, and dependent on a mind-body split, this activity facilitated a transformative experience that was experiential, material, and embodied. In the end, we created over fifty silkscreens.

It was during my time at the Institute that I came to know Melanie, a then York University Art History student also participating in the MISHI. It was during the Institute, amidst shared conversations about art, decolonization, and storytelling, that I formed a deep bond with Melanie. Over the week at the institute, our discussions naturally evolved into exchanges on how art and storytelling can serve as vessels for conveying history, identity, and personal experiences.

Developing the Thesis Project

After returning home from the island, and thoroughly engaged by its transformative pedagogy, Melanie and I began strategizing to explore how we might embark on a research journey to mobilize art and storytelling as tools to reveal the limitations of the law’s stories about colonialism and colonial truths. Agreeing to collaborate for my dissertation, our processes included an engagement with artistic and creative practices and a form of liberatory storytelling that began without an agenda or any objectives to make way for what unfolded. Placing stories at

the center of our conversations facilitated reflective, non-extractive, embodied, and process-based learning experiences and created space for relational ontologies. This dissertation, therefore, focuses not on any particular ‘output’ that reflects an individual achievement, instead it elaborates on a more collaborative, storytelling-based process. What Melanie and I developed as a result of our collaboration emerges as a creative intersection taking the form of an immersive, interactive digital story.

Featuring artistic and creative works shared and created throughout our research process, our creation transcends disciplinary boundaries creating a space where art and law converge. This digital output therefore, offers a distinct research-creation project that is not the institutional definition of an individualist written dissertation that draws on the creative arts only as a resource; rather it is primarily focused on the process of research-creation itself and on the ways that the research process can be a pedagogical instrument of unlearning. I am grounded in the personal, the embodied, the critical, the process-based, the storytelling, the conversational, the collective, the humility, and the unlearning that is required if we are to substantively challenge the colonial model. Given our colonial context, this *we* includes and implicates the university, as I insist that unlearning is the most important result of this process.

Informed by the fields of visual arts, anti-colonial thought, and Indigenous theory, this project understands artistic and creative representations, as well as the knowledge found in oral stories as valid methods of theoretical development and knowledge production. Rather than treat artistic production as an add-on, despite contemporary academic standards now treating art as a form of research “on a par” with traditional social science or humanities disciplines, I approach artistic practice as a unique and valuable method in and of itself. In this way, I bring to the field of SLST new possibilities for questioning the ontological status of texts and standard research

practices to make way for the reimagining of traditional notions of what it means to carry out research or a scholastic undertaking.

To bring this embodied, process-oriented, decolonial knowledge sharing and research-creation to the university is to deliberately talk back to the university model of top-down, extractive, positivist education. My project reflects these choices and processes and proceeds in some unfamiliar ways, namely as a form of storytelling that focuses on collaboration rather than discipline-based or even interdisciplinary research. Inspired by the people, stories, and experiences I explored while on the Island, this dissertation does not take a traditional form. Instead, I deliberately challenge the traditional way of displaying knowledge, which is, as per anti-colonial insights, outside the box/cube/case/discipline of traditional academic knowledge production.

Organized through the theme of display, I argue that just as colonial museums and galleries display artifacts to contain them in order to tell a positivist, linear story that perpetually dehumanizes Indigenous peoples, so too do universities, especially via disciplinary knowledge-production. Drawing from critiques of exhibition culture, and primarily the ways in which it reinforces colonial temporal logics, identity, and subjectivities, I show how these practices are analogous to or comparable with disciplinary knowledge and positivist methodologies. Both exhibition displays and university knowledge production are inherently extractive, with both serving as metaphors for and conditions of colonialism. Thus, my dissertation is a distinct way of *displaying* knowledge, in the same way that the new museology challenges the containers of racist and imperialist anthropology.

Breakdown of Dissertation

Chapter 1 begins by examining how knowledge functions as a site of colonial domination, discrediting non-Western ways of knowing and being. I highlight how the colonial subject is not simply excluded from humanity but also constituted through temporal and ontological deferral. This framing underscores the importance of engaging with Indigenous legal orders, including storytelling and artmaking, as resistant practices that can disrupt and challenge colonial epistemologies. I then turn to pedagogy as both methodology and critical inquiry, emphasizing listening and collaboration as core commitments. Building on the claim that autoethnography unsettles unconventional research paradigms and enables process-based knowledge production, I explore museums and galleries as key sites for the legal and epistemic reproduction of colonial power. Next, I analyze visibility as a tool of control and distortion, as well as argue that museums reinforce hierarchies of aesthetic value emboldening colonial authority. By linking the ‘museum glass box’ to academic disciplinary boundaries, I demonstrate how both systems organize knowledge and aesthetics to uphold colonial logic. This analysis brings museums and galleries into legal discourse to highlight how a challenge to these cultural institutions can make way for transgressive practices and for a different legal imaginary. The chapter concludes by exploring how research-creation fosters Indigenous resurgence and supports artistic, creative, political, and legal ways of knowing.

Building on Chapter 1’s analysis of museums and galleries as sites of colonial epistemic power, Chapter 2 turns to how legality itself is reproduced, represented, and resisted through visual and narrative practices. It deepens the inquiry by examining how legal meaning is made within cultural institutions through performance, art, and storytelling. I begin by unsettling state-

centric definitions of law that exclude Indigenous legal orders; this shift enables a broader understanding of legality as affective, embodied, and culturally-mediated. Framing the discussion within CLS, I argue that law and culture are mutually constitutive and that museums operate as legal sites akin to courtrooms in shaping public understandings of law and authority. Through a transdisciplinary approach that draws from law, critical theory, Indigenous and feminist studies, I examine curatorial and display practices as legal and political acts. Turning to legal developments such as *Delgamuukw v. The Queen* and the Gladue Courts, I examine the inclusion and the limitations of Indigenous narratives within colonial legal frameworks. The chapter concludes with an exploration of Indigenous artists, including Kent Monkman, Bonnie Devine, Christi Belcourt, Brian Jungen, and Nadia Myre whose work mobilizes visual storytelling to resist erasure and reframe Indigenous legality. By emphasizing decolonial aesthetics, representation, and storytelling, this chapter demonstrates how cultural institutions can function as legal sites and how creative, collaborative, and transdisciplinary practices open new pathways for engaging legality beyond colonial paradigms.

Continuing the project's focus on how the relationship of legality, representation, and colonial power is co-constituted, Chapter 3 shifts attention to the relationship between law, temporality, and display. It argues that time, like visibility and narrative, functions as a regulatory mechanism within both legal and cultural institutions. By expanding on earlier discussions of storytelling and display culture, I examine how colonial systems impose not only aesthetic and epistemic hierarchies, but also temporal ones through colonial notions of time. This framework is embedded in legal doctrine where Indigenous presence is rendered temporally incongruent with the legal present, which enables an ongoing dispossession and a denial of sovereignty. The chapter then explores museums and galleries as sites where colonial temporal logics are made

visible and material. By investigating into this temporal regulation, this chapter aims to establish how law and display culture work together to sustain colonial authority; it also considers how non-Western, relational temporalities offer critical innovations challenging the presumed neutrality of institutional time.

Chapter 4 transitions from mapping institutional structures to bringing them to life through narrative. I speak in and through a series of autoethnographic stories to convey the affective and methodological dimensions of my research encounters, while reflecting on the diverse, dialogic processes through which knowledge emerges. This shift toward autoethnographic narration is a deliberate decolonial move in method and voice reorienting the form of inquiry toward relational accountability rather than individual ownership. Where earlier chapters examined law, display, and temporality as methods of regulating bodies, histories, and meanings, this chapter underlines process over outcome. In turning from a conventional academic stance toward one grounded in relationality, I foreground collective knowledge-making over independent authorship.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by situating my research within and as an expansion of the field of SLST. By interrogating the role of display across museums, galleries, universities, and legal institutions, I illuminate how colonial knowledge systems are reproduced through visual, textual, sensory, and pedagogical means. Display emerges not only as a metaphor but as a mechanism of control and containment, one that is central to the cultural and legal maintenance of colonial order. At the same time, this chapter articulates how practices of research-creation can serve as sites of disruption and become spaces where colonial timelines, disciplinary boundaries, and institutional hierarchies can be critically challenged and reimagined. Ultimately, this chapter argues that research-creation is not reserved for trained artists or confined to

institutionalized forms. Rather, it can be a transformative practice capable of unsettling dominant systems of meaning, making space for non-Western ways of knowing.

Chapter 1: Making and Unmaking Colonialism: The Production of Knowledge

I begin this chapter with a discussion that unpacks knowledge as a site of colonial domination structured around a logic that discredits other ways of knowing and being. In this analysis, I draw attention to how the colonial subject is not merely excluded from the category of *the human* but is, in fact, constituted through a temporal and ontological deferral always positioning it as *not yet human*. This conversation illustrates the importance of engaging with Indigenous legal orders, including storytelling and artmaking as practices that attempt to resist capture by colonial epistemologies. I then turn to pedagogy as both a methodology and a critical mode of inquiry, foregrounding listening and collaboration as central methodological commitments in my approach. I also articulate how my use of autoethnography aspires to unsettle canonical research paradigms and makes space for the emergence of knowledge through process. Building on this methodological grounding, I examine museums and galleries as critical sites for the legal and epistemic ordering of colonial power; here I describe how these institutions not only shape, but also actively reinforce national narratives through visual regimes. This point of inquiry is vital because it reveals how exhibitions function as publicly sanctioned representations of identity where artworks become components of institutionalized stories to domestic and international visitors.

I then follow with an inquiry into visuality as a mechanism of distortion and control that employs practices of objectification, classification, and aesthetic management to mirror broader institutional mechanisms. Here, I argue that museums and galleries enact hierarchies of aesthetic value that reinforce colonial systems of legitimacy and authority. I then emphasize how colonial power operates through the dual logics of knowledge organization and aesthetic regulation. By later linking the glass box of the museum to the disciplinary boundaries of academic knowledge

production, I demonstrate how these systems function analogously. This analysis not only brings different legal sites including museums and galleries under the purview of law, but also illustrates how exposing and challenging these colonial structures open up space for transgressive practices allowing me to inhabit a different legal imaginary, one more attuned to generative engagements with Indigenous law. Finally, I illustrate how research-creation functions as a form of creative activism as it enables a refusal of rigid disciplinary boundaries while embracing embodied, affective, and emergent dimensions. Drawing on examples of research-creation projects and research creationists who have influenced my own work, I demonstrate how these practices make way for epistemologies rooted in Indigenous resurgence and forms of knowing that are at once artistic, creative, political and legal.

Interrogating Institutional Authority: Universities and Museums as Sites of Colonial Pedagogy and Eurocentric Knowledge Production

Central to this project is a critical interrogation of how legal and cultural institutions reproduce colonial hierarchies by upholding a narrow definition of the human. As Sylvia Wynter (2003) observes, the Enlightenment's formulation of Man and the universal figure of the human is a narrow and exclusionary construct that was born at the intersection of settler colonialism and transatlantic slavery. This figure defined itself through the dehumanization of those it excluded, overrepresenting itself as the human while relegating Indigenous, Black, and other racialized peoples to the category of the non-or not-yet-human (Wynter, 2003, p. 260). Reinforcing this epistemic authority on the figure of Man is the Cartesian mind-body split, inherited from Kant and others, which defines knowledge as that which is discovered by a neutral, dispassionate observer. Within this framework, knowledge itself becomes a site of colonial domination,

structured around a logic that assimilates, absorbs, and/or erases other ways of being and knowing. The embodied, relational, and affective modes of knowing central to many Indigenous and Black epistemologies are thus rendered illegible within dominant academic and legal paradigms. This argument extends from social philosopher Frantz Fanon (2005) and English Professor Saidiya Hartman (2008) who maintain that the colonial subject is not merely excluded from the category of the human; rather, these theorists contend that the colonial subject is constituted through a temporal and ontological deferral—a complete restructuring of being. Critical theorist, Homi Bhabha (2004) names this condition “belatedness,” which he describes as the structural positioning of colonial subjects as perpetually behind Western modernity, never fully sovereign, and never fully present (p. 341).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) parallels these ontologies with an understanding of epistemology where the “realness” of knowledge is understood not as an intrinsic value but as dependent on its location within systems of power, cultural norms, and institutional validation (p. 48). In her discussion of research “through imperial eyes,” Smith argues that scientific research has been implicated in the “worst excesses of colonialism” (p. 55), as it conveys a sense of innate superiority and a goal of bringing so-called progress spiritually, intellectually, socially, and economically into the lives of Indigenous peoples. Research “through imperial eyes” describes an approach “which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold—certainly the only rational ideas—and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life, and of human beings” (p. 56). This ‘scientific’ process, which names and claims Indigenous peoples and their experiences, per Smith, is part of the same movement of dispossession as the “naming and claiming” of Indigenous lands for European invaders (pp. 80–83).

Historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe (2016) similarly critiques the university as a central site of epistemic colonialism. More specifically, Mbembe argues that Western institutions not only privilege Eurocentric methods as universal but also reproduce colonial hierarchies by rendering other traditions inferior. This reproduction is not merely practical, it also functions as an ideological mechanism that erases the foundational violence of colonialism by embedding it within frameworks of progress, civility, and modernity. Sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) takes this argument further in his articulation of “abyssal thinking,” an epistemological division that constructs Western scientific and legal rationality as legitimate while systematically disqualifying Indigenous and non-Western knowledges (p. 45). What Santos calls the “abyssal” not only separates what can and cannot be known, but also structures who is permitted to know, speak, and be heard. In this sense, research has served as a primary tool of colonial ordering via the naming, sorting, interpreting, and regulating of Indigenous life and knowledge within a Eurocentric realm of authority (Archibald et al., 2022; Kovach, 2010; Mignolo, 2017; Simpson, 2014; Sinclair, 2003; Spivak, 1988; Tuck, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

“Abyssal thinking” is not restricted to formal institutions of knowledge-production, such as the school and the university, but can be extended to pedagogical sites like the museum as well. Theodore Low (1942), an influential museum scholar and writer, conceptualizes the varied mandates of museums, including acquisition and preservation, scholarly study, and popular education as interconnected through pedagogy. Through display, museums construct specific narratives and produce resources for learning. These interpretive processes, which involve the assigning and validating of meaning, make up much of the work of museums and could be described as “the constitution of the curriculum of the museum” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 4). Although education and learning have been prioritized in museums, there is no single view of

what this might mean (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). In this research, I see learning in the museum as synonymous with “scholarship” or “knowledge” as educational processes in these spaces are designed to enable the transfer of this learning/knowledge from the teacher (the expert) to the student (the novice) (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, pp. 2–3).

The top-down transfer of information used in museums that treats visitors as empty vessels to be passively filled with information exemplifies educator and philosopher Paulo Freire’s (1969) “banking” concept of education (p. 72). Described as an instrument of oppression, this form of “narrative education” fills students with contents “detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (Freire, 1969, p. 71). The banking concept of education, as described by Freire, can be observed in multiple manifestations within the museum and art gallery, including those discussed in Chapter 3 that illustrate how the display of objects in art institutions reinforces colonial discourses.

This fundamental dissonance between Indigenous and institutional understandings of both objects and time underscores how museum display practices do more than preserve, they also impose epistemic and temporal frameworks that can sever relationships, interrupt ceremonies, and render living traditions inert within a colonial order of knowledge. For example, Museum Studies Professor Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (1992) explains that Blackfoot tradition regards sacred objects as living beings deserving of the same ongoing care and attention one would give to an infant. This relational and ongoing engagement stands in stark contrast to museum protocols that store items in plastic bags, freeze them, or seal them in low-oxygen environments, practices that result in these objects being perceived as “dead” or “dormant” by the communities they were taken from (p. 121). Hooper-Greenhill also emphasizes how the Blackfoot understand time as cyclical rather than linear, meaning historical materials remain part

of the present and future. While museums often present these items as relics of a distant, ‘finished’ past, Blackfoot Elders regard them as part of living cultural practice (p. 121). As discussed in Chapter 3, this colonial temporal logic mirrors legal frameworks that ‘freeze’ Indigeneity in time and in turn deny its presence in the contemporary world. This colonial temporal logic not only underpins museum practice, but also shapes dominant forms of education where knowledge is presented as static, archived, and dislocated from lived experience. By challenging both museological and educational norms, Blackfoot temporalities offer an alternative approach to learning, one that recognizes knowledge as alive, responsive, and rooted in relationship.

In a similar context, Métis artist and Visual Arts Professor David Garneau (2016) describes how colonial curators have exhibited “dead Indianness” through collecting, preserving, and editing Indigenous objects and have actively delegitimized and repressed the possibility of living, contemporary Indigeneity (p. 37). By presenting a European-modernist perspective that frames Indigenous cultures as static or vanished, museums reinforce the narrative that Indigenous peoples are no longer “authentically Aboriginal,” and thus no longer entitled to land, sovereignty, or treaty rights (Garneau, 2016, p. 23). This form of “colonial storying,” as Kovach (2000) calls it, erases Indigenous perspectives and displaces Indigenous meanings from their own life worlds (p. 94). This colonial storying not only distorts the past but also restricts the future, foreclosing the possibility of Indigenous presence as dynamic, evolving, and self-determined. In response, anti-colonial methodologies reject the authority of Eurocentric knowledge systems and make space for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Within this dissertation, collaborative (un)learning and autoethnography emerge as precisely such methodologies: deliberately anti-colonial practices that challenge dominant epistemologies by centering relationality, reflexivity,

and lived experience. Rather than reproducing extractive or objectifying forms of research, they invite researchers—particularly those embedded within colonial institutions—to unsettle their own positionality and engage with knowledge as situated, partial, and co-produced. In this way, the methodologies of collaborative (un)learning and autoethnography do not remain abstract approaches, they shape the dissertation itself, making it a relational site that embodies the collaborative processes and ethical commitments they enact. I see this dissertation itself as a relational site, because it is not neutral, but an expression of our collaboration. Its form reflects our shared decisions about voice, representation, visibility, and circulation. Rather than extracting narrative to serve the goals of a dissertation, I intended to engage in narrative with Melanie through reciprocity, vulnerability, co-creation, and shared analysis. This commitment to entering into conversations alongside Melanie and engaging in reciprocal co-creation shaped the research process, even as it acknowledged that relational engagement does not eliminate the inherent limits of understanding another's experience. While my positionality in this research is reflexive, I understand that no matter how much we come to recognize our biases and positionality, there remains an impossibility of fully knowing the Other (Clough, 1998). Keeping this in mind, I reflexively—as opposed to *extractively*—put Melanie's stories and mine into conversation with each other to create space for mutual learning and the co-construction of meaning.

Following Shawn Wilson's (2008) articulation of relational accountability, I understand this research as generating obligations within the relationship itself. Within Indigenous legal frameworks, relationality structures obligation (Napoleon, 2013; Wilson, 2008); thus, the sharing of stories inherently generates responsibility (Wilson, 2008). If research is ceremony, as Wilson argues, then it is transformative, not only because it produces knowledge, but because it

reconfigures relationships. My own intellectual and creative transformation is one dimension of that ceremony. However, reciprocity also required careful attention to how the process affected Melanie. This emphasis on relational accountability and mutual transformation provided the foundation for the storytelling practices described in Chapter 4, where knowledge and experience were exchanged reciprocally through our story-sharing practice. As discussed in Chapter 4, I incorporated storytelling through the conversational method, which involves a two-way exchange of experience, emotion, and knowledge (Kovach, 2010). Just as Melanie shared her stories with me, I also shared my stories with her, and both she and I benefited from the storytelling process. While the institutional benefits of this project accrue primarily to me, during one of our last conversations in Spring 2025, Melanie described the collaboration as “expanding her creative practice,” “giving her opportunities to explore and reinforce her identity,” and “strengthening her confidence in articulating her work in a way to talk back to law and the university”. Importantly, Melanie expressed that she hopes sharing her personal experiences through this project might help other marginalized people feel empowered to speak back to colonialism and to create in ways that move beyond Westernized understandings of art and creativity. In this context, the forms of gain were distinct, but not unilateral. Both Melanie and I were transformed through the process, her stories shaped the research and deepened my understanding, while the act of storytelling allowed her to explore and reflect on her own identity. Likewise, sharing my experiences contributed to shaping her reflections and perspectives. This reciprocal exchange illustrates how research-creation, guided by relational accountability, becomes a space for co-creation, ethical engagement, and mutual transformation.

Research as Process and Pedagogy as Method

In this research, I theorize pedagogy not only as a conceptual framework but as a methodology. Drawing on Freire's (1969) dialogical and liberatory pedagogy, I understand the process of co-creating knowledge with Melanie as a pedagogical one rooted in mutual learning, critical reflection, and ethical relations. This approach also resonates with Willie Ermine's (2007) concept of ethical space, which describes the space that opens when distinct worldviews meet and commit to engaging one another with respect and accountability. Like Freire's dialogical model, ethical space requires entering relationships without subsuming difference, and creating conditions for exchange that acknowledges historical and structural inequalities while making room for reciprocal understanding. Within my research-creation practice, co-creation becomes such a space, structured by relational responsibility and the possibility of shared transformation. This space is not neutral in the context of erasing history, instead, it is shaped by relationship, knowledge systems, values, and ongoing social and political realities. Dialogue within this space became a reflective process, one that attends to how our thought systems shape relationships and structures of power.

Rather than treating methodology as a set of technical procedures for data collection and analysis, I treat pedagogy as the method—a relational and critical mode of inquiry. In this approach, listening and collaboration are core methodological acts. Pedagogy, in this sense, becomes a method for dismantling the hierarchies between researcher and participant, for making space for story as theory, and for rendering visible the learning that happens through being in relation to one another. This approach challenges dominant notions of neutrality, objectivity, and control by differently positioning research as a transformative, educational process grounded in decolonization, resistance, and dialogue.

Critical pedagogy provides theoretical and practical foundations for rethinking the purpose of education, the nature of politics, and the way in which these two realms are inseparable (Giroux, 1988). As a moral and political practice, pedagogy represents a struggle over knowledge and values as well as agency; central to any notion of critical pedagogy is the understanding that pedagogy is always a deliberate attempt on the part of educators to influence *how* and *what* knowledge and subjectivities are produced (Giroux, 1988). While pedagogy is often understood as the theory and practice of teaching (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 1988; Freire, 1969), my engagement with research-creation expands this definition beyond the classroom to encompass the unconventional, relational, and arts-based ways knowledge may be shared, learned, and co-created. Drawing on Freire's (1970) understanding of education as dialogical and rooted in empowerment and collective transformation, I approach pedagogy not as a unidirectional transmission of information, but as a reciprocal process shaped through encounter. In this framework, Melanie's experiences, perspectives, and stories are not objects of study but active forces in the co-productive of knowledge. Meaning emerges through our dialogue, through the iterative and reflexive exchanges that position us as co-creators rather than as researcher and researched. This approach aligns with the concept of *solidarizarse*, which captures the action-oriented nature of solidarity (Freire, 1970; Gaztambide-Fernández, Brant, & Desai, 2022, p. 252). To solidarize with someone is to enter into their situation and act alongside them to transform the conditions that shape their lives (Freire, 1970, p. 49). What distinguishes solidarity from other relational orientations is its transitivity, as it requires movement, responsiveness, and openness to contingency (Sandoval, 2000). In this way, a pedagogy of solidarity is about solidarizing oneself through action, allowing the relationship to alter one's own understanding and position. Within research-creation, this pedagogy becomes an ethical and methodological

commitment. Arts-based practices disrupt conventional hierarchies or authority and invite co-creation, cultivating relational accountability and reciprocity. Engaging with Melanie's stories is therefore an active, transformative practice. Knowledge-making unfolds as a process of solidarizing, of learning alongside and being changed through that learning. Pedagogy, in this context, becomes an ongoing, ethically grounded practice of co-creation in which both Melanie and I are implicated in, and transformed by, the work.

Unlearning and Autoethnography

Rather than attempting to detach myself from this research in pursuit of neutrality, I intentionally embrace my positionality and embed myself within the work. It is this orientation that gives shape to my dissertation, which unfolds through autoethnography. As a storytelling approach to research (Adams & Jones, 2011, p. 109) and a form of writing that seeks to describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2014), autoethnography challenges canonical ways of doing research (Gergen, 2014). American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1973) argues that the ethnographer "stands above and behind the people and uninvited, peers over their shoulders" (p. 39), which offers a clear message on ethics in autoethnography: with traditional ethnography, the researcher is disengaged from the risk and vulnerability of face-to-face interrelation, thus establishing a colonizing attention of "I" and thereby reifying the power-laden binary of *the self* and *the Other* (Spry, 2016). Moving away from such a researcher position where I am a detached observer of others, I use autoethnography to center lived experiences, embodied knowledge, and subjectivities. I do this by aligning with French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari's (1988) notion of becoming to understand myself as always in a process of

transformation (as cited in Spry, 2016). This process-based approach emphasizes the unfolding and dynamic nature of inquiry where knowledge is not static but emerging through the process.

Added to my interpretation of critical pedagogy is what Sociology Professor Norman K. Denzin (2003) refers to as “performance (auto)ethnography,” a practice that seeks to disrupt and deconstruct cultural and methodological traditions that endorse hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the Other (p. 333), I reposition myself not as someone who seeks to give voice to Melanie or to empower her. Rather, I engage in a process of listening and co-participation that facilitates Melanie’s development of “a sense of [herself] as agentic and having an authoritative voice” (Bishop, 1999, pp. 207–208). This Indigenous Kaupapa Māori approach to research challenges colonial discourses that inscribe otherness. As a participatory mode of knowledge production, it privileges subjectivity, personal knowledge, and non-Western epistemologies. Furthermore, it creates space for a mode of inquiry that unsettles the dialogic *I*, the researcher-self, who is made and remade in co-performance with *the Other* (Spry, 2016).

My approach to autoethnography disrupts positivist research paradigms by rejecting Cartesian dualism and the notion that the subject is separate from and objectively observing an independent object (St. Pierre, 1997). Instead, autoethnography, particularly as conceptualized by Spry (2016), assumes a stance of incompleteness that embraces becoming and intersubjectivity. It is through this dialogic performance that the self and the other come into being not as fixed identities, but as relational, co-constructed presences within the research encounter. Like Freire’s (1969) revolutionary pedagogy, this position values dialogue as a method of sharing and assessing knowledge claims and privileges storytelling, listening, voice and personal performance narratives (Denzin, 2003, 2006). The critical pedagogy I engage with, therefore, rests on an ethics of care and personal accountability through dialogues grounded in

collaboration and experiences of everyday life (Collins, 1990; Denzin, 2006). Building from this ethical stance, I locate myself within the research as a participant and as a meaning-maker. My engagement in this undertaking is not detached or neutral; rather, it is situated within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and shared.

Understanding my own positionality as shaped by my identity, lived experiences, and relationship to Melanie is central to the integrity of this work; it requires me to remain reflexively aware of how power can circulate through our interactions, through the stories we tell, and through the frameworks I use for their analysis. Throughout this research I continuously reflected on my own position, perspectives, and biases. This form of critical reflexivity made way for an openness that disrupted the foundational rules of Enlightenment philosophy: knowledge comes only from a knowing subject separated and distant from the object of investigation (Pillow, 2010). Demonstrating how women's lives are worthy of critical reflection as they offer vital insights into the social world (Campbell & Wasco, 2000), this research highlights the power of storytelling not only as a method of inquiry, but also as a transformative process that disrupts dominant narratives and reclaims voice, agency, and relational knowledge.

From Aesthetics to Epistemics: Visuality Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

While museums and art galleries are typically regarded as institutions outside the domain of law, concerned with aesthetics or narrowly defined cultural ephemera, and distinct from the “hard” social sciences, I argue that they function as critical sites for the legal and epistemic ordering of colonial power. These institutions reflect and actively shape national narratives through visuality, which must be understood not simply as a mode of perception but as an

epistemology and pedagogy. Central to this work is visibility, not merely as a way of seeing, but as an epistemology and pedagogy that determines what counts as knowledge, as well as whose histories are made visible or erased. Before turning to museums and galleries specifically, I begin by briefly examining how the visual itself has operated as a powerful mechanism of distortion and control.

Visual representations, particularly of Indigenous and racialized peoples, have long served colonial projects by objectifying and managing cultural difference. This broader visual logic underpins the institutional practices of aesthetic classification that museums and galleries enact. Crucially, the disciplinary distinctions between high art and “folk” art/artefacts are not simply matters of artistic taste or formal analysis, rather they reflect and reproduce colonial hierarchies of value and legitimacy. As such, the museum becomes a site where the aesthetic is inseparable from the political and where visual culture is mobilized to reinforce—or potentially disrupt—settler colonial logics. In what follows, I explore how these aesthetic classifications function as mechanisms of exclusion and control, in addition to how my project intervenes in this system by engaging visibility as a decolonial mode of inquiry and expression.

The visual has long held power: the power to define, distort, and discipline (Mirzoeff, 2011; Sekula, 1986; Sontag, 1977; Tagg, 1988). As French Marxist theorist Guy Debord (2014) argues in *Society of the Spectacle*, the image is not merely a mirror of reality but a central mechanism through which social relations and power structures are mediated. Visual culture is, therefore, not neutral; it shapes how knowledge, identity, and authority are constructed and maintained. This is particularly true under what visual cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999, 2011) calls “visibility”, a colonial regime of seeing that emerged alongside modernity and serves as a key tool of imperial dominance. Mirzoeff (1999), understands vision as a sensory experience

as well as being structured by systems of knowledge and power. He identifies three central functions of this regime: “classification” (through naming and categorizing), “separation” (as a means of organizing and controlling populations), and “aestheticization” (which normalizes these processes by embedding them in culturally dominant “common sense”)—all of which work to reinforce colonial narratives that position Indigenous peoples as inferior, uncivilized, subhuman and/or premodern (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. xxxi).

This colonial gaze is deeply embedded in colonial research practices. For example, Richard Rorty (1979, as cited in Gergen 2015, p. 4) famously uses a visual metaphor of the “mirror of nature” to describe research practices in ways that resonate with what Mirzoeff identifies as colonial visuality. Through methodologies like double-blind studies, standardized questioning, and large sample sizes, researchers are encouraged to purge any trace of bias in order to keep this mirror steady and unaffected. In this model, research is not only about seeing, but also about “revealing, illuminating, and reflecting truth,” a process that privileges detachment and objectivity over relational or embodied ways of knowing (Gergen, 2015, p. 4). This emphasis on disembodied visual objectivity is mirrored in Western aesthetic traditions and institutionalized in museum practices where the privileging of sight shapes how knowledge is produced and displayed.

The visual thus becomes a way of imagining and reinforcing social and legal realities. Through this lens, aesthetics and visual representation are not merely about beauty or form, but also power and authority. One of the most enduring legacies of colonial visuality lies in the disciplinary distinctions between so-called high art and “folk” art/artifacts. These categories, far from being objective or apolitical, are rooted in Enlightenment and Eurocentric epistemologies that privilege European, elite, and masculine artistic traditions as intellectually and aesthetically

superior (Mirzoeff, 2023). In contrast, Indigenous and non-Western artistic expressions are often relegated to the margins as “decorative,” “primitive,” or “anthropological artifacts.” These aesthetic frameworks serve to contain and delegitimize alternative ways of knowing and being, functioning as a cultural mechanism for the reproduction of colonial authority. My concern, then, is not simply with visual representations of Indigenous peoples, but with the broader aesthetic and disciplinary systems that shape how art is interpreted, valued, and legitimized. By interrogating the hierarchical distinctions between high art and “folk art/artifact,” I aim to unsettle the colonial and elitist foundations of aesthetic judgment and create space for relational, decolonial understandings of creative expression.

Philosopher and semiotician Walter Mignolo and decolonial thinker Rolando Vázquez (2013) show how the visual plays a central role in legitimizing colonial logic by arguing that Western-European philosophy has appropriated the category of the ‘aesthetic’ to reinforce and naturalize colonial power structures. They describe how Western-European notions of the beautiful were presented as universal conceptions, ultimately excluding other expressions of image and symbol-making beyond the Western world from the 17th century onward. Within this framework, images produced by othered peoples were consistently devalued as “idolatry,” “fetishes,” “primitive arts,” and “*artesanía*” (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2013, n.p.). By expounding as normative the idea of sensory pleasure and creative appreciation as a purely Occidental phenomenon, aesthetics has served as a mechanism to produce and regulate sensibilities (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2013).

The concept of ‘the art canon’ is heavily influenced by the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant, which “gives priority to form over context” (Pluhar, 1994, p. 264) and is used to erase the multiplicity of creative expressions in non-Western societies (Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013). By

erasing the purpose and function of a work of art, such as its social and historical dimensions, this aesthetic judgment separates art from “all other practical realms of life and from the theoretical realm” (Pluhar, 1994, p. 171). This Western aesthetic tradition, consistent with a “pedagogy of disembodiment,” detaches art from its emotional, spiritual, and affective dimensions and further entrenches Eurocentric epistemologies that privilege sight over all other senses (Carter, 2016, p. 8). As a result, the Kantian-inspired Eurocentric-colonial body-mind binary is reinforced: intellect (the mind) is legitimized, while the body is relegated to the background of learning and perception (Graham et al., 2016, p. 32).

Moving away from modernist understandings of aesthetics, I take up what Mignolo and Vázquez (2013) refer to as “decolonial aestheSis” (sic, n.p.): a movement that names and articulates practices that challenge and subvert the dominance of colonial and modern aesthetics. The altered spelling “aestheSis” signals a rupture with Western aesthetic theory and draws attention to sensing as a decolonial act. As Mignolo and Vázquez (2013) suggest, this formulation reclaims embodied, relational, and community-based modes of perception that have long been suppressed by colonial modernity. The capital “S” functions as a visible marker of an epistemic disobedience that refuses the aesthetic norms inherited from the European canon and affirming alternative, often Indigenous or Afro-diasporic, ways of sensing and worldmaking. In this context, decolonial aestheSis offers a radical critique and a compelling alternative to the modern/postmodern canon that has worked to colonize the senses as aestheSis insists on the recognition and inclusion of plural ways of relating to the world. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, embracing these frameworks allows for a more nuanced engagement with the visual that is deeply linked to sentiment, affect, and emotion. This perspective opens up space to consider how visual culture can move us and make us feel emotions such as inspiration, admiration,

connection, outrage, revulsion, and anger. In doing so, it challenges the detached, disembodied ways in which the visual has often been theorized by contrastingly emphasizing the political and emotional power of visual practices that emerge from and engage with Indigenous worldviews. Although the Eurocentric epistemic canon has become the foundation of art history, the classification and lionization of “the greats,” such as Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and Rembrandt, has not been an apolitical process.

Rather, this attempt at legitimization reflects values, aesthetics, and ideologies of empire including, whiteness, masculinity, conquest, and linear progress (Dymond, 2019). Art historian Hubert Locher (2012) reminds us that the notion of “the canon” has its roots in religious and legal discourse. For instance, the term canon referred to religious law in early Christianity. This historical entanglement of canon with moral and legal authority is mirrored in the modern art world where “high art” (Locher, 2012, p. 474) continues to carry connotations of legitimacy, refinement, and value, shaped by colonial and patriarchal systems of classification. Locher notes that the casual use of the term “high art,” and the shared cultural understanding it invokes—such as Beethoven’s *Eroica*, *Swan Lake*, or Cézanne’s paintings—reveals how deeply entrenched these distinctions are in our conceptual frameworks (p. 474). The categorizations of “high” and “low” art expose how Indigenous creative expressions have been segregated through racialized, colonial hierarchies (Ames, 2004). Cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter (1992) describes how the distinction between “high” and “low art” is embedded in class and race-based systems of taste due to the fact that “high art” is seen as cultivated and pure and “low art” as backward or impure (p. 241). These divisions also track along class lines, including symphonies versus rock bands, opera versus television, literature versus comic books, among other dichotomies (Bourdieu, 1984).

This division emerged most prominently in Enlightenment-era Europe and the 19th century, eras that coincided with empire-building, scientific racism, and the classification of human societies into hierarchies of civilization (Smith, 1999). “High art” came to be associated with intellectual, elite, and European forms: painting, sculpture, classical music, and ballet; on the other hand, “low” or “folk art” was relegated to the decorative, emotional, functional, and everyday (Wynter, 1992). The art of colonized peoples, including Indigenous art, was often classified as artifact, craft, or ethnographic object and placed in natural history museums rather than art galleries (Newhouse, 2005). These associations have come to define what is considered a “masterpiece” (Fisher, 2000) and reinforce the narrow criteria defining “merit” rooted in Western traditions. The “masterpiece” emerges from the European guild system where apprentices were required to produce a work to be judged by established masters in order to reach this superior status. This system institutionalized legitimacy through exclusivity and gender-bias as women were rarely allowed to participate (Azoulay, 2019). The absence of female or Black equivalents to figures like Rembrandt, Delacroix, Cezanne, Picasso, or Matisse, illustrates the deeply racial and gendered origins of “the art history canon” (Reilly, 2018, p. 150). Treating Indigenous art as ethnographic, craft, or traditional, rather than as contemporary, critical, or conceptual is not merely a curatorial decision, it is a knowledge decision; it reflects a larger epistemic order that reinforces Santos’ (2007) abyssal line: on one side is “Art”; on the other, “Artifact”—with the capitals signifying the generation of clear-cut cultures through these practices of distinction.

The critical insights emerging from the fields of knowledge construction and aesthetic theory have largely developed along parallel but distinct trajectories. Scholars, such as French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (1977), have demonstrated how disciplinary

boundaries function as mechanisms of power ultimately policing what counts as legitimate knowledge while reinforcing colonial, Eurocentric, and hierarchical structures. Meanwhile, Mignolo and Vázquez (2013) have shown how Western-European aesthetic frameworks rooted in Enlightenment ideals and Kantian philosophy have historically privileged certain artistic expressions while marginalizing Indigenous and non-Western creative and artistic practices. My contribution lies in drawing these critiques together to highlight how colonial power operates simultaneously through both: the organization of knowledge—in the academy, the museum, and the gallery—and the regulation of aesthetic value within these milieus. By linking the “glass box” of the museum where Indigenous artworks are displayed, categorized, and represented within colonial visual and cultural logics with the disciplinary boundaries of academic knowledge production, I argue that these systems function analogously. Both locales act as institutional sites that discipline meaning, exclude alternative epistemologies and ontologies, and reinforce colonial narratives through processes of legitimization and marginalization. This research therefore suggests that decolonization must address not only what knowledge is produced, but also how aesthetic practices are framed and valued. It demands a decentering of dominant epistemologies and aesthetics to create space for relational, embodied ways of knowing and seeing that transcend the colonial “glass boxes” of museums and academic disciplines alike.

Practices That Teach: What I Learn From and Through Research-Creation

While the visual has often been employed to capture a specific and loaded figure, particularly that of the “backwards,” “primitive,” “uncivilized,” and “homogenous Native,” it can also serve as a powerful tool for decolonizing the Western-European modern and colonial

imaginary. In the hands of research-creation practitioners, the visual participates in representation without necessarily reproducing asymmetrical power dynamics. Drawing on what Mirzoeff (2011) refers to as “the right to look”, a reciprocal act in which looking becomes an assertion of political subjectivity and collective recognition, resistant looking can disrupt dominant visual regimes and epistemologies of control (p. 2). It is important here to underscore how resistant looking also exposes the power/knowledge nexus that underpins visual representation as it is shown to be historically constructed and contingent rather than natural or neutral. This perspective contributes to a broader decolonial intervention in how modernity and coloniality have framed Indigenous cultures within a reductive metanarrative of Western superiority. Jolene Rickard (2022), an artist, scholar, and member of the Tuscarora Nation, offers a compelling concept of Indigenous visual sovereignty that expands this intervention by theorizing sovereignty not only in political terms but as an intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural mode of self-determination through image-making and visual presence. While Mirzoeff (2011) similarly foregrounds the decolonial stakes of visibility, Rickard's framing offers an explicitly Indigenous articulation that centers visual sovereignty as a strategy of refusal and survival.

Mirzoeff (2011) highlights the decolonial stakes of visibility by emphasizing how the act of looking reveals and reproduces power relations embedded in colonial histories. He frames visibility as a site where the power/knowledge nexus operates and how colonial gazes construct and control knowledge about Indigenous peoples. This “looking back” exposes how visual regimes enforce racialized hierarchies and sustain settler colonial logic. Rickard’s framing of visual sovereignty parallels and extends this argument by offering an explicitly Indigenous response that reclaims the power to represent and control Indigenous images, narratives, and identities on Indigenous terms. Visual sovereignty is thus both a strategy of refusal against

colonial visual regimes and a form of survival that asserts Indigenous agency within and beyond the colonial gaze. Together, these perspectives articulate two intertwined aspects of visual culture. Mirzoeff calls out the systemic violence of colonial visibility, while Rickard imagines a mode of visual resistance that re-centers Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies. The recognition of the power/knowledge nexus inherent in visual regimes creates the imperative for visual sovereignty, as Indigenous communities seek to disrupt colonial control over representation and reclaim their authority to define how they are seen and understood.

As a framework rooted in artistic practice and critical theory, most notably developed within Canadian academic contexts (Loveless, 2019), research-creation refers to research that is conducted through creative practice rather than about it—the artistic process itself is integral to the production of knowledge (Loveless, 2019). What makes research-creation distinct is its refusal of rigid disciplinary boundaries (Loveless, 2019) and its insistence that knowledge is not only cognitive or textual, but also embodied, affective, and emergent (Loveless, 2019; Truman, 2016; Truman, et. al., 2020; Springgay & Truman, 2019). It operates in tension with positivist and empiricist traditions that privilege objectivity, detachment, and replicability, and instead aligns with epistemologies that are relational, situated, and process-based.

Scholars have called for a broader understanding of research-creation, which has evolved in recent years beyond the narrow, bureaucratic framework originally defined by SSHRC (see Preface). This evolution is reflected in a growing body of academic work that positions research-creation not only as method but also as critique, intervention, and imaginative possibilities. Below, I highlight several such research-creationists who have influenced my own project. Their work demonstrates how the university can engage more deeply with experimentation, relationality, and creative exploration. Through these examples, I attempt to illustrate the

transformative potential of research-creation and how it can be mobilized to challenge, resist, and unsettle traditional approaches to research and knowledge production.

The research-creation work of Professor Sarah E. Truman offers one example of how the process-based tenets of research-creation make way for knowledge production that can be incomplete, ongoing, and subject to contingencies. In one project, Truman (2016) facilitated a four-month walking and writing experiment during school hours by using the outdoors as a “walking classroom” (p. 98). Nine English literature students participated in walks where they composed Tanka poems about their experiences in public space, while also engaging with poetry by African American poet Harryette Mullen. A key theme that emerged from these writings—Mullen’s work and that of her students—was an awareness of how race and gender intersect in public space.

Truman’s emphasis on movement, improvisation, and relationality as modes of inquiry has been a source of inspiration for my own research-creation practice. Her work has revealed to me how pedagogy can unfold through shared physical space and how creative expression can serve as both method and data. I was particularly struck by how the act of walking opened up space for critical reflection that was embodied rather than abstract and how the poetic form allowed students to explore complex social dynamics without being confined to rigid academic modalities. These insights encouraged me to think about my own methodologies as similarly emergent and situated or as a space where collaboration and affect shape the process of research. In this way, Truman’s approach validated my commitment to research as lived, relational, and always in progress.

Another project that informs and inspires my work is *Prototypes for Possible Worlds* by History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture Professor Natalie Loveless and Media,

Communications and Cultural Studies Professor Sheena Wilson (2019). This process-based and future-oriented initiative engages arts-based methods to imagine “alternative futures,” bringing together scholarly inquiry and creative practice to “explore questions and express knowledge that is not necessarily accessible or representable in a traditional academic context” (Loveless & Wilson, 2019, n.p.). Through collaboration with artists, activists, engineers, policymakers, scientists, academics, and Indigenous legal experts, this interdisciplinary, multi-year project explores the “complex intersections of climate change and energy transition as interlocking sites of possibility” (Loveless & Wilson, 2019, n.p.). Loveless and Wilson’s (2019) future-oriented approach gestures toward alternative temporalities that resist the colonial containment of Indigenous futures demonstrating how futurity can itself be a site of anti-colonial intervention. *Prototypes for Possible Worlds* (2019) inspired me by modeling how scholarly work can be both rigorously intellectual and imaginative. The scholar-artists’ use of arts-based methods to envision “alternative futures” (Loveless & Wilson, 2019, n.p.) pushed me to think beyond conventional academic frameworks and to embrace speculative, experimental approaches in my own practice. I was additionally intrigued by how their process foregrounds collaboration not just across disciplines, but also across worldviews by incorporating voices of artists, scientists, Indigenous legal experts, and policymakers. This emphasis on plurality and collective imagination reminded me of the importance of co-creating knowledge and how creative processes can highlight insights that traditional academic discourse often assimilates or excludes.

In conceptualizing “space-time outside humanist reproductive logics”, the project resists neoliberal temporalities that render some bodies—particularly Black, queer, disabled, and Indigenous bodies—as “out of time” (Springgay and Truman, 2019, p. 1). Central to their methodology is walking-based research, a process that integrates embodied movement with

critical inquiry and creative engagement. Rather than treating walking as a neutral activity, they position it as a means of disrupting dominant spatio-temporal narratives. Resisting the disciplining of bodies through time—such as the school bell schedule, standardized curriculum, and developmental timelines—participants engaged walking as a way of moving outside institutional time. By lingering, doubling back, and looping, participants invited reflection, emergence, and sensory engagement.

The approach of Springgay and Truman (2019) informs my own project by modeling how research-creation can operate not only as critique, but also as generative refusal that rejects the assumption that the future must emerge linearly from a colonial past. Like Springgay and Truman, I seek to create spaces for speculative engagement that foreground marginalized epistemologies and temporalities. The integration of Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism by Springgay and Truman demonstrates how imaginative practice can reconfigure what kinds of futures are imaginable when grounded in embodied and relational methods. Springgay and Truman's walking-based research exemplifies a process-based methodology that resists the instrumentalization of research as something linear or finalized. Framing walking as research-creation, they move away from data extraction towards a mode of inquiry where the process itself generates knowledge. My own process-based project, similarly, prioritizes emergence, and unfolding. Their work inspires me to think about process as knowledge-in-motion, a form of becoming with the people, and stories I encounter.

All situated under the umbrella of research-creation, the examples above represent distinctly different projects that offer a range of methodological and ethical frameworks for engaging with questions of futurity, temporality, and collaborative knowledge-making. Loveless and Wilson's (2019) *Prototypes for Possible Worlds* and Springgay and Truman's (2019)

Counterfuturisms and Speculative Temporalities challenge normative conceptions of time and progress by foregrounding process-based, speculative approaches that resist colonial and neoliberal temporalities. Taken together, these projects offer diverse but complementary models of creation that emphasize collaboration, relationality, and process-based methods. Each has inspired different aspects of my project—Loveless and Wilson’s interdisciplinary future-making, and Springgay and Truman’s embodied and anti-linear temporalities—and converge to inform a practice that resists colonial narratives of continuity and control by opposingly opening space for plural, relational futures. I contend that research-creation resists easy definition precisely because of its inherently non-replicable, context-specific nature. Unlike standardized methods, research-creation unfolds uniquely in each context and is shaped by the particularities of places, relationships, and moments. However, certain principles consistently emerge as characteristic of this form of inquiry, which are revealed by the similarities of these distinct projects. Grounded in ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political sensitivities toward creating more just and livable worlds, these projects are unified by their process-based, future-oriented, anti-colonial, experimental, exploratory, and iterative approaches. These guiding principles also underpin my own research-creation practice.

Chapter 2: Making and Unmaking Colonialism as a Legal Order

This chapter explores how legality can be reproduced, represented, and resisted through visual and narrative practices with a particular focus on museums and galleries as sites where legal meaning is made and colonial authority is either reinforced or resisted. I begin by unsettling state-centric definitions of law that marginalize Indigenous legal orders by drawing on the insights of legal pluralism (Merry, 1988) and thinkers such as Law Professor Kirsty Gover (2020), sociologists Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey (1998), as well as Law Professor Cassandra Sharp (2016). This reframing allows me to consider how legality, rather than law as doctrine, circulates through cultural and embodied forms, affectivity, and representational practices. Drawing on the work of Merry (1998), Gover (2020), Ewick and Silbey (1998), and Sharp (2016), I approach legality as something constructed through performance, aesthetics, and storytelling in spaces like galleries and museums, not just courtrooms. I then situate my project within the field of Cultural Legal Studies (CLS), approaching law and culture as mutually constitutive and deeply entangled. This framework enables an examination of how legal culture operates beyond traditionally-defined legal institutions and within spaces like the museum, which are often overlooked but are of equal socio-legal significance in many ways.

By adopting a transdisciplinary approach, I move beyond doctrinal law or art history methods alone in favour of integrating tools from law, CLS, feminist studies, Indigenous studies, and critical theory to interrogate how display practices function as legal and political acts. Here, I explain how my transdisciplinary approach rejects a conventional perspective on law and art in favour of one that decenters the state to consider “the ways(s) in which law and legal meaning manifest themselves or come to be represented” (Giddens, et al., 2024, p. 1). Following cultural theorist Dale Mitchell (2024), I use “analogy” as a methodological tool to read visual and

curatorial practices as jurisprudential texts that participate in the reproduction of legal norms (p. 36). This mode of analysis enables me to treat museums not simply as educational or cultural spaces, but also as sites of legal storytelling that work analogously to courts in shaping public understandings of law and authority in relation to Indigeneity. I then discuss how legal decisions, such as *Delgamuukw v. The Queen* (1997), and the implementation of Gladue Courts demonstrate recent efforts within the formal legal system to recognize Indigenous narratives and oral traditions as well as how they remain constrained by the epistemic boundaries of colonial law. As scholars like sociologist Carmela Murdocca (2013) caution, even gestures of inclusion—such as allowing oral evidence or Gladue reports—often reduce Indigenous knowledge to evidentiary status stripped of its cultural and legal layers. This chapter builds on these tensions by exploring how Indigenous stories can exist on their own terms and as law—not evidence.

I then turn to the work of Indigenous artists like Kent Monkman, Bonnie Devine, Christi Belcourt, Brian Jungen and Nadia Myre who mobilize visual storytelling and decolonial aesthetics to reframe Indigenous presence, identity, and legality. I demonstrate how art becomes a medium through which legal meaning is produced, resisted, and disrupted. Their artistic interventions challenge institutional norms and unsettle the epistemic foundations of the Western art canon and exemplify Anishinaabe writer and scholar's Gerald Vizenor's (2008) concept of "survivance": an active resistance to erasure and a continuation of Indigenous stories (p. 85). These examples illuminate the possibility of reimagining not only art and history, but also legality via creative and artistic practices. In situating representation, display, decolonization and storytelling at the heart of this inquiry, I demonstrate how cultural institutions function as legal sites in addition to how transdisciplinarity and creative, collaborative, and process-based methods open new pathways for engaging legality as a decolonial practice.

Shifting from Law to Legality: Creating Space for Indigenous Legal Orders

In what is now Canada, multiple legal orders operate simultaneously within the same jurisdictions, most notably the Canadian legal order and Indigenous legal orders. This coexistence exemplifies legal pluralism, which is defined as “a situation in which two or more legal systems coexist in the same social field” (Merry, 1988, p. 870). When considering Indigenous legal orders, it is important to consider the very definition of law. Conventional definitions often restrict law to state-based sources, such as court decisions and legislation, equating law with state authority (Gover, 2020). Gover (2020) argues that this doctrinal approach is grounded in absolutist notions of sovereignty and systematically denies the independent legal authority of Indigenous peoples. Under this framework, Indigenous law is³ only recognized as “law” if it can be traced back to or authorized by the legislative or judicial branches of settler governments. As a result, Indigenous legal orders are often treated as subordinate to state law rather than acknowledged as legitimate systems with their own sources of authority, interpretation, and application.

In developing a conversation concerning Indigenous legal orders, this research shifts focus from narrowly defined notions of law to the broader concept of *legality*; per Ewick and Silbey (1998), legality refers to “those meanings, sources of authority, and cultural practices that are commonly recognized as legal, although not necessarily approved nor acknowledged by law” (p. 23). Likewise, Sharp (2016) adopts the concept of legality as a set of practices and processes

³ Although the term Indigenous law has become a common way to refer to the diverse legal orders of Indigenous peoples across North America, it can be misleading as it suggests a singular or universal legal system. In reality, each Indigenous society has its own distinct legal order that is shaped by its specific history, cultural practices, and social, political, and economic structures (Gordon, 2019).

that are continually recirculated through culture. Like Ewick and Silbey (1998) and Sharp (2016), I reject the notion of law as an autonomous domain divorced from everyday cultural life. Instead, I approach law as something that is constituted, reconstituted, and subverted through acts of representation, display, and storytelling. My work extends this analysis into the spaces of the museum and the gallery where legal meanings are not only reinforced but also actively reproduced through curatorial choices, visual narratives, and institutional framings. These cultural sites are not secondary to law but are themselves part of its (re)production or what Thomas Giddens et al. (2024) describe as law's "representational encounter" (p. 18). In taking representation seriously as a site of legality, I build on Sharp's (2016) call to locate law within cultural forms and affective encounters through which people experience and contest power.

Cultural Legal Studies: Understanding Law as a Cultural Practice

Geertz's (1983) characterization of law as "a distinctive manner of imagining the real" marks a turning point in how scholars understand the nature of law (p. 232). Rather than viewing law as a rigid system of rules standing above society, this perspective reframes it as a cultural and interpretive practice, as well something embedded in everyday life. To understand this view, it is essential to consider what is meant by culture. In this research, I draw on cultural theorist Stuart Hall's (1997) definition of culture, which he describes as the shared ideas, symbols, and meanings that shape how we think, see, and act. Like Hall, I view culture as linked to power, identity, and communication, and as a process of meaning-making that does not exist in objects or symbols themselves, but in how people interpret those objects and symbols. Building on Hall's view, this understanding of culture as a process of meaning-making provides a useful lens for examining how law operates within society. My understanding of law as grounded in

meaning-making and cultural embeddedness directly challenges the narrow formalism that continues to dominate civil and common law traditions. Civil and common law traditions of narrow formalism elicit a common response from CLS scholars (see, for example Giddens, Crawley, Peters, 2024; Johnson, 2024; Matthews, 2024) who insist that their objects of inquiry, including stories, images, and performances, are juridical in addition to cultural. As the primary field informing and shaping this research, CLS offers a foundational lens for challenging dominant conceptions of law, particularly the idea that law exists as a formal system distinct from culture (Schulz, 2021). CLS disrupts this separation by framing law as a signifying practice: one that both shapes and is shaped by cultural forces (Coombe, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Gover, 2020; Mezey, 2010; Sharp, 2016). Rather than viewing law and culture as parallel but discrete domains, CLS emphasizes their entanglement and recognizes that they are consistently co-constitutive (Giddens et al., 2024). In this research I view “law as culture” and recognize law as constituting and being constituted by social relations and cultural practices (Mezey, 2010, p. 35). In her discussion of law, American legal scholar Naomi Mezey (2010) explains that law’s power is “discursive,” “productive,” and “coercive” (p. 47). Influenced by Ewick and Silbey’s understanding of law and culture—where law is viewed “not so much [as] operating to shape social action but as social action” (as cited in Mezey, 2010, p. 49)—Mezey’s insight becomes highly important in the context of Indigenous law, which is often dismissed or mischaracterized as “cultural” rather than “legal” (Johnson, 2024, p.78).

The framing of Indigenous law as “cultural”, rather than legal, serves to obscure the legitimacy and authority of Indigenous legal orders, rendering them marginal within dominant legal paradigms. Law Professor Rebecca Johnson (2024) explains that Indigenous legal systems are often understood as differing from Western conceptions of law, as their principles are

expressed through culture rather than formal legal institutions. She argues that describing these systems as cultural overlooks the complex governance structures within them. As Johnson notes, artistic and cultural expressions, such as songs and dances, can function as both tradable goods and instruments of legal government and are central to the enactment and understanding of law. Through this research and our engagement with artistic and cultural expressions, Melanie and I approach storytelling and art-making not merely as cultural acts but as forms of legal and ethical engagement. In this context, our collaborative creation and dialogue become ways through which law and governance are expressed, taught, and learned in relational and embodied ways. Intentionally shifting focus away from narrowly defined state law, I engage a broader understanding of legality as a way of engaging Indigenous legal traditions on their own terms, rather than through the reductive lens of colonial legal frameworks.

Adopting a broader understanding of law—one that recognizes legality not only in formal institutions but also in the ways people adapt, deliberate, and reason (Napoleon, 2013), as well as in how they solve problems, make decisions, create safety, and maintain or repair relationships (Hadley & Friedland, 2016)—is essential. This expanded view is particularly important when engaging with Indigenous law, which arises from and is embedded within distinct Indigenous legal traditions (Napoleon, 2013). Such traditions reflect more than rules, they encompass the full spectrum of a society's legal reasoning, responsibilities, and relationships (Napoleon, 2013). Val Napoleon (Saulteau First Nation) (2013), one of Canada's most influential Indigenous scholars, explains that Indigenous legal traditions refer to the protocols, legal processes, and laws of Indigenous societies, as well as their worldviews, aspirations, pedagogies, and practices. These traditions are dynamic, lived, and rooted in specific social and ecological contexts continually shaped by community engagement and collective memory.

In line with this understanding, and drawing from Napoleon's (2013) work, this research uses the term *legal orders* rather than *legal system* to reflect the plural, grounded, and evolving nature of Indigenous law. This distinction is significant as legal order emphasizes law as it exists within broader-than-state, social, political, economic, and spiritual institutions, in contrast to legal system, which refers to state-centered law administered by legal professionals through institutions distinct from other areas of social and political life (Napoleon, 2013). Additionally, this term more accurately reflects the holistic and integrated nature of Indigenous law, which is not confined to formal legal institutions but also deeply interwoven with everyday community life and governance. Following the innovative work of many CLS Scholars (Antaki and Anker, 2024; Giddens, Crawley, Peters, 2024; Johnson, 2024; Matthews, 2024; Mitchell, 2024), I extend this critical lens beyond the courtroom to examine how legal culture operates in less formal but equally influential spaces. As Johnson (2024) writes, we must "explore the legalities laced through sites of popular culture, economy, urban design, and more" (p. 76). The sites of my own exploration are the museum and the gallery, institutions that are deeply embedded in colonial frameworks of classification despite their lack of treatment as legal spaces. These spaces often claim to "represent" Indigenous art, but they additionally enact legalities through curatorial decisions, ownership claims, modes of display, assimilation, erasure, and exclusion. This is one of the central aims of this research: to interrogate the role of the museum not merely as a site of cultural representation but as a site of legal meaning-making.

Representation, Decolonization, Display Culture, Affect, and the Sensory

At the center of this project is a commitment to unpacking the representational dimensions of legality, particularly in spaces like museums and galleries. In this research, I think

with Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation and understand it as a constitutive force and set of processes through which meaning is actively produced, organized and circulated by images, language, symbols, and practices. This is especially important in the context of cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries, where the way things are represented and displayed has direct implications for how law, identity, and sovereignty are understood by onlookers. Additionally, this understanding is vital for analyzing spaces like museums where representation is tied to the performance of institutional authority and nationhood (Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). In this context, I view the museum and the gallery not as neutral spaces of education and culture; rather, I see them as instruments of law and deeply implicated in a colonial logic that defines who belongs, whose knowledge is credible, and what histories are worthy of display (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Napoleon, 2013; Newhouse, 2005).

As I argue in my recent work, museums and galleries are overlooked as legal institutions that engage in citizenship-building and colonial praise to reinforce dominant narratives of state sovereignty and identity through display culture (Richer, 2024). The display of potlatch regalia functions as a pertinent example. Anthropologist David Howes (2024) highlights the potlatch ceremony as a deeply affective and multisensory legal institution where songs, dances, and gifts did more than symbolize relationships as they enacted and reaffirmed legal and social bonds. Thus, items tied to the potlatch are not merely artistic or ceremonial, they enact legal obligations, kinship ties, and governance systems (Fisher, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Newhouse, 2005; Smith, 1999). As both legal and aesthetic practice, the potlatch was a space where law was felt, heard, seen, and performed: a "total sensory phenomenon" (Mauss 1967, as cited in Howes, 2024, p. 57). Yet, when placed behind glass cases, stripped of context, and framed as *artifacts*, the legal significance of these Indigenous vestments is erased. As Johnson (2024) reminds us, the

potlatch was not outlawed because it lacked seriousness, but precisely because it posed a legal challenge to the authority of the colonial state. The Canadian state viewed potlatches through a colonial lens by framing them as economically irrational and socially disruptive, which led to their criminalization from the late 19th to mid-20th century (Loo, 1992). This criminalization reveals how legal suppression also employs affect to deny the emotional, sensory, and relational dimensions of Indigenous legal orders. Therefore, as museum displays decontextualize potlatch regalia by failing to acknowledge how relevant items are constitutive of legal orders—and hold significance beyond their aesthetic value (Napoleon, 2013)—it may be contended that these spaces engage in reductionist practices that perpetuate narrowed, limited, and incomplete representations of Indigeneity, more specifically Indigenous legality. This is also of significance when understanding the museum as a pedagogic site since the conclusions and futures of Indigenous legal histories, realities, and possibilities that patrons may draw are bound by limited representations and unseen politics. The challenge is thus not only to recognize Indigenous law, but to understand how institutions like the museum shape the boundaries of *what* is acknowledged as law. To do this, I highlight the affective, the sensory, and the embodied dimensions of legality—the elements of law often dismissed as extra-legal—which the potlatch demonstrates are central to how law is practiced, experienced, and transmitted. This raises broader questions about how legality itself is constructed and mediated through the senses across a range of legal domains where touch, sound, scent, and affect shape what counts as evidence, harm, and truth.

Across diverse cases, law emerges not as a disembodied system of reason but as a deeply sensory regime, one that sees, hears, smells, touches, and feels in ways that are politically charged, institutionally shaped, and culturally motivated. Drawing on examples from tort law,

environmental litigation, landlord-tenant hearings, and criminal prosecutions, it becomes clear that law does not simply process evidence, rather law actively constructs sensory meaning. For example, in a tinnitus liability suit, jurors were asked to listen to a sound simulation of the plaintiff's suffering, which may be understood as a request for the transformation of their legal reasoning to move from a space of rationality to a site of affectivity (Feigenson, 2016). In use-of-force cases, such as the killing of Sammy Yatim, courtroom analysis of sound, including gunshots, shouts, and silence demonstrates how audio becomes central to judgement, yet is often considered subordinate to visual narratives because sound is culturally and legally seen as more subjective, and more open to interpretation (Chapman, 2020).

Furthermore, in landlord-tenant disputes, complaints about odour reveal how law translates smell into moral and cultural codes that disproportionately target racialized and working-class tenants (Buhler, 2016). In reflecting on these examples, the courtroom can then be understood as a space of sensory translation where feelings, bodies, and perceptions are later filtered through legal logics that often erase or absorb the senses' initial complexities. Therefore, these cases reveal how law disciplines and relies on the senses not as neutral conduits of truth, but as sites of meaning-making, subjectivity and personal influence and therefore void of the formality and rational positivist researchers aim to attribute to law. Nevertheless, theorists—like Art and Archeology Professor Tina Campt (2017)—remind us that we can “listen to images” and sounds to attend to what is quiet, suppressed, or unresolved elsewhere—outside the venues of traditional law. Through my creative, artistic, and collaborative practices, I respond to law not just with critique, but with alternative forms of attunement and witnessing that foreground lived experience, storytelling, as well as artistic and creative expressions as ways of knowing, refusing

and reimagining law. CLS, thus, becomes not just a method of analysis but a space of felt engagement with legality's material and imaginative force.

In drawing on the affective dimensions of legality, my research shifts legality away from an exclusive focus on written doctrine and toward a recognition of its grounding in lived, sensory experience (Howes, 2024, p. 57). These understandings challenge the assumption that law operates purely through reason and alternatively reveals how legal authority is sustained through its ability to engage, direct, and absorb public emotion (Maroney, 2011; Shaw, 2021). To “recognize law in its encounter,” as Giddens et al. (2024) put it, is to treat representation as a legal act and as something that constructs legality itself. My research treats visual representations as sites where legal meanings are reinforced and resisted. In this context, representation is not only a medium of colonial power, but also a site of decolonial refusal. By critically engaging representational practices found within cultural institutions, I open space for recognizing and responding to Indigenous law on its own terms as a living system of governance, story, and relation—and not as an object of state recognition. In this way, this project is committed to decolonization through a fundamental reorientation of power, knowledge, and space—and not symbolic gestures of inclusion or reconciliation, (Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). One of the ways in which I do this is by shifting from a *research question* to a *line of inquiry*.

Traditional university standards tend to valorize the research question as a fixed, clearly defined problem to be solved, which reinforces an epistemology of discreteness, stability, and extractability by those trained to “see” its applicability. This approach reflects a more traditional, linear approach to research that often assumes the researcher's authority, a fixed methodology, and a clearly defined research question posed from a neutral standpoint. Such models are often aligned with a desire for prediction, control, and generalizability; these models can constrain

what can be known and how (Camargo-Borges, 2017). As Transformative Studies Professor Celiane Camargo-Borges (2017), notes, traditional research questions are often either too broad or too narrow and limit depth and shaping of what is considered valid inquiry. To counter this, I intentionally depart from the rigidity of a fixed research question. Instead, I follow a line of inquiry rooted in critical pedagogy and anti-colonial thought: one that considers the potential to decolonize institutional sites of power—including, the museum, the gallery, and the university—through challenging imperialist histories of curatorial and exhibition knowledge, and their implications for knowledge production more generally.

Kovach (2000) describes decolonization as a process aimed to create space within research and academia for Indigenous perspectives without dismissing, erasing, or mocking Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing. Decolonizing, in this context, is not about replacing one system of knowledge with another; instead, it is about unsettling dominant Euro-Western frameworks and making way for culturally grounded epistemologies. Aligned with this understanding, my open-ended process reimagines the possibilities of storytelling and explores how engaging with Indigenous legal orders can serve as a pedagogical approach rooted in Indigenous legal processes. As an intervention aligned with epistemic disobedience, this process prioritizes knowledge systems suppressed, erased, absorbed, and/or assimilated under colonialism. By approaching knowledge not as something to be discovered or extracted but as something emergent and relational, questions arose—and continue to arise—organically through my collaboration with Melanie. This approach deliberately decentered the role of the researcher as an expert to make space for a transformative process in which both of us entered the work as co-learners and co-creators. In this context, Melanie is not a subject from whom knowledge is drawn, but a co-creator of meaning. Our collaboration does not aim to teach Melanie or to

narrate her story on her behalf; rather, it centers a process of mutual engagement where both of us bring our own insights and lived expertise into a shared space of critical reflection. This method aligns with Freire's (1969) concept of *conscientização* (p. 10), which highlights the development of critical consciousness through the recognition of and action toward social and political contradictions to emphasise how knowledge is constructed in relationship instead of being externally found.

Through research-creation, I reimagine the possibilities of storytelling and engage in storytelling not as an aesthetic or supplementary practice, but as a relational method of legal and cultural sharing (Manley-Casimir, 2012). In this way, storytelling allows Melanie and I to move beyond the boundaries of state law and institutional authority into a space where law is lived and performed in ways that are embodied, land-based, and grounded in community (Borrows, 2010; Napoleon & Friedland, 2016). As Robinson (2020) argues, Indigenous forms of expression, such as song, performance and narrative, are often illegible to settler institutions that privilege textuality and objectivity. In this context, this project does not aim to make Indigenous legality legible to the state or university. Instead, it strives to support and make way for non-state centered legalities, ones that emerge through art, memory, narrative, and collective witnessing (Coulthard 2014; Johnson, 2024; Robinson, 2020). This is where decolonization lives, refuses containment, and makes space for Indigenous resurgence on its own terms.

Building on the understanding of representation as a constitutive and political act, I examine display culture as the institutional practice through which visual and material representations are organized in institutional art spaces in order to explore how these practices actively reproduce and reinforce meanings in ways that uphold colonial identities, legacies, experiences, and historical narratives. As an epistemological practice, display culture is never

neutral or apolitical; rather, it participates in the production and regulation of knowledge, shaping how history, identity, and legality are understood and experienced (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Within settler colonial contexts, display culture plays a crucial role in reinforcing colonial authority by representing Indigenous cultures as static, ahistorical, or ethnographic, which renders them objects of study rather than as contemporary, living, legal, and political orders (Phillips & Brydon, 2011; Simpson, 2014).

Critiquing display culture becomes a necessary part of decolonial legal inquiry, especially when attempting to reimagine representational practices that support Indigenous resurgence, relational accountability, and “decolonized legal pluralism” (Napoleon, 2013, p. 239). The museum, the gallery and other colonial institutions have mobilized display tactics that serve to decontextualize non-Western cultural expressions and, in turn, reify hierarchies of knowledge and taste. Yet precisely because it is a mode of influencing perception, display can also function as a site of radical transgression, especially when Indigenous artists and curators subvert the logics of the institution through refusal, disruption, or re-storying. In this way, aesthetics and visual art can become entry points for thinking *against* dominant legal and representational normativities as well as tools for the disruption and unsettling of coloniality; it is in the crossing of this threshold that this research is located.

In situating my research within the field of CLS, I draw on the concept of analogy as both a legal logic and a methodological approach. As Mitchell (2024) suggests, analogy enables us to read cultural artefacts not as passive objects of aesthetic or historical curiosity, but as jurisprudential. This framework is also key to my project, which treats museums not merely as cultural institutions, but as legal spaces where representations are curated in ways that mirror legal reasoning, particularly through mechanisms of appropriation, standardization, education,

assimilation and erasure. In this way, CLS enables a critical engagement with museum practices as forms of institutional power that are analogous to legal violence echoing the harms perpetuated by other colonial systems, such as residential schools. By extending CLS into the space of artistic and curatorial production, my research contributes to a growing body of work that challenges the separation between legal and cultural spheres and opens up new possibilities for reading and resisting law in its representational encounters. By interrogating display and visibility as modes of knowledge production, I explore their decolonial possibilities. Key to these possibilities is transdisciplinarity

Moving from Interdisciplinarity Toward Transdisciplinarity

Transdisciplinarity, as a decolonial orientation, invites forms of knowledge production that are not bound by textual authority or disciplinary gatekeeping (Heywood, 2017; Leavy, 2011; Schulz, 2021). This becomes an important intervention when applied to display and visibility, which have long been constrained by disciplinary norms in art history, anthropology, and museology. By working across and beyond these fields, transdisciplinarity enables us to reimagine display not as a neutral presentation of knowledge, but as a contested and generative space where meaning is constructed through relational, affective, and sensory engagements. In this way, display becomes a site where colonial narratives can be both exposed and challenged and where art, especially contemporary Indigenous and decolonial art, functions as a disruptive force that unsettles dominant epistemologies. Rather than reinforcing institutional authority, art can make way for non-Western knowledge that resists containment, challenge disciplinary classifications, and propose different ways of knowing and being. To do this, it is necessary to move from interdisciplinarity toward transdisciplinarity.

Following theoretical physicist Basarab Nicolescu (2018), I take up transdisciplinarity as a form of education that accounts for all dimensions of the human being: material, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. This requires not only new content, but a rethinking of form. In my research, form is not just about structure (i.e., chapters, methodologies, or citations), it is also about the logics and aesthetics that govern knowledge production. The insistence on a particular “academic form” often reflects colonial assumptions about legitimacy, truth, and objectivity. If research is to be decolonial and transformative, it must not only challenge disciplinary boundaries but also question the very formats through which knowledge is expected to appear. Without doing so, even the most interdisciplinary work risks becoming an empty gesture merely paralleling art and law without allowing either to fundamentally change the other through intersection. Transdisciplinarity, in my view and undertaking, is not simply a blending of fields, but a refusal of disciplinary boundaries altogether; it enables a methodological space where education, storytelling, art, ethics, and theory can co-exist without hierarchy. This aligns with Smith’s (1999) call for decolonizing methodologies and with American scholar and activist bell hooks’ (1994) vision of engaged pedagogy as both aim to resist the abstraction and elitism of academic knowledge and insist on its connection to the lived, the embodied, and the collective.

The term transdisciplinary was first theoretically conceptualized in the early 1970s by Jean Piaget and Erich Jantsch respectively; the scholars understood it as a process involving the integration of multiple disciplines to address complex problems that exceed the scope of any one field (Leavy, 2011, p. 24). While this foundational work emphasized structural integration across disciplines, more recent perspectives have shifted focus toward the relational, conceptual, and epistemological dynamics that distinguish transdisciplinarity from other forms of boundary-crossing scholarship. One helpful way to conceptualize this distinction is through Austro-British

philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of *family resemblances* as taken up by researcher Owen Chapman and Communication Studies Professor Kim Sawchuk (2012). They explain that Wittgenstein argued that concepts often share overlapping characteristics without being reducible to a single defining essence. Using the example of games, which include board games, card games, and sports, he shows that while no single feature is common to all, each game is connected to the others through a crisscrossing network of similarities.

Applied to disciplinary formations, this metaphor helps clarify the difference between interdisciplinary and transdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity often involves the collaboration of two or more distinct disciplines, such as law and sociology, to study a shared issue while each maintains its disciplinary boundaries and assumptions. Transdisciplinarity, by contrast, moves beyond those boundaries altogether to allow for a kind of conceptual hybridity to emerge. For example, in a transdisciplinary inquiry into Indigenous art in museums, the research might not simply combine art history and legal studies, but would instead blur those categories altogether, recognizing artistic practices as legal acts and treating visual culture as a site of jurisprudential meaning. This allows for a mode of analysis that is not tethered to any one discipline but instead makes way for a process shaped by the knowledge practices from distinct but linked communities. In this way, transdisciplinarity resists containment and allows for forms of inquiry that are emergent, situated, and responsive to lived realities (Leavy, 2011). While much of my engagement with CLS so far has focused on how the field investigates the various way in which law is represented, performed, and displayed, CLS also demonstrates that legal meaning cannot be fully understood through legal doctrine or conventional cultural analysis alone (Coombe, 2001; Giddens, et al., 2024; Johnson, 2024). This insight underscores one of CLS's core principles: transdisciplinarity. CLS does not merely apply cross-disciplinary methods, rather it

deliberately challenges and dissolves disciplinary boundaries that uphold colonial legal orders. Instead of treating law as a self-contained domain, CLS insists on engaging with it through its entanglements with aesthetics, cultural production, storytelling, and performance. This is not a mere additive process where art is brought “into” law, but it is a transformative approach that redefines what qualifies as legal knowledge and where law is enacted. For my project, transdisciplinarity is a pathway toward decolonial critique that enables me to treat Indigenous art and storytelling as deeply legal forms of discourse. In this dissertation, transdisciplinarity is not just a method of borrowing tools from other disciplines, it is about dissolving strict disciplinary boundaries to develop new ways of seeing law as a cultural practice.

This transdisciplinary lens also makes possible a deeper engagement with storytelling, not as supplementary or anecdotal, but as a method of legal reasoning, a mode of knowledge transmission, and a site of legality. Within this framework, Indigenous stories are not simply cultural artifacts to be interpreted through legal doctrine, but practices of lawmaking embedded in lived experiences, memory, and relationality. By moving across disciplinary boundaries, I am able to situate storytelling as a method and a way of doing research as well as a site where law is practiced, performed, and resisted. This shift is especially important in settler-colonial contexts where oral histories have historically been dismissed or marginalized in legal proceedings and public discourse. In what follows, I take up the legal and epistemological significance of storytelling and oral history to highlight their significance within Indigenous legal orders and to critique the structures that claim to be inclusive.

Storytelling and Oral Evidence

The legal status of Indigenous legal traditions can be most effectively understood through the framework of customary law. Unlike prescriptive legal codes, customary law emerges from lived experience and is shaped by the relationships, responsibilities, and shared understandings within a society (Borrows, 2005). The very term customary, like Indigenous, signals a legal order that is distinct from the formalized, transplanted systems imposed through colonialism (Borrows, 2005). It reflects a legal framework grounded in place, community, and continuity, rather than in state-centric authority (Borrows, 2005). In the early stages of colonization, when imperial powers held limited control, Indigenous institutions operated autonomously; however, as colonial authorities sought to expand the reach of state law, they adopted various strategies to incorporate legal traditions. These included the codification of customary law, the application of Indigenous or unwritten customary law by state courts in ways analogous to the common law, and the establishment or recognition of ‘customary’ courts overseen by local leaders (Tamanaha, 2008). This categorization relegated Indigenous legal traditions to a secondary and less authoritative status, which made way for state laws to supersede them.

Despite this apparent inclusion, the scope of officially recognized customary law was typically restricted to family law matters, minor criminal offenses, disputes deemed unique to Indigenous contexts, and other relatively minor issues (Tamanaha, 2008). Moreover, repugnancy or supremacy clauses were frequently enacted to invalidate local laws and customs deemed offensive or incompatible with colonial norms (Tamanaha, 2008). In many cases, state courts retained final authority over Indigenous legal institutions (Tamanaha, 2008). Consequently, Indigenous legal traditions were not treated as binding legal orders, instead they were reframed

as flexible customs subject to state interpretation and control. This development reflects the rise of legal centralism, the ideology that “law is and should be the law of the state, uniform for all persons, exclusive of all other law, and administered by a single set of state institutions” (Tamanaha, 2000, p. 299). Thus, by declaring Indigenous legal systems “custom”—and not independent legal systems with inherent sovereignty—the ascendancy of state laws, including the Canadian legal order, was propelled by discursive and ideological forces undermining Indigenous law’s sanctity.

By reclassifying Indigenous law as mere custom, the colonial state was able to assert its dominance and position colonial law as the legitimate legal authority. This categorization placed Indigenous law outside the framework of formal state law and often treated it as informal, non-binding, or even irrelevant in legal settings (Tamanaha, 2000). However, in recent decades, particularly following key legal decisions like *R v. Sparrow* (1990) and *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997)—and with the growing recognition of Indigenous rights under Section 35 of the Constitution Act 1982—there has been a gradual shift toward acknowledging the legitimacy of Indigenous legal traditions (Borrows, 2002; Napoleon, 2013; McNeil, 1997).

A key feature of this ongoing shift is the increasing recognition of oral traditions and storytelling, not as mere cultural expressions, but as foundational sources of law, governance, and historical record (Napoleon & Friedland, 2016). Consequently, courts are more frequently confronted with the question of how and to what extent can Indigenous law be meaningfully recognized and implemented within the Canadian legal system. Yet, this engagement is far from apolitical. Indigenous legal orders often challenge the very power structures that the Canadian legal system is designed to uphold and expose the limits of a legal framework still grounded in colonial assumptions (Murdocca, 2013). For example, the legal system’s enduring privileging of

written over oral forms of knowledge does more than exclude and marginalize Indigenous epistemologies, it also systemically reinforces colonial perspectives (Coulthard 2014; Tully 1995).

One of the most pressing critiques of Western legal and academic systems lies in their reliance on text-based forms of knowledge, which have long dismissed or devalued oral traditions, song, and storytelling as illegitimate or unreliable (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Kovach, 2010). This privileging of written documentation not only marginalizes Indigenous ways of knowing, but also reinforces a broader colonial epistemology that equates legitimacy with textual permanence and Eurocentric rationality (Smith, 2012; Venne, 1997). Yet, Indigenous legal traditions often rely on oral narratives, ceremony, and song as vehicles for encoding and transmitting law, governance, and relationships to land (Borrows 2002; Napoleon & Friedland 2016; McCaslin & Breton, 2008). Recognizing these forms as valid is not only a question of inclusion, but also of epistemic justice. This tension comes into sharp focus in *Delgamuukw v. The Queen* where courts were forced to confront the evidentiary status of oral history and in the development of Gladue Courts that attempt to accommodate Indigenous life stories and structural context in sentencing decisions—albeit within colonial constraints. These legal moments illustrate both the limitations of Western epistemologies and the transformative possibilities opened by storytelling-centered approaches to law and justice. The next part of this chapter thus attends to these legal ways of knowing and to the possibilities afforded by knowing otherwise.

Legal norms have long been tethered to text-based knowledge regimes, which are central to the administration, bureaucratization, and regulation of colonial life. The interaction between textual authority, legal form, and colonial power continues to shape whose knowledge is seen as

credible and whose is dismissed. Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1990) describes how bureaucratic cultures are saturated with texts, such as passports, birth certificates, parking tickets, and application forms, which act as mechanisms through which institutions organize, authorize, and discipline everyday life in industrialized societies (p. 209). These texts, though, are not neutral administrative tools; rather, they are constitutive of the social relations they encode. This mode of inscription works to organize time, experience, and authority and define what counts as knowledge and what is relegated to the margins.

Historically, the elevation of text as the primary mode of legal reasoning can be traced back to early modern Europe. During the Protestant Reformation, legal and religious authorities rejected visual imagery and associated it with sensuality, error, and corruption. As Professor of Law and Society Linda Mulcahy (2017) explains, while Latin-based legal texts demanded linear, disciplined reading, images were viewed as “anarchic” because they could be entered at any point in the visual field (p. s122). This binary between image and text served epistemological and political purposes. The rise of “legal science” (Mulcahy 2017, p. s117) and the formation of early law schools helped solidify this hierarchy by positioning ancient manuscripts and textual authority at the center of legal education and marginalizing visual representation. This dynamic persists today as Western legal and educational systems continue to prioritize text-based reasoning and offer little training in how to interpret or critically engage with images (Sherwin, 2018). As Smith (1990) notes, this privileging of textuality reflects a broader ideological commitment to viewing written forms as inherently rational and authoritative, yet this commitment also constrains legal thinking and limits its capacity to engage with non-textual forms like oral histories and storytelling.

The legal system's treatment of visual evidence reveals deep anxieties about the relationship between perception, truth, and authority. At the heart of this lies a commitment to an epistemology that privileges text, rationality, and proceduralism—an epistemology that must manage, contain, or domesticate the disruptive potential of visual forms. As several scholars have argued, photography's admission into the courtroom was never coincidental; instead, it was shaped by a legal logic that sought to assert control over how images could signify. Legal scholar Jennifer Mnookin (2013) famously illustrates this in her analysis of *Cowley v. People* (1881) where a photograph was accepted only as *demonstrative evidence*—proof like maps or diagrams that contextualize other findings—as opposed to *substantive evidence*. In this case—among others—this legal classification worked to tame photography's perceived threat, namely its supposed revolutionary promise of veracity by relegating it beyond the judge's interpretive authority. In this way, law participates in a colonial visual regime that renders only certain kinds of knowledge legible while discrediting or excluding others. Legal visibility, as independent scholar and curator LaCharles Ward (2021) explains, is shaped through a “prism of white supremacy” (p. 367), which is best understood as a system of interpretation that structures what counts as evidence and whose images are deemed credible. This regulatory framework extends beyond the courtroom and conditions public understandings of race, violence, and authority through the selective legibility of visual media.

Crucially, as sociologists Sarah Brayne, Karen Levy, and Bryce Clayton Newell (2018) remind us, images do not “speak for themselves”—they are always inserted into discursive and institutional contexts that shape how they are seen and what they are allowed to mean. Similarly, in the realm of copyright law, American legal scholar Rebecca Tushnet (2011) argues that legal discourse continues to misapprehend the nature of the visual by alternating between treating

images as transparent reflections of reality or as entirely opaque and inaccessible to analysis. In both cases, the law fails to grasp the visual as a site of meaning-making in its own right. Taken together, these insights reveal that law's engagement with images is not just about evidentiary standards, but about sovereignty over truth itself. Visuals threaten the legal order not because they lie, but because they offer alternate routes to truth that challenge the authority of the judiciary, the supremacy of text, and the logic of colonial visibility that undergirds both.

Signalling the tenacity of the written word in legal thinking, the original ruling of *Delgamuukw v. the Queen* (1985) required the plaintiffs to demonstrate that their ancestors constituted an “organized society” that had continuously and exclusively occupied the disputed territory since before the declaration of British sovereignty (Howes, 2024, p. 64). The Wet'suwet'en chiefs and their Gitksan counterparts supported the plaintiff's claim through direct testimony of their connection to the land—a sacred oral tradition. This included the *kungax*: spiritual songs and stories that formed the basis of their authority over specific territories and peoples (Howes, 2024, p. 64). Discussing *Delgamuukw v. the Queen*, Dylan Robinson (2020) focuses on the contestation of song within the court proceedings, more specifically the moment when counsel for the plaintiffs asked Mary Johnson, Gitksan hereditary chief Antgulilbix, to “perform a limx oo'y (dirge song) associated with her adaawk or oral history” (p. 41). Robinson explains that although the court admitted some cultural evidence, it initially privileged written documentation over Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en oral tradition given the judge's overt agitation. Conflating the song with “performance,” Justice McEachern refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the limx oo'y as admissible evidence (Robinson, 2020, p. 44). This refusal underscores a broader epistemic divide between traditions transmitted orally and those grounded in writing (Howes, 2024, p. 65). Crucially, McEachern's view failed to account for the fact that

in Wet'suwet'en tradition these narratives were authenticated each time they were performed in the Feast Hall, a vital site of legal, political, and ceremonial life (Howes, 2024, p. 65).

Justice McEachern's rejection of the song as testimony also contributed to his broader characterization of Indigenous life as "nasty, brutish and short," thus reinforcing a Western myth of the so-called state of nature (cited in Howes, 2024, p. 66). While the court purported to include Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en oral tradition, it ultimately privileged the written word in several specific and systemic ways. Firstly, by refusing to treat the *limx oo'y* as admissible legal testimony, Justice McEachern equated it with performance or spectacle rather than recognizing it as a legitimate vehicle for conveying historical and legal knowledge. This move exposed a bias: while oral traditions were nominally admitted, only those resembling or that could be translated into written testimony were granted full legal weight. Secondly, the rules of evidence remained fundamentally shaped by Western legal epistemologies, which value linearity and textual documentation. Oral traditions like those expressed through song, ceremony, or relational storytelling were evaluated against the criteria of written discourse, including consistency, verifiability, and objectivity; therefore, when the modality and intricacies of oral knowledge did not conform to these standards it was sidelined. Thirdly, the court's normative framing of knowledge anchored in written documentation's commonplaceness and oral history's deviation meant that even when oral evidence was heard, it was not given equal epistemic or legal status. This hierarchization is underpinned by a colonial logic that positions writing as a marker of civilization and legal sophistication, while casting oral cultures as pre-modern. Finally, the court's reliance on colonial legal frameworks prevented genuine engagements with Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en legal orders. Instead of recognizing the Feast Hall as a legitimate legal institution where laws are validated through repetition and collective witnessing, the proceedings measured

Indigenous knowledge through Western legal norms that privilege documentation over performance. In this context, while the court made gestures toward inclusion, its underlying structure remained text-centric, thereby reproducing colonial hierarchies of knowledge and denying the full legal authority of Indigenous law.

In contrast to the lower court ruling, however, the Supreme Court of Canada's ruling in *Delgamuukw v. The Queen* emphasized the importance of giving proper weight to oral history by recognizing that Indigenous stories often serve as the primary—and sometimes the sole—evidence supporting Indigenous claims (Manley-Casimir, 2012). Demonstrating a significant development in the recognition of Indigenous land rights in Canada, the Court's decision of ordering a new trial and its establishment of novel legal principles have profoundly influenced Canadian jurisprudence. For legal scholar Kirsten Manley-Casimir (2012), this ruling demonstrates that although there remains structural constraints and dominant ideologies embedded within Canadian law, courts still hold potential as sites for decolonization. Drawing from a pedagogy of discomfort, she challenges judges to open themselves to the emotional weight of Indigenous narratives and, more specifically, to listen to stories of disrupted identities that are inherently painful and deeply tied to colonial violence. Her work is grounded in the idea that the disruption of a people's story is among the most enduring effects of colonization and that enabling these stories to be told—particularly in legal settings—is a crucial part of decolonial work. Manley-Casimir offers a humble but powerful demand: that Canadian courts ought to create respectful spaces for Indigenous storytellers and oral evidence. She emphasizes that while courts may not be ideal or culturally appropriate venues for Indigenous restorying, they remain one of the few formal arenas in Canada where Indigenous people publicly assert their understandings of rightful place, history, and relationships to land. Within a colonial legal system

that has historically invalidated Indigenous ways of knowing, the visibility and publicness of this act matters. Speaking in court forces a reckoning with the legitimacy of oral histories and Indigenous legal orders. Similarly, in museums and art institutions, Indigenous restorying functions as both a critique and a reclamation. In both contexts, the formal recognition of Indigenous stories is not just symbolic; it is also a strategic intervention into dominant institutions that continue to shape public memory and legitimacy. The Supreme Court of Canada in *Delgamuukw* acknowledged the importance of oral history by noting that Indigenous stories often constitute the only available evidence to support land claims. This recognition makes it even more critical that courts not only accept oral histories as legitimate evidence, but also provide space for them to be told in their entirety.

Manley-Casimir's (2012) arguments deeply inform and inspire my own project. Like Manley-Casimir, I take storytelling not as a secondary form of evidence but as a central, relational method of knowledge production. Her suggestion that storytellers be permitted to share their narratives without strict time constraints resonates directly with my research process, which unfolded over several years—allowing stories to emerge, shift, and deepen at their own pace. In both her vision and mine, storytelling is not merely a means of conveying information but a political and pedagogical act that opens space for reparation, recognition, and relational accountability. By centering storytelling, my project similarly seeks to create space for listening, witnessing, and validating knowledge systems often dismissed by institutional norms. The courtroom, as Manley-Casimir describes it, and the academic research process both function as institutional spaces for producing, legitimizing, and circulating knowledge. In both contexts, there are dominant epistemologies that are privileged, while others—particularly those rooted in Indigenous oral traditions—are often marginalized or dismissed. Manley-Casimir's call for

courts to become spaces that respectfully receive Indigenous storytelling mirrors the challenge facing academia: how to create room for knowledge systems that do not conform to the linear, detached, or time-constrained expectations of conventional scholarly practice?

My move away from Manley-Casimir's analysis of the courtroom to the research process rests on this shared institutional function: both the law and the academy act as gatekeepers of legitimacy, deciding what counts as credible evidence or valid knowledge. Just as Manley-Casimir asks judges to sit with the discomfort of disrupted subjectivities and personhood, I challenge myself to sit with the discomfort of slow, nonlinear, and relational forms of knowledge production. In both spaces, storytelling challenges dominant norms: it demands time, relational accountability, and an openness to knowledge that is felt as much as it is understood. Thus, the publicness of my dissertation defence becomes more than a formal academic requirement, it also becomes a relational act of witnessing. Like the courtroom, the defence space is structured by institutional norms, but it also holds the potential to interrupt those norms through storytelling, and art-making. By bringing slow, affective, and embodied knowledge into this formal setting, I position the defence not as a final judgement, but as a continuation of dialogue, one that insists on the legitimacy of knowledge that emerges in relationship, and not solely through citation or critique. By drawing this parallel, I position academic research not as a neutral or purely objective endeavor, but as a site where decolonial practices, such as listening deeply, witnessing, and honouring Indigenous epistemologies can take place. This allows me to approach research not just as a method of inquiry, but as political and pedagogical acts much like storytelling in the courtroom.

Gladue Courts offers another example of how integrating contextualized Indigenous knowledges creates opportunities for legal professionals to engage in the broader project of

decolonization. Established in response to the Supreme Court of Canada's decision in *R v. Gladue* ([1999] 1 SCR 688), these specialized courts signify the importance of the sentencing principle itself—outlined in section 718.2(e) of the *Criminal Code of Canada*—and Gladue reports, both effectively establish an Indigenous-specific framework of reduced moral blameworthiness based on recognized “Gladue factors.” Criminologists Paula Maurutto and Kelly Hannah-Moffat (2016) explore how Gladue Courts engage with and incorporate Indigenous knowledges into judicial processes. They argue that these specialized courts offer a more nuanced and informed application of Gladue principles largely because court personnel often possess a deeper understanding of the socio-political realities affecting Indigenous communities. This background enables them to better interpret the structural challenges, such as the effects of colonialism, systemic racism, and intergenerational trauma that shape the lives of Indigenous offenders. The authors contrast this with the use of Gladue reports in mainstream courts where judges and legal actors frequently lack the training necessary to properly contextualize or apply the information contained in these reports. While Gladue reports are meant to provide insights into an individual's life circumstances within the framework of colonial oppression, their effectiveness in non-specialized courts is often diminished due to limited cultural competency.

Murdocca's (2013) analysis of the relationship between the legal system and criminalization of Indigenous peoples further provides a guiding theoretical understanding of the relationship between the legal system and Indigenous communities. She argues that colonial legal structures are incapable of remedying the harms of colonialism, instead functioning to sustain the state's ongoing colonial dominance. Critical of sentencing reforms that claim to accommodate Indigenous peoples, she argues that Section 718.2 counterintuitively reinforces

racism in the criminal legal system and increases incarceration rates, especially among Indigenous women. She suggests that Section 718.2's focus on "culture differences" allows the justice system to overlook the structural factors, such as victimization, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism, which criminalize women. Additionally, the contextualization of Indigenous offenders as oppressed foregrounds an argument against an offender's ability to overcome these systemic barriers; thus, they may be seen as 'not trying hard enough' now that the hurdles they encounter are known. This model also actively situates Indigenous offenders in a discursive space of 'deficit' or 'lacking' through a mobilization of solely the barriers they encounter and not the richness of their cultures.

Maurutto and Hannah-Moffatt (2016) and Murdocca (2013) offer two contrasting but complementary frameworks that highlight the challenges and possibilities of integrating Indigenous storytelling within legal contexts. Maurutto and Hannah-Moffatt identify a conditional potential within Gladue Courts: they argue that these specialized spaces can better interpret the structural realities that shape Indigenous peoples' interactions with the criminal legal system through culturally informed processes. In this way, they suggest that the law can become a more responsive and decolonial tool when adapted and contextualized. By contrast, Murdocca's work frames the law not as a site for decolonial transformation, but as a space that reduces the position of Indigenous storytellers as vulnerable or deviant subjects. The tension between these perspectives are generative for my own project. Maurutto and Hannah-Moffatt help me think about the value of storytelling as a potentially transformative research practice, while Murdocca's critique reminds me to remain cautious when attempting to bring these transformative research practices in spaces that are constrained by colonial logic.

These productive tensions between Maurutto and Hannah-Moffatt's account of Gladue Courts and Murdocca's critique of the colonial legal structure also highlights a critical question that has emerged at the heart of my own research: What are the conditions under which Indigenous stories can be meaningfully told and received? While the courtroom may gesture toward inclusion by inviting oral history or Gladue reports, Murdocca reminds us that the legal structure itself often renders Indigenous storytelling legible only as *evidence*—a colonial concept—and framed by cultural difference, trauma, or deficit. This leads me to ask: How can we create spaces that allow Indigenous stories to exist not in translation, but on their own terms?

My work responds to this question by engaging with research-creation, Indigenous art, and storytelling as practices that allow me to move outside the epistemic boundaries of law and into a space where meaning is made relationally and across time. Research-creation enables a non-linear, affective, and embodied inquiry that resists the fixity of written evidence or institutional critique alone. In this space, art is not an object to be interpreted, but a site of ongoing narrative, legal and cultural relationships. This redirection aligns with what Ewick and Silbey (1995) call “subversive stories”, or narratives that situate individual experiences within wider cultural, political, and material frameworks (p. 197). In contrast to hegemonic narratives that “efface the connections between the particular and the general,” subversive stories resist generalization and instead foreground how personal experiences are shaped by structural forces (p. 219). These conceptual frameworks are not only useful for understanding the interventions made by Gladue Courts, but also for thinking through the limits and possibilities of other institutional spaces—like museums, universities, and galleries—where stories are often similarly extracted, displayed, or assimilated. Building from this, the next section explores how Indigenous art operates as a form of legal and political resistance. Through visual storytelling,

artists like Kent Monkman, Bonnie Devine, Christi Belcourt, Brain Jungen and Nadia Myre challenge institutional boundaries, subvert Canadian political history, and reclaim the authority to represent Indigenous histories, law, and futures on their own terms.

Storytelling and the Work of Indigenous Artists

Storytelling is one way in which the imagination becomes a tool for practice and transformation, particularly in relation to decolonization. This is especially evident in the counter-narratives shared by Indigenous artists who use storytelling not only to resist legal and historical narratives, but also to assert presence, knowledge, and continuity. Indigenous visual artists such as Monkman, Devine, Belcourt, Jungen, and Myre—among many others—have mobilized decolonizing curatorial practices to frame Indigenous art through Indigenous perspectives. Embodying the rejection of colonial discourses of “Indian” art, Monkman, Devine, Belcourt and Jungen exemplify Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor’s (2008) idea of “survivance,” which he describes as “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; [and] the continuation of stories” (p. 1). Their work opens space for imagining decolonial futures and provides inspiration to my own project.

In Indigenous traditions, storytellers and artists frequently challenge and disrupt Western perceptions of time as a linear, progressive unfolding of events. Rather, their stories and histories exist in places where “time is round, open, malleable, and can fold and fluctuate” (Canada Council for the Arts, n.d.). For example, Cree visual artist Monkman reimagines time through his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, a trickster, time traveler, and “disruptor of historical narratives and colonialist mythologies” (Powell, 2021, n.p.). By inserting Miss Chief into iconic art-historical scenes, such as Robert Harris’s *Meeting of the Delegates of British North America*

to *Settle the Terms of Confederation, Quebec, October 1865* (1884) (see Figure 4) that is often referred to as *The Fathers of Confederation*, Monkman (2016) intervenes in both the colonial past and the settler-present. In his piece *The Daddies* (2016), a remix of Harris's work, Monkman subverts Canadian political history by "imposing an Indigenous, queer presence on the origins of Confederation" (Madill, 2016, n.p.).



Figure 4: Kent Monkman's *The Daddies* 2016

Monkman challenges the hegemony of Western, homogenous, linear, and secular time and calls attention to the genocidal and assimilationist policies, practices, and attitudes that shape the relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums. In this context, by inserting Miss Chief, Monkman reclaims space for Indigenous pasts, presents and futures, and critiques the secular and exclusionary conceptions of law's time that underpin colonial history-making. In this way, his interventions expose how museums and national histories have historically operated as

tools of erasure and assimilation and invite viewers to reckon with the past not as something static or settled, but as something actively shaped by resistance and storytelling. This reimagining is essential to decolonizing cultural institutions and opening up space for more just and inclusive narratives of history and identity (Richer, 2024).

Similarly, Devine sees art and creative engagement as spaces of possibility. Her installation *Battle for the Woodlands* (2014–2015) (see Figure 5) offers a counter-narrative that works to discredit colonial mapping practices and the asserted rights of colonists to Indigenous lands. Drawing the piece directly onto the walls of the Art Gallery of Ontario (Figure 6), Devine disrupts both the spatial and ideological limits of the modern Western aesthetic framework.



Figure 5: Bonnie Devine's *Battle for the Woodlands* 2015



Figure 6: Bonnie Devine at the Art Gallery of Ontario

During her keynote speech at the Women's Art Association of Canada entitled *Claims, Names, and Allegories*, Devine (2017) explains the significance of *Battle for the Woodlands*. Drawing attention to a colonial map made in 1911 while also sharing an image that illustrates the vast amount of land involved in colonial takeover, she explains that surveyors under the colonial government were sent to Indigenous lands and walked along them as they completed their surveyor's report. In 1787, the British recorded these transactions. In some reports, they described the event as a purchase, while in others it was framed as a surrender. Devine (2017) points out that this ambiguity signifies how foreign the colonial understanding of land ownership was to the Mississaugas at the time. They did not view the agreement as a sale nor did they believe it extinguished their rights to the land. Instead, they understood it as a mutual relationship between themselves and the British based on the exchange of gifts and ongoing responsibilities in perpetuity.

Devine (2017) argues that as a result of this fundamental misunderstanding, irregularities and disputes arose over the official survey of 1788. When John Graves Simcoe investigated the matter personally four years later, he uncovered only one document: a blank deed with no description of the land. In 1805, the new Lieutenant Governor of Ontario Peter Hunter revisited the issue. His investigation resulted in an addendum or what Devine notes the British referred to as an “indenture” to the original transaction; William Claus, the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs at the time, signed on behalf of the Crown. According to Devine, the Mississauga Chiefs who also signed a document were assured by Claus that their people would be adequately compensated. Devine argues that the serious flaws in this exchange stem from how drastically different cultural worldviews interpret land, agreement, and time.

Through *Battle for the Woodlands*, Devine (2014-2015) not only contests colonial spatial narratives but also challenges colonial temporality. She reasserts Indigenous understandings of time and memory where treaties are not closed chapters in history, but ongoing relationships grounded in reciprocity and continuity. By highlighting the flawed and ambiguous documentation as well as the 2010 \$105 million settlement reached between the Canadian government and the Mississaugas of the New Credit Nation, Devine (2017) draws attention to the lasting impacts of these colonial misunderstandings. In doing so, she flips the colonial gaze and exposes the whiteness embedded in legal and historical narratives to emphasize the enduring Indigenous presence and the need for just economic development for Indigenous communities.

In October 2017, I had the opportunity to volunteer with Belcourt’s *Walking With Our Sisters* project, a community-based commemorative initiative. Her project further demonstrates how art can contribute to an ongoing process of decolonizing. As a memorial ceremony, this crowdsourced project honours the lives of women, girls, and two-spirited peoples who are

missing or have been murdered. The installation includes 1,810 pairs of moccasin vamps, plus 119 pairs of children's vamps, created and donated by hundreds of individuals across Turtle Island (Belcourt, n.d.) (see Figure 7 & Figure 8). Working on this project gave me a first-hand glimpse into the power of community to come together in unified voice to call public attention to the systemic violence that made this memorial necessary. Through my experience, it became evident that, as the project states, "There is power in numbers, and there is power in art" (Walking With Our Sisters, n.d.). This power, I came to understand, is not merely symbolic, it is also cultural, collective, and legal.

The large-scale, collaborative artwork was exhibited in galleries and community spaces across what is now known as Canada. Installed on the floor, the vamps were arranged in a winding path on red cloth surrounded by cedar boughs. Visitors were asked to remove their shoes before entering and were invited to walk slowly alongside the vamps. Each pair of vamps represented a missing or murdered Indigenous woman, girl, or two-spirited person and the incomplete moccasins symbolized the unfinished lives of those who were taken too soon. The children's vamps, for example, were dedicated to those who never returned home from residential schools. Together, the installation honoured not only the individual lives lost, but also the grief, trauma, and resilience of their families and communities. It also created a space of remembrance, mourning, and public witnessing, as well as fostered community-based dialogue about gendered and colonial violence. Grounded in ceremony, remembrance, and relational accountability, Belcourt's project functions as a living expression of Indigenous law, as each vamp acts as a testimony and a demand for justice. In this way, the installation is not only a memorial, but a legal intervention that makes visible the failures of state law to protect Indigenous lives. By transforming cultural expression into a legal and political act, Belcourt

demonstrates that cultural practices can function as legal practices, especially in contexts where colonial law is complicit in harm. Enacting forms of Indigenous legal orders rooted in respect and responsibility, *Walking With Our Sisters* illustrates how legality is threaded through art, ceremony, and collective care. This project's deeply collaborative and ceremonial nature challenged me to reconsider the boundaries between academic inquiry and lived experience. Through dialogue with organizers, families, Elders, and fellow volunteers, I came to understand knowledge as something that is carried and shared, not extracted or possessed. These experiences have influenced my research as they have made me more attentive to the ethics of presence and the importance of listening, and allowing space for grief and beauty to coexist. In my research process, this has meant moving more slowly, inviting collaboration, and resisting the urge to conclude or explain what must instead be witnessed. Ultimately, *Walking With Our Sisters* taught me that knowledge shared in ceremonial and communal spaces carries a different kind of truth, one academia must learn to honour.



Figure 7: Christie Belcourt's, *Walking with Our Sisters*



Figure 8: Christie Belcourt's, *Walking with Our Sisters*

Jungen, a member of the Dane-Zaa Nation of Northern British Columbia, offers another compelling example of how Indigenous artistic practices can inform and inspire storytelling, particularly within the context of my own project. His renowned sculptural practices, most notably his transformation of Nike Air Jordan sneakers into objects resembling Northwest Coast-style Haida masks, invites viewers to reflect on the intersections between traditional Indigenous cultures and first-world consumer economies (Kaplan, n.d.) (see Figure 9 & Figure 10). Garneau (2000) describes these masks as “like souvenirs” as they appear “mass produced” and are meant to be hung on the wall rather than worn in ceremony, underscoring Jungen’s commentary on commodification. As Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada Rhiannon Vogl (2019) observes, Jungen’s (1999) work displays a distinct ingenuity in the way it critically juxtaposes the fetishization of both sporting goods and Indigenous culture, exposing the complexities of representation, appropriation, and display.

During his exhibition titled *Friendship Centre* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Jungen transformed a large gallery space into his version of a gymnasium displaying over three dozen

masks and headdress sculptures arranged like “players” on his gym floor (Vogl 2019, n.p.). The installation pays homage to Indigenous friendship centres, cultural spaces that offer social, spiritual, and recreational services to members of the urban community (Vogl 2019). As Vogl explains, these friendship centers often house gyms and sports facilities, offering an important place for people to play and exercise and to hold important meetings, celebrations, and pow wow ceremonies. Thus, Jungen’s (2019) mirroring of space and function reflects the transformative nature of his practice, in which consumer goods are remade into artworks with layered meanings. By using the visual language of Haida masks and privileging the aesthetics of mass consumerism, Jungen (2017) highlights the cultural and legal entanglements of Indigenous life under colonial capitalism while challenging the boundary between commodity and cultural object. In this way, his sculptures resonate with Val Napoleon’s (2013) argument that Indigenous law is found not only in formal governance, but in “the stories, the songs, the art, the performances, and the protocols” of Indigenous peoples and can be seen as a mode of legal reasoning and critique (p. 232).



Figure 9: Brian Jungen’s Warrior, 2017



Figure 10: Brian Jungen's Prototype for New Understanding, 1999

Similarly engaged with questions of identity and state control, Nadia Myre, an Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg First Nation, transforms the language of the *Indian Act* into a statement of Indigenous resilience and community. With her creative intervention *Indian Act* (2000-2002)—where she uses beads to cover or bead over all fifty-six pages of the 1985 version of this colonial document —Myre “takes back” the text (through the art of beadwork) (McGill University, n.d.)⁴. To complete the multi-page work, Myre enlisted the help of curator Rhonda Meier, over 250 friends, colleagues and helpers to bead over the *Indian Act*. (McGill University, n.d.). Demonstrating how a traditional Indigenous practice, beadwork, can be mobilized as a legal intervention, and an act of rewriting and reclaiming, Myre reminds us of the violence of colonial law, but also the strength of Indigenous resistance. By redacting and making

⁴ I have not included a visual of Myre's *Indian Act* in this work due to privacy restrictions on images found online. To view her inspirational piece, please visit:
<https://nadiamyre.net/indian-act>

the words in the act illegible, Myre takes away from law's material and symbolic power, transforming a top-down colonial imposition into a collaborative act of Indigenous self-determination. In this way, Indian Act is both a critique of colonial law, and an enactment of Indigenous legality.

Together, Monkman, Devine, Belcourt, Jungen, and Myre provide powerful examples of law as culture and the ways in which legal structures and social structures shape identity, collective memory, and meaning making. Additionally, their works demonstrate the potential for artistic and creative practices not only to critique, but also to reimagine the temporal, spatial, and pedagogical structures that sustain colonial authority—a central concern of this dissertation. In exploring the potential of the transgressive and emancipatory nature of Indigenous art, I illustrate the importance of drawing on more than text to demonstrate the ensuing necessity of grappling with exhibitionary spaces as comparable or directly linked to sociolegal and academic sites as well as their distinct ways of knowing and knowledge production. By critiquing both exhibition practices in museums and galleries, particularly the ways in which artifacts are positioned within linear historical narratives and the disciplinary structures of knowledge production within the university, I challenge conventional modes of displaying and legitimizing knowledge. In this way, I bring new possibilities of challenging the ontological status of text and standard research practices to make way for the reimagining of what it means to carry out research in the field of SLST.

In centering Indigenous art and storytelling as forms of legal and political intervention, this chapter has laid the foundation for understanding how creative practices can open up space for Indigenous legalities. These practices not only critique the colonial structures of representation, but also offer new relational and sensory frameworks for engaging with

Indigenous law, histories, and futurities. As this dissertation moves forward, it carries with it this central insight: that decolonization, if it is to be meaningful, must attend to the representational forms and affective forces through which colonial power is sustained and through which it might be undone.

Chapter 3: Making and Unmaking Colonialism: The Museum, Display, and Temporality

This chapter explores the relationship between law, temporality, and display, arguing that time is not neutral in legal and cultural institutions but is a key mechanism of power. Building on earlier discussions of storytelling, display culture and the embodied and sensory dimensions of legality, this chapter examines how time itself functions as a mode of representation and control. Just as legal and cultural institutions regulate what can be seen, heard, or felt, they also regulate when and how subjects are allowed to exist. Temporality, like display, becomes a technology through which institutions authorize certain narratives while silencing others, particularly those grounded in Indigenous legal orders, oral traditions, and embodied knowledge. In doing so, colonial systems not only impose aesthetic and epistemic hierarchies but also temporal ones, which mark certain ways of knowing and being as uncivilized, backwards, or primitive. This chapter extends the project's commitment to decolonial methodologies by foregrounding how legal and museological practices entangle time, representation, and power as well as by asking how non-Western, relational temporalities might unsettle the presumed neutrality of these institutions. In doing so, it builds on earlier discussions of storytelling, Indigenous art, and transdisciplinary knowledge production by further interrogating how institutions like museums, galleries, and universities function as gatekeepers that continue to reproduce colonial ways of knowing. This chapter challenges these structures by exploring how alternative temporal frameworks can disrupt dominant narratives and open space for more accountable, relational forms of understanding.

I begin with the concept of colonial time as the linear, progressive temporality that has historically positioned Indigenous peoples as out of sync with modernity. This temporal logic is

not just discursive, it is built into the structures of the law. By rendering Indigenous peoples as existing outside or behind the legal present, law enacts a form of temporal violence that justifies dispossession, paternalism, and the denial of sovereignty. The second aim of this chapter is to examine how museums and galleries participate in this same colonial temporal ordering. Here I focus on the museum and the gallery as analogous sites to legal institutions engaging in the pedagogical re/production of colonialism and revealing the ways that display can be used to contain or transgress. Display culture often aestheticizes or freezes Indigenous life in a way that echoes the law's temporal logics. Exhibitions that frame Indigenous cultures as static, ancestral, or "pre-contact" work in tandem with legal structures that cast Indigenous people as anachronistic or existing in a time apart from modern, rights-bearing subjects. Museums, in this sense, are not neutral spaces of culture or knowledge. Rather, they are institutions that display colonial time; they materialize the same temporal distancing that the law enacts symbolically and procedurally. What links these two inquiries is the shared investment in regulating and visualizing time as a form of control.

Playing with Time

Drawing from Fanon, Bhabha (2004) articulates the consequences of Indigenous peoples being subjected to colonial time, particularly through the concept of "belatedness": a temporal positioning that renders colonial subjects as perpetually behind the universality of the white man and Western culture. Within this framework, Indigenous and Black peoples are not only positioned as temporally "late" to modernity, but also as epistemologically and ontologically *lacking*. Emphasizing the "cultural supremacy and racial typology upon which the universalism of Man is founded" (p. 341), Bhabha argues that white humanity defines itself through contrast

with those who are not “fully human”, those who are best understood as existing in a different ontological and temporal state (p. 338). In this way, the category of the human becomes inherently exclusionary and sustained by the continued marginalization of those it deems beyond its purview. This construction of Indigenous peoples as backwards finds institutional reinforcement through the disciplines of law and anthropology, which operationalizes these hierarchies by legitimizing racialized understandings of humanity and civilization.

While Bhabha (2004) highlights the cultural and ontological dimensions of colonial temporality, scholars like sociologist Renisa Mawani (2014) and Jamaican philosopher Charles Mills (2020) extend this analysis by demonstrating how time operates not only as a symbolic frame but also as a legal and political instrument that structures exclusion through juridical logics, territorial claims, and the temporal terms of citizenship and sovereignty. In describing the effects of the law’s temporalizing force, including the racial subjection and subjectification of Indigenous peoples, Mawani (2014) argues that law produces a dominant chronology that contains Indigenous peoples and their experiences within a singular temporality. By consigning Indigenous peoples to the past, the law both reflects and enacts a continuity and a rupture with what came before. Using the example of national constitutions, Mawani (2014) illustrates how constitutions divide time into a “before” and “after” inaugural legal impositions:

Figured in a moment of discontinuity and interruption, between the past and future of social and political life, the Constitution is not solely a product of or in time. Rather, it produces, condenses, and disjoins time while remaining explicitly teleological. It encourages the people to cultivate and expand their national solidarities by moving beyond the past, overcoming their individual difference, while striving to fulfill a more promising and just future. The Constitution produces its own set of temporal rhythms,

effacing other temporalities—reducing “Indigenous time” to a time before conquest, the nation, and history, for instance—and arranging the social body in its own visions of a selectively imagined past, present, and future. (pp. 71-72).

In other words, colonial law insists on leaving behind the “primitive” past in favour of a settler-defined future, while simultaneously defining Indigenous existence as forever stuck in the past (Blomley 2003; Borrows, 2017; Fabian, 2014; Smith, 1999). This temporal logic becomes a key mechanism through which Indigenous peoples are positioned as non-modern and thus not entitled to full legal, political, or cultural recognition.

Mills (2020) complements this argument by noting that modernity is structured by “white racial time” (p. 311), a temporal logic in which whiteness is not only positioned as temporally superior but also as timeless. As Mills (2020) and Mawani (2014) argue, respectively, white settlers effectively set the clock to zero at the moment of “discovery.” This temporal reset, which aligns closely with settler constitutionalism, serves to naturalize Indigenous dispossession by anchoring legitimacy in a settler-defined beginning.

This dynamic is not merely abstract or discursive, it is a legal practice made tangible and which reflects and reinforces settler temporalities. Law Professor John Borrows (Chippewa of the Nawash First Nation) (2017) provides a compelling example of how courts have operationalized these logics by unpacking the Supreme Court of Canada’s narrow framework for recognizing Indigenous and treaty rights, which demonstrates law’s ongoing role in maintaining colonial temporality. In his critique of the Court’s approach in *R v. Van der Peet* (1996), Borrows notes that the case turned judges and lawyers into amateur historians as they focused their attention on what was—once upon a time—of central significance to “Indians” (p. 120). Importantly, the Western legal actors only considered “Indian” life as authentic during pre-

European contact time; they did not consider what was important to Indigenous peoples when the Constitution Act was repatriated in 1982 and beyond. From this temporal positioning, Indigenous peoples could not claim any rights penned by European influence. As such, “[t]he search for “original” understandings of Aboriginal life drove the courts’ inquiries... [This] entrenched a view that Aboriginal nations were past-tense peoples” (p. 120). This narrow interpretation limited Indigenous rights to a frozen moment in history, effectively denying the legitimacy of their evolving cultures, laws, and governance systems in contemporary times.

Smith (1999) shows how this temporal logic is not restricted to the formal instruments of colonial government, contending that it infiltrates the knowledge-production process as well. As she argues, these forms of classification, especially those produced by anthropology, further solidified Indigenous peoples as occupying an earlier stage of human development. “Chronology,” she writes, “became a method for connecting the histories of Western nations and civilizations to those of other people by separating the two” (p. 31). In this imagined sequence, Indigenous peoples were positioned in an “interrupted continuity” of human evolution and as occupying a “twilight zone between nature and culture” (Bennett, 1995, p. 77). This linear model of progress—from savage to barbarian to civilized (Fabian, 2014)—mapped race *onto* time, with white Western modernity as the universal endpoint. Given the links between anthropology and the museum, it is not surprising to find that this *frozen-in-time* doctrine is also present in the logic of the museum where Indigenous cultures are similarly framed as static, authentic remnants of a lost world. Like courts, museums and galleries operate within a colonial temporality that denies Indigenous people’s temporal congruency with white culture or what cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian (2002) calls the denial of “shared time” (p. 47). These institutions display Indigenous art and culture as if they belong to the past, which further

dislocates Indigenous peoples from the present and forecloses their futures. Museums—as spaces of visual and epistemological power—are actively engaged in shaping public understandings of time, progress, and civilization.

In thinking about the place of museums in colonial consolidation, Social and Cultural Theory Professor Tony Bennett (1995) offers the very useful concept of the “exhibitionary complex” (pp. 146-176). Analogous to but distinct from the carceral institutions analyzed by Foucault which functioned through confinement and surveillance, the exhibitionary complex of museums governs through visibility and cultural instruction. Bennett notes that this regime of visibility mirrors earlier spectacles of power, such as public executions, but reverses their logic as visitors become part of the spectacle and are regulated not by force but by norms of behavior and self-governance. London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 is emblematic of this shift as it staged industrial and colonial dominance through elaborate displays of looted goods and technological progress while regulating attendance, appearance, and conduct through tiered pricing and behavioral codes (Auerbach, 1999; Bennett, 1995). This performance of civility and order was not limited to one event. Rather, it became embedded in the architecture and operations of public museums, which taught visitors to internalize the disciplinary gaze by positioning them as both observers and the observed. Of particular interest to my own study is the legacy of the display culture that was embedded in this “exhibitionary complex”, specifically, the white cube and the glass case.

Admittedly, the white cube and the glass case refer to slightly different things. The white cube refers to the white walls of art gallery spaces that became increasingly popular then standardized over the course of the twentieth century. Describing modern gallery spaces as “constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church” (McEvelley, as

cited in O'Doherty, 1986, p. 15), Brian O'Doherty (1986) notes that inside the white cube "[t]he outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life'" (p. 15). Removing art from its historical context, these high art approaches decontextualize objects and exemplify a form of cultural control that establishes a dichotomy between that which is to be kept outside (the social and the political) and that which is inside (the aesthetic value of art).

The disembodied visual regime reinforced via the white cube, where perception is removed from context and relationality, is echoed in the glass case, which is a key display strategy of the museum. In describing museums as "cannibalistic in appropriating other peoples' material for their study and interpretation," anthropologist Michael Ames (1992, p. 84) argues that the use of glass display cases is emblematic of how institutions confine and control cultural representation (p. 84). Curator Henreitta Lidchi (2012) similarly critiques this convention by emphasizing the artificiality of such display techniques; objects are rarely created for sterile, ordered environments, and their placement in reconstructed settings within glass cases highlights their dislocation and recontextualization. The glass case, Lidchi argues, assigns objects fixed identities by making them appear as though they can speak for themselves, while simultaneously severing them from the cultural systems and relationships in which they were originally embedded. These imposed identities are further mediated by curatorial text, which interprets and directs a specific reading of the object. In many reconstructed displays, multiple artifacts are grouped together with accompanying labels that structure viewer perception, thereby reinforcing institutional authority over subjective interpretation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Phillips & Brydon, 2011).

Ultimately, the white cube and the glass case give an illusion of neutrality and—as should be clear—this fiction is not merely aesthetic but deeply and intentionally political. Specifically, these “exhibitionary complexes” enact a form of temporal and sensory colonization that strips the artworks and artefacts of their context, embodiment, and relationality. By producing a sense of timelessness and detachment, these display practices reinforce the colonial fantasy that Indigenous culture is static, universal, and out of time.

More recent initiatives, such as the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada’s *Calls to Action* (2015), signal a growing institutional commitment to decolonize museums. These efforts, though, often remain constrained by the very colonial display logics they aim to unsettle and leave the underlying temporal and sensory frameworks largely intact. For example, UNDRIP Article 12.2 calls for the development of “fair, transparent, and effective mechanisms” for the repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in collaboration with Indigenous communities. Similarly, the TRC’s *Calls to Action* underscore the need for museum policies that support reconciliation; Call 67 recommends a national review of museum practices for alignment with UNDRIP, while Call 68 advocates for funding commemoration projects centered on reconciliation. Calls 79 and 83 further encourage artistic collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. These measures reflect a growing recognition of the central role that museums play in shaping public memory and political discourse.

Unfortunately, however, the responses to these recommendations have—to date—not been taken up in more than superficial form. For example, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) appeared to be taking responsibility for its lack of Indigenous representation when it established the Department of Indigenous and Canadian Art and appointed Anishinaabe curator Wanda

Nanibush as a co-leader of this transformative initiative. Collaborating with Georgiana Uhlyarik, Nanibush reimagined the Canadian Wing by introducing a non-linear exploration of settler-colonial, immigrant, and Indigenous visual narratives. These innovative displays challenged the racial and temporal hierarchies perpetuated by colonial art spaces and disrupted the dominance of Eurocentric historical interpretations in North American art history by placing Indigenous art on equal footing with settler art to reflect nation-to-nation relationships and an embrace of Indigenous conceptions of non-linear time (Nanibush and Uhlyarik, 2023). During her tenure, Nanibush also curated Rebecca Belmore's acclaimed solo exhibition *Facing the Monumental* (2012) and launched the aabaakwad symposium (meaning "it clears after a storm"), an annual event that began in Fall 2018 bringing together Indigenous artists, curators, and scholars from around the world (Couchie et al., 2023). However, when Nanibush made public connections between the colonization of Gaza and the colonization of Turtle Island (Ditmars, 2023), the AGO terminated her appointment and even erased her professional biography from its website, removing all traces of her "institutional presence" to respond to demands from influential donors, (Couchie et al., 2023, n.p.). This dismissal was particularly striking given the AGO's reliance on Nanibush's work to build its "international reputation for decolonizing and Indigenizing" its programming (Couchie et al., 2023, n.p.). It thus appears that the AGO's commitment to decolonization was couched in terms that refused Indigenous solidarities or political frameworks that substantially unsettled existing (donor) relations.

This pattern of hiring and later dismissing Indigenous artists is not limited to the AGO. In fact, Nanibush's departure marks the fourth loss of an Indigenous curator from a major Canadian art institution in recent years (Couchie et al., 2023). Kanyen'keháka artist and curator Greg Hill was dismissed from the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in November 2022 after

twenty-two years of service (Crawford, 2022). Despite the gallery's chronic understaffing, Hill was "declared surplus" in a department that was "chronically understaffed" (Crawford, 2022, n.p.). In an Instagram post, Hill expressed that his firing stemmed from his opposition to the "colonial and anti-Indigenous ways" in which the Department of Indigenous Ways and Decolonization was being run (Puzik, 2023, n.p.). Under similar circumstances, Lucy Bell, a Haida woman, resigned as head of the First Nations Department and Repatriation Program at the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives in Victoria in July 2020. Shortly after, Indigenous curator Troy Sebastian also left the museum expressing relief in leaving behind what he called a "wicked place" (Little & Stanton, 2020, n.p.). In her resignation speech, Bell described the museum's "culture of racism and anti-Indigeneity" by recounting both personal experiences and instances of discriminatory behaviour she had witnessed (Ditmars, 2023, n.p.). A recording of her speech revealed that the breaking point came during an anti-racism Zoom session where a colleague made "racist" and "horrible" remarks, including an anecdote about alcohol use and Indigenous people, "It's proven science that Natives can't tolerate alcohol" (cited in Lederman, 2020, n.p.). Deeply hurt by these comments, Bell sought support from her supervisor only to face inaction, which ultimately led to her resignation.

The dismissal of Nanibush, and resignations of Hill, Sebastian, and Bell reflect a critical failure within cultural institutions to understand and enact decolonization. As Indigenous Studies Professor Eve Tuck (Unanga) and Ethnic Studies Professor K. Wayne Yang (2012) argue, "decolonization, both as a verb and a noun, cannot easily be grafted on pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist" (p. 3). Instead, decolonization requires nothing less than "a change in the order of the world" (p. 3). Cultural institutions such as the AGO, the NGC, and the Royal BC Museum often point to increased

Indigenous representation as evidence of their commitment to decolonization. However, the resignations or terminations of Indigenous curators underscore how conflating decolonization with representation and inclusion fosters toxic workplaces that exploit those being “included.” These cases illustrate the limits of representation as a path to transformation and highlight that decolonization is a complex, imperfect process deeply tied to broader sociopolitical struggles. Achieving true decolonization requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands sustained efforts to confront and dismantle entrenched systems of oppression (Coulthard, 2014).

The Sampson-Matthews Silkscreen Project

Just as Indigenous artifacts are dislocated and redefined when displayed in colonial enclosures, landscape paintings have been mobilized to reframe territory as empty, ahistorical, and available for settlement. The Sampson-Matthews silkscreen project that launched in the 1940s through a collaboration between the National Gallery of Canada and commercial printers exemplifies a different, but related pedagogical tool of colonial nation-building through art and artistic display (Zemans, 2007). Running until the early 1960s, the project involved the mass reproduction of Canadian landscape paintings—particularly those by the Group of Seven—to circulate nationalist imagery to the general public. The project aimed to make Canadian art accessible and familiar by reproducing and distributing these images in three phases: first to soldiers during World War II, then to schools, and finally to the broader Canadian art market (Zemans, 2007, p. 25).

In line with broader patterns related to colonialism, visibility, and display, the silkscreen project naturalized settler-colonial conceptualizations of land and nationhood by giving visual primacy to a very specific view of the Canadian wilderness (see Figure 11, Figure 12, and Figure

13). These paintings imagined landscapes as empty by reflecting back to settler publics a narrative of Indigenous peoples as a pre-contact, disappearing and homogenous culture (Zemans, 2007). Depicting North America as an uninhabited space, the Group of Seven's paintings functioned as settler visual mythmaking, thereby reinforcing both the Western canon of art and a white national imaginary rooted in possession, erasure, and aesthetic order (Dawn, 2006; Jessup, 2007). This history underscores the urgent need for approaches that understand the significance of 'display' as a key pedagogical tool of colonial regimes.



Figure 11: Lawren S. Harris, Lake and Mountains 1928



Figure 12: F.H. Varley, Early Morning 1928

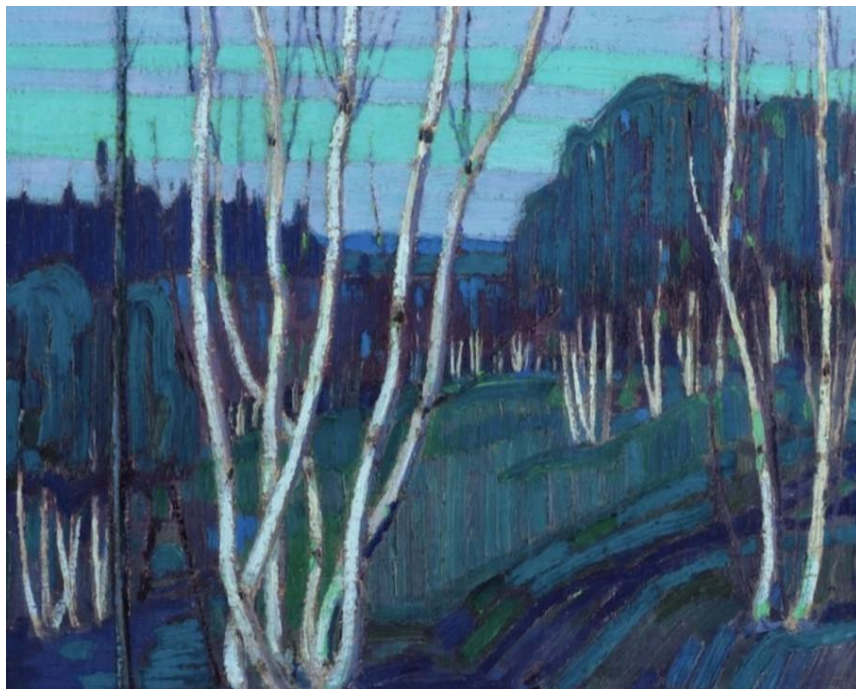


Figure 13: Tom Thompson, Silver Birches 1915 1916

Expo 67 and Spirit Sings: Catalysts for Change

Although museums and galleries continue to reinforce settler logics and aesthetics, anti-colonial counter-imaginaries work to disrupt and unsettle colonial erasure. To understand the relevance of museology to Indigenous peoples and decolonization efforts today, in what follows, I highlight the changing role of museums and curators in art institutions. According to curator Paul O'Neill (2007) the primary discourse around art-in-exhibition started to move away from a critique of artwork as autonomous objects of study towards a form of curatorial activism in the early 1960s. He explains that this form of critique differed from traditional Western art criticism in that its discourse and subject matter began to include the subject of curating and the role played by curators. For museum director Maura Reilly (2018) curatorial activism is a counter-hegemonic initiative that challenges the hegemony of the art canon and its exclusion of work produced by women, artists of colour, and other marginalized groups. In a similar context, art historian Juan Albarran Diego (2018) describes curatorial activism as an act that makes way for transgressing the limits of representative politics. He explains that only through radical questioning can one transform the social context of exhibition spaces and challenge the institutional frameworks that regulate visibility, legitimacy, and cultural value. This shift toward curatorial activism emphasizing ethical commitments, inclusivity, and critical engagement with institutional power provides a useful framework for analyzing earlier exhibitionary moments that attempted to engage with Indigenous voices—albeit problematically.

One attempt of well-intended but misguided curatorial activism is the *Indians of Canada Pavilion* at Expo 67, which was held in Montreal to celebrate—per colonial time—Canada's 100th birthday (Phillips & Brydon, 2011). This national spectacle reinforced a colonial framework and invited Indigenous peoples to contribute to imperialist and nationalist discourses

of celebration and nationhood as evidenced in the Official Guide of l'Expo 67 (1967):

In all parts of Canada, Indians have discussed and helped to shape their exhibit.

Indian painters, carvers and other artists have worked to translate the concept which evolved into a form of significant expression.

Through their exhibit, the Indians of Canada speak to fellow Canadians and to the other peoples against the background of Man and his World. Primarily the Indian people want to present the problems with which they are faced by involvement in a modern technological society, and to affirm their will to preserve the traditional moral and spiritual values of their forefathers.

This is a positive expression of Indian thought. While the Canadian Indian approaches the Expo 67 theme in terms of himself and of his own world, the subject is a common experience of Man (p. 7).

This description reveals several critical tensions. There is a deliberate inclusion of Indigenous artists and an allowance for them to voice their version of the “national story,” including their grievances (Phillips & Brydon, 2011). However, this space is circumscribed not only by tokenism (Cadena-Laborde, 2010), but also by its preconfiguring of those grievances within a colonial framework, specifically, by portraying Indigenous peoples as struggling to cope with the “modern” world, which perpetuates narratives of ‘backwardness’ or ‘belatedness.’ Ultimately, these differences are erased by assimilating Indigenous perspectives as “positive” contributions to a supposedly universal “common experience of Man,” which, implicitly, is coded as white. This invocation of the sentiment underlying formal equality, namely that all are equal, ultimately fails as it does not take seriously the realities encountered by Indigenous people and, instead, conflates the abuses of their rights with quotidian quarrels of their white

counterparts. As historians Myra Ruthford and Jim Miller (2006) argue, the Pavilion represented a failed pedagogical model as it reinscribed colonial authority rather than challenged it.

Art historian Ruth Phillips and curator Sherry Brydon (2011) offer the contrasting opinion that, despite the Pavilion's shortcomings, it had significant effects, most notably as "a formative moment in the development of an activist Indian cultural politics" (p. 29). For example, the project created a sense of purpose among participating Indigenous artists, organizers, and activists across Canada and made way for self-determination, diversity, resistance, activism, identity and increased visibility of Canadian Indigenous art (Phillips and Brydon, 2011). Thus, despite its constraints, l'Expo 67 influenced art culture and artists' agency, including Indigenous artists Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig's formation of the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporation, also known as the Indian Group of Seven (Phillips and Brydon, 2011), and the development of the Woodland School of Art, which is also known as Anishinaabe painting. Artists such as Morrisseau and Ray, among others, began to assert their place within the Canadian mainstream and the contemporary art canon (McMichael Canadian Art Collection, n.d.). The Pavilion also sparked critical dialogue among Indigenous artists and curators, prompting many to see exhibition spaces not merely as sites of containment or erasure, but as potential platforms for resistance and transformation. In this way, it became a generative moment that seeded future forms of Indigenous-led curatorial and artistic activism.

Notwithstanding these initial developments, it was not until the 1980s that the most dramatic shifts in modern museology began to take hold, including a transformative reassessment of display practices and institutional authority (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999). Described as a critique of 'old' museology and its focus on museum methods, 'new' museology questions

traditional approaches to issues of “value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority and authenticity” (Stam, 1993, p. 267). Library and Information Science Professor Deirdre C. Stam (1993) observes that theorists of the new museology view museums as social institutions with political agendas and advocate for art spaces that reflect the communities they claim to serve. Within this broader shift in museological thinking, Indigenous representation—or lack thereof—has become a focal point for critique. This matter came into sharp focus during the aftermath of *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First People*, an exhibition hosted in January 1988 by the Glenbow Museum to promote and celebrate the Winter Olympics in Calgary. The exhibition, which was created to highlight Canada as a culturally diverse nation, failed to consult with Indigenous communities about the portrayal of Indigenous art and culture, leading to international attention and critique (Marstine, 2006; Phillips & Brydon, 2011).

Sponsored by Shell Canada, an extractive oil company responsible for the destruction and exploitation of natural resources on the lands of the Lubicon Cree who had been trying to settle a land claim with the Canadian federal government for over a century, the exhibition opening was met with protests and pickets outside the Glenbow Museum, as well as at museums and galleries across Canada (Phillips & Byrdon, 2011). During the protest, Indigenous artist Rebecca Belmore performed *Artifact #671B*, in which she “tagged her body like an artifact in a museum, but with one important twist, one of the signatures was the Shell corporate logo, marking corporate incursion on First Nation space” (Phillips & Byrdon, 2011, p. 77) (see Figure 14). Seated outside of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery in view of the passing Olympic torch, her performance raised questions about power and the authority of representation in art spaces. Through this performance, she deeply affected the making, display, and teaching of Canadian art (Cronin and Robertson, 2011). Belmore’s performance gained international attention and became

representative of the ways in which Indigenous artists challenge institutional complicity in both corporate and colonial power. It also demonstrated the urgent need for structural change beyond tokenistic inclusion within Canadian cultural institutions and laid the groundwork for national initiatives including the *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples* (1994).



Figure 14: Rebecca Belmore, Artifact #671B 1988

Beyond Consultation: The Limits of Representation in Reconciliation Discourse

The lack of Indigenous voices in museums in general and the specific political urgency created by the controversial *Spirit Sings* exhibit led to the creation of the federal *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples* (1994). Co-authored by the Canadian Museum Association and the Assembly of First Nations, the Task Force Report aimed to develop an ethical framework and strategies for Indigenous Nations to represent their history and cultures in museums. During the Task Force's initial meetings in February 1990 at the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, three priorities were

identified: increased involvement of Indigenous peoples in the curation of their culture and history by cultural institutions; improved access to museum collections by Indigenous peoples; and the repatriation of artifacts and human remains. However, museum discourse around repatriation often takes on a paternalistic tone. As Ames (2008) argues, institutions often frame repatriation as a benevolent gesture rather than a necessary act of restitution. According to art curator and writer Lee-Ann Martin (2003), the recommendations of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples have not been meaningfully implemented by Canadian institutions. Museums often fail to follow appropriate protocols for returning items, including the fundamental step of initiating contact with the communities from which objects in their collections originate. Martin notes that in many cases institutions wait for Indigenous communities to request repatriation, rather than proactively reaching out. This approach places the burden of action on Indigenous peoples and reveals how the existence of policy on paper does not necessarily translate into a genuine institutional commitment to decolonization or accountability. Although the report was supported in principle by the Assembly of First Nations and acknowledged by many cultural institutions, it did not carry the legislative weight or federal funding necessary to ensure consistent, nationwide adoption. As a result, the report served more as a moral and ethical guide than a binding policy framework and left individual museums and galleries to determine the extent of their response.

While the Task Force marked a significant step toward accountability and reform, change has been slow to come. By the 1990s, curatorial activism moved beyond organizing exhibitions that simply gave voice to the historically marginalized towards becoming a vital site of critical intervention where curating was reframed as a tool for discourse, critique, and political engagement (Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, 1994). O'Neill (2007) notes that during

this period, curators and artists began to challenge the boundaries of conventional exhibition forms by integrating more discursive, participatory, and geopolitical approaches (p. 13). The 1992 exhibition *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations* at the National Gallery of Canada exemplifies this shift. Showcasing the work of 18 Indigenous artists, including, Carl Beam, Rebecca Belmore, Dempsey Bob, Domingo Cisneros, Robert Davidson, Jimmie Durham, Dorthy Grant, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, Faye Heavyshield, Alex Janvier, Zacharias Kunuk, James Lavadour, Turman Lowe, James Luna, Teresa Marshall, Alanis Obomsawin, Kay WalkingStick and Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton, the exhibition centered Indigenous perspectives, disrupting dominant narratives of Canadian history (Nemiroff, 1992). In tandem, the Canadian Council for the Arts released Lee-Ann Martin's *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion* (1991), which critiqued public art museums for their systemic marginalization of Indigenous art, while the Task Force Report pushed for meaningful consultation and Indigenous control over representation. These landmark moments in Canadian museology signaled a shift in curatorial practice and deeply inform my own research and praxis. This shift toward Indigenous-led display practices lay the groundwork for thinking about how time itself has become central to decolonial artistic interventions.

While representation in museums and galleries is crucial for challenging dominant colonial narratives, it has inherent limitations. The visual, as Simpson (2014) emphasizes, can only communicate parts of Indigenous realities, as images and exhibits often risk being aestheticized or decontextualized. Moreover, Tuck and Yang (2012) caution that representation alone can be insufficient and even harmful when it functions as a metaphor for decolonization without accompanying material change; visual narratives risk being assimilated by institutions, which often emphasize spectatorship over genuine engagement (Phillips and Steiner, 1999). This

reveals the necessity of moving beyond representation toward decolonial practices that center structural transformation, acknowledging that while visual culture is a powerful tool, it must be situated within broader processes of Indigenous resurgence and self-determination (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This dissertation is my attempt at engaging decolonial practices that center structural transformation.

Chapter 4: Unmaking Colonialism: Storytelling as Method: Relational Accountability and Indigenous Ways of Knowing

In this part of the dissertation, Melanie and I attend to a series of stories that convey both the affective and methodological dimensions of our research counters, weaving together our experiences and reflections to show how knowledge was generated collaboratively. In acknowledging our shared experiences and collaborations, the narrative form that follows shifts into autoethnographic narration, not to center only my voice, but to trace how our entangled reflections, emotions, and insights became meaningful within and beyond the research encounter. This turn toward autoethnographic narration emerges as a deliberate decolonial shift in method and voice. While the earlier chapters mapped the abstract structures of law, museum display, and temporality by highlighting how these institutions participate in the ongoing regulation of ontologies, histories, and meanings, the processes to be explored aim to resist a singular focus on outcomes or findings. Instead, they emerge through an ongoing, dialogic unfolding that privileges process over outcome and centers knowledge as something in community—not owned or produced by an individual or institution. In this way, I intentionally shift from a traditional, individual-oriented academic stance to one grounded in relational accountability and collective meaning-making.

What follows now is not a departure from my previous analysis, but its practice-in-retrospect. Having explored how colonial systems produce knowledge through disembodied authority and institutional containment, I move here to situate knowledge in lived experiences, relationships, and engagements with creative and artistic practices. As Smith (1999) argues decolonizing research requires challenging Western modes of knowledge that position the researcher as detached and objective; contrastingly, research must be accountable to

communities, histories, and places. Similarly, Simpson (2017) reminds us that Indigenous knowledge is not only held in language or text, but embodied in practice, kinship, and story. This chapter takes up these arguments, as well as Tuck and Yang's (2014) insistence that "decolonization is not a metaphor", as an invitation to venture beyond the inclusion of Indigenous voices into dominant frameworks and fundamentally reorient how we understand knowledge, power, identity, and research.

In this research, storytelling invites ethical engagement, personal reflection, and relational accountability. Our storytelling method thus centers interconnectedness over linear causality; also, instead of moving from point A to point B, our stories circled, spiraled, and returned, echoing Anishinaabe ways of knowing that resist Western narratives of progress, closure, and mastery (Gross, 2016). Indigenous Studies scholar Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) (Sto:lo First Nation) speaks to how Indigenous Storywork holds emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions together in requiring the listener/reader to not only understand but to feel and carry the story. Our storytelling as method holds this principle closely by emphasizing ethical relationality: the responsibility to be affected by the stories shared and to respond with care. Kovach's (2010) work on Indigenous research methodologies, particularly her emphasis on the conversational method, profoundly influenced my approach to collaborative research with Melanie. She notes that Indigenous research is not merely about data collection but about engaging in relational, respectful, and reciprocal dialogues that honour the lived experiences and worldviews of Indigenous peoples. She posits that "story and knowing have been tightly bound together as a legitimate form of understanding since time immemorial" (Kovach, 2010, p. 94), which highlights the centrality of narrative in Indigenous epistemologies. Inspired by Kovach's (2010) framework, I approached my conversations with Melanie not as interviews or data-

gathering exercises but as co-creative exchanges where both of us brought our stories, insights, and perspectives to the table.

In this research, witnessing emerged as a conceptual framework and as a lived, relational practice that shaped how knowledge was co-created, shared, and held. Drawing on American philosopher Kelly Oliver's (2001) articulation of witnessing as a move "beyond recognition" (p. 3), I understand witnessing not as a practice that seeks to fix or define Melanie, but as one that allows us to remain present with the complexities, contradictions, and vulnerabilities that arise in shared storytelling. Our conversational process required us to be comfortable in the messiness of experience and to allow the knowledge that emerged to be shaped through relation instead of extraction. By centering witnessing as a method, I position this research not as an act of knowledge production in the traditional academic sense, but as a form of relational and creative knowledge holding. Our stories, creative and artistic representations, and digital output are not data to be analyzed, but living expressions of this witnessing.

An important part of this process involved sustained reflexivity and continuous critical revisiting of the findings in relation to my position as a co-creator with Melanie in the meaning-making process. This commitment to personal accountability also functioned as relational accountability, shaping a critically reflexive practice of self-location that kept us attentive to the shifting power dynamics between us (Kovach, 2009). It was this attentiveness to power that became especially critical as our spoken stories moved into written form. When translating our fluid, co-constructed stories into written academic text for this dissertation, a potential power imbalance emerged, as the written form situated our stories within my authorial framing. This shift also meant that audiences beyond Melanie and me would encounter our stories, and that our stories could be interpreted in ways that we did not anticipate. To mitigate this power imbalance,

we engaged in explicit conversations about how stories would be quoted or paraphrased, and whether additional contextual framing was necessary. We also discussed that her words would appear in the body of the text and that her reflections would be presented alongside mine. It was our hope that including direct quotations would preserve the context of the stories and prevent them from being stripped of their relational grounding to fit neatly into an academic argument. Our attempt to avoid distortion through selective quoting required careful decisions about representation as relational obligations. These decisions created space for Melanie to shape how future readers might come to understand her, reinforcing the importance of representation as an ethical and relational responsibility rather than solely an analytic one.

Indigenous communities hold the inherent right to refuse participation, and researchers hold a corresponding ethical and moral responsibility to respect that refusal (Aguilar, Henderson Smith, & Goforth, 2025). While I had the opportunity to witness and learn from storytelling, this does not grant me the ownership over these narratives or the authority to retell, reframe, or reuse them. Some stories carry mythical elements intended to teach (Aguilar, Henderson Smith, & Goforth, 2025); some are deeply personal (Kovach, 2009); and others are sacred (Wilson, 2008). Recognizing these distinctions required relational accountability throughout the research and writing process, one such example of which is the way this chapter was developed in collaboration with Melanie.

This chapter, which includes excerpts from our conversations, was the first chapter written. This proved beneficial to the research process, as it allowed me to continually invite Melaine to review and respond to the stories included in the chapter. Each iteration incorporated her edits, input, corrections, and reflections in a way that aligns with a decolonial approach to collaborative research. The chapter evolved through multiple revisions, shaped through our

ongoing conversations and her careful engagement with the text. Many of the stories we shared do not appear in this dissertation. This absence is intentional. In some instances, Melanie expressed that certain stories belonged within our creative relationship rather than in the written document. In others, the stories contained intimate details that we agreed were meant to remain between us. At times, we explicitly acknowledged that particular moments would stay within our conversations, at other times, I recognized intuitively that what was shared was offered in confidence. Each story shared in this dissertation is the result of our collaborative and purposeful selection of stories curated for this dissertation in an attempt to capture the themes present in our storytelling adventures.

Applying Professor of Humanities Tina Campt's (2017) concept of "the haptic" (p. 69) to our storytelling approach brings further depth to this work. Campt (2017) challenges us to engage not only with what an image or narrative shows, but with what it feels like—its textures, its rhythms, and its resonance in the body. The haptic is not only about touch, but also about the sensation of proximity, intimacy, and affect. In the context of our stories, the haptic manifests through the sound of our voices, the pacing of speech, the presence of silence, and the emotional textures. Our stories were not shared at a distance; instead, they were crafted and received in a way that invites sensory, emotional, and embodied engagement. Story, in this sense, is not just something to read or listen to, but something to feel and something that disrupts the routinized ordering of everyday life's sensorial rhythms.

Approaching storytelling as a relational exchange—and not an extractive research method—meant that Melanie and I engaged as equal co-creators of knowledge. Our work is not about one voice representing the other; such a model perpetuates the deactivation of one's agentic potential in favour of the amplification of the other's authority and capacity. Therefore,

our collaboration is about building a space of resonance (Robinson, 2020) where both of our voices could be in conversation, resonance, and tension. Rather than seeking consensus, this space allowed for difference, partial understandings, and productive friction to remain present. In keeping with Dylan Robinson's (2020) critique of extractive listening practices, resonance here is not something to be taken or resolved, but something that emerges through attentive, relational engagement over time.

Reciprocity—a key tenet of Anishinaabe thought (Gross, 2016)—guided our methodology so that we were giving each other time, trust, attention, and care throughout the entire process. Every decision—from what stories to share to how they were represented in the digital output—were made through iterative dialogue grounded in mutual respect. This commitment to reciprocity was continually revisited, creating space for ongoing reflection about how the work was unfolding and being represented. This became especially evident during our second-to-last research conversation in early 2025, when Melanie shared that she was happy with how the dissertation had come together and felt that I represented her words in a way that honoured her intentions. She emphasized that having a space to respond to drafts and shape how her stories were represented were key to her sense of agency within the project. In revisiting our collaboration, I asked Melanie how she understood the process and whether it felt reciprocal to her. She reflected that she “deeply valued our collaboration”, “appreciated reviewing stories before they were included in drafts that others would read”, “happy that we could disagree and laugh about things”, “felt heard throughout our conversations”, “felt [she] had influence over decisions” “trusted me more with each conversation we had”, and “loved how her ideas shaped the digital outcome in significant ways”. Melanie's reflections deepened my understanding of reciprocity. While I experienced the process as transformative, she emphasized it as “a process of

learning” and a “relationship based in trust that slowly developed”. This conversation made clear that reciprocity was continually negotiated and was not achieved at a single moment but enacted throughout the project, in co-creation, in interpretive dialogue, in editorial review, and in decisions regarding circulation.

Emphasizing an iterative and dialogic approach to knowledge creation meant that listening was not confined to our recorded conversations but became a shared practice shaping every stage of the research. Listening informed how we designed, curated, and edited the work. We returned to our stories multiple times, not to analyze them through a detached academic lens, but to listen again: to what was said, to what was felt, and to what remained unspoken. In revisiting the material together, we reflected on tone, emphasis, and representation, ensuring that the evolving form continued to resonate with both of us. Listening thus became not only an ethical stance and methodological tool, but a relational and artistic process. It shaped how creations were displayed, how sound and image were paired, and how the digital output would reflect our collaboration while inviting viewers to listen with and feel with our work.

Beginning in March 2022, Melanie and I began a series of conversations. After our initial meeting, we met more than twenty times over the next two years, often speaking for at least three hours at a time. The shape of our conversations changed over time from something that initially resembled a more traditional, academic interview structure to a form of liberatory storytelling that deeply influenced and shaped my praxis. Unlike the detached objectivity and pre-scripted questioning that typify traditional research paradigms, our conversations became spaces of shared reflection. The process can be understood as mirroring the practices of liberatory storytelling, as it was nonlinear, relational, and transformative. This approach challenged aspects of the typical researcher/participant binary and also became a central force in shaping my praxis.

What began as a method of gathering information slowly transformed into a shared space of resonance, reflection, relation, and mutual learning. For example, during our second meeting, I became acutely aware that our conversations were—albeit unintentionally—reproducing the dynamics of settler colonialism. I realized I was approaching the process in a way that felt extractive and one-sided. At Melanie’s request, I had prepared a list of words to guide our discussion and explore the conceptual overlaps between ‘art’ and ‘law.’ My list included the following terms: emotions, representation, learning, culture, embodiment, violence, nationhood, perception, and power. As Melanie described how each word (did or did not) represent a relation between art and law, I listened with my ears (Robinson, 2020) and scribbled down her thoughts. But as we neared the end of my list, it became clear that the structure I had brought into our conversation, though prepared at Melanie’s request, was still shaped by my own academic framing. These words, not unlike formal interview questions, imposed external parameters on our exchange and limited the space for stories to unfold in more relational and intuitive ways. In this context, my well-intentioned listening stance inadvertently reinforced existing hierarchies by centering my research goals and ways of knowing over the organic flow of our shared conversation. Although Melanie had initially suggested we prepare in this way, what emerged between us was a shared realization: that even well-meaning research practices can reassert the logics of extraction when not continually re-evaluated. This moment invited me to rethink what it means to listen, to collaborate, and to truly co-create knowledge beyond the confines of academic methodology. We therefore entered our third meeting without the list of words that had previously structured our discussions. This absence of predetermined direction freed us from the expectations embedded in more formal, goal-oriented conversations by allowing us to follow the flow of what emerged naturally between *us*. This shift from a question-and-answer format to a

shared storytelling approach marked a turning point in how Melanie and I engaged with one another. It was in this switch that listening transformed into something more relational and reciprocal.

Rather than positioning myself as the extractor of knowledge, I began to understand listening as an act of care, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility or what Communications Professor Lizabeth Lipari (2009) calls “listening otherwise” (p. 44). This concept invites us to listen beyond comprehension or agreement, and instead with a deep openness to difference, ambiguity, and the unknown. Listening otherwise asks us to attend to what is unspoken, untranslated, or unresolvable and to let that silence or tension speak in its own right. By adopting a mindset of “listening to learn” (Lipari, 2009, p. 47), I was able to let Melanie’s epistemologies guide my understanding without trying to translate them into the normative structures of Western academic discourse. This required me to sit with moments of dissonance or unknowing and to allow those moments to remain open rather than resolved.

Placing stories at the center of our conversations opened space for a non-extractive, reflexive learning experience grounded in respect for difference and relational accountability. Stories unfolded through memory, land, kinship, and feeling and often looped back or spiraled forward; they certainly did not follow the tidy, prescriptive arc of Western narrative progression—nor will their narration. This way of listening required me to move away from a model of “hungry listening” (Robinson, 2020)—seeking to consume or possess knowledge—towards a more ethical and accountable form of being with the story. Through this process, I came to understand that concepts like art and law are not only intellectually constructed, but also emotionally and politically lived. As we explored how visual, creative, and artistic representations give expression to acts of political resistance, I learned that such expressions are

not simply symbolic; they are grounded in lived experience, land-based knowledge, and collective memory. This realization arrived not through analysis alone, but through the relationship itself: the trust, the stories, the silences, the listening, and the shared act of witnessing. What follows is a series of vignettes that include brief glimpses into the stories and the moments we shared.

Mother's Skirt

On March 16, 2022, I met Melanie online for our first meeting with no specific agenda and no clear expectations for what our discussion might yield. Almost immediately, it became evident that we shared a mutual commitment to challenging and disrupting conventional knowledge practices in higher education. This connection was particularly striking when Melanie expressed her admiration for circles, a powerful symbol that informed her transgressive artwork. In describing the creation of a piece created many years ago, *Mother's Skirt* (see Figure 15), she reflected on the ways creativity is often disciplined out of us within the university setting, which underscores the profound implications for resisting these limitations. In her words:

I seem to be attracted to anything spherical, anything round, anything circular. I have this fondness for circles—there is a symbolism there. One of the key symbols found in the Ojibwe culture is the circle. It represents Creation, where humans don't occupy a place above the other parts of creation. I had the opportunity to play around with circles while taking a course at York University a couple of years ago. We were tasked with creating shelter and the course director stipulated we had to use something borrowed and that we had to repurpose something when creating the piece. I found this random piece of metal that was 3 feet in diameter, and in the shape of a circle

sitting in a pile of scrap, in the welding shop, and asked if I could have it. As soon as I laid eyes on that circle, I had this whole idea for it and knew my creation was going to be significantly different than others in the class. A lot of my peers created stuff like shelter for homeless people out of cardboard. Because we had to repurpose something, everyone turned to cardboard. But I thought about comfort and shelter differently. When I think about comfort or a place of comfort, I think about a mother's skirt. Throughout my life, my grandmother was a place of comfort and shelter. That's what immediately came to mind. Using material from my grandmother's skirt and a tablecloth my mother had given me...you know, to represent the matriarchy... I created a skirt sewing together the different materials. I kept it very basic and hung it outside in an area that allowed me and my classmates to get under the skirt. We were in the folds, spinning around and we were all laughing like little kids. It was magical, it was like child's play. It brought us out of this world, and outside of ourselves, to experience a different type of world. Initially, the course director wasn't impressed with my creation. She claimed I didn't follow the instructions and assigned me a low grade. However, after a somewhat heated office hour appointment [we both laugh] she was less skeptical and agreed to change my mark to an A. It wasn't about the mark though. It was more about fighting to embrace a form of art and creativity that isn't conventional and different than the norm.



Figure 15: Melanie Delamoraidaire, Mother's Skirt

Sharing her story served as a powerful source of inspiration, highlighting the transformative potential of encounters with otherness. Such encounters create a threshold where possibilities emerge to challenge dominant frameworks of knowledge that privilege scientific rationality, linear logic, and material productivity. In this context, Indigenous modes of creativity, such as storytelling, playful learning, and experimentation were dismissed as irrational or primitive. Play and creativity were often relegated to the realm of “childishness,” rather than being recognized as essential components of learning and community building (Fanon, 2005 & 2008; Nandy, 2009; Smith, 1999). In settler-colonial contexts like North America, forced assimilation policies—including residential schools—systematically stripped Indigenous children of their cultural identities, erasing these rich traditions of play and creativity. Melanie disrupts this legacy by embracing experimental thought and play and by challenging rigid, linear

notions of time tied to colonial productivity.

During our conversation on March 16th, Melanie shared a video of *Mother's Skirt* swaying in the wind. The scene depicted Melanie and her classmates gathered under the skirt, their joyful smiles radiating a sense of connection and play. As I observed them twirling and engaging, I imagined myself joining them, feeling an embodied urge to participate. In this context, *Mother's Skirt* served as a catalyst for critical reflection and dialogue about self-formation, identity, and social inequality as it engaged my body on an affective level. It encouraged subsequent pedagogical moments reminiscent of what Art Education Professors, Amelia M. Kraehe and Tyson E. Lewis (2018) term “flashpoints” (p. 2), in which a rupture in habitual ways of being provokes transformative reflections. Pedagogical flashpoints invite us to examine how bodies are educated and shaped by sociocultural differences within both formal and informal contexts. These differences emerge through processes that constitute the self within and against histories of oppression, including racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, speciesism, and class inequality. Flashpoints “are moments of interruption or suspension in everyday patterns of behaviour, perception, and experiential flow” (pp. 3–4). *Mother's Skirt* exemplifies such a flashpoint in my own learning with Melanie.

The clip disrupted my normal state by drawing attention to the *lived* structures of sociocultural difference as they are felt through sensation and “affective surges” (Kraehe and Lewis, 2018, p. 5). By engaging with these preconscious affective intensities, irreducible to rational thought, Melanie’s creation revealed how art can unsettle traditional dichotomies between the researcher and the researched, while also interrogating privileged discourses that prioritize certain forms of academic knowledge over embodied experiences. Despite *Mother's Skirt* being created in an art course where originality and creativity were encouraged, there was

nonetheless a specific kind of representation the professor anticipated. Enacting a form of hungry listening (Robinson, 2020), Melanie's professor expected her to translate her work into a form that would be legible and acceptable to those trained within the frameworks of Western art history. The professor's initial response to the work reveals a narrow, disciplinary definition of "shelter" as an architectural and materially discrete object, an understanding deeply rooted in Western artistic and spatial traditions. Through *Mother's Skirt*, Melanie resisted this pedagogical assimilation by refusing the literal frameworks that many others in the class adopted. While others depicted homes, or walls, she approached shelter differently, as something carried in the body, in lived experience, in story, and in intergenerational presence. By creating a skirt that references the maternal body as a site of protection and care, Melanie mobilized an epistemology in which shelter is relational, and affective rather than structural. The low grade, then, was not simply a matter of failing to follow instructions, but a disciplinary refusal to recognize a different articulation of shelter as legitimate knowledge within the evaluative framework of the course. The subsequent grade change following an office-hour discussion underscores that what was at stake was not artistic rigor per se, but whose definitions and ways of knowing were permitted to count. As someone relatively new to engaging with art, and still learning how to question both how I create and what is considered art, I find Melanie's approach inspiring. Her refusal to conform to dominant expectations, and her choice to define shelter on her own terms, challenges me to consider what it means to create work that does not seek approval, but instead exists on its own terms.

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Intrigued by the ways in which artistic practices feel, Melanie and I turned our focus to

explore how artistic practices might evoke further emotions. In this context, we explored how emotions like anger can inspire impactful creative expression. According to feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2014), anger can take different forms, such as shaping a vision of the future or transforming pain into knowledge (p. 175). Similarly, English Professor Audre Lorde (2007) argues that anger involves not just naming racism, but also envisioning an alternative reality. In our conversation on May 11, 2022, Melanie described her creative process while making *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* (see Figure 16). Melanie illustrates how anger can drive productive creation and make way for alternative realities:

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing expresses my views. With this piece, I am thinking about law. At the time I was learning about residential schools and how the state placed children in these state-run schools. The more I dig, the more I realize how successful the state was in breaking the Indian. When I think of residential schools, I can't help but think about my mother-in-law. When she had to write down what she experienced for the residential school settlement, I think she realized the extent to what she went through. We had to fight for over five years to get what she was promised. She kept getting brushed off. When I created the piece, I was angry and let my anger come out through this piece. It was a reaction. I was really upset about residential schools. So, I wanted it to be in your face. I did it as an in-your-face piece for a reason. This was me expressing my anger at law and institutions for its overreach. A lot of my pieces are created from instances like that. Creation through things I have learned or things I was feeling. I created the piece for a drawing class. We had to create three different images and all three of the images had to be something different. So, I met the requirement and did three sketches, but then I used fire to burn the images into wood.

It really was an experimental learning process. The three pieces depicted three different time periods. The first period represented via a teepee, represents a time before residential schools. The teepee is the home, a representation of Indigenous life. If you look closely, you might notice I used hide for the drawstrings of the teepee. The second picture depicts a time of residential schools and includes the juxtaposition of two images of Thomas Moore Keesick, from Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nations, the poster child for residential schools and juxtaposed the picture of him before and during his time at a Canadian residential school. He looked about 4 or 5 years old in the before picture, and about 8 years old in the second picture. The look in the eyes in the second picture is what captured me. You can see a harshness in his eyes in the second photo that wasn't there before. The state did a great job of assimilating him and he fit nicely into the image of what a good Indian could be. The three pieces were two dimensional with three-dimensional aspects. The third picture is of the church. I chose beads and some fur and included some words on the cross to show the merging of two very different cultures.



Figure 16: Melanie Delamoraide, *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing is more than an artwork; it is a form of testimony that transgresses legal and institutional forms of recognition. By naming her anger and locating its source within colonial structures rather than individual failings, Melanie engages in what researcher and author Sarah Hunt/Tłaliłila'ogwa and interdisciplinary scholar May Farrales (2024) describe as creations rooted in affect, embodied experience, and the refusal to separate emotion from intellect. This act of naming is especially significant in the context of legal erasure where residential school survivors have long been required to narrate their trauma in ways that conform to bureaucratic or evidentiary standards. Melanie's artistic intervention rejects these limitations by asserting that memory and emotion are themselves valid forms of knowledge and resistance. Within a settler-colonial legal framework that privileges documentation, neutrality, and disembodied truth, her work insists on the validity of affective experience, visual storytelling, and personal history. As such, Melanie's work contributes to a growing body of

artistic and intellectual practices that reframe what counts as evidence, testimony, and ultimately, as law. This need for new forms of evidence becomes particularly evident in the context of Canada's residential school system, where images and legal frameworks worked hand-in-hand to produce narratives of assimilation, progress, and state authority.

The federal Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), implemented in 2007, marked the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history. While it included mechanisms such as the Common Experience Payment (CEP), the Independent Assessment Process (IAP), and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), survivors often encountered retraumatization, bureaucratic resistance, and systemic delays in accessing justice (Fontaine, 2010; TRC, 2015). These legal processes, though framed as reparative, expose the limitations of formal law when it comes to addressing colonial harm, particularly when that harm is social, institutional, cultural, and intergenerational. This tension between legality and lived experience is echoed in the visual archive of the residential school system, most notably in the now-infamous photographs of Moore Keesick taken by the Department of Indian Affairs in the late 1800s. The juxtaposition of the "before" image where Keesick wears traditional clothing and the "after" image where he is dressed in a military-style school uniform visually performs the assimilationist agenda of the residential school project. These images were not merely documentary; there were aesthetic tools of colonial power constructed to legitimize the legal and moral authority of the state. In this context, they function as a part of a broader epistemic regime in which law, knowledge, and visual culture are co-constitutive.

By referencing these images and the legacy of residential schools, Melanie uses artistic intervention to disrupt the visual and legal narratives of assimilation. By engaging law not only

as text but as image, symbol and affective experience, *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* reveals the entangled ways in which legality operates through aesthetic and institutional forms, including the museum, the photograph, and the legal settlement. As such, it challenges dominant legal imaginaries and reclaims space for Indigenous ways of knowing, remembering, and resisting. In its ability to provoke a felt response and disrupt normative patterns of knowing, *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* mirrors the kinds of affective and sensory ruptures that this project seeks to foreground. Just as the installation unsettled habitual ways of being through embodied engagement, my work interrogates how legal structures similarly operate beneath the level of conscious awareness, shaping who can be seen, heard, and felt within juridical frameworks. Furthermore, *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* and our conversations around it demonstrate it is possible to engage legal structures—such as the *Indian Act*, Indian status, and residential schools—through non-legal language that re-orient these state-centered formations into personal narratives grounded in emotion, anger, community, family, and the legacy of genocidal devastation represented in cultural forms. This approach illustrates that law exists beyond doctrinal forms, and that it has deeply affective dimensions, as it is felt in the body, carried through intergenerational memory, and expressed through artistic and thus cultural practices. In this way, law is not merely a set of rules, but a force that is shaped by lived experience, and resistance. These responses, then, are not only pedagogical, they are juridical. In this sense, *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* becomes more than a site of aesthetic or pedagogical inquiry, it becomes a critical analogue for thinking law otherwise.

Portrait of Our Truth

At our meeting on September 7, 2022, Melanie shared another story highlighting how she

was denied access to cultural lessons, such as learning her traditional language, participating in ceremonies, or being taught Indigenous knowledge systems from Elders. She explained that this exclusion stemmed from family members having internalized false assumptions about Indigenous peoples and their perceived social worth. She explained:

I'm always on the outside looking in because I'm so white looking and didn't have status until recently. I was always considered white. Growing up on a reserve was hard because I was a kid with blonde hair and hazel eyes. Because I didn't look Indigenous, my community didn't accept me. So, I never felt like I belonged. My grandfather's mother would call my grandmother a squaw and talk down to her. Even though she was also Indigenous, she was furious when my grandmother decided to marry an Indigenous man. Being Indigenous was frowned upon, especially in Toronto, where she lived. She was white-passing and never wanted to look at herself as Indigenous. This way of thinking had so many negative implications. While growing up, I wasn't allowed to explore cultural practices. That was frowned upon. Not too long ago, my reserve sent me this survey. It had several hypothetical questions. One of those was about this non-status kid named Adam. His mom is from Killarney and has status. He grew up in Henvey, and his grandmother who taught him some of our ways was also from Henvey. The question asked, "Do you think Adam should be status?" I answered, yes. You also have the option of adding a comment. I responded and stated that I don't believe in the one-drop rule. If you are accepted by your community and you're willing to be part of that community, why should the government dictate that relationship? So many of us do not have the choice to be part of our community.

Melanie's story reflects how the legacy of Section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act* continues to shape lived experiences, even when it is not explicitly named. The question of whether someone like Adam "should be status" is not only a community-based inquiry, but also a legal one, rooted in Canada's history of legislating Indigenous identity. Although recent amendments to the *Indian Act* have aimed to address the gender-based discrimination embedded in 12(1)(b), specifically the way it removed status from Indigenous women and their descendants (Palmater, 2014), these changes do not erase the long-term social and cultural impacts. The legal definition of who qualifies for status still influences how Indigenous identity is negotiated in everyday life (Palmater, 2014). In Melanie's story, we see how formal law continues to exert power through community perceptions and internalized exclusions, even as community members push back against it by asserting cultural belonging over state-imposed criteria. Audra Simpson (2014) argues that the state's recognition is often at odds with Indigenous self-determination and creates tensions between legal identity and lived identity by shaping the terms of recognition without necessarily being named as the source of that power. Melanie's story illustrates this tension vividly, highlighting how identity is negotiated within complex familial and social contexts and how external systems of recognition can intersect with personal and relational experiences in ways that complicate straightforward understandings of identity.

Hearing Melanie's stories of cultural loss and identity disruption was both uncomfortable and deeply affecting. These stories did not simply inform me; they moved through me. They compelled me to confront the limits of my own positionality and reflect on parts of my own life I had long avoided. While I can never fully inhabit Melanie's experiences or the emotions tied to her storytelling, I experienced what Campt (2017) might describe as a "haptic resonance" (p. 69), a feeling that bypasses cognition and takes root in the body. This resonance emerged through

shared and distinct experiences of loss, racism, resistance, and family. It was not about sameness, it was about *feeling with* and an embodied recognition that occurred through affect, vibration, and presence—not logic. These encounters with Melanie’s work and words were not passive moments of reception; they were felt frequencies, prompting unease, connection, and reflection. In this way, my engagement was not purely visual or auditory, it was haptic, involving the full sensorium. The affective intensity of our collaboration unsettled the conventional boundaries of knowledge production and inspired a creative response. Rather than simply documenting or analyzing, I was compelled to make, and to create in return as a gesture of relational and reciprocal listening.

Reflecting on Melanie’s artistic process, I found myself newly curious about my own cultural roots. While flipping through an old photo album, I stumbled upon a photograph of my mother. She was just eight years old in the image, her eyes heavy with loss and pain. Despite my mixed-race identity, I realized how little I knew about my mother’s birth country or culture. She had immigrated to Canada from Korea at eight years old and, after being abandoned by her physically abusive father, she spent the next decade living in a state-run group home.

The passport photo of her as a child left me devastated. It became more than just an object of sight; it elicited a deeply embodied encounter. Inducing another flashpoint or rupture, I experienced what Campt (2017) describes as an “affective connection”, a moment where we begin to feel with the subject of the image and they, in turn, elicit emotional and affective responses from us (p. 6). Drawing on Campt’s concept of “lower frequencies” (p. 68)—those often subtle, nonverbal, nonvisual vibrations, that speak through the image—I analyzed the photo to imagine what it *felt like*. With this particular image, it was not just my mother’s expression or the setting that held meaning, it was her stiffness of posture, her sombre face, and

the dissonance between what the photo was likely meant to convey and what still *leaks* out through it. As I listened to the image, I began to hear the vibrations of grief and the resilience that resists the cataloging of my mother as a particular subject. This encounter moved me beyond what was visible in the photograph by revealing a deeper, instinctual relationship between my body and the image. It was a moment of connection and reflection that reshaped how I engaged with both my past and my identity.

Growing up without Korean relatives or exposure to Korean culture while being surrounded by white relatives profoundly shaped my identity, sense of cultural belonging, and social interactions. This disconnection from the Korean half of my heritage led to persistent questions such as, “Am I Korean enough?” and “What does being Korean mean to me?” My mother, siblings, and I (marked by our distinctly Asian appearance) were not fully embraced by our predominantly white family. My blonde-haired, blue-eyed father was frequently asked by his relatives how he felt about having Asian children, a question steeped in exoticism. These remarks created discomfort—a sense of objectification—and ultimately underscored my feelings of being caught in a liminal space, neither fully belonging to one racial identity nor the other. Holding my mother’s passport photo in my hands evoked a deep sadness for myself and my mother, as it symbolized this complex intersection of identities. It sparked profound reflections on how generational differences have shaped my understanding of myself and prompted questions about the role I want culture and tradition to play in my future. These reflections became the foundation of my creative process in developing *Portrait of Our Truth* (see Figure 17).



Figure 17: Natilie Richer, Portrait of Our Truth

Campt (2017), argues that images, like sound, have the potential to vibrate with histories, emotions, and embodied experiences that transcend the visible. In particular, she suggests that passport photographs are often seen as sterile and lifeless, yet can be approached as sites of resistance, power, and hidden narratives that we can *hear* through the subtle vibrations of their context and creation. Inspired by this framework, I engaged with my mother's passport photo differently. Like Campt, I found myself hearing movement, fugivity, and the tension between capture and resistance, which are themes Campt insists are implicit in images of individuals caught in the bureaucratic gaze, such as passport photographs. These images, while ostensibly still, vibrate with the histories of those who are photographed, their stories, struggles, and survival. To reclaim the narrative of this photograph, I physically altered it by slicing it in a way that enabled me to "listen" and respond to its emotional undertones. The slices symbolize prison bars to evoke the emotional vibrations of grief, loneliness, isolation, and powerlessness embedded in the image. Through this act of deconstruction and reconstruction, I created a

dialogue between the photograph and my artistic voice by transforming the image into a medium of expression and resistance. By placing the image in front of a colourful background, my intention was twofold: to symbolize brighter horizons and to allow the background to become part of my creation, infusing it with new life and meaning. Here, I also evoke the passage of time and transcend linear depictions by integrating archival materials with contemporary techniques. By acknowledging the sadness embedded in the photograph as a living archive, *Portrait of Our Truth* can be seen as a catalyst for decolonial creation. It amplifies resonance while reclaiming representation, offering a means of exploring complex narratives tied to identity and history. While photographs are often perceived as timeless, this work connects with echoes of both a “before” and an “after” to hold space for complex emotions and histories that transcend a single moment in time.

As I recounted to Melanie my mother’s tumultuous relationship with her physically abusive father, our discussion deepened into reflections on our relationships with our own mothers and the ways art can illuminate their experiences of patriarchal systems. Through this process, *Portrait of Our Truth* became a focal point for exploring intergenerational trauma and resilience. We talked about how the piece conveys not only sadness, but also the strength that enabled my mother to navigate a system designed to diminish her humanity. Together, we agreed that placing a more recent photo of my mother beside her passport picture would allow a new narrative to emerge, one that contrasts with the original image and is shaped by emotions like hope and love. And so, we decided to include a photo of my mother and me reading together in our digital output. When sharing my experiences of creating *Portrait of Our Truth*, Melanie shared how it stirred a profound sadness within her by intersecting with her own journey as an artist grappling with decolonization. In this way, sharing my reflections transparently created a

space where Melanie also felt safe to voice her perspectives. For example, it invited her to *listen* to the photograph and contribute her own interpretations, thereby allowing for the creation of a multi-vocal narrative.

In embracing this form of collaborative knowledge-making and in creating space for symbolic and experiential artistic practices, we illustrate how bodies develop performative relationships with objects to enact the construction of meaning. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) conceptualization of affect—a complex process linked to bodily intensities and social systems—I situate affect not within myself, Melanie, or the artistic representations we share, but in the relational space between the three. In this way, I engage what Robinson and English Professor Keavy Martin (2016) describe as “aesthetic action” (p. 2), a range of sensory stimuli, including image, sound, and movement, that generate social and political effects uncovered through affective engagements. Exploring the impact of TRC proceedings and artworks related to the residential school system, Robinson and Martin (2016) emphasize the importance of creating spaces for embodied experiences that provoke and unsettle. These actions challenge colonial assumptions, enabling us to reconsider our relationships with sensory experiences. In this context, our conversation as a decolonizing space facilitated such transformative encounters. It was within this space that creations like *Portrait of Our Truth* could be engaged not only as artistic expressions but as sites of legal and cultural meaning-making.

In our conversations around *Portrait of Our Truth*, the connection between law and culture is further emphasized particularly through the engagement with intergenerational trauma. But, rather than reproducing the bureaucratic gaze that legal structures often impose, this work reclaims affective and embodied modes of witnessing. By approaching legal documents, like passport photos, through the lens of lived memory and inherited pain, *Portrait of Our Truth*

demonstrates that law is not solely encountered through statutes or in courtrooms, but can also be experienced viscerally, through grief, silence, and storytelling. This form of legal engagement disrupts the detached, objectifying tendencies of settler-state surveillance and instead makes way for haptic relations. As with *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*, this creation reinforces the argument that law can be engaged through embodied, affective encounters that both reveal and resist the ongoing legacies of structural violence.

This is Pain

During the winter of 2023, as Melanie and I reflected on our discussions from the past year, we noticed many of them centered on the intersections of women's roles in our lives. This realization sparked a deeper dialogue about Melanie's piece *This is Pain*, which invites viewers to critically reconsider the social construction of gender. Through this work, Melanie offers a nuanced critique of the roles and expectations often imposed on women. While sharing a picture of her sculpture *This is Pain* during a screen share (see Figure 18), Melanie elaborated on how her lived experiences as a woman informed her defiance of conventional gender norms. She explained:

This is pain. I used paper and cement to create the base of the shoe. The nail that goes right through the heel is a metaphor for Achilles' Heel and the heel represents the expectations women place on themselves. So, it's about the pain of being a woman. Physically, mentally, emotionally. The shoe represents the expectations my mother placed on herself, and in turn tried to place on me. Who a woman was supposed to be and what her roles were. She believed a woman's place was in the kitchen. Domestic stuff.

Cleaning the house. It was assumed she would do that because it was the job of women to do so. Even though she worked full time, and my dad only worked part-time. My nanny believed and strived to live up to those expectations too. Expectations of what a woman should be based on what a man wanted, or what society expected of a woman based on stupid, patriarchal, and colonial norms. It all really breaks down to patriarchy. For me, art is really personal. It reflects part of me. And using wire was constricting and represented being caged. Like the woman who can't escape the kitchen. (Laughs). But wire is also bendable and malleable. Like us. We don't have to be who they say we should be. I like wire for that reason.



Figure 18: Melanie Delamoraide, This is Pain

Melanie's experiences of womanhood deeply resonated with me, as I was also raised

with the expectation that women would take on more domestic roles. In this process, we engaged in an act of decolonization confronting the internalized white supremacist ideologies that had influenced our thinking. This confrontation, as bell hooks (1994) describes in *Outlaw Culture*, initiated a path toward healing. Together, we embodied hooks' (1994) concept of "love as the practice of freedom" (p. 289), committing ourselves to challenging the politics of domination that perpetuate our individual oppression.

By embracing the feminist principle that "the personal is political," we illuminated how political forces permeate private life to shape power dynamics in spaces like the kitchen and bedroom (Lee, 2007, p. 163). Using examples from our own lives, including lifting heavy weights, embracing hearty appetites, and swearing with abandon, we built deeper connections while dismantling and resisting the identity politics tied to being a woman. Thus, our stories became a lens through which to explore the social world, sharing our experiences and learning through dialogue. Through sharing the ordinary details of our lives, we called out the overt violence embedded in our experiences. This process reflects what second wave feminist scholars describe as consciousness-raising, a political act rooted in collective reflection where personal experiences are not dismissed as anecdotal but treated as crucial data for understanding structural oppression (see, for example, hooks, 1984; Taylor, 1989; Sarachild, 1973). In this context, knowledge ceased to reinforce the scientific model and instead emerged as a response to living in a world dominated by white male supremacy. Our conversations became more than casual exchanges; they were "kitchen table revolutions" (hooks, 1989; Smith, 2000), a space of feminist resistance and radical reimagining. In this way, storytelling expanded beyond an exchange of narratives, toward a transformative process fostering a bond rooted in personal experience, family, empowerment, disruption, transgression, and love.

The feminist practice of consciousness-raising described here directly challenges dominant forms of knowledge legitimated through institutions like the university, museum, and courtroom. This mirrors Freire's (1969) concept of *conscientização*, which emphasizes the development of critical consciousness through reflection on social and political contradictions (p. 86). Just as *conscientização* involves recognizing how knowledge is constructed in relation to power, rather than discovered as objective truth, feminist consciousness-raising reframes knowledge as something collectively produced through shared experiences and critiques of oppressive structures. Both practices resist the hierarchical "banking model" of knowledge transmission and instead makes space for participatory, transformative learning that empowers. In this context, these "kitchen table revolutions" constitute a disruption to display culture where knowledge is often ordered and aestheticized. In contrast, consciousness-raising foregrounds embodied, affective, and relational ways of knowing. For example, in legal discourse, testimony must be relevant and verifiable, often resulting in the dismissal or misinterpretation of things like oral testimonies (see Chapter Three). In contrast, our consciousness-raising stories transgress these formal conventions by treating personal narratives, emotion, and embodiment as evidence of structural harm.

In this way, these revolutions foreground feminist storytelling that refuses the universalizing claims of dominant knowledge systems (hooks, 1999; Smith 2000) in ways that align with decolonial practices. By making way for situated knowledge that emerges from lived experiences like our dialogues, this refusal challenges colonial divisions that separate through the binaries that reinforce Western epistemologies and legal systems, including, private/public, rational/emotional, and objective/subjective. This undoing invites the law to recognize that knowledge is not neutral or universally applicable but constructed in relation to power. In this

context, it exposes how legal knowledge often relies on exclusionary categories that serve to contain and control meaning, often erasing or assimilating experiences and voices that do not conform to its textual norms. The law's pursuit of containment is challenged by this refusal, which instead embraces ambiguity, contradiction, and relationality. Naming and writing about these contradictions to a socio-legal audience promotes critical reflexivity within legal scholarship and practice, urging the field to reckon with its epistemic boundaries and to imagine more inclusive, responsive forms of justice grounded in lived experience. In this context, the feminist principle that the personal is political becomes a radical act of re-representation as it recenters what has been excluded, disrupts the institutional curation of knowledge, and affirms relational forms of understanding. The act of speaking, lifting heavy weights, eating heartily, and swearing freely are not just about liberation; they are a purposeful refusal of the gendered, racialized, and colonial norms that govern how people are expected to behave, speak, and know. In this way, this mode of storytelling can be understood as a form of decolonial display that does not seek legitimacy within dominant frameworks, but actively works to unmake them.

The Bloom of Unbecoming

Inspired by our conversation, I logged off our call and felt compelled to translate the emotional and intellectual resonance into something material. I made my way to a local craft store, drawn by an impulse to work with my hands and to think through making. Inspired by the immediacy of my conversation with Melanie and her comments on working with wire as an art medium as both constraining and malleable, I was left with a roll of aluminum wire unsure of what exactly I would create but certain that I wanted to explore my identity as a woman in a form that resists and reconfigures patriarchal constructions of femininity.

Working intuitively with the wire, I allowed the process to unfold without a fixed endpoint; I embraced what scholars such as Ahmed (2014, p. 47) describe as a “feminist orientation” toward the body that refuses to straighten itself along normative gendered lines. Rather than reproducing hegemonic femininity or aesthetic ideals rooted in Euro-Western patriarchy, this act of making became a small gesture of resistance: an attempt *to feel through*, rather than perform what it means to inhabit a gendered body outside of its socially prescribed boundaries. Holding the wire in my hands, I leaned into its malleability, twisting, bending, and shaping it into forms that became metaphors for my fluid and shifting identity. This process was reflexive of my ongoing conversations with Melanie, whose wire-based practice and storytelling opened new ways for me to see, think, and imagine form. While inspired by her work, my making became a site for transforming those dialogues into my own embodied and relational language. I began with the silhouette of a human body. Losing track of time, I meticulously wrapped, twisted, and layered the wire around different parts of the figure. With each motion, my initially thin silhouette transformed into a thick, heavy, and intricately layered sculpture. The physical effort required for this process, including being hunched over my desk for hours feeling the tension in my shoulders and back, illustrated how enmeshed I was with my environment. This visceral connection to the material challenged traditional mind/body dualisms by demonstrating how my body was dynamic, continually in process, and intertwined with non-human elements. The act of creation was mediated by practices and processes that produced dynamic intersections and connections underscoring how bodies are never static but always in the process of becoming.

Lisa Blackman’s (2021) discussion of “Bodies without Organs” (BwO)—a concept informed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988)—further informed my reflections. Blackman (2021)

explains that bodies are not fixed entities defined solely by their biological components (organs, blood, limbs, and so on), but are marked by their capacity for transformation and change. BwO, as she describes them, are about relational connections and networks that configure bodies in specific ways by offering possibilities for reimagining the self-outside of normative frameworks (Blackman, 2021, p. 125). Mobilizing this notion, my wire sculpture became a site for imagining different possibilities of selfhood in which the body breaks free from societal expectations. Rather than being defined by the physical outline of the silhouette that gives the body its definition, the figure derived its robustness from layered wire that both constricted and held it, poised in a state of tension. Through this process, I saw my identity as fluid, dynamic, and continually evolving; it is open to endless configurations of becoming—and not constrained by rigid definitions, but always on the verge of shatter.

As I wrapped pieces of wire around the torso of the silhouette, I ignored the slight pain in my fingertips from the pricks of the metal, opting to feel a sense of pride as I intentionally excluded morphological traits traditionally associated with female attractiveness, such as large breasts or wide hips. I viewed my sculpture as a reflection of my journey toward becoming “otherwise” and embracing creative processes to shift power. This aligns with feminist philosopher Judith Butler’s (1997) concept of moving from “status as a condition of agency” to embodying one’s “own agency” (p. 12). By challenging the performance of gender and the norms governing gender relations, the creation of my non-binary body marked the beginning of an interrogation into my own identity and positionality.

As I continued shaping the wire, the sculpture gradually took form as a figure with a wild, untamed head resembling hair (see Figure 15). The unruly, “uncivilized” strands defy Eurocentric beauty standards by resisting the disciplining of bodies and aesthetics that seek to

render subjects legible within a colonial framework. The sculpture's sexless body unsettles the oversimplified and reductive binary oppositions embedded in cisheteronormative Euro-Christian paradigms by refusing categorization within rigid structures of gendered and sexual legibility. In this process, I align with what Rosemary Hunter (2011) describes as "the disorderliness of women's bodies" (p. 28), but I also push further to challenge the ways in which women's corporeality has historically been used as a site of control, subjugation, and epistemic dismissal (Crenshaw, 1991; Halley, 2008; Lacey, 2004; Smith, 1999). The entanglement of women with nature, the body, and irrationality continues to haunt contemporary structures of power where the policing of bodies extends beyond aesthetics to professional and intellectual life (Dymond, 2019). By crafting a figure clearly not gendered, I create space for a subjectivity that is fluid, emergent, and resistant to patriarchal containment. Here, sculpture becomes not merely an object but a material manifestation of resistance and a visual articulation of the complexities of decolonizing identity.

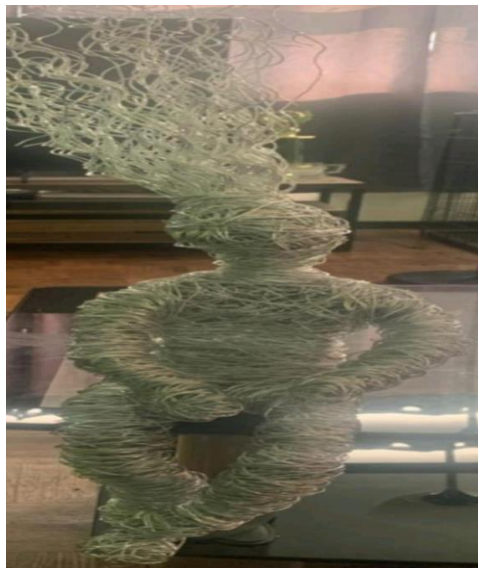


Figure 19: Natilie Richer, Progression 1

When I stepped back to take in my sculpture, I waited for the elusive "I'm an artist"

feeling to sink in. When it did not, I placed the sculpture on my desk, refusing to engage with it for three long days. On the fourth day, I shared a picture of my creation with Melanie and asked if she had time for a quick chat. That brief conversation ignited something within me by helping me channel my anger into more constructive paths. During our discussion, I confessed my deep dissatisfaction with the piece I had created. Instead of dismissing my frustration, Melanie guided me through my emotions, listening attentively as I tried to articulate what I disliked. When I struggled to find the words, she gently prompted me with questions: “What don’t you like about it? Is it the mood? Does it evoke something unsettling? Or is it missing something?” Her thoughtful questions pushed me to reflect honestly and I realized the piece felt incomplete and lacking something I could not yet define. Before we ended our chat, Melanie shared her own experience with creating *Past, Present, and Future* (see Figure 20), describing how it was both a challenging and liberating process. Her insights left me with much to ponder and a renewed perspective on my own work as she shared:

I started with a piece of tree about the size of my head. There was this tree that was cut down. It was my father’s tree. I call it my dad’s memory tree. It stood for 20-plus years. Family members put a chair underneath his tree. It was a place to remember my father. He didn’t want a funeral. He wanted a celebration of life. That was his wish. I’m not sure how it all started other than somebody had the idea, my dad wanted a different kind of party. Hanging out at that tree was that party. Family members and friends all went and drank under the tree. They would reflect. It was a place for grief. They visited and sat under that tree for over 20 years. Unbeknownst to my family, they ended up killing the tree because they

nailed in all the beer caps from the beer they drank in memory of him while sitting underneath that tree. One day me and Jay went looking on the property for the tree and decided to pay homage. When we found it, I saw this piece of wood the size of my head. I had gone there initially to find a log of some sort because I knew I couldn't just go and hack down a tree that didn't belong to me. So, the part of the tree I did bring home, it's a representation of where I came from. It has all the lines. The lineage shows the history, of my family. I used the pieces to create the series I call Past, Present and Future. I started with 3 pieces which soon turned into 5 pieces. Matriarchy is literally what it's all about. I am in the center because I am the center of my universe. The other two were slightly smaller: my grandma and my daughter. That's where it went for me. I made those three pieces during the first semester of my second year and in my second year I did the other two pieces of Saisaigonokwe and my granddaughter. I decided matriarchal was the way I was going to go, even though my lineage was my grandfather and not my grandmother. It is through both, it's not that it's not through my grandfather's lineage. But for the sake of this piece, I didn't include my grandfather, so it kind of unintentionally became matriarchal. I think what's important though, is that with those pieces, one means nothing without the other. The portraits came together in three days. I outlined our heads at school; then wood burned them. At first, the process was incredibly frustrating and difficult for several reasons. Fire is unpredictable, it's hard to control exactly

where and how it spreads, so achieving precise details was challenging. Having to wait for certain areas to burn or cool to the right intensity also made the process difficult. It really disrupted my flow of creativity. Yet, I was still drawn to fire. It still speaks to me in a weird way. Creating with fire, it preserves the wood. It's not synthetic. And fire really works well with this piece. For this piece, I used pyrography, coloured pencil, and mahogany stain. Some pieces are much longer processes. When you're creating, I encourage you to just be yourself and do your thing. Feel and go through it. But don't overthink it. There is no rhyme or reason for how long it should take to create from beginning to end.



Figure 20: Melanie Delamoraide, Past, Present, and Future

As I listened to Melanie share her story, I listened not just orally, but visually and sonically and turned to what Camp (2017) would describe as “lower frequencies”: the hums, the pauses, and the emotion that registered through things like sensation (p. 19). Camp’s (2017) concept of listening to frequency is about listening with the body to the vibrations of grief and resistance that live beneath the surface of what is said. For instance, when Melanie spoke of her father’s memory tree, her voice caught slightly, not enough to be considered an oral iteration of a caesura but enough to register as an emotional shift. Though there was no explicit declaration of loss, that small frequency shift—in tone and in breath—signaled something else: something deeply felt. I let that moment stay with me. I did not follow up with questions or try to make it “fit” into research criteria. Instead, I let it guide my own creative process and it inspired me to invite her to feel my stories rather than interpret them.

Inspired by Melanie, I began collecting random objects to represent the people I love. Among these items were an empty bag of Cool Ranch Doritos to represent my grandfather, an army-inspired bandana for my puppy, a beaded bracelet made with my younger sister, and a piece of fabric from my moccasin made by my step-grandmother. However, I struggled to find a way to represent my maternal Korean grandmother whom I never knew. Instinctively, I reached for a pad of brightly coloured Post-it Notes beside me and created a paper flower. With delicate care, I placed the vivid pink flower into the hands of my wire sculpture envisioning it as a tribute to my grandmother. Inspired to craft a second flower to symbolize my mother, I turned to Google Chrome and typed in the query bar, “Korean flowers representing loss.” Among the search results, a description of chrysanthemums stood out; celebrated for centuries in Korean culture, these flowers symbolize “eternal blossoms that never fade.” Intrigued, I embarked on another search, this time seeking a tutorial for making paper chrysanthemums. A step-by-step YouTube

guide soon had my desk strewn with crumpled Post-It Notes although none resembled the flower I had envisioned. Yet, rather than feeling disheartened, I embraced Melanie's words about accepting imperfection and allowed myself to simply enjoy the process. Taking a calming breath that eased the tension in my shoulders, I reached for a fresh Post-It Note. Immersed in the act of creating, I cut, glued, layered, and folded the bright pink paper until it transformed into a vibrant, three-dimensional flower (see Figure 21). When I placed the two flowers together, they became a poignant representation of my mother and grandmother as joyfully reunited after enduring hardship, loss, and pain (see Figure 22).

As I folded more Post-It Notes into flowers, I became aware of how integral these notes had become to my research process, not just as tools for organizing information but as embodied expressions of thought. They enabled me to compare, juxtapose, and interweave diverse materials ranging from storytelling and recorded conversations to scholarly texts and immersive experiences. In this way, the Post-it Notes enacted Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1988) rhizomatic model of organizing thoughts, which emphasizes multiplicity, non-hierarchical linkages, and the unpredictable, non-linear growth of knowledge networks. Using the Post-It Notes, I began to visually and conceptually unpack, connect, and synthesize themes emerging from various sources, including textual, conversational, visual, and experiential ones. I covered the long wall of my basement with these notes, each representing fragments drawn from scholarly texts, personal experiences, art shows, museum visits, social media, and commentary from artists and curators (see Figure 23). I grouped and regrouped them according to evolving themes, which allowed ideas to expand, intersect, contradict, or diverge.



Figure 21: Natilie Richer, Progression 2



Figure 22: Natilie Richer, Progression 3



Figure 23: Post-it Notes Wall

This method of (re)working draws on the concept of the rhizome as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, a structure that spreads horizontally, without a central point or hierarchical order allowing for multiple, non-linear entry and exit points. In this way, thought became nomadic, as well as fluid, decentered, and generative. My fluid, process-based, rhizomatic Post-It Note arrangement encouraged associations that might not have emerged within a conventional, outline-driven format; instead, I was demonstrating how one idea can spur, connect to, build on, speak back to, and/or challenge another. Within this framework, Melanie's artistic engagements were not treated as an add-on but as equally valid ways of knowing. Emphasizing interconnectedness, the rhizomatic model aligns strongly with Indigenous epistemologies as it creates a non-hierarchical space for inquiry where different stories, voices, and ways of knowing can co-exist. By adopting this methodology, I attempted to resist rigid structure, which, as an approach, meant Melanie's voice had space to do whatever it needed to do on its own terms.

During the week following my initial creative process, I met with my supervisor to share

the first iteration of my sculpture. Positioned on a stack of books that symbolized the intellectual milestones of my doctoral journey (see Figure 24), the sculpture initially felt unsatisfying to me. Its doll-like appearance, combined with the literal reading of the symbolic objects I had carefully chosen, seemed to undermine its conceptual depth. My supervisor's question, "What happens if the flowers are multiplied? What expands if you make more of them?" led me to reconsider the material and the scale of the work (White, 2023). With curiosity, I went to Staples and purchased a variety pack of Post-It Notes to test what could unfold if I created more flowers. In crafting over 300 flowers from these everyday office materials (see Figure 25), I transformed them into artistic expressions embodying a metaphorical blossoming tied to my intellectual growth and the ongoing process of decolonizing my mind. Through this act of creation, my engagement with the materiality of the flowers—the texture of the paper and the continuous folding—became an extension of my own bodily labour. The process mirrored what Rosi Braidotti (2002) calls the "subject-in-process" (p. 14), wherein new forms of expression enable critical engagement with subjectivity. Here, bodily materiality emerged in the act of creation; my hands became agents of transformation linking the symbolic and physical worlds in an iterative process.

This slow and embodied act of making became a quiet but persistent refusal of the detached, disembodied rationalism that underpins dominant academic knowledge systems. In this repetitive labour, my hands challenged the supremacy of the head and the humble Post-It Notes—icons of bureaucratic efficiency and institutional logic—were reimagined as soft, fragile blooms of resistance. By working with this mundane, disposable material, I enacted a transformation that speaks to the tension between what is traditionally recognized as "legitimate knowledge" and the affective, sensorial, and emergent knowledge that has long been marginalized or dismissed, especially those associated with femininity, craft, or care (Ahmed,

2017; Haraway, 1988). Through sustained, intimate, and materially grounded practice, this research makes way for what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) might call a “decolonial option” where alternative ways of knowing, sensing, and being are not just theorized but physically enacted. In this way, the sculpture was not merely an artistic artifact, but a site of epistemic refusal and a space that makes way for a reimaging of how knowledge is produced, displayed, and felt.

After carefully arranging the hundreds of Post-It Note flowers I had created across my dining room table, it became clear that the installation was far from complete. Sensing the need for more—not just in quantity but in shared intention—I invited my mother and father to join me in the making. What began as a simple request for help became an act of relational research, where creation was collaborative. In this gesture, I opened up my research process to familial participation, not as data collection, but as a quiet practice of decolonizing methodology, foregrounding kinship, reciprocity, and the everyday as legitimate sites of knowledge-making.

The next afternoon until the early hours of the night, we cut, glued, folded, and shaped Post-It Notes of various colours into flowers. My mother’s workspace remained tidy throughout, her careful precision reflecting her own ways of engaging with creativity. Mine, on the other hand, was strewn with Elmer’s glue, scraps of paper, and crumpled Post-It Notes, all evidence of trial, error, and improvisation. My father, who struggled with folding the notes, was instead tasked with using a protractor to make and cut circle-shaped paper for my mother and me to fold into flowers. He also organized his seemingly perfect circles into neat piles, finding his own rhythm within the collaborative process (see Figure 26).



Figure 24: Natilie Richer, Progression 4



Figure 25: Progression 5



Figure 26: Kitchen Table Revelations

As we engaged with the Post-It Notes, conversation flowed freely. My mother reminded me of how creative I had always been, which sparked reflections on the ways creativity itself often becomes disciplined out of us. As mentioned when discussing *Mother's Skirt*, colonial systems of education, labour, and societal norms frequently prioritize conformity and productivity over exploration and play, thereby stifling creative impulses and relegating them to the realm of childhood pursuits. These systems do not operate in isolation. Instead, they are deeply entangled with capitalism, which imposes rigid value systems around time and output. Within capitalist logic, creativity is only deemed valuable when it can be commodified, turned into profit, or serve economic growth (Lazzarato, 2014; Mould, 2018).

By re-centering creativity through our flower making process not as a solitary act but as an intergenerational, collective, and cooperative one, I sought to resist and reimagine those colonial-capitalist frameworks. The act of making and thinking with my mother outside of institutional settings and in a space that allowed for slowness and storytelling became a subtle

form of refusal. In reclaiming creativity on our own terms, we challenge the narratives that tell us what is worthwhile, what is productive, and who gets to be called a “knowledge holder” or an “artist.” With our collaborative act we began to carve out spaces of possibility where different worlds and knowledge systems can co-exist.

This process of slow, shared, and embodied creativity also speaks to practices like quilting which feminist scholars and artists have long understood as both a craft and a form of political expression (Boris & Berlage 2012; Parker, 1984). Much like flower making, quilting is often collaborative, intergenerational, and situated within domestic or informal spaces, all of which have been historically dismissed by colonial knowledge systems as outside the realm of serious intellectual or artistic production (Parker, 1984). Yet these practices hold deep epistemic and political values. As hooks (1990) argues, in a critical feminist intervention responding to white feminist constructions of the private sphere as oppressive, the home has served as a site of resistance where knowledge, survival strategies, and radical imagination are passed down through everyday case-based practices like sewing and storytelling. The AIDS Memorial Quilt exemplifies how quilting, as a communal act of grief, remembrance, and political witness, brings marginalized narratives into public view. Scholars like Media, Culture, and Communication Professor Marita Sturken (1997) have shown how the Quilt functions not only as a memorial but a form of counter-narrative, asserting the value of lives lost to AIDS and protesting their erasure by state and media discourse. In this way, quilting—and by extension other forms of feminist craft—operates as a kind of counter-display, resisting the epistemic authority of institutions by making space for alternative modes of witnessing, memory, and world-making.

Feminist theorists, such as Rozsika Parker (1984) and Elissa Auther (2010) have critiqued the historical separation between “art” and “craft” to affirm the political importance of

reclaiming such practices not only as legitimate aesthetic forms, but as modes of knowledge production. The repetitive, tactile labour involved in both quilting and our flower-making process reflects what feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1988) calls “situated knowledge”: knowledge that is embodied, partial, and relational, rather than universal or abstract. In crafting flowers with my parents outside institutional contexts and in a space that allowed for slowness, storytelling, and intergenerational exchange, we enacted a form of what hooks (1990) calls “homeplace”, which she describes as a space of resistance where Black women—and by extension, other racialized and marginalized groups—have historically cultivated dignity, care, and self-definition in the face of systemic oppression (p. 42). In this way, this was not just art-making; it was “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 13) and a refusal to abide by colonial-capitalist frameworks that define what counts as expert knowledge. By reclaiming creativity on our own terms, we challenge dominant narratives that privilege commodifiable output and institutional validation. Instead, we begin to carve out epistemologies where process matters more than product and where creativity is linked to care, memory, resistance, and love. Thus, our flower-making, like quilting, becomes not just metaphorically radical, but materially so, as I see it as a reweaving of meaning, subjectivity, and world-making outside the logic of extraction and display.

Upon returning home from my parents’ house, I found myself surrounded by over a thousand flowers. Each flower invited reflection, reminding me of the interconnected process of creation as I repurposed my leftover wire by looping large pieces around the sculpture. Hours later, I held in my hands a wire sculpture encased within a frame of control; its rigid aluminum evoking the oppressive structures of colonial epistemologies.

With my newly purchased ball of yarn, I softened the harshness of the wire figure by

wrapping the cold wire in warm fibers. This generative process became a metaphor for decolonial transformation and a conscious effort to unravel and reconfigure artificial boundaries in favour of the “spaces of possibility” where diverse cultures and ways of being might flourish (Grande, 2015, p. 139). Venturing out with my dog, I gathered sticks scattered across my neighbourhood; upon returning to my work, I wrapped yarn around the branches imagining each twist and knot as an act of reclamation and a reimagining of the boundaries that had once confined my wire sculpture. In time, the wire itself became almost entirely concealed within the beehive I had constructed.

Understanding my piece as an act of decolonial autoethnography, I intentionally placed the sculpture in front of sheets of paper carrying stories, themes, research papers, arguments, poems, critical reflections, and visual images integral to my doctoral journey. By affixing these pages to my white walls, I disrupted the sterile and exclusionary “white cube” aesthetic and instead gestured toward an aesthetic grounded in embodiment and relationality. By situating the sculpture against a backdrop of my own research, including pages from academic journals, activist pages, art websites, research notes, poems, arguments, and revelations, I participate in what Johnson (2004) describes as the transformation of legal imaginaries through creative practices. My sculpture and the way in which I display it, then, are not just about showcasing my creation, but also challenging the ways in which knowledge becomes visible and shareable. It is in this context that my research finds its decolonial force in transforming how knowledge is understood.

Reaching for the large box of now over one thousand paper flowers, I carefully arranged them around my creation. When my wire sculpture seemed to disappear beneath their abundance, I began cutting yarn to create an opening, symbolizing my emergence from imposed boundaries.

As I pulled each colourful strand of wire through the opening, painted to resemble tree branches, the act became a reclamation and a way to visually assert my presence and engagement with creative and artistic practices in a sociolegal space (see Figure 27, Figure 28, Figure 29, and Figure 30). As I arranged the flowers, I embraced their personal, romantic, feminine, and emotional resonances. Their vivid colors evoked joy and vitality by subverting the colonial tendency to suppress emotion, feminized expression, and embodiment as “lesser” forms of knowledge (Ahmed, 2014, p.3). With more than a thousand flowers on display, I celebrated my femininity as an act of resistance and renewal. Through this creative intervention I call *The Bloom of Unbecoming*, I reimagined research and knowledge production as deeply embodied and relational dismantling of hierarchical systems that privilege the disembodied and "neutral" observer.



Figure 27: The Bloom of Unbecoming (1)



Figure 28: The Bloom of Unbecoming (2)



Figure 29: The Bloom of Unbecoming (3)

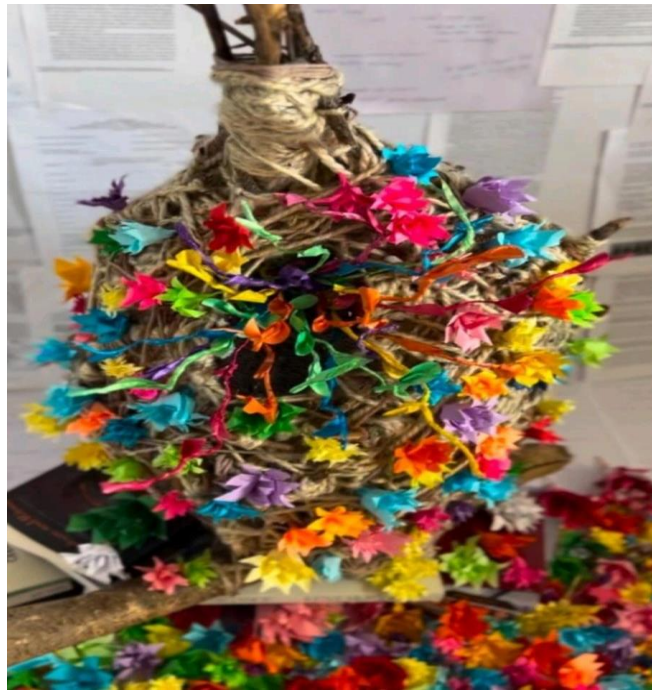


Figure 30: The Bloom of Unbecoming (4)

As I shared *The Bloom of Unbecoming* and its creative process with Melanie, she immediately drew attention to the alchemy between the flowers and the wire sculpture. In our conversation, we reflected on how the wire form—though made of industrial material—echoed the delicate, ephemeral qualities of the flowers themselves. I came to see the sculpture as enacting a tension between the human desire to transcend the body and the grounded cycles of growth, bloom, and decay that flowers represent. The flowers speak to a natural temporality—one that is beautiful, fleeting, and regenerative—while the wire—a product of human intervention—holds the promise (or threat) of endurance beyond the natural world. This tension also mirrored an internal process, one that involved grappling with the limitations placed upon me by systems rooted in hierarchy and exclusion, including those tied to gender and race. As someone racialized, I have experienced systems of devaluation that attempt to fix and contain subjectivity. Yet I also name myself as a settler on this land, a designation that requires ongoing

reflection on how I benefit from colonial structures and am implicated in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The metaphor of “becoming otherwise” is not meant to position me as a victim of colonialism, but to acknowledge the constraints imposed by intersecting systems of domination—including white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy—and to explore how creative practice can help reimagine subjectivity beyond those constraints. In this way, *The Bloom of Unbecoming* becomes a space for reflecting on the ways in which bodies, identities, and knowledge are shaped by and can challenge the hierarchies that make some lives valuable and others expendable.

Our conversations not only deepened the understanding of *The Bloom of Unbecoming*, but also laid the groundwork for a collaborative approach that would honour our curation process. To better understand the direction of that process and the themes emerging from our dialogue, we spent time brainstorming a list of guiding questions during our meeting on April 24, 2023. The plan was to explore these questions individually and then reconvene to discuss our findings collectively. These questions included: What stands out when reflecting on our conversations? Were there any specific exchanges that particularly resonated with you? Did you learn anything new?

While earlier in this dissertation I made a deliberate choice to abandon rigidly structured formats in our conversation, recognizing how such frameworks can reproduce extractive and hierarchical dynamics, I also found that returning to a shared set of guiding questions at this point in the process served a different function. Rather than directing or controlling the conversation, these questions emerged collaboratively in the spirit of co-creation and mutual curiosity. They were not designed to extract “answers,” they were co-created to open space for reflection, resonance, and deeper connection as we prepared to engage more intentionally with

our curational work. By this stage, a strong foundation of trust and relationality had already been built. Thus, the questions functioned less as a framework imposed from above and more as scaffolding that supported our collaborative process. They offered a moment to pause, reflect, and attune to what had been shared and what was unfolding. Importantly, they also helped us begin to shape the emerging digital space we were co-creating, guiding our choice around what stories to include, which artistic and creative representations to feature, and how to weave together sound, image, and narrative in a way that reflected the intimacy and multiplicity of our process. This shift signals that structure is not inherently oppressive or antithetical to decolonial and feminist practice. Instead, when introduced in response to the needs of the relationship and the project, structure can become a generative tool—one that supports collaboration without foreclosing emergence. In this way, the act of revisiting structure became part of the artwork itself: a reflection of our evolving dialogue and a form of collective meaning-making.

Each of our answers was grounded in personal and relational insight. When unpacking our thoughts on the question “What stands out when reflecting on our conversations?” Melanie and I agreed that what stood out most is the depth of relational engagement that emerged, not just the stories themselves, but how they were told, how they were received, and how they lived between us. During that conversation, I raised the idea of extraction and asked whether anything in the research process had felt extractive to her. Melanie laughed at the question and reminded me of one of our first meetings, when I arrived armed with a list of terms, unintentionally imposing an unwelcome structure on what was meant to be a collaborative process. She described that moment as extractive and recalled how relieved she felt when we chose to go with the flow, trust the process, and learn from one another. She explained that in our first two conversations, she initially assumed she would act as a mentor because she was the artist. She

felt her role was to teach me how to "art". In hindsight, however, although she was undeniably an important mentor in my artistic development, she emphasized that she also learned a great deal about herself and me. We grew together.

An exchange that stayed with me was when Melanie described her process of creating *Past, Present, and Future*, as she demonstrated a shared memory tied to land and community. Her story revealed how knowledge is deeply situated and embodied, in addition to how wood from the land serves as both a representation of and a connection to family. Furthermore, the frustrating process that came with this creation illustrated that art is oftentimes a complex process of negotiation between memory and material. The work bore the emotional weight of intergenerational stories, and the physical labour required to shape the wood mirrored the emotional labour of carrying and transforming those histories. In this context, *Past, Present and Future* was not just a story, it was a teaching. It invited me to slow down, listen differently, and reflect more deeply on my own engagements with land, family, and artistic process. It showed me that art, particularly when rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, is a relational act, something that emerges from care, kinship, and place rather than from individual expression alone.

For Melanie, an exchange that resonated with her was my sharing of *The Bloom of Unbecoming*. She expressed that in hearing me articulate my process of creating, she was able to reflect on and share the many layers of herself, as well as to consider the complicated process of disrupting identity formation. In our dialogue, she spoke of how hearing my own struggles with language, form, and self-definition opened a space for her to explore similar tensions between cultural expectations and personal transformation. In this way, our mutual sharing became more than just an exchange of artistic insight; it became a space of reciprocal witnessing where we

each offered up pieces of ourselves not for analysis or critique, but for connection. In that space, we were not simply collaborators, we became co-learners, co-witnesses, and co-holders of each other's creative and personal journeys. This act of witnessing emerged as a central methodology in our collaboration. Drawing from feminist and decolonial scholarship (see Campt, 2017; Felman & Laub, 1992), witnessing can be understood not as a passive observation, but as an active, ethical, and relational practice. It involves listening with care, acknowledging the complexity of lived experience, and resisting the urge to fix, translate, or resolve. As feminist, post-colonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) reminds us, to listen is to disarm. In our conversations, witnessing became a way to hold space for each other's processes without imposing interpretation or seeking mastery. Unlike conventional research methods that often privilege analysis or "findings", our practice of witnessing emphasizes attunement over extraction. It allows us to dwell in ambiguity and contradiction and to honour the emotional, spiritual, and embodied dimensions of knowledge production. This was especially important given the themes we were engaging, including identity, cultural expectations, and transformation, all of which resist linear explanation or fixed meaning. Witnessing also functioned as a form of reciprocal recognition: by sharing and listening, we validated each other's becoming, not as subjects to be studied but as co-creators of meaning. It is in this mutual vulnerability that the boundaries between researcher and participant as well as artist and audience begin to blur. In this context, witnessing became more than a concept, it became an ethic of relation, a methodology of presence, and a practice of holding space for transformation without ownership.

When discussing whether or not we learned anything new, we both agreed that decolonizing work is not about replacing one system with another, but reorienting our

relationships to power, knowledge, and place. We learned the power of stories and how they are not just context or data to be extracted and studied, but that they are methodology, theory, and practice all at once. We therefore turned the questions into new ones: if stories are alive, how do we hold them in ways that honour their life? If knowledge is relational, how do we design a space that reflects and sustains those relationships? These conversations became the groundwork for a collaborative engagement with the act of curation.

Our Curatorial Approach

Rather than positioning ourselves as curators in the traditional sense of one who gathers and displays, we began to see ourselves as facilitators of continuity, care, and accountability. Our approach to curation thus became an extension of the conversations we had. In this way, our storytelling process was not separate from our decolonizing approach to curation; in fact, it was the foundation of it. It meant embracing the *ongoingness* of story and acknowledging that curation can also be a site of colonial violence *and* a site of healing and reimagining. In embracing this understanding, we recognized that curation could be an act of listening rather than telling and of responding rather than arranging. It required us to ask not only what to include, but how and why. What obligations do we have to the stories shared with us? What temporalities do we re/produce when we place certain narratives together? This approach asked us to relinquish control and allow space for the artworks and narratives to speak to each other and to those who encounter them on their own terms. Curation thus became not a final product, but a living, evolving relationship grounded in reciprocity, humility, and trust.

Since the 1990s, independent curators—that is, those who are not full-time employees of art institutions—have adopted approaches that are considered “paracuratorial” (O’Neill, 2012,

n.p.). These practices, discourses, and modes of operation exist alongside or beyond traditional curatorial work and offer critical alternatives to institutional norms (O'Neill, 2012). Curatorial refers to the traditional roles of curators within art institutions and focuses on the selection, organization, and display of artworks in exhibitions. Curatorial work involves decisions about the arrangement of artworks and the creation of narratives (O'Neill, 2012). Paracuratorial, a term coined by curator Jens Hoffmann in the early 2000s, extends beyond traditional exhibition-making to include activities that contribute to the broader context and understanding of art (O'Neill, 2016). This evolution invites a reconsideration of how art is experienced and understood beyond institutional confines to encourage a more holistic approach that values the creation and the stories behind the creations.

A key feature of paracuratorial practice, and one particularly relevant to the curatorial approach Melanie and I adopted, is its emphasis on process: the treating of curation as a medium for inquiry and experimentation (O'Neill, 2012). This process-oriented approach allowed us to pursue a curatorial method that was driven by dialogue. In developing our paracuratorial strategies, I engaged with anti-colonial theories including the work of Freire (1969) who argues that “consciousness evolves through voice and in dialogue with others” (p. 40). I also draw on the scholarship of Kovach (2000) who highlights Indigenous research methodologies that prioritize conversation and participatory acts.

Critical scholar Leanne Unruh (2015) introduces the concept of “dialogical curation” by drawing on Professor of Art History Grant Kester’s (2004) term “dialogical art”, which refers to the practice of allowing conversations with community members to shape both the process and outcome of an artwork or curated exhibition (p. 78). According to Kester (2004), the core of dialogical artistic practice lies in an “extended process of listening and documentation” (p. 7).

While he acknowledges that artworks often provoke dialogue among viewers, he emphasizes that this usually occurs in response to a finished object. In contrast, Unruh's (2015) framework positions conversation as an integral part of the artwork itself by framing it as "an active, generative process that helps us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse" (p. 8). Through this lens, dialogue becomes a vehicle for ongoing transformation enabling new ideas and understandings to emerge. These frameworks were foundational to our approach as our digital output emerged from a dialogical, storytelling-based process. The works featured in our immersive digital project were those we had shared or created during the course of our research conversations: *Mother's Skirt*, *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*, *Past, Present, and Future*, *Portrait of Our Truth*, and *The Bloom of Unbecoming*. The pieces we chose to include in our digital output were not curated retrospectively to fit a predetermined theme; rather, they emerged organically through our decolonizing storytelling process. Each work holds significance as an artistic and narrative expression, while collectively functioning as acts of refusal and reimagining grounded in lived experience and embodied knowledge.

Honouring Indigenous oral traditions, each piece incorporates audio clips drawn from our conversations. As users pan over an image, they hear a soundbite from our conversations that contextualizes the artistic and creative representations on display. But these sound bites are not merely informational, they are also haptic and relational—they aim to engage the body and the senses as much as the intellect. The texture of the voice and the breath between words are not incidental. They carry affective knowledge or what Robinson (2020) refers to as "felt knowledge", a way of knowing that is embodied, emplaced, and relational (p. 33). In this context, our project seeks to contribute to conversations around decolonial listening practices that resist extractive modes of reception or hungry listening; it takes part in the act of listening

that is participatory and ethical, as well as a way of slowing down and being present. As Smith (1999) reminds us, decolonizing research involves more than just inclusion; it requires a fundamental shift in how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued. Sound, particularly within Indigenous oral traditions, resists static representation. It moves. It breathes. It remembers. When these clips are activated through user interaction, through hovering, or panning, sound becomes a material and sensory form of connection. It prompts an affective response that is tactile, emotional, and situated. In this way, the digital becomes a space of encounter, not merely between user and artwork, but between listener and speaker, between personal story and collective memory. In all of these ways, Melanie's and my decision to engage the paracuratorial is an intentional method of working through a process of experimentation and creation. Building on the paracuratorial's emphasis on process, collaboration, and conversation, the digital becomes a space for enacting these principles by expanding the curatorial into an immersive, relational terrain.

The growing integration of digital platforms into curatorial practice marks a significant shift, which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of physical museums forced art institutions and artists to adapt and led to the emergence of new digital curatorial strategies that challenge the dominance of the "white cube" model. These digital pivots were not just functional, they became powerful tools for storytelling by offering new ways to convey complex narratives and foster deeper connections between art and its viewers.

For instance, the USC Pacific Asia Museum utilized Matterport, a software that uses 3D technology to create immersive replicas of physical spaces. By allowing users to virtually walk through galleries, stop at artworks, and engage with audio clips and in-gallery videos, Matterport transforms the act of viewing into an experiential journey where the story of the exhibition

unfolds spatially and interactively (Levin & Mamlok, 2021). USC Museum's Interim Director Bethany Montagano notes that the museum's website saw a spike in global traffic following the launch of the virtual tour, highlighting how storytelling in digital spaces can transcend geographical boundaries.

Similarly, curator Nateene Diu (2021) responded to the crisis by curating *Reimagine Public Art*, the first online-only exhibition from L.A.'s Department of Cultural Affairs. Built from digital submissions during the height of the pandemic, the show centered on the very real human stories of adaptation and resilience, as well as the collapse of traditional boundaries between work, home, and artmaking. It exemplifies how digital formats can be harnessed not just for access, but as platforms for thematic storytelling and collective reflection (Levin, 2021). Smaller institutions also found compelling ways to connect with audiences through narrative. The Medical History Museum in Germany launched a daily online meditation series known as #covid19history where historical artifacts became storytellers of past pandemics to link present anxieties with centuries-old struggles. The Natural History Museum in Berlin extended its curatorial voice through the podcast *Beats & Bones*, which contextualized its exhibits through expert interviews and behind-the-scenes insights, which reinforces the museum as a dynamic, story-driven space even when doors were closed (Levin, 2021).

These approaches deeply influenced my own digital output. Inspired by their use of immersive and accessible storytelling tools, I turned to the online platform Spatial to create an online space modeled after York University's Vari Hall. This spatial mimicry is deliberate; Vari Hall is often critiqued for its colonial and surveillance-informed architectural design (Brean, 2019; Rodman, et. al., 1998) and is one of the most coercively "law-like" places at the university, governed by byzantine rules about things like space, noise, and "proper use".

Characterized by its expansive multi-level atrium, Vari Hall exemplifies how architectural design can reinforce colonial frameworks within academic institutions. Its central location makes it ideal for monitoring student activity by using architecture and the built environment to control and discipline behaviors deemed disruptive. For example, in November 2019, a pro-Palestinian student protest was staged in Vari Hall, but was quickly suppressed as York University security and Toronto Police maintained a strong presence patrolling the hall, surveilling the crowd, and removing individuals involved in physical confrontations. The protest, organized by members of Students Against Israeli Apartheid (SAIA), aimed to disrupt a university-approved panel featuring Reservists on Duty, a group of former Israeli soldiers (Brean, 2019). Media coverage largely condemned the protesters for alleged violence and offered little critique of the University's choice to host a controversial panel in such a highly surveillance-welcoming, prominent space. Jess McLean, the then-NDP-candidate for York–Simcoe, criticized the University on Twitter: “An institution that claims to stand for social justice is no place to host those tasked w/upholding an illegal occupation, enforcing apartheid and murdering protestors” (Brean, 2019). While the Israeli Defense Forces soldiers were not themselves speaking in Vari Hall, the protest was staged there, a choice that is significant given Vari Hall's centrality to student life and its role as a highly visible, heavily regulated campus space. The University's subsequent management of the protest through security presence and spatial regulation illustrates how Vari Hall operates not merely as a neutral gathering space, but as a disciplinary space encouraging dual roles: the facilitation of surveillance and the enforcement of institutional limits on acceptable protest and dissent.

Beyond its physical architecture and design, Vari Hall also operates as a sensorial and regulatory environment. Through the management of sound, movement, and visibility, the Hall

becomes a site where certain forms of expression are amplified, while others are contained or silenced. Justice Studies Professor Bill McClanahan and sociologist Nigel South (2020) explain that sensory information is given meaning through a complex system of interpretations, encounters, and relations. This manipulation of the sensory environment, used in regimes of punishment like solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, and waterboarding, underscores the deep entanglement between the senses, control, and power (McClanahan and South, 2020). Non-visual sensorial interactions, especially sound, can therefore contribute significantly to the ways in which we analyze and experience the complex dynamics of crime, control, and resistance. Understanding Vari Hall as a space that simultaneously invites public gatherings and enforces institutional control was also essential to how we curated our online digital platform. Just as the Hall's architecture disciplines protest through surveillance, spatial design, and the regulation of movement, it also governs through sound by policing who is allowed to speak, who is silenced, and what kinds of auditory disruptions are tolerated. This form of governance aligns with what scholars in acoustic jurisprudence argue in relation to the sensory dimensions of legal and institutional power. Critical scholar Sean Mulcahy (2019) examines how silence operates not as absence but as a performative legal tool that shapes how authority is felt and enacted; the enforced silence in Vari Hall during the 2019 protest framed dissent as aurally cacophonous and compliance as quietude.

By curating art disruptively in an online space that mirrors Vari Hall's structure, we highlight how even so-called "open" platforms can enforce boundaries on expression through algorithms, moderation, or social norms. However, unlike traditional institutional spaces, such as museums and galleries that often operate through exclusivity, high financial barriers, and hierarchical gatekeeping (Dymond, 2019), digital platforms can offer artists and curators

different modes of visibility and access. Our use of online curatorial tools reframes museum and gallery culture by disrupting these hierarchies and democratizing display processes. This unconventional digital display becomes a form of resistance, not only against the hidden power structures embedded in institutions like the university, the law, and the museum, but also against the market-driven exclusivity that often determines whose work is seen and valued. The online space, while not without its own constraints, allowed us to provoke dialogue, question institutional norms, and expand the possibilities of expression beyond the surveilled and exclusionary spaces of the traditional art world.

The theme of our online story, entitled *Decolonize These Halls*, emerged organically through our storytelling process and was chosen with intention. The theme is not simply a critique, but an invitation to reimagine the university as a space of listening, refusal, and reciprocity. It acts as both a provocation and an invitation, as these “halls” are both literal and metaphorical: they represent more than architecture. They are the physical manifestations of colonial knowledge systems, hierarchies, and surveillance regimes that shape who is seen, who is heard, and whose histories, knowledge systems, and legalities are valued. In choosing *Decolonize These Halls*, we sought to foreground our shared commitment to challenging these structures. The title draws on movements like *Decolonize This Place*, a movement based in New York City that organizes around Indigenous rights, Black liberation, Palestinian nationalism, de-gentrification and economic inequality (MOCA, 2021), and university-based interventions such as *Decolonize These Walls* at Queen’s University (Gaudreau, 2018); however, *ours* is grounded in the relational, creative and artistic processes we undertook together. Rather than relying solely on critique, this theme affirms the importance of presence: the presence of Indigenous ontologies, futurisms, epistemologies, voices, and traditions within and against these halls. It was

important to us that this theme not only be oppositional, but also generative by making space for reimagined futures rooted in celebrating difference, equity, inclusions, and creativity. In this way, our digital output became more than an outcome, it opened up possibilities for decolonial practice.

Debates About the Digital as a Form of Curatorial and Artistic Display

Fanon (2005) argues that decolonization is inherently a violent process not only in the physical sense, but also in epistemic and structural realms. He contends that the struggle for liberation often necessitates forceful resistance and that this violence takes multiple forms, including the enduring epistemic violence that shapes how knowledge is produced and disseminated. In the realm of digital knowledge, this epistemic violence appears through the privileging of Western epistemologies and ontologies while Indigenous ways of knowing are marginalized or erased (Christoph Neuberger, et. al., 2023). Such practices marginalize non-Western knowledges, raising critical questions about inclusion in digital knowledge production. Yet, while the digital can hinder inclusion, especially for Indigenous communities, it also holds transformative powers to “invent” and “make discoveries” (Fanon, 2005, p. 255) by creating space for resistance, resurgence, and the reassertion of Indigenous knowledge systems. In this way, the digital holds the potential to both promote and hinder inclusion, especially for Indigenous peoples. In what follows, I draw attention to some of these debates and recognize the privileges associated with digital space, while also highlighting the productive tensions that inform my own critical reflections.

Digital Activism

In recent years, digital spaces have transgressed physical, social, and emotional boundaries, particularly in community building, collective identity construction, and self-expression. For example, from its inception, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has utilized social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to combat racial violence across the globe and to highlight counter-discourses of police brutality (Mundt, et al., 2018). Through the platform Twitter, usages of #Blacklivesmatter allows users to establish a collective and distinct group identity and solidarity (Brown et al., 2017). Providing a platform for international news and support, the social media activity enacted by BLM was a key factor in increased awareness of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray, among many others (Brown, et al., 2017).

Social media has similarly played a significant role in grassroots protests, such as the Canadian-based Idle No More Movement (INM) (Melançon, 2018). The protest, which emerged in December 2012, mobilized Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous allies in North America and internationally to bring attention to their cultures, struggles, and identities; it also made way for the advocating of changes in policy areas related to the environment, governance, and socio-economic matters (Melançon, 2018). The use of #IdleNoMore tweets proved to be a successful activist effort as it mobilized users and influenced information flows.

Digital activism has also played a significant role in feminist movements, particularly those challenging violence in public spaces and sexual harassment. The #MeToo movement is a well-known example that illustrates how social media can serve as a powerful vehicle for feminist change (Risam, 2022). Transforming the digital landscape, the Twitter #MeToo hashtag offered those who experienced sexual harassment and violence a space to claim their experience

(Risam, 2022; Williams, 2019). In a similar vein, Twitter has also been a space for digital activism for members of the growing ex-Evangelical Christianity movement that challenges misogyny and sexual harassment within purity culture; the online platform has created a space for members to discuss their recovery processes from the trauma of purity culture and how women are blamed and shamed for sexual indiscretions (Peterson, 2022). Twitter functions as a platform for storytelling and collective resistance. Our digital output has been deeply influenced by activist movements like BLK, and INM, which exemplify how digital spaces can be mobilized for resistance, resurgence, and community-building. These movements challenge the notion of the digital as a neutral space, instead highlighting its potential as a site of decolonial action.

While digital technology has led to a greater and more diverse participation in political and social discourse, it does not necessarily create more democratic spaces, especially for Indigenous peoples who are most affected by this divide (Haight, et al., 2014). In fact, there are significant limitations imposed by “the digital divide”, a gap that often reinforces existing forms of marginalization (Haight, et al., 2014, p. 503). The following section therefore turns to an examination of the digital divide and its implications for social justice work.

The Digital Divide

Our digital output—existing in the metaverse—provides an immersive experience making way for users to interact more naturally and intuitively online. With the ability to create customizable avatars for social interactions, users can represent themselves and interact with other users and objects within the virtual world (see Figure 31 and Figure 32). Users can also roam the space, explore, and zoom in on our creative interventions. In addition, they can

socialize with new and existing friends as well as create a community for discussions and collaborations. For example, by implementing a chat box that encourages users to “say something,” visitors can chat with others who are logged on, or leave messages, questions, or inquiries for other users, as well as for me and Melanie (see Figure 33). The open-ended nature of this digital space—where visitors can interact with each other and with the project over time, often beyond our direct involvement—raises important ethical questions about responsibility and authorship. By inviting public participation through tools like the chat box and encouraging ongoing dialogue, we have, in effect, created a living, evolving platform. This level of radical openness works to disrupt traditional notions of authorship and curatorial control, but it also means we must grapple with how to ethically maintain a space where interactions are not always accountable to us. We see this as a radical shift and an ethical commitment. By relinquishing full control, we allow for unexpected connections, and community-led dialogue. However, we are also aware that creating a space where anyone can contribute brings with it the risk of harm, misinterpretation, or the reproduction of ongoing oppressive dynamics. This awareness compels us to consider our role as facilitators rather than gatekeepers. This challenges us to think beyond the project’s original timeline, as we have effectively made space for participants to continue shaping it in ways that we may not foresee or fully control. We view this as a radical departure from institutional norms, as well as a call to reimagine what responsibility and authorship look like in collaborative, digital, and decolonial curatorial practices.



Figure 31: Choose your look

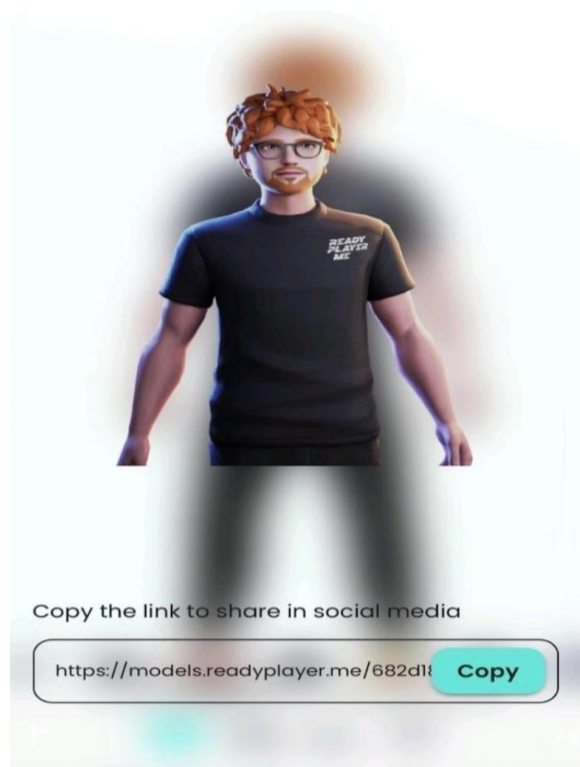


Figure 32: Avatar



Figure 33: Say Something

While our digital output provides an immersive space to interact and explore, I recognize the privilege associated with navigating a digital-game like experience and the skills required to navigate it effectively. Persistent inequalities in access to digital infrastructure, including the lack of broadband and reliable electricity, geographical isolation—such as being in remote areas with limited or no internet connectivity—and socioeconomic barriers often prevent access to technology and hinder one’s ability to perform tasks effectively in a digital environment.

Demographic factors that influence digital access, online activity, and social networking, such as income inequalities, age, and level of education are further enmeshed with the policies governing broadband access in Indigenous communities in Northern Canada. A Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) report (2016) to Innovation Science Economic Development Canada (ISED), for example, recommended that digital literacy be included in their funding priorities; however, the ISED program has failed to improve community members’ ability to meaningfully use the infrastructure, instead focusing on physical infrastructure alone (Haight et al, 2014). As a result, the digital divide remains a persistent

challenge in the North.

In a similar context, the PanNorthern Report on broadband and Canada's digital divide (Public Policy Forum, 2014) alongside the recommendations from the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board (January 2016) highlight how private sector development has prioritized southern regions due to population density and geography, while the North faces significant challenges, including a low and widely dispersed population. These infrastructural and geographic barriers underscore that access to digital spaces is not evenly distributed across Canada. This disparity is not only about access to broadband, but also about the broader ability to meaningfully participate in online, Indigenous-led and-inspired spaces. While I am not in a position to materially address the digital divide experienced by many Indigenous communities, particularly those in the North, I believe it is essential to acknowledge its existence and implications. This recognition is a small but necessary step within decolonization. Decolonial practice requires not only making way for Indigenous voices, but also challenging, and interrogating the systems that silence or exclude them. In the context of my research, this means being critically aware of who is able to participate fully in the digital sphere and who is left out due to factors like broadband access, digital literacy, or socio-economic position.

A Digital Place

Our digital output reimagines how we interact, learn, and play by transforming users from passive viewers into active participants. Rather than functioning solely as a static archive or visual gallery, the digital space becomes a curated environment and an affective and interactive experience where users navigate stories, sounds, and images in ways that invite response and reflection. However, this is not the same as physical presence. The digital can evoke immersion,

but it cannot fully replicate the embodied, sensorial, and spatial qualities of being in a place or in relation with others in material settings (Kember, 2016). As such, there remains a contradiction between beliefs like centering land-based epistemologies and embodied relationality, which are core to our decolonizing approaches and digital display where our engagement with one another is virtual, disembodied, and that happens from different places on the land. This contradiction raises important questions about what it means to curate or create in digital spaces with Indigeneity and decolonization in mind.

Scholars such as curator Christiane Paul (2015) have pointed to the “ubiquity” and “dislocation” of digital art, as well as its ability to circulate widely while being removed from physical context. Others, like visual theorist Johanna Drucker (2013), have critiqued the digital’s tendency to flatten experience and caution that while interactivity can simulate engagement, it does not always support deeper forms of connection or critical reflection. These tensions are especially pronounced in projects like ours, which are rooted in embodied knowledge, affect, and relationality.

While some critics argue that digital exhibitions risk flattening or commodifying cultural experience by removing art from its spatial, material, and communal contexts (Paul, 2015), others have shown that digital curation can incite new, plural forms of engagement. Feminist scholar Sarah Kember (2016) argues that, rather than being inherently disembodied, digital practices can help us reimagine embodiment and presence through relational mediation or something felt, evoked, and co-created across computer screens. In this way, our digital output participates in ongoing conversations about what it means to create, share, and witness artistic and creative practices and research in spaces that are not neutral, not placeless, and not disembodied, but differently situated and differently relational. Rather than replicating physical

proximity, we aim to nurture what Camp (2017) might call affective resonances that reach across space and time to create connection and accountability.

In a similar vein, feminist theorist Tanya Elias (2021) addresses this contradiction by applying land-based ideas to digital places/spaces. Elias (2021) draws on Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Professor Sandra Styres (2018) (*Six Nations of the Grand River Territory*), who argues that space is never neutral, empty or abstract in favour of an understanding of place as grounded in lived experience and that, therefore, carries histories that resist erasure. Elias uses this awareness to connect digital and physical environments by pointing out that even the most seemingly immaterial digital elements, like motherboards, processors, and displays, are embedded with stories of land and carry with them undisclosed stories of human labour and material extraction. Influenced by notions of Indigenous futurisms, which claim science fiction as a way to renew, recover and extend Indigenous voices, and traditions (Dillon and Muzyka, 2019), Elias suggests that educational technology might be reimagined as a type of re-claimed space/place. This reframing invites us to view digital environments not as detached, but as deeply connected with land, story, and Indigenous legal systems and as offering pathways for rethinking how we engage with technology through decolonial and relational frameworks.

By embracing Indigenous futurism, Melanie and I aim to resist universalizing tendencies and open up space for alternative temporal frameworks. In this way, our digital output gestures toward a disruption of law's time. Through digital and oral storytelling, we introduce temporalities that are cyclical, relational, and iterative. By centering voice and embodied presence, our output resists the closure that law demands and instead opens time as a site of resurgence and possibility. In this work, the digital space becomes a place for different timelines—ancestral, present, and future—to exist simultaneously. As such, our digital output is

not just a rejection of colonial timelines, but an invitation to imagine and engage in temporal frameworks rooted in Indigenous knowledges. In centering these ways of knowing, our digital output aims to resist the flattening effects of colonial time and space to make room for more nuanced, lived, and ongoing expressions of Indigenous presence and futurity.

Including stories in our own voices not only contextualizes our creations, but also renders us part of the art itself. In this way, we replace the objective “view from nowhere” caption with an embodied narration of history grounded in personal experience and relational knowledge.

Resonances

The collaborative process of storytelling at the heart of this research is not simply a method, but an attempt at a decolonizing praxis grounded in relationality, reciprocity, and care. Working in collaboration with Melanie allows for a shared creation of meaning that honours Indigenous epistemologies and resists extractive research models. Additionally, through our digital output, we enact a form of knowledge disruption that challenges the authority of text-based, outcome-driven scholarship. By centering nonlinear, multisensory storytelling, and listening as an embodied, ethical act, we create a space where histories, emotions, and forms of resistance can be felt, not just read. Our digital work seeks to unsettle dominant knowledge structures and to foreground affect, community, and lived experience as legitimate and powerful forms of knowing. In this way, our project not only strives to contribute to a growing movement of decolonial curatorial and research practices, but also works to affirm the possibility of digital space as a site of refusal, reimagining and transformation.

Chapter 5: Expanding the Field of Sociolegal Studies

Within this dissertation, I expand the field of SLST by joining those who challenge the divides between legal and cultural spaces. Examining these cultural spaces through the theme of “display” has sharpened my awareness of the subtle processes that sustain colonization, including those embedded within the university—a space I occupy. By situating these cultural institutions within a broader context, I identify points of resonance among them and underscore the necessity of critically engaging with exhibition spaces and practices of display not only as analogous to, but also as deeply intertwined with the sociolegal and the academic as well as their distinct ways of ‘knowing’ and knowledge production.

Recognizing museums, galleries, and universities as sites that perpetuate the banking concept of education, linear narratives of history, common heritage, and Canadian identity, I mobilized research-creation as a means of decolonizing learning. This required me to critically engage with my own learning and acknowledge how I have been disciplined within these structures. With pedagogy always at the forefront of my research process, I challenged traditional modes of learning and exposed how we have been conditioned to internalize institutionalized hierarchies of knowledge in these spaces. Through research-creation, I engaged in a more integrated form of learning, one deeply rooted in lived experience. While pedagogy is often defined as the theory and practice of teaching (Freire, 1969), my engagement with arts-based pedagogy extends beyond the classroom. It encompasses the many ways knowledge is shared, embodied, and co-created through creative processes and disrupts conventional hierarchies between teacher, learner, and subject.

In challenging the assumption that academic research must be exclusively text-based and linear, I shift away from treating Indigenous art as raw data to be analyzed or extracted. Instead, I

call out and seek to challenge the boundaries imposed by extractive practices, such as conventional interviews and data collection, which have historically limited our capacity to embrace difference on personal and political levels. Traditional social science training often marginalizes the personal by suggesting that subjectivity is a liability rather than an asset. I contest this notion by employing personal storytelling as a research method to create space for conversations about how our subjectivities are ongoingly formed and understood as lived, personal experiences.

When Melanie and I began our conversations, we challenged traditional social science research culture by engaging in an experimental, exploratory, process-oriented approach to research that allowed space for storytelling without a predetermined agenda. Not all questions raised through these conversations were resolved, nor were they intended to be. In this context, this research resists the expectation that ethical relationships must be concluded. Instead, our process remains open, and grounded in relational accountability that extends beyond the dissertation itself.

Moreover, we confronted display culture within academic, legal, and representational spaces by challenging the culture of the glass cube and disciplinary knowledge-making processes that contain rather than liberate—despite the explicit textuality of this dissertation. By carving out spaces for transdisciplinary expressions and centering the culture and knowledge practices of Indigenous peoples, this research-creation project embraces a liberatory aim to challenge the unequal power dynamics inherent in many research practices and archival institutions.

Positioning curation as an activist activity, Melanie and I were intentional in our process of selecting, organizing, and presenting artistic and visual representations that challenge dominant narratives, amplify marginalized voices, and inspire social change. In this context, we sought to

act as agents of transformation by creating a virtual space for collective action and discourse. Curation was not simply about showcasing art—it *was* about fostering dialogue and shifting perspectives.

Additionally, our collaborative digital output works to disrupt widely held conventions of excellence and modernist notions of artistic genius. By entering in this research as a “non-artist,” I challenge the notion that research-creation is only for those already recognized as artists. This notion reinforces the institutional framework of research-creation by keeping it confined and limiting its potential rather than recognizing it as a tool with broader socio-political significance. If we insist that research-creation is reserved only for artists, we perpetuate exclusivity and reinforce the need for a specific set of skills or training thereby ultimately limiting its transformative power. This privileging of visual forms in digital research-creation opens a critical dialogue with the legal system’s own fraught relationship to images. Legal actors are often irresponsible interpreters of the visual and see in images only what reinforces existing power structures. Visuals are granted authority because they appear to offer unmediated access to truth, especially emotional or sensorial truths; thus the modality contradictorily negate their own supposed objectivity. Yet, as more subjective or affective imagery enter legal spaces, the underlying colonial order remains intact. Visual evidence has rarely—if ever—challenged the structural foundations of racism or colonialism in courtrooms. Instead, as Mirzoeff (2023) argues through his concept of “white sight” (p. 1), visibility itself is embedded in a colonial matrix that frames what is seen and how it is interpreted. Within this regime, images often serve to uphold whiteness and state power reinforcing dominant narratives rather than subverting them. In contrast, our digital output can be understood as refusing the pretense of neutrality and instead embraces ambiguity, multiplicity, and the political dimensions of representation by

foregrounding how research-creation can unsettle—rather than reinforce—dominant ways of seeing and knowing.

Crafting a Process-Based Methodology

My process-oriented approach also involved collaboration and dialogue to shift the focus from the researcher as the sole authority to a more reciprocal mode of knowledge production. Rather than determining in advance what would constitute an appropriate form of reciprocity, these questions were taken up through conversation. At different moments, we returned to what it might mean to give, to receive, or to refuse both. These conversations shaped the direction of the research without requiring resolution. In this context, the methodology employed throughout this research process was adapted as the project progressed; the insights gained from initial conversations influenced subsequent iterations. By crafting a process-based methodology that emerged from practice and engagement with the work, I inverted the conventional and linear direction of traditional research. Additionally, by following an evolving line of inquiry rather than a preconfigured hypothesis or research question, I was able to allow new questions to surface organically through the work itself. This fluidity not only reshaped the research process, but also expanded the scope of conversations and conceptual territories that could be brought into the work and traversed. For instance, I involved my family in the process of making flowers in the midst of creating—a truly transformative learning experience. Through our conversations, I rediscovered my creative side. This reflection challenged the conventional stereotypes of what it means to use an artistic lens, engage in creative work, or even approach research. Although this process-based methodology was at times messy, ambiguous, and unpredictable, these very qualities were integral to its nature. Ultimately, this approach underscores the importance of

embracing uncertainty, experimentation, and the generative potential of not knowing.

The involvement of experimental and embodied learning emphasized the importance of process by demonstrating how learning can unfold not only through intellectual understanding, but also through the body, emotions, and aesthetic experiences. In this way, this research-creation project works to challenge the mind/body binary that is often privileged in social science research and highlights how expressive, sensory, and embodied forms of knowledge can emerge from creative and artistic practices. In this process, Melanie and I open up space to disrupt traditional exhibitionary and curatorial practices. In particular, we attempted to transgress an approach to aesthetics that is decontextualized and detached from their emotional, spiritual, and affective layers. Instead, we made space for senses other than sight. For example, by using storytelling as a method, we were able to contextualize our artistic and creative representations and prioritize the social and historical aspects of their production. By putting stories into conversation in ways that were reflexive rather than extractive, we created an opportunity to learn from those stories and to build upon that learning. Melanie's narratives inspired me to forge connections in my life that I might not otherwise have made. For example, they led me to join my parents at the table while making flowers. The experience would probably not have happened had I not been actively engaged in conversation or not actively reflecting on what I have learned through those conversations with Melanie about mothers, family ties, belonging, and art-making. Our conversations encouraged me to reflect on my own history and experiences and to incorporate community into that narrative so that my reflections were not confined solely to my internal world. This relational mode of learning also aims to resist the individualism often associated with academic research and traditional art-making.

By rooting our process in shared experience and emotional resonance, we moved away

from the notion of the artist or researcher as a solitary genius and toward a more collective, reciprocal understanding of knowledge production. This is particularly significant within the context of research-creation where dominant academic structures often seek to contain creativity within frameworks that are legible to institutional norms. By centering practices like storytelling, intergenerational connection, and collaborative meaning-making, we challenged those boundaries and instead affirmed forms of knowledge that are embodied, affective, and grounded in everyday life. These experiences not only reconfigured what counts as research but also reoriented me toward an understanding of knowledge as not only what we know, but how we come to know it and with whom.

Reflections and Possibilities

This dissertation reflects a personal journey that challenges systems of power embedded in academic structures. Shifting at the level of form, I work to unsettle the boundaries of traditional academic research and its colonial underpinnings. Through this research, I challenge others to rethink their own training, practices, and scholarly pursuits. Decolonization must happen at the university level, but it ultimately begins with the individual. It is not enough to proclaim support for decolonization and anti-colonial research in theory. If we continue to use colonial methods and practices, we fall into the trap of representation without transformation and fail to dismantle colonial power structures or reshape Indigenous-state relations.

We also cannot claim to be *doing* decolonizing or anti-colonial work if it is not occurring within ourselves first. We must go beyond the superficial gestures and deeply interrogate our practices, values, and the systems that enable them. We must transform the way we think, see, and listen. This is the work that must be done within us and, from there, we can begin to envision

new possibilities for how knowledge is created and who has the authority to create it. By reflecting on how I have attempted to decolonize my own discipline and training, I illustrate the profound shifts that can occur and the meaningful outputs that can be produced. Finally, I demonstrate that research-creation, when approached inclusively, allows for the disruption it is meant to provoke.

This project is not directed toward a single audience but circulates across multiple publics. It moves between academic, artistic, and broader interpretive contexts. For academic audiences, particularly scholars in the social sciences, the project invites reflection on how we might incorporate approaches that are artistically and pedagogically responsive to Indigenous communities, while seeking to avoid the pitfalls of subsuming the visual within a primarily textual ontology. At the same time, it also speaks to those who may feel disenchanting with dominant Western institutional systems, offering ways of engaging knowledge that are relational, visual, and experiential rather than exclusively text-based or disciplinary.

Though it is true that this dissertation is institutionally authored by me and situated within state academic bureaucracy, relational accountability does not dissolve that structural reality. However, it shaped how authority was exercised within it. Interpretive claims were not finalized without dialogue; representation was collaborative; and story inclusion was contingent on continued consultation with Melanie. Relational accountability does not require the elimination of institutional asymmetry, it requires that asymmetry be named and navigated in ways that prevent extraction. In this way, this work models an ethical engagement that honours co-creation, respects Melanie's knowledge, and acknowledges the limits of the academic structures within which it is produced. This dissertation enacts relational responsibility, reflexivity, and ethical praxis alongside the research it presents.

While I work to resist the commodification of knowledge, I also recognize that in academia, knowledge production is often treated as capital, tied to things such as career advancement and funding. Rather than resolving this tension, I choose to remain in it. My resistance is not about complete detachment from academic structures. Instead, I focus on how I can engage those structures. I center things like community collaboration, relationality, accountability, and reciprocity over metrics of productivity or market value. Navigating the academic world while resisting its colonial logics is itself part of my decolonial praxis. I view the visibility academia offers not as an end, but as a way to engage non-Western knowledge, and disrupt extractive colonial logics.

As a next phase of this research, an in-person display emerges as a natural extension—not as a correction to the digital version, but as a continuation of the research-creation process. Another direction for this work is the expansion of arts-based practices into pedagogy within the social sciences, something I have already begun through my teaching. One example of this direction is a fourth-year social science course at York University that I co-designed and taught with Kimberley White. In the first part of the course, I examined how representation reproduces colonial narratives in sites such as museums and galleries, alongside contemporary Indigenous artistic practices that resist and reframe them. As part of this, students worked across scholarly and creative forms, including a visual journal that invited them to think through course ideas using images, materials, and text. This opened a different mode of engagement, one grounded in reflection, process, and personal connection, where students traced how they learn and how their thinking shifts. This offers one example of how this work might extend into pedagogy through teaching. Here, research-creation can offer a different language, one that allows students to recognize themselves in their work, engage the conditions shaping their lives, and push analysis

beyond traditional academic forms. Another direction this work may take is through continued collaboration with artists in different contexts and practices, where each collaboration becomes its own site of inquiry, and knowledge emerges through the relational conditions of practice.

With this dissertation, I aimed to position arts-based pedagogy as a way of engaging law beyond text and doctrine, through visual, narrative, and artistic forms. In this way, the project contributes to socio-legal scholarship while reimagining its pedagogical form, insisting that the aesthetic and relational dimensions of law are central to how legal worlds are made and how they might be otherwise.

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