Decolonizing Settler Legacies in Canadian Indigenous New Media Art

My doctoral work will focus on how Canadian-based Indigenous new media art shapes and defies concepts of civic space and related notions of identity and community in Canadian cities. Within Canada, there has been a recent surge of Indigenous new media art that elaborates creative dialogues with urban space (Claxton, Townsend, and Loft, 2005). These include video and installations by Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Scott Stephens, KC Adams' Cyborg Hybrids series, and Terrance Houle’s Urban Indian series. While media studies scholars have focused on a notion of the mediated city (Appadurai, 1996; Crinson, 2005), little scholarly consideration has been given to Indigenous interests in both the city and its media. In my research program I intend to focus on these interests, employing these new media artworks as key to understanding discourses of decolonization, recognition, and reconciliation in Canadian civil society.

Indigenous people’s struggles have become issues of wide public debate within Canadian society; numerous government initiatives, hearings, commemorative events, and institutions in Canadian cities have accompanied these debates (Blaser, Fait & McRae, 2004). The relevance of geographic spaces to these issues cannot be overstated. In this vein, I will investigate site-specific case studies including Winnipeg, Manitoba. In 2010, Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years was launched in Winnipeg. It was the largest international display of contemporary Indigenous art ever held. Also in 2010, the Federal Government of Canada hosted the inaugural Truth and Reconciliation Commission Event (TRC) at the Winnipeg heritage site, The Forks (Government of Canada, 2010). Further, the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR) is currently under construction at The Forks – an exhibition space which will be instrumental in the way in which Indigenous representation is framed and engaged with nationally. Each of the above-mentioned sites address previous encounters between native and non-native people, to imagine a collective future “in a city that in many ways epitomizes the future of Aboriginal people in Canada” (Curator’s Statement, 2010). Clearly, the spatial dynamics of this contested history is now illuminated within our cities as never before. My research, then, is situated in this context in order to consider the significant impact of contemporary Indigenous new media artists on the civic imagination in Canada.

The research program I propose has three objectives: 1) to understand how notions of identity and community currently function vis-à-vis what Sherene Razack calls civic “place-images” (2002) in Canada, how these mobilize civic practices and power relations in settler society; 2) to analyze Indigenous new media art practices (video art, digital photographs, multimedia installations) within cities: how civic “place images” interact with Indigenous epistemologies in these works, reorienting prevailing notions of urban space, identity, and community for Indigenous and settler citizens; and 3) to look at public responses to these artworks: the ways in which these artworks allow for the building of new “place-images,” towards decolonized citizenship practices in Canadian cities. My theorizing of cultural production in this context will reflect engagement with Indigenous epistemologies, and will accompany other scholars’ recent attempts (Manning, 2003; Ranciere, 2010) to look at imaginative cultural production towards broadening what it means to be a citizen of the nation. In this, I mean to foreground the significance of Indigenous epistemologies towards contributing to a “reinvention of
politics” (Alfred, 2005; Ranciere, 1992), as well as the role of new media in shaping future civic life in Canada.

In “Decolonizing Settler Legacies,” I will engage a decolonized methodology according to Indigenous qualitative research methods (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith, 2008; Smith, 1999). I aim for my research to contribute to the Indigenous arts community. In this I will undertake my research program in consultation with Indigenous arts organizations, such as Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg. I will conduct semi-structured interviews with artists and curators, who will be invited to inform my analysis and dissemination of findings. These methods will be complemented by participant observation, photographic and video documentation, and discourse analysis of Native new media art production and reception, as well as research objects reflecting the civic context of these art practices. Such framings that are relevant to my study include: “truth and reconciliation” discourses (Nobles, 2008) and practices of the TRC; forms of media citizenship in cities; and cultural forms that figure modes of the civic, including the CMHR and mainstream media. These objects have been chosen for how they illuminate contemporary “place-images” in Canada. As this project is beholden to critical Indigenous pedagogy (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith, 2008), which includes multifaceted research, I will engage a combination of Indigenous, postcolonial, and communications theories read via discourse analysis (Foucault 1972; 1977; Smith 1999) to study how Native new media works and their contexts are framed by the structures and discourses through which they are articulated.

As a doctoral candidate I will continue my research on spatial cultural identity and related interventions of art in public space initiated during my award-winning undergraduate research and my Master’s in Cultural Studies at the University of Winnipeg. I will spend this year completing course work. In my second and third years, I will combine theoretical research with analysis of the artworks engaged by this project and their civic contexts, including participant observation of TRC events and the development of exhibits and policies of the CMHR. This component of my program will also include semi-structured interviews with artists and curators. During the last year of my degree, I will write up and begin disseminating my work within relevant academic venues. I also plan to create opportunities to present this research beyond academe, for example, through the development of an educational, interactive website with broad public access. Given my research experience and curatorial relationships in Western Canada, I will be able to draw upon the resources and expertise of the Indigenous arts community for my future analysis. This prepares me well to undertake the research I am proposing.

This research will participate in asserting and mobilizing Indigenous socio-political and cultural self-determination within Canadian civil society, while contributing decolonized research to several fields of knowledge including Indigenous studies, urban media studies, and the sociology of visual arts and culture. Undertaking this research using Indigenous methodologies will enable me to transform critical discourses to suit the new relationships instantiated by these works and their contribution to new paradigms of identity and community within the context of urban citizenship in settler nations.
Proposed References (In Progress)


Butler, Judith. “Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism. 
*Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left.* 


Cheah, Pheng. *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* 


Clough, Patricia Ticineto. *The Ends of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism.* 


------“Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States.” Hypatia: Native American Issue. 18(2) 2003. 3. Print.


