

# Continuities Between Eras: Indigenous Art Histories

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This special issue of *RACAR* engages with recent and past scholarship that explores continuities between historic and contemporary Indigenous art practices. While the writing and framing of Indigenous art histories—arguably a diachronic project of linking past and present—is not a new initiative, it continues to be an urgent one. In an essay for the exhibition catalogue *Revisions* (1992), Mohawk scholar Deborah Doxtator observed,

The past and present of Indian situations must be dealt with together because they are inextricably connected ... In non-Indian art and history about Indians, the seventeenth and twentieth centuries are rarely connected. Academic studies deal with colonial history of the eighteenth century or with events of the twentieth century, not both. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are both part of the stream of Indian experience. From Indian perspectives, the fact that a value or a practice or an idea comes from the past does not render it irrelevant in the present. (In this way *the past can exist in the present*.) Emphasis is placed not on the point of division or disruption between time periods, but on the continuity between eras [*italics added*].<sup>1</sup>

Doxtator is among many leading Indigenous scholars who ground Indigenous art histories in the idea of a continuum. This issue builds upon her poignant arguments and explores the diverse and distinct methods of writing, representing, and curating Indigenous arts and their histories.

As scholars, we come to this project from distinct subject positions and lived experiences; one of us (Heather Igloliorte) is an Inuk, while the other (Carla Taunton) is a white settler. As co-editors of this special issue on Indigenous arts—*RACAR*'s first—we are grateful to be joined by many other thoughtful scholars of both Indigenous and settler descent, whose work contributes to shared Indigenous and settler-colonial

art histories in what is now known as Canada. The idea for this issue emerged from a panel on Indigenous art history we co-chaired during the 2015 UAAC conference at NSCAD University, but also from our shared, longstanding interest in fostering more nuanced writing on Indigenous history and visual culture today. The path for this scholarship has been cleared by many significant academics, and their work continues to inspire us. Among them are Ruth B. Phillips, whose important text, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (1998), reframed so-called Indigenous “souvenir arts”—long considered an unfortunate, modern deviation from the more authentic productions of an idealized, primitive past—as a sign of cultural continuity, artistic florescence, and Indigenous agency. *Native North American Art in the 20th Century* (1999), edited by W. Jackson Rushing, and *Transference, Technology, and Tradition* (2005), co-edited by Dana Claxton, Steven Loft, and Melanie Townsend, are also two key anthologies that helped define the field of Indigenous art history by bringing together noteworthy scholarship on historical and contemporary Indigenous art production. More recently, Louise Vigneault's polemics section, “Art autochtone: langue, oralité, communication,” which appeared in a recent issue of *RACAR* (41.1 2016), raised the question of cultural continuity in the context of language and oral communication. Over the past three decades, other scholars specializing in global Indigenous arts, such as James Clifford, Dorothy Eber, Sherry Farrell Racette, Nelson Graburn, Judy Hall, Richard Hill, Robert Jahnke, Ian Mclean, Howard Morphy, Olu Oguibe, Jolene Rickard, Jackson Rushing,

Christopher Steiner, Nicholas Thomas, Judy Thompson, and Charlotte Townsend Gault, have challenged the erasure of Indigenous arts and lived experience from history by advancing scholarship that addresses Indigenous conceptions of time, continuity, agency, and resurgence. Recent exhibitions, such as *Temporal Re-Imaginations* (2015), curated by RACAR contributor Alexandra Kahsenni:io Nahwegahbow, and *The Fifth World* (2015-2016), curated by Wanda Nanibush and reviewed in this issue by Elyn Walker, also explore Indigenous ontologies, knowledge, time, and space, while providing profound critiques of Western understandings of these concepts.

Conceptualized as a project of *centring* Indigenous art practices and histories, while also highlighting their interdisciplinarity, this special issue is informed by methodologies, epistemologies, and ontologies from across Indigenous territories and nations. Drawing upon current academic discussions about Indigenous material and aesthetic productions, the research it presents advances the writing of Indigenous art histories that draw from a range of disciplines, including Indigenous studies, art history, anthropology, and cultural studies. The articles in this issue thus present new ways of writing Indigenous art histories that seek to decolonize and indigenize art history through critiques of existing approaches that privilege eras, movements, and masterworks. This entails a fundamental shift away from past practices rooted in Eurocentric discussions of Indigenous arts, and a mobilization of productive methodologies—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—that honour and centre Indigenous ways of knowing and being. In other words, the authors in this collection make significant contributions to the *ongoing* project of transmitting, sharing, framing, and contextualizing historical and contemporary Indigenous art practices and their socio-political contexts. They also investigate continuities between Indigenous art practices, and represent the diversity and distinctness of Indigenous nationhood and territories in Canada.

This special issue acknowledges the development of Indigenous art histories as a field of study, and brings to light the persistent advocacy, extensive labour, and consistent mentorship of previous

generations of Indigenous curators, scholars, and artists on whose shoulders a younger generation now stands. Many of the essays in this issue reference these individuals and collectives, as well as the work of scholars and curators such as Marcia Crosby, Deborah Doxtator, David Garneau, Tom Hill, Robert Houle, Alootook Ipellie, Steven Loft, Lee-Ann Martin, Gerald McMaster, Nancy Mithlo, Ryan Rice, and Gerald Vizenor.

The articles included here address a diverse range of topics and discuss essential aspects of Indigenous art histories, including diverse Indigenous perspectives and practices, art production in regional and historical contexts, and diachronic investigations of socio-political and cultural structures. As Indigenous scholars Steven Loft and Jolene Rickard argue, moving Indigenous sovereignty forward in academia is essential to the creation of a framework for the advancement of Indigenous art histories. At a methodological level, all the articles contributed advance this project. In “Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Women of the Flatland,” for example, Carmen Robertson examines the work of three, contemporary, Saskatchewan-based Indigenous women artists—Ruth Cuthand, Judy Anderson, and Katherine Boyer—and two anonymous, Indigenous artists whose works are housed in regional collections of historic beadwork. In so doing, she highlights an intergenerational relationship between their works, one that is rooted in a shared relationship to the land. Annette de Stecher’s essay, “The Art of Community,” considers the role of both historical and contemporary art production in Wendat nationhood and cultural continuity, and argues that contemporary artists, such as Sylvie Paré, Manon Sioui, and Francine Picard, sustain Wendat knowledge, art practices, and traditions in their communities. Alexandra Kahsenni:io Nahwegahbow’s contribution, “From Great-Grandmothers to Great-Granddaughters: ‘Moving Life’ in Baby Carriers and Birchbark Baskets,” explores Anishinaabek carriers and birchbark baskets by considering the concept of the family portrait in relation to multigenerational knowledge transmission. Louise Vigneault, for her part, discusses the continuum of Indigenous sovereignty/territory concepts

in relation to Indigenous art production and the nation-specific epistemologies and knowledges it embodies. She also addresses the complex negotiation Indigenous artists, and more broadly Indigenous peoples, face while coexisting with not one, but two linguistically distinct settler-colonial societies. Similarly, Jean-Philippe Uzel critiques colonial attitudes embedded within Western art history by considering how the discipline's longstanding denial of Indigenous art's historicity is reborn in contemporary scholarship focused on mixed temporalities that ironically ignores Indigenous conceptions of time. In her essay, "Archival Predecessors and Indigenous Modernisms: Activating Archives in Contemporary Curatorial Practice on the Northwest Coast," Eugenia Kisin explores two recent, archive-based exhibitions of work by Northwest Coast artists Doug Cranmer and Henry Speck. She sees these curatorial projects as "sites of production for art-historical knowledge" with the potential to re-contextualize and decolonize settler-colonial practices in art history, including canonical hierarchies and theories of representation and spectatorship. By questioning Western distinctions between traditional and modernist, private and public, secular and religious, she foregrounds a pressing issue for Indigenous art history: the limitations and affects of Eurocentric language and academic research methodologies. Stacy A. Ernst, on the other hand, investigates the work of Saulteaux artist and curator Robert Houle in relation to Indigenous sovereignty and settler responsibility, and focuses on the ways in which the artist "privileges the Indigenous position while disrupting settler amnesia."

Many of the essays assembled here, but particularly those by Ernst, Kisin, and Uzel, contribute to *unsettling* the legacies of settler colonialism in the field of art history. In so doing, they showcase methods of decolonial practice that reveal the colonial structures and apparatuses embedded in institutional spaces, such as galleries, universities, and archives, as well as the ways these structures serve to erase Indigenous presence and sovereignty. Over the past four decades, Indigenous artists have participated in the creation and mobilization of decolonizing methodologies that foreground

Indigenous self-determination, and the texts presented here build on their important contributions. This is most evident in "Presence and Absence Redux: Indian Art in the 1990s," in which Ryan Rice returns to a paper he first presented in 2001 as part of the Musée d'art contemporain's colloquium *Mondialisation et postcolonialisme: Définitions de la culture visuelle V*. Mapping the artistic, curatorial, academic, and institutional developments in Indigenous arts in Canada in the 1990s, Rice bridges eras through a thoughtful consideration of a range of significant socio-political and cultural events, including Expo '67, the Oka Crisis, the Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to say nothing of the 1992 quincentennial "de-celebrations" across the Americas—which happened to coincide with Canada's 125th Anniversary—and the current sesquicentennial of Canadian Confederation. Rice concludes, "The path we traveled has been mapped out. Like oral traditions, the performance of our histories needs to be told, written, read, heard, acknowledged, and, most importantly, remembered."

When we first embarked on this project, we discussed current gaps in the literature of our field and then wrote the call for papers with these in mind. We intended for this issue to be a space for mapping, writing, and remembering Indigenous art histories—present since time immemorial—in the context of what is now known as Canada. As scholars who work in art history departments and who teach Indigenous art history, we imagined the articles presented here serving multiple pedagogical and research purposes, but ideally they would be included as readings in undergraduate courses and graduate seminars on Indigenous arts. In developing RACAR's first issue focused on Indigenous art histories, we wanted to explore a wide range of topics, including—but not limited to—continuities, cultural continuance, the production of material culture, contemporary Indigenous arts, and museum representation and curating around these themes. In keeping with current academic discussions of Indigenous material and aesthetic production, we also wanted to engage with projects of Indigenous sovereignty,

self-determination, resurgence, and nationhood, and foreground Indigenous worldviews, philosophies, ways of being, and concepts of time and history. This issue was also conceived as a response to the substantive lack of peer-reviewed publications focused on Indigenous art histories and informed by Indigenous knowledges, perspectives, and methodologies. As such, we envisioned it contributing to decolonization and indigenization, while also underscoring the value of Indigenous art-historical research and methods. We acknowledge, however, that there are gaps in our work, the most discouraging being the underrepresentation of Inuit and circumpolar art production. This reflects an ongoing discussion/tension in our field concerning the exclusion of Inuit art from the discourse of Indigenous art production in both the art world and academic institutions. We would, therefore, like to use this platform to call for a more consistent integration of Inuit art histories in Indigenous arts curricula, exhibitions, and public programming, as well as a substantial commitment to the inclusion of Arctic art and Inuit artists more generally. We are grateful, in this respect, to Christina Williamson, whose thoughtful review addresses the installation of Inuit art in *Canadian and Indigenous Art: From Time Immemorial to 1967*, the recently reopened and renamed permanent exhibition of Canadian and Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Canada. A testament to the possible impact Indigenous art histories could have on a range of academic disciplines, this issue also contributes to the development of best practices for critical engagement with the histories and structures of colonialism; collaboration and consultation with Indigenous peoples; and productive

investment with Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Ultimately, we hope that it will help define Indigenous art histories as a distinct field of study. Our approach aimed to situate historical and contemporary Indigenous arts together on a continuum as a means emphasizing the endurance of Indigenous histories of art production, which are not new and have always existed in the sovereign territories of Indigenous nations across Canada. ¶

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1. Deborah Doxtator, "Reconnecting the Past: An Indian Idea of History," *Revisions*, exh. cat., Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff: WPG, 1992), 3.