

DECOLONIAL STRATEGIES FOR THE ART HISTORY CLASSROOM

A zine for sharing exercises and resources assembled by
Amber Hickey and Ana Tuazon

Recent discourses across disciplines have been concerned with the questions of if and how we can decolonize. Carolyn Dean points out the problematics of using the term “art” (2006), and scholars such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have pushed us to consider the material imperatives of decolonization, rather than simply the metaphorical (2012).

A (more) decolonized art history may be possible, if we are able to rethink both what we teach and how we teach it. How might this manifest through re-reading and reassessing the traditional canon? How might it manifest through challenging the traditional lecture format, inviting students to relate to each other and their own histories more closely?

We come together in this open workshop format to discuss how we are working towards decolonizing our art history classrooms. This workshop unites educators committed to such a material reconfiguration of art history, as well as the potential impacts of such a reconfiguration beyond the classroom.

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What do we mean by ‘decolonizing’?
- How do we disrupt the replication of an art historical canon that is predominantly white and male?
- How do we discuss cultural appropriation?
- How do we design courses to relay different cultural narratives than what we were taught?
- How do we help students think critically about how art has accrued value?
- What can we do to go beyond the standard ‘checklist’ for representation?
- How do we confront the presence of colonial violence, racism, and misogyny in famous artworks and art movements?
- What do we think of the “multi-survey” model?
- How do we create safer spaces for students?
- How do we hold our colleagues accountable, and in turn remain open to them to hold us accountable?
- What are best practices for acknowledging Indigenous land and artists?
- How do citational practices tie in to a decolonization project?
- How do we bridge decolonization within the classroom to decolonization beyond the classroom?
- _____

ON LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

You may wish to acknowledge the multilayered histories of the land on which your course meets. For instance, this workshop is convened on the territory of the Lenape Nation.

In addition to a longstanding engagement with the nations on whose territories you meet, these maps are helpful resources that may be used to find relevant information:

<https://native-land.ca/>
<http://www.tribalnationsmaps.com/>

*We also want to acknowledge that acknowledgement is not enough.

EXERCISE : SITUATING OURSELVES

By Amber Hickey

The following exercise was inspired by a practice of storytelling witnessed at the Performing Cartography Symposium at York University in April 2016, as well as by a deep listening exercise learnt and experienced during a workshop organized by YES! on “Healing Our Movement Ecosystem” at Synergia Ranch in November 2013.

Instructions for students:

- Please find a partner.
- Tell your partner your family’s story — how did you arrive in what is now often known as the United States? Where are your ancestral roots? Do you consider yourself a settler on this land? If not, how do you identify yourself? If you are Indigenous to Turtle Island (the North American continent), which Indigenous nation are you from? Share this with your partner. If you do not know exactly how or why your family came to the United States, discuss why that might be.
- Share your partner's story with the class (modification for large groups: share your partner’s story with another pair). Make sure you take care to represent your partner's story accurately and respectfully.

Reflection Questions (ask your students to respond):

- How did it feel to hear someone else telling your story?
- Did you feel responsible for the other person's story?
- How did it feel if/when your partner made a mistake in the telling of your story?
- Was there anything about this exercise that surprised you? If so, what?

Objectives of this exercise (you can share these with your students after they complete the exercise):

- It's important for us all to situate ourselves and our ancestral ties before delving into subject matter that relates to Indigenous land, sovereignty, and cultural production.
- These stories are highly personal and it is important for everyone to practice caring for stories and information shared in this course.
- It's important to begin questioning the primacy of the written word in western academia, and to begin to consider including oral histories and/or interviews in your research.

EXERCISE : ADDING TO THE MAP

By Amber Hickey

Instructions for students:

- Learn which Indigenous nation(s) inhabit(ed) the place where you are from.
- Find an Indigenous artist or activist from that place, or with a connection to that place. (It's ok if you're not from the U.S., this exercise is relevant in other countries as well)
- Research that artist or activist and record a short (ca. 2 minute) video presentation about their work.
- Upload your video to YouTube (make sure to select "unlisted" or "public" settings)
- In order to share your presentation, upload it via the Google MyMaps link (provided by the instructor).
- After posting your "Adding to the Map" assignment, please view the populated map (link provided by instructor).

Discussion Questions:

- Was it challenging to find an Indigenous artist or activist from your hometown?
- If so, why might that have been the case? If not, why might that have been the case?
- Why might it be important to note the visibility or invisibility of Indigenous art and activism?
- What would you say influences what is seen and unseen, visible and invisible in contemporary society?

Objectives of this exercise:

- Non-Indigenous students' notions of their hometowns are "unsettled." They are able to see their hometowns through the lens of Indigenous peoples' presence, languages, and visual culture.
- Indigenous students are able to draw connections between the practices of diverse nations. They see a map that foregrounds Indigenous rather than non-Indigenous presence.
- Students can now refer to their collectively created online map as a resource for seeing territory and the landscapes of Indigenous visual culture differently.

EXERCISE : RESEARCH MAPPING

By Amber Hickey

Objectives:

- This exercise is intended to bring Leanne Simpson's argument in her text, "Land as pedagogy" into practice. I encourage you all to use this exercise as an opportunity to engage with ways of knowing that may be available to you and your students beyond the confines of the classroom.

Reference:

- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 3, No. 3, 2014, pp. 1-25.

Instructions for students:

- Please create a map that is somehow related to your final research project.
- Your map may take any form — sonic, visual, gestural, and so forth.
- If your map is ephemeral, please document it.

Consider:

- What must be mapped for your research project?
- What would be the most useful way to map it?
- Is your map a part of the process, or part of the final

product?

- For whom is this map?
 - Is it for yourself, or may others benefit from it as well?
 - What is the function of your map, or is it functionless?
Is it symbolic? Instructional?
-
- Please present your map (or documentation of your map, if it is ephemeral) in class, with a brief description of your process and objectives.

EXERCISE : UNSETTLING ART MUSEUMS

By Amber Hickey

Instructions for instructor:

- Organize a field trip to a museum or gallery in your region that features Indigenous visual culture.

Instructions for students:

While you are viewing the relevant exhibition(s), consider the following:

- How is the work of Indigenous artists portrayed, installed, labeled, categorized?
- How are Indigenous peoples portrayed, labeled, categorized?
- How are historical narratives told, and who tells them?
- What might be missing from the narrative in the exhibitions at the museum or gallery?
- Do notions of nationality and nation-building manifest in work at the museum? If so, how?

This exercise can lead nicely into a writing assignment in which your students engage more deeply with the questions above. It can also be used as a jumping off point for further discussion related to these issues.

Note: Don't forget to ask students to view the gift shop. Often gift shops and their contents can lead to dynamic discussions

about appropriation, commodification, and reclamation of Indigenous visual culture.

References:

- William H. Truettner, ed. *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991: 27-54.
- W.J.T. Mitchell ed., *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 (first edition 1994): 1-34.

CASE STUDY: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE/ SHIFTING THE DISCUSSION

By Ana Tuazon

As a PhD track graduate student in Art History, I worked as a teaching assistant for several professors, and was then the instructor of record for a survey course (Modern Art), a course that I had previously assisted for. It seemed like a great opportunity for me to update the standard curriculum for a “Modern Art” survey to make it more reflective of a global, postcolonial perspective on art, and to counter the false neutrality that is often present in Western-centric art survey courses that obscure power relationships between the colonizer and colonized subject. It was also an enormous challenge to undergo this with limited resources. In structuring a different survey course (for an undergraduate class with many non-major students taking the course as a requirement) I knew I wouldn’t be able to spend weeks teaching postcolonial theory, but identified the following priorities for reimagining a “Modern Art” survey:

- Help students form a critical understanding of of the social and cultural conditions which instituted concepts of

modernism and modernity (i.e. patriarchy, colonialism, otherness)

- Slow down the lecture pace in order to talk about these conditions in greater depth, and to help them understand that these unequal conditions were integral to deciding what kinds of art have accrued value throughout history
- Institute a greater focus on the cross-cultural exchanges that were often influential to Western artists, examining why a non-Western artwork might not be considered ‘modern’
- Challenge the narrative around modernism to decenter whiteness/Europeanness and maleness from an idea of cultural ‘progress,’ and poke holes in the association of ‘progress’ with the depoliticized ‘development’ or advancement of culture.

Though I feel I was only partially successful in accomplishing these goals on my first attempt teaching this kind of survey, I did find ways to shift the discussion around specific artists and works that tied into my overall goals of changing the narrative around modernism. One example that stands out is teaching the work of Paul Gauguin during a class on Post-Impressionism. Two readings were directly helpful in providing a backing for the discussion of Gauguin:

- “Primitivism and Otherness,” Chapter 2 in Steven Leuthold’s *Cross Cultural Issues in Art*

- “Going Native” by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Chapter 7 in *Race-ing Art History*, ed Kymberly Pinder

Leuthold’s chapter is written in the style of a textbook and allows for a very accessible entry point into these basic concepts, perhaps for a student who has never heard of primitivism or ‘othering’, while Solomon-Godeau’s provides a rigorous critique grounded in a biographical account of Gauguin, illuminating his role as a colonizer in a dominant power relationship with the subjects he painted. Here are some excerpts to give you a sense of each:

(Leuthold)

Western artists attracted to the primitive attempt to show the “mind”—the basic structures of thought and emotion—working in a purer form. In an essay from the catalog for the primitivism show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, Kirk Varnedoe wrote that Gauguin’s primitivist works demonstrate his interest in basic structures of thought.² Similarly, for anthropologists the primitive mind has sometimes stood for the universal human mind.³

To have the term original, we must have the complementary idea of development from an original state. Embedded in the notion of the primitive, then, is the idea of progress. When viewing the art of other cultures, primitivism is an imposed term that presupposes the idea of evolution. Gauguin’s art attempted to invert the values of “technique” and “progress,” but does inversion really undermine the assumption of progress? Primitivism may be a way of valuing, even reifying, the origin of human experience, but this does not necessarily undermine the values attached to progress. Gauguin, for instance, never became and never could become primitive; he was a primitivist. In reifying that which is basic, primitive techniques downplay technical discipline and emphasize the rough and unpolished. This serves to counterbalance the over-polished, slick-surfaced character of modernity. This inversion of one aspect

(Solomon-Godeau)

All of which suggests that in Gauguin's art the representation of the feminine, the representation of the primitive, and the reciprocal collapse of one into the other, has its analogue in the very process of his artistic production. For what is at issue is less an invention than a reprocessing of already constituted signs. The life of Gauguin, the art of Gauguin, the myth of Gauguin—approached from any side we confront a Borgesian labyrinth of pure textuality. Feminine and primitive, Breton and Maori, are themselves representable only to the extent that they exist as already-written texts, which yet continue to be written.

Though the texts are clearly written for different audiences, I decided to assign both to this class for a discussion that centered heavily on some of Gauguin's paintings that depict Tahitian women and how we can view these works from our contemporary perspective. In other survey courses I had taken or TA'd for, it was likely that the 'problematic' aspects of Gauguin's work had been mentioned - but not as part of an in-depth discussion. By centering a class on Post-Impressionism around this discussion, I felt we were able to approach many of the themes and problems that I wanted to attend to at large (while still discussing formalism) and critically examine the kind of art historical 'mythologies' that Solomon-Godeau draws out in her text: "Gauguin's mythologies of the feminine, the primitive, the Other." Both of the texts address how primitivism is tied to gender relations, and while a more advanced course could leave out Leuthold, I found it helpful to include him for this diverse group that included students who had never taken an art history course.

CASE STUDY: A DECOLONIAL FIELD TRIP IN CYBERSPACE

By Amber Hickey

In summer 2018, I taught a course on Indigenous Art & Activism. When I had taught the course before, I noticed that students had a hard time imagining what a decolonized world might look like. In addition to pointing them toward on-the-ground projects, initiatives, actions, and artworks that begin to imagine such a world, I decided to offer them an extra credit opportunity that would allow them to visit *AbTeC Island*, a decolonial territory in cyberspace.

I had been in discussion with artist and initiator of *AbTeC Island*, Skawennati, for several months. I asked her if we might be able to organize a time for my students to visit the territory, and she agreed. The students who participated in this extra credit opportunity were given a tour of the territory, as well as time to walk and fly around and ask questions of the research assistant in attendance (as his avatar, Abbi Bluebird).

In addition to experiencing what a decolonial world might look like, some students noted that their previous understanding of Indigenous visual culture was challenged. One student stated, “I think the artist’s display and use of media technology really showcases how indigenous peoples are not restricted to the past tense, but rather they have a place in the society’s present and

future.”

Links and resources:

- <http://abtec.org/iif/activating-abtec-island/>
- Lewis, Jason Edward. 2014. “A Better Dance and Better Prayers: Systems, Structures, and the Future Imaginary in Aboriginal New Media.” In *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, edited by Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson, 55-77. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- Amber Hickey, “Rupturing Settler Time: Visual Culture and Geographies of Indigenous Futurity,” *World Art* Special Issue: Indigenous Futurisms (Spring 2019, forthcoming).

GENERAL TIPS

- Don't just integrate material created by Indigenous peoples into your classroom; build trust and longstanding relationships with Indigenous artists and scholars.
- Share space. Invite Indigenous artists and scholars to speak with your class (and remember to pay them, even if it has to be out of your own pocket).
- You will be a better supporter of Indigenous peoples' visual culture if you also support Indigenous peoples' self-determination. For instance, donate to causes such as the Unist'ot'en Camp (<http://unistoten.camp/support-us/>).
- Consider providing students with guidelines regarding best practices in writing about Indigenous communities. Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* is a good reference.
- Visit archives and community spaces that may hold materials that are relevant in your process of creating a decolonial classroom space. For instance, the Interference Archive has many relevant materials. Visit us at 314 7th St, Brooklyn, NY 11215.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Readings

Carolyn Dean, "The Trouble with (The Term) Art," *Art Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Summer, 2006), pp. 24-32.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization. Indigeneity Education & Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012, pp:1-40.

Kymerly N. Pinder, *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Melissa R. Kerin, PhD and Andrea Lepage PhD. 2016.
 "De-Centering "The" Survey: The Value of Multiple Introductory Surveys to Art History." *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 1, (1).
<https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol1/iss1/3>.

Steven Leuthold, *Cross-cultural issues in art: Frames for understanding*. Routledge, 2010.

Adrian Piper, "The logic of Modernism." *Callaloo* 16, no. 3 (1993): 574-578.

Kathleen E. Kaandossiwin Absolon, *How We Come to Know*. First Edition. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing Co., Ltd., 2012.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books, 2012 (2nd edition).

Journals:

<http://decolonization.org/index.php/des>

<http://www.alternative.ac.nz/>

Podcasts:

<http://www.brokenboxespodcast.com/>

Syllabus projects:

Standing Rock Syllabus

<https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>

All Monuments Must Fall Syllabus

<https://archive.nyu.edu/bitstream/2451/40071/2/All%20Monuments%20Must%20Fall%20A%20Syllabus.pdf>

Citation Practices Challenge:

<http://www.criticalethnicstudiesjournal.org/citation-practices/>

A SPACE FOR NOTES

CONTACT

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