

# Radical Currents: Indigenous Art in the Future Continuous

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‘Indigenous’ is not just the collective noun for the Peoples formerly known as Aboriginal. It is a word used to describe those First Peoples who struggle to decolonize themselves and the world. The Indigenous are globally connected folks who choose to identify and ally with each other rather than with those who maintain colonial power. Their connections are forged negatively by shared oppression and positively by sharing strategies used to resist that oppression. Indigenous peoples honor their own cultures while also acknowledging that their ways of knowing and being often rhyme with those of traditional peoples from other territories. These are living philosophies that emerge from the earth and are contrary to colonial, patriarchal, capitalist and anthropocentric modes. While Aboriginal art is bound to colonial art history, discourses, institutions, markets and agents, Indigenous art perpetuates and invents non-colonial ways of making, displaying, sharing and engaging. Indigenous art emerges when First Peoples use traditional forms to describe their contemporary lives and/or use contemporary media and aesthetics to make art that is grounded in their home territory’s worldview.

Art, in the sense of human-made untouchable things removed from daily use, having a cash value, and displayed in special rooms, is a modern and ‘Western’ concept. Indigenous art, then, is a hybrid of Indigenous and ‘Western’ modes of creative production. Aboriginal art is Native creative production assimilated by the (‘Western’) art world. First Peoples are Indigenous when they indigenize their practices; when they engage those aspects of colonial culture that suit their purposes and discard the rest. This selective engagement is only possible when you have a more credible counter-narrative than the dominant one. In our<sup>1</sup> case, Indigenous art is seen by its makers as both an engagement of contemporary life and art, and a continuation of pre-contact creative production.

I would like to offer a glimpse of how traditional culture influences Indigenous contemporary art by considering time. The Blackfoot and Cree of the Great Plains of Northern Turtle Island figure time as cyclical rather than linear.<sup>2</sup> The turning Earth produces a succession of days and nights and its solar orbit creates seasonal cycles, inspiring patterns of migration and innumerable other natural and cultural rhythms. The Enlightenment-colonial-capitalist-empirical imaginary pictures time as a straight line: a point extending from somewhere to elsewhere in the midst of nowhere. A train rolls through the night from a dimming past toward a future brightened by its headlamp. Time conceived as a line assumes progress. It imagines time as history, as a singular entity moving in one direction. It centers humans as time’s protagonists. It privileges newness over repetition. It represses attention to time’s pulse and reverberations and the fact that time is not only duration, but also a medium.

Blackfoot Elder and legal scholar Leroy Little Bear explains that the fact that everything is in flux “results in a concept of time that is dynamic but without motion. Time is part of the constant flux but goes nowhere. Time just is.”<sup>3</sup> This only seems a paradox if there is one time and it is not relative. Time is both a current and a medium. As a medium, “time just is.” It is not a being-toward or from. However, within the medium are currents, patterns and rhythms that are “in constant motion.” Time is experienced as a current when we flow with it, and as a medium when we no longer do.

While the Indigenous model of time may seem linear—a circle is, after all, a line—a model of curving time pictures water eddies, rings within rings, days within seasons within years, lives within families within Nations. Circles have no beginning or end. Such a model centers the continuous present we actually experience. Unlike straightened timelines, it neither orients us as beings moving toward the future or as beings fleeing the past. Looping time is focused on the lived current moment, the current that carries us in an ever-present present, but one that is also intimate with other iterations of that moment.

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<sup>1</sup> I am Métis artist, curator and critical arts writer. The Métis, along with First Nations and Inuit Peoples, are recognized as First Peoples by the Canadian Constitution.

<sup>2</sup> These teachings come to me primarily from listening to Cree Elder Jerry Saddleback and Blackfoot Elder Leroy Little Bear, as well as from Little Bear’s text cited below.

<sup>3</sup> Little Bear, L. “Jagged Worldviews Colliding.” *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Ed. M. Battiste. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000. 177–185. Also: [http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/worldviews/documents/jagged\\_worldviews\\_colliding.pdf](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/worldviews/documents/jagged_worldviews_colliding.pdf).

Imagining time's curves inspires spirals, springs and coils. These seemingly overlapping circles touch without quite being each other. The current season echoes the last and presages seasons yet to be experienced. They are alike, kin but not copies. The same goes for all instances of life—your life is like other lives, but not identical. Cyclical time recognizes reiteration, recurrence and other timely rhythms. It embraces how your lived current is entangled with all other currents. This model values complex relationality: visiting and revisiting, telling and retelling, making and remaking. Indigenous understanding of time is inseparable from bodies and place. Time as a medium just is, but as a current, it is experienced by specific bodies in particular places. Little Bear explains:

In Plains Indian philosophy, certain events, patterns, cycles, and happenings take place in certain places. From a human point of view, patterns, cycles, and happenings are readily observable on land: animal migrations, cycles of plant life, seasons, and so on.... Creation is continuity. If creation is to continue, then it must be renewed. Renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and resinging of the songs, are all humans' part in the maintenance of creation.<sup>4</sup>

Indigenous philosophy and practice, then, is holistic and entangled, is generalist, process-oriented, about iteration, continuity and firmly grounded in a particular place and community.

I assume we all agree that Indigenous people and settlers are human beings. We are not essentially different, but our ideas and practices make it appear so. If so, then it is important to resist constructing false dichotomies of the 'Western' and Indigenous as essentialist categories that resist agreement. Both ways of being are polyphonous and full of dissent. It is reactive, reductive and inelegant to articulate the Indigenous as the opposite of 'Western.' Likewise, to describe 'the West' as if it was internally consistent only serves to reify its power. Rendering the 'West' as a singular narrative is convenient for one kind of argument. Yet seeing, for instance, how its repressed contents mirror Indigenous philosophy suggests that a dominant habit such as the Enlightenment-colonial-capitalist-empirical imaginary might be a momentary preference of the powerful rather than a natural fact. Such stubborn habits can eventually be displaced by a more holistic and generous project that is already latent in the hearts of its citizens.

While the 'West'—as in the colonial-capitalist aspect—has a singular sense of time, not every westerner agrees. Ancient Greeks, for example, had competing concepts of time. Chronos embodied linear time while Aeon personified circular time. Chronos and chronology only came into ascendance during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Under chronological time, with its sense of the inevitable march of history, of progress, the central position of time-keepers and their feelings of superiority over the untimed became important conceptual fuel for colonialism. Scientific concepts like light-years are neutral, but when welded to the chronological imaginary, they inspire a moving toward other planets and away from the one we are currently ruining. Aeonic time, Indigenous time, encourages being in an intimate relationship with the current we actually occupy. Central to its imaginary is the idea and practice of migration and return.

A caution: just as 'the West' often lacks coherence and consistency, few First Peoples are paragons of their traditional teachings. Natives live under occupation and with programs of aggressive assimilation and racism. Reserves are not utopias. Indigenous is not a settled position. It is an aspirational identity, a recovery and creative mission that attempts to continue the best non-colonial ways of knowing and being into the future.

In practical terms, the art world, institutionalized art history and studio instruction are colonial when they prefer chronological art surveys to networks of aesthetic kinships and webs of mentorship, when they are oriented toward the future or the past instead of the lived and continuous present, when they center novelty and progress over continuity and reiteration, when they measure worth according to capital rather than in terms of sharing, gifting and engaging. There are two broad Indigenous art projects. One works within colonial art institutions in an educational, reform project. The other is the separatist struggle to develop a network of Indigenous curators, critics, publics and sovereign spaces.

Decolonization is a practice of undoing. Non-colonial action is the practice of doing otherwise. It includes looking for homologues in settler and Indigenous societies, ways of being and knowing repressed by the colonial imagination. Finding such common truths and reviving them is essential

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Little Bear.

to our collective survival. Indigenous philosophy and practice, including contemporary art, then, embodies and celebrates past and future as a continuous present. In grammar, “the future continuous refers to an unfinished action or event that will be in progress at a time later than now.”<sup>5</sup> Indigenous contemporary art as future continuous is the recognition that our work is forever incomplete and also always a part of later and previous projects.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ef.com/wwen/english-resources/english-grammar/future-continuous/>.