

# PERFORMING INDIGENOUS NATIONHOOD

## The Use of Embodied Knowledge in Resistance and Resurgence

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### Thesis

Privileging the experiences, voices, and scholarship of Indigenous Knowledge holders, this research essay explores how contemporary Indigenous performers draw upon ancestral teachings as a method of contradicting colonial representations of Indigenous peoples, repatriating one's Indigenous heritage to the present, (re)asserting their intimate relation to place, and creating possibilities for thriving Indigenous futures outside the confines of settler colonialism.

### Theoretical Approach

To evaluate how embodied practice in performance is used as a tool for change, three areas of Indigenous theory are referenced.

#### 1. Indigenous Philosophies

Indigenous philosophies understand consciousness as embodied, endlessly created through interactions with the life-maintaining forces and entities that animate the environment (Henderson 2000, 257). Performance art in Indigenous nations is used both as a method of teaching important social, legal, political, and environmental relationships as well as a realization of them (Hunt 2014; Shea Murphy and Dangeli 2016).

#### 2. Settler Colonial Governance

Settler colonial nations, such as Canada and Australia, are some of the many nations where colonizers came, and often violently and coercively took land from Indigenous nations and created 'permanent' settlements (Strakosch and Macoun 2012, 45). In order to sustain their presence, principles of colonization have been built into the aforementioned systems of governance, and as such these structures necessitate the ongoing mental, physical, and spiritual dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land (Wolfe 2006, 388). To facilitate their agenda, settler colonial authority has created a binary of the "civilized Euro-Settler" and the "uncivilized/savage Indian" whereby artificial representations of Indigenous peoples portray them as primitive beings stuck in the past (Recollet 2016, 95). In this regime, Indigenous peoples and their ways of being are confined to the realms of non-being and folklore, they are the living dead whose existences haunt and remind settler authority of the unfinished project of their dispossession and erasure (Morrill, Tuck, and Super Futures Haunt Collective 2016, 12-13).

“ We’ve been here all along, see  
Australia doesn’t exist, just another  
dead myth ”

DRMNGNOW

#### 3. Resisting Erasure and Resurgence

Eve Tuck (2018) explains that “the opposite of dispossession is not possession”, it is unforgetting internalized Settler narratives and relentlessly remembering that which existed before dispossession. Freedom for Indigenous peoples lies in their agency, to act in such a way that challenges settler narratives and negotiates terms of governance. Tully (2019, 265) speaks of freedom in two senses: (1) struggles *for* freedom i.e. actions taken to reach their larger goals of decolonization, self-determination and political difference, and (2) struggles *of* freedom i.e. the individual actions of Indigenous people within settler society that challenge settler narratives of power and preserve their ways of life.

It is through visitations to traditional teachings and the re-centering of them in one's daily life that one reclaims and (re)presences Indigeneity in the present, fosters community solidarity, and creates future possibilities for thriving Indigenous nations (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 608-9).

Ceremonies that encompass the physical and oral aspects of storytelling (e.g. drumming, dancing, prayer) are renewal processes integral to remembering social, political, and legal order that maintain balance within one's Indigenous community; these narratives comprise and sustain Indigenous communities as distinct peoples (Aguirre 2005, 191; Recollet 2016, 98). Karyn Recollet (2016, 93) employs Martineau and Ritske's use of the term "Decolonial Aesthetics", which refers to spaces where contemporary "Indigenous artists and creators are remixing media, aesthetics and modes of expression to refuse the constraints of colonial narratives on creation production, and reorienting art-making to effect resurgent practices and Indigenous ways of being".

### Abstract

In a settler colonial dominated society, Indigenous peoples' embodied potential for resistance to erasure and the resurgence (revitalization) of their nations lies in their worldviews. It is imperative to understand that (1) Indigeneity is a way of life that is active, lived, and relational, endlessly signified through Indigenous place-based ecological philosophies, (2) these worldviews are incompatible with a Eurocentric Capitalist worldview, and (3) as such, these worldviews have been disparagingly portrayed as primitive and targeted for erasure. This essay centralizes the Indigenous body as a source of agency (capacity to act) and argues that gestural vocabulary, as embodied archives of Indigenous Knowledge, are political tools of resistance and resurgence as they counter colonial portrayals of Indigenous peoples, repatriate ancestral Indigenous Knowledge to the present, (re)assert relationality to place, and are used to envision futures of thriving Indigenous nations outside the confines of the settler state.

### Case Studies



#### Dee(a)r Spine

Sam Mitchell, Yaqui

Drawing inspiration from the movement of Yaqui Pascola dancers' performance of the Deer Dance ritual, Mitchell visibilizes his Indigenous presence at University of California San Diego in his performance Dee(a)r Spine (Mitchell and Burelle 2016, 41-42, 45). In essence, Mitchell's performance serves as a resurgent act of re-ancestralizing the present through the revitalization of Indigenous presence, knowledge, as well as social and political order on their sacred territory.

Image: (Mitchell and Burelle 2016)



#### DRMNGNOW

Neil Morris, Yorta-Yorta

In his video "Australia Does Not Exist", Neil Morris uses a hip/hop, rap performance style driven by "100 000 plus years of ancestral force" to assert Indigenous political difference and sovereignty as well as enact a complex, layered, and nuanced questioning of nationhood ("DRMNGNOW" 2018). This performance employs hip/hop dancing as a way to refute socio-spatial arrangements that erase Indigenous presence from their sacred territory in conjunction with lyrics that cast an ironic paradigm shift, thus shaking settler claim to authority and presenting it as self-serving, genocidal, mythical and folkloric (Recollet 2016, 95; "DRMNGNOW" 2018).settler claim to authority and presenting it as self-serving, genocidal, mythical and folkloric (Recollet 2016, 95; "DRMNGNOW" 2018).

Image: DRMNGNOW, Facebook



#### Piqsiq

Sisters Kayley Inuksuk Mackay and Tiffany Kuliktana Ayalik, Inuit/Irish

Piqsiq creates improvised performances that merge traditional Inuit throat singing with electronic voice loops and vocal syncopations to honour ancient traditional songs and create "eerie new compositions" (2018). It is through their vocal arrangements that they renew traditional teachings in the present and transport the audience to a futuristic landscape of unscathed Indigenous ways of being.

Image: Vincent Guth, Unsplash