

Ilene Sova

LAND, ART AND ANCESTRAL MEMORY

The Artist Studio as a Site of Placemaking and Decolonial Celebration of Ancestral Stories

Artist Studies

Collection Editor
JOY SPERLING

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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LPP

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To the incredible artists across this land of the past and present who are doing this impactful and moving work of humanizing decolonization through their inspiring creative practices.

Abstract

This text explores how contemporary artists across a variety of disciplines, from Canada to Brazil, focus their creative practices on decolonization while examining identity, land, culture, and ancestral memory. Centering the artist's voice and exploring studio-based processes, this text addresses conceptual themes including race, the climate crisis, cultural resurgence, resource extraction, and social justice. Through interview-based chapters, it explores the studio's role as a site of research, resistance, and social transformation. Designed for students in art and art history, it includes discussion questions, learning outcomes, and writing prompts to support critical engagement in the classroom.

Key words

Anti-colonialism
Ancestral memory
Colonization
Decolonization
Eurocentrism
Hierarchies in art
Turtle Island
Trans-Atlantic slave trade
Truth and Reconciliation Commission
Western Canon

Note on language

This text focuses on artists who work with **decolonization** as a driving concept in their art-work. However, the phrase **anti-colonial** is also used in the text. It's important to note the difference between these two terms. *Anti-colonial* refers specifically to the deliberate resistance to colonial rule and occupation. This is enacted through political, social, and cultural struggle. Decoloniality in this book is about eradicating enduring colonial structures within a country that continue to shape knowledge systems, educational curriculum, institutional policies, a hierarchy of aesthetics, and cultural life in society (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2021). In this volume, the term *decolonial* is used to indicate that the artists interviewed not only resist colonial histories but also reclaim and revitalize Indigenous and diasporic histories through their ways of knowing and creating their artwork.

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Introduction

In Nassau, Bahamas, a tall, elongated heritage tree is painstakingly carved by artist Antonius Roberts into the striking image of an African Caribbean woman looking out to sea. In California, Sarah Rosalena creates complex weaving patterns that are transformed through computation into large artworks depicting captivating textured celestial landscapes. In Canada, Michelle Peraza carefully paints large pieces of tree bark paper with gold and red clay, and cuts them into enormous circles as part of a huge immersive installation. In Argentina, Valeria Arendar works with her artist community to reenact undocumented histories of violence, painstakingly documented through digital photography, using the symbols and familiar compositions from art history. In Peru, the intricate patterns of the Amazonian anaconda snake are enlarged by Olinda Silvano into stunning, colorful Kené murals painted in bright hues by a community of women who work while singing traditional songs together.

When lands and peoples are taken over by foreign colonizing entities and occupied through violence and force, the negative repercussions are seemingly endless and unfathomable. The colonization of land and people disrupts, denies, and often destroys relationships to language, culture, and community. The invading force brings with it entirely new ways of understanding, seeing, speaking, and viewing the world. Colonization imposes new languages, new religions, new economic systems, new

medicinal practices, new systems of crime and punishment, and new approaches to educating the populace (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021). In the Americas, large swaths of land have been occupied at various times by the French, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, the Spanish, and the United States. Since Columbus landed in the Bahamas in 1492, in search of a new westward route to India, Indigenous peoples have been grappling with the vast disruptive implications of the suppression of their people, culture, language, and spiritual practices. Additionally, as enslaved African people were brought to the Americas by force via the transatlantic slave trade, they too were physically disconnected from their land, spiritual traditions, artistic practices, languages, value systems, and their family histories (Hartman, 2007). The process of decolonization demands not just a reversal of colonization, but a new framework of replacing the imposed social structures and assumptions of it with a reimagined and refreshed way of seeing and imagining the future. Decolonization investigates and comprehends what colonization wrought and this movement works to change the way people speak and view the world. It reconnects people with their land, ancestors, and cultures that the colonizers attempted to erase. Many people in the Americas today are replacing old colonial narratives through various forms of advocacy, national policy, re-education, and unlearning (Beckles, 2013). Through deep and thoughtful research, a passionate, motivated, and increasingly widespread decolonial movement has had meaningful success in demanding reparations through a variety of institutional and transformational community strategies (Absolon, 2019). Although many nations in the Americas have achieved semi-political independence, colonial states have

had a long-lasting impact on and influence over numerous societal structures and forms of governance (Quijano, 2000). In Canada, for instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2008 to interview and document the survivors of the residential school system. It addressed the colonial educational system created to assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream Canadian life by forcibly removing them from their homes and "educating" them in boarding schools. They were designed by the state to remove all traces of indigeneity and instill in them the new culture of the British Colonial state (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The commission's far-reaching report called for both widespread decolonial institutional policies and active, deep consultation with Indigenous peoples across Canada. Today, activists in the Americas and Africa continue this work by demanding the return of precious cultural objects seized during colonial rule to their communities of origin where they can be reconnected with their sites and locations and reactivated in ceremony (Lonetree, 2012). People who lost connection with their language and spiritual practices through forced assimilation are reviving ceremonies and languages in intergenerational communities. They do so through knowledge sharing, along with Elders collectively benefitting from the immense healing that comes with an understanding of one's roots and ancestral knowledge.

Across the Americas, impassioned visual artists committed to this decolonial transformation are producing artwork deeply informed by, and connected to this movement. Through their art, they connect with communities around the complex, multilayered concepts of decolonization and social transformation. They variously reveal

their research, their histories and current narratives, make art inspired by uncovered creative practices of the past and the hidden histories of the land they live on. Through their artwork they grapple with deep and difficult emotions raised in the process. Through their paintings, installations, photography, performance art, digital technology, and sculpture, they celebrate their reconnection with the land, their traditional spiritual practices, their creative histories, and their familial ancestors. They speak of the empowerment they feel when working with and learning about their ancestral ways of creating. They collectively celebrate their reconnection with their communities, their refreshing engagement with fellow artists, and the joy they feel in sharing their work with others.

This book comprises recorded interviews with 13 artists from Canada to Brazil who are working to decolonize their studio practices in various ways. *It centers the artist's voice, their individual experiences, and the emergent theories of decolonial discovery and unlearning unfolding in their studios and exhibitions*. The approach is interdisciplinary and focuses on the theory and practice undertaken by artists in the midst of each unique creative problem-solving process. Through this unearthing of histories, knowledge, and connection to community, each artist in this collection has transformed the way they make artwork and how they engage with their audiences. Each has centered decolonial and anti-colonial activism at the forefront of their studio practices and has engaged in impactful and meaningful creative research to decolonize their minds, their ways of making, and their connections with their audiences. Many are grappling with their art school training, the underpinnings of Western Art

history, and how these shape their understanding of how their art is situated and reflected within the culture of contemporary art practices. Through their uniquely visual languages, they contemplate what they have lost as creative people and how they can regain it. Thus, several decolonial themes repeat throughout these artists' work: reclaiming the land, reclaiming stories, reclaiming methods and meanings, reclaiming art histories, and reclaiming family histories.

Reclaiming the land

Many of the artists interviewed expressed a deep, emotional dedication to reconnecting with The Land as integral to their art: the land as materials; the land as inspiration; the land as spirit; and the land as a site of remembering. The center of the colonial project was, and is, the occupation of land and the extraction of resources to enrich the empire (Simpson, 2017). It is not surprising, then, that these artists' work is anchored to this topic as both connection and inspiration. They remind viewers that humans on this earth are in communion with nature. Their artwork elevates the natural world and communicates with us that our relationship with the land is directly related to our own health and well-being. The land becomes an inspiring site for art materials, subject matter, and conceptual motivation. With diverse approaches to honoring and centering the land, the artists in this book draw our attention to where we stand, to the natural world surrounding us, and to the history the land has witnessed over centuries of colonial impact. Bahamian artist Antonius Roberts carves his images of his ancestors from the native trees of the archipelago to represent the loss of ecology

from and in resistance to the "tropification" of The Bahamas by the tourist industry (Figure 10.3). Leasho Johnson researches the history of natural, land-based pigment production by the original Taíno peoples of Jamaica, using found knowledge to inform a more nuanced understanding of color theory in the making of the pigments he uses on his canvases. Olinda Silvano, a Peruvian artist, creates large-scale murals that emulate the cosmology of the Amazon rainforest, using the spirit within the patterns of animal and plant life as the driving force of her work. She draws attention to the beauty and richness of the still-endangered Amazon rainforest amid ongoing colonial impacts and extraction. Jose Jimenez, a Venezuelan landscape painter, creates a unique iconography of the land with hyper detailed elements of nature painted in deep purples and vibrant pinks with saturated bright yellows that draw attention to the unique shapes of the leaves, the curvature of a tree stump, and the repeating textures of a mountain's rock face (Figure 5.2). Other artists address the land as a sacred site, a place of respect, and a source of our sustenance. Chantal Bethel, a Haitian artist, focuses on the unique cracked surfaces of her chosen medium by painstakingly painting between each crack to build the physicality of the land's broken surfaces into her compositions, and to echo the devastating impact of earthquakes in her original home of Haiti. She then intermixes her compositions with figures representing the strength and spirit of the women who uphold the families and traditions of the land in the islands. Throughout these artists' work is a reverence and celebration of the land as subject, the land as materials and the land as foundational to creative inspiration in the studio.

Reclaiming narratives

Within a colonial framework, occupying forces work to erase or undermine Indigenous histories, first languages, and cultures. The colonial project, set within a hierarchy of Western European Art, attempts to denigrate and regulate artworks by Indigenous peoples by describing them as unsophisticated or forcibly categorizing them as "historic craft." Education in the American colonies has historically centered European ways of art-making through curricula, governmental policies on culture and museum collections, and scholarly texts (McMaster, 2020). This means that, to decolonize their studio practices, the artists in this movement embark on the unearthing and celebration of artistic practices that were driven underground, hidden within legal religious practices, and previously enacted in secrecy. They have committed their studio practice to relearning and reviving their ancestral ways of making that connect them, their identity, and their land to their heritage. They become stewards of a culture "meant to be lost" and, like artistic detectives, they find and celebrate the rich creativity of their ancestors. They meet with Elders, work in communities, delve into historical texts, visit museums to view stolen objects, find and meditate at sacred sites, and work through inspiration found in their intuition, dreams, and visions.

Reclaiming methods and meanings

Vanessa Dion Fletcher makes contemporary work using traditional materials and methods of working with porcupine quills from her ancestral culture. She meets with knowledge keepers and uses

the ways of working that were not taught to her in art school. She has learned quillwork through community mentorship and dyes the quills with natural materials from the land and her body. She melds traditional methods with new or more contemporary visual languages: she enlarges her more traditional porcupine beads to a massive scale, amplifies their iconic importance, and reframes traditional materials and methods to create intimate abstracted compositions that speak metaphorically of the broken cycle of tradition and spirituality (Figure 4.2). The sculptures of Natia Lemay are inspired by the methods and traditions of her family, which have been passed down through the generations. She watched and learned from her father's traditional soapstone carving, echoing his sculptural approaches in her own wood and soapstone artworks. Using her ancestors' methods to sculpt, she creates objects that seem to teeter on the brink of collapse. Through these forms, she speaks of her childhood and the lack of resources in her upbringing. Her parents repurposed discarded roadside furniture, which now appears in her sculptures, acting as a poignant metaphor for families harmed by the intergenerational impacts of family breakdown within the colonial project (Figure 7.2). Michelle Peraza, an artist of Costa Rican descent, uses traditional Amate bark paper (which was banned by the Spaniards) to reference the land. She researches the medicinal practices of her culture and works these papers with handmade pigments, including hibiscus, chamomile, marigold, coffee, rue, passionflower, mint, mugwort, and rosemary, that connect to centuries-old ingredients for healing and transformation. Sarah Rosalena works with the weaving of her ancestral heritage, which continues to be practiced among communities despite colonization, to

celebrate its longevity, persistence, and lasting impact across generations. She literally reweaves what she learned at a young age with computation and digital processes to make intimate connections between the past and present. Through her pieces, she draws attention to how the military's current use of technology continues the project of colonization. Embedded within the contemporary creative approaches of all these artists to traditional ways of making is a deep understanding that the materiality and site specificity of materials hold profound and impactful meaning. Their materials and methods hold the stories of the longevity of their ancestors' creativity, of cultural resistance, of the power to revive what was meant to be lost but is now found again, and of stories "not meant to be told."

The shadow of the canon

In decolonial art, the shadow of the Western art canon is omnipresent. Many of the artists interviewed openly addressed their relationship to it. Most grapple with, reject, or critique the foundational teachings and styles of European art history that underpinned their art education. Gordon Shadrach references the traditions of historical European portrait painting, the use of oil paint, chiaroscuro lighting, and even the large ornate gold frames he displays his paintings in. But, he replaces the portrait's subjects, who were once European figures of power, with heroes of integral Black history, still not widely taught in classes across Canada. His work is at once striking and provocative; his compositions, expertly painted, seemingly celebrate the materials and mores of European Baroque artists, but by replacing the Kings and Queens of European courts with Black subjects, he transforms and decolonizes them into

gloriously powerful images of Black historical figures (Figure 12.2). Valeria Arendar uses more deeply embedded symbols of art-historical imagery and symbols to compose photographs that document undocumented histories. In her Ophelia-esque photograph, for instance, she translates the familiar and iconic image of Sir John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–1852) into a woman in a contemporary dress face down in the water to represent the "disappeared" and undocumented people of the Argentine civic-military dictatorship (1976–1983) (Figure 1.3). Leasho Johnson critiques the proliferation of the European studio processes and their presumed promotion of the Western art canon, which tells artists to cover drawings with paint. In an act of defiance, he paints first, then draws over the painted surface to invert and resist the colonial hierarchy of both accepted creation processes and oil-painting techniques (Figure 6.3). Vanessa Dion Fletcher rewrites the Western romantic myth of the sequestered genius artist as an individual working alone in their studio. Instead, she brings the larger public to her process, through community workshops at her exhibitions and murals in public schools. She invites people to create with her; painting beaded patterns on the walls and building larger-than-life beadwork. She proposes art as connection, art as sharing, and art created by the collective. By sidelining the dominant narratives of Western Art History, these artists work to both refer to and upend the strategies and tenets of European art and to overwrite the tenets of a Eurocentric view of creative production.

Reclaiming histories

Many artists in the collection explore and acknowledge lost pre-colonial histories and highlight the persistent harm and

violence wrought by colonization. Micaela de Vivero, for instance, addresses ways in which colonial occupation of the Andes begat violence and catastrophic loss of life. She grounds her work in part in an exploration of the historic colonial search for the riches of gold and silver in the Americas, and how the extraction of precious metals wrought violence and havoc in Latin America. She deeply researches the meaning and significance of her ancestors' artifacts to create new, immersive installations that allude to precious materials and their historical and contemporary visual significance (Figure 3.3). Her complex installations embody the past in four dimensions. She encourages her viewers to walk through a contemporary metaphorical environment freighted with symbols of rich cultures and peoples oppressed by the colonial search for wealth. Gabriela Noujaim also amplifies the ancestral stories erased during Brazil's colonization. Working with her ancestry and local Indigenous communities, inspired by the traditional myths of the Indigenous peoples of Brazil, she creates prints and uses her body to perform visual representations of the treatment of women during colonial occupation. Using lines to refer to the scars, memories as patterns, and the body as a symbol of historical injustices, she invites us into a richly complex ceremonial culture that was both outlawed and hidden by the occupying state (Ribeiro dos Santos and Dagli Hernandez, 2022) (Figure 8.2). Bethel's paintings and sculptures take us into the glittering turquoise ocean to honor those spirits that were lost through invasion and occupation. Her tall symbolic figures become symbols of the many. Through images of cracked earth, holey stones from the beaches of Grand Bahama, and paintings of women making ceremonial offerings, she honors the land and

the ocean that were impacted by the transatlantic slave trade (Figure 2.2). In her recent work, she focuses on the climate crisis and the increase of extreme weather in the region by painting the spirits of those lost to the ocean—elongated figures, surrounded by water; surfaces crackling with broken earth. With her meditative imagery, she reminds us that the continued extraction of resources and disconnection from the environment continue to harm the populations of the global south. Through deep historical research often not easily found in the textbooks, these artists unearth and retell their findings through imaginative and innovative artistic approaches to understanding the past.

Reclaiming families

Finally, the need to reclaim family and community connections is often critical to how many of the artists in this study embrace decolonization. Family is a grounding lens through which they create their art. Many colonial powers across the Americas made concerted efforts to fracture and destroy the family cohesion of both First Peoples and those brought to the Americas as part of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Hartman, 2007). Families were separated by laws, forced relocations, imposed work, and more recently, children were forcibly removed from their family homes to be sent to special residential schools where traditional dress, hair, education, and practices of union and family ceremony were prohibited (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). This disrupted the concept of family and is a tragic legacy of colonialism, and many artists in this volume have grounded their art practices in rediscovering their family histories. They speak of how they learned their family's traditional

methods of creating meaningful visual objects as young children, of learning the ways of Indigenous culture and resistance at home, and of being encouraged by their parents or larger family to express themselves and their identities in unique ways. They describe how they had to unearth lost identities hidden in family trees, unspoken of until recently to protect family safety. They express how they watched, listened, and were mentored at the feet of relatives, and how family germinated and nurtured the seeds of their creativity. For many artists, family is also a site of risk-taking, studio exploration, knowledge-keeping, and imagination that enables them to reveal untold ways in which colonization has created a complex and all-embracing set of stories about resistance, celebration, and ongoing trauma. Olinda Silvano, for instance, traces the beginning of her artistic journey to her own precarious birth and to her grandfather's use of ceremony to give her the gift of creative sight and artistic vision. She now dedicates her studio practice and community work to maintaining and supporting her family traditions of spiritualism and art-making as they connect to the Amazonian ecosystem (Figure 13.4). Family remembrances and family archival history are also central to Natia Lemay's figurative paintings of the contemporary world, reminding us that the traumas of colonization remain an active, present, multi-generational force that haunts the families of those who survived colonization and continue to live on occupied lands, carrying its stories. Her work shows languid children and youth lying in stark domestic scenes illuminated like flashes of memory. The children are alone, bored, and waiting, surrounded by the questionable debris left by absent adults (Figure 7.4). These intriguing scenes draw in the viewer

by depicting figures engulfed by layered shades of black, finely textured linear forms, with light bouncing off the shapes to suggest three-dimensionality. The narratives are open to many interpretations. Lemay's layers of Blackness serve as both visual and substantive metaphors; they establish an inescapable space that carries the weight of her human and family histories, as well as colonial history.

Conclusion

In recent decades, statues have begun to fall, history books have begun to be rewritten, and ancestral artworks have begun to be returned to their home sites of creation. Families are reconnecting again through traditional storytelling, and communities are rediscovering rich ancestral spiritual practices rooted in their vibrant cultural histories. People are meeting in online communities to learn the languages previously banned by colonial governmental policies. Amid this resurgence of cultural renewal and resistance to colonial rule, many artists, such as those in this book, are responding to, reclaiming, and renewing their family and cultural pasts and presents in creative and breathtaking ways. Porcupine quills, plants, bark paper, antique frames, herbs, embodied performance, oil paint, computation, canvas, handmade dyes, digital photography, trees, charcoal, textiles, tree bark, clay, and spices all imbue the work of these artists with meaning about the land it was and is created on, and with contemporary meaning and emotional impact. The interviews with sculptors, painters, installation artists, performance artists, textile artists, photographers, and mural artists in this volume share a remarkable commonality despite their wide-ranging voices and

practices. They are all driven to communicate their own complicated feelings and meanings behind their land, art, and ancestral memories through dynamic and interconnected (and often intersectional) visual languages. In many ways, these artists all express a desire to work with and among both their immediate and larger communities as active sites of artmaking, and to overwrite the European modernist idea of the lone artist seeking internal inspiration while sequestered in the studio. The words and images of these artists touch us in new and old ways; they show us what it means to connect with and be part of a rich, long-standing, and enduring culture, to breathe in long-told stories of the land, and to comprehend the connections among our ecologies and the humanity of equity.

At the end of each chapter are writing prompts and studio prompts to motivate, inspire, and expand the reader's creative and theoretical practices. The projects invite the reader to look within and connect deeply with one's memories, inherited history, land and unique environment, and to reconnect with the community as part of the artistic process. They are invited to experiment, take artistic risks, and move beyond the conventions of Eurocentric art-making that has been taught on this land for centuries.

Learning objectives

1. Understand how to explore the creative potential of art as an archival history of identity and theories of personal positionality.
2. Display expertise in contemporary artists working with the concept of decolonization and gain an artistic knowledge of that history through creative research.
3. Interpret the visual vocabulary of artists who connect materials and methods of making to ancestral and traditional modes of creating.
4. Know examples of and be able to speak to approaches to decolonial research in contemporary art making across modes of interdisciplinarity.
5. Gain confidence in studio writing, creative experimentation, and risk-taking in one's practice as it relates to contemporary issues of social justice, identity, and site specificity.

1
Valeria Arendar

Artist Name: Valeria Arendar

Artist Website: www.valeriaarendar.com

Artist Bio: Valeria Arendar is a visual artist and researcher. She holds a Master's degree in Art Studies from Universidad Iberoamericana and a BA in Social Communication from Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. Her practice moves beyond the boundaries of documentary to insist that stories could have unfolded differently. Her work aims to alter the conditions under which images appear and to transform how they generate connections with what they evoke, displace, or make visible. From a situated perspective, she approaches the image as an open question, one that seeks to inquire into what has not yet been said or what remains in suspension. Her projects propose ways of seeing that open meaning, interrupt the obvious, and make room for what has yet to emerge. Her work has been exhibited in Argentina, Mexico, Guatemala, India, Germany, Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Lithuania, Canada, and Georgia. She was nominated for the *Leica Oskar Barnack Newcomer Award* (2022) and the *World Press Photo 6x6 Global Talent Program* (2020). Her distinctions include winning the *Intersection* grant from *PhMuseum*,



Figure 1.1: Valeria Arendar. (2025). *Self-portrait, Chiconcuac, Morelos.* January.