



of-the-now: Decolonial Imaginings

Curator Statement, by Dylan Robinson and Mitch Renaud

“Whiteness is never allowed to unpack itself” – Aruna D’Souza

While Patrick Wolfe’s statement “settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event” is now ubiquitous in the study of settler colonialism, the quotation has often tended to be understood as emphasizing the continuance of invasion as one structure of settler colonialism. Invasion, that is, is not simply a moment (or *the* moment) of settler colonial history. Far less attention, however, has been given to the way Wolfe’s statement points toward invasion as a structure, defining the way it permeates the world and our relations. The unmarked forms, patterns and structures that constitute settler colonialism might be called settler colonialism’s aesthetics.

Histories of settler colonialism—histories of theft (land, culture, artistic practice), genocidal policies of residential schools and the Indian Act, the legacies of these and contemporary expressions of racism and oppression—are often pointed to as the foundations of settler colonialism. Yet these, we might say, are only settler colonialism’s content. We can perhaps more clearly identify such narratives and stories as instances of oppression and injustice, than we can identify the structures (sentences, language, materialities, forms of perception...) that similarly effect forms of violence against the values, ways of knowing (epistemology) and life of Indigenous people.

Gaining a more nuanced understanding of settler colonialism’s content/events is one important pillar of decolonization, but by focusing exclusively on content we may elide an engagement with settler colonialism’s form: those “structures” that underpin everyday contemporary life, artistic practice, and institutional practices. This workshop starts by “unpacking” where the form and structures of settler colonialism (and white supremacy) might show up in composition and sound art practices, as well as in their presentation, before moving to speculate on alternative forms and ways of doing.

Hungry Listening was a beginning of ongoing work to understand normative, settler colonial structures of new music and classical music, and the systems they operate in through music presentation, rehearsal, education/training, etc. The book takes as a given that those structures not explicitly understood as racist/oppressive/violent (western notation, time signatures, the

piano, the concert hall, the gallery) have different effects upon Indigenous and racialized folk who participate in new music. All structures express ideologies that are felt individually and unequally.

While *Hungry Listening* illustrates many normative structures of settler colonialism that underpin composition and performance, others are less easily described. Perhaps this is also because describing the meaning/impact artistic structures risks solidifying a deterministic hegemony:

X structure in an artwork is violent from the perspective of an Indigenous worldview,
X structure is always violent in the same way,
therefore to remove all X structures in a work removes this violence.

This kind of determinism can become a quick checkbox for those seeking to make sure they haven't done anything wrong. It also risks conflating the nuances of/differences in X structure in each instance, as well as the differences between how Indigenous worldviews understand the nature of the violence, or in fact do not understand the same structure as violent at all. Nonetheless, it is important to talk about the structures that underpin our work, to challenge the legacies we have inherited and sometimes come to cherish, and to question structures that we have come to assume do not effect violence because they are "merely structures".

Starting from an understanding that the work of resurgence for First Nations artists is distinct from the work ahead of settler artists, we set out to clarify and begin decolonial labour for settler sonic artists. A goal for this project is to re-think settler-artist methodology to bring into being ways of thinking about or working with sound, with awareness of the colonial potentials of our ways of working. This workshop is intended to be an open and hopefully generous forum to speculate about how these structures present in different compositional practices and sound art, and how to work otherwise to such norms. Speculation operates within a suspension; in order to speculate, you have to put something aside for a time. In the work we are proposing, to create imaginary compositions that are decolonial, there is space between the critical mode we are practicing together and a creative gesture extending from our reflection. Below, we include some questions we're currently thinking about. We are open to discussing these further if they feel relevant at any point in our various conversations.

1. *Hungry Listening* considers compositions that deploy "inclusionary" compositional structures. These occur when a composer/ensemble situates Indigenous music/performers within the time and terms of Western forms, and by doing so, subject Indigenous music/performers to epistemic violence. For this conversation, we're interested to consider when Western compositional/presentational forms (temporality, notation, rehearsal, location for presentation) might enact settler colonial aesthetics of their own, *outside* of any relationship with Indigenous music/performers. That is, what forms and structures of whiteness/settler colonialism can we identify as operating within our own and other composers' practices?

2. Once identified, is it useful to create compositions/sound works where normative Western forms become “marked”? That is, to what extent might we create works that are “composition/sound work-as-critique”? Does such an approach become merely didactic? Alternatively, once we identify such normative forms, should we then simply work to eliminate them from our practices, or does this elimination hide the fact of their existence as normative? (i.e. this is a similar debate to that regarding the removal of colonial statues: does their removal hide the histories of injustice?; to what extent does the creation counter-monuments redress historical injustice?).

3. How might we imagine decolonial spaces of compositional practice that are “pre-critical” and speculative? Returning to the book’s discussion of listening positionality (esp. Daughtry’s ideas of the palimpsestic listening), how do we create compositional/artistic practices guided by an awareness of normativity without slipping into “positionality paralysis” and hypervigilance?

4. If we imagine utopianism, does that act of imagination (or a performance of our speculation) break away from burdens of historical realities? To what extent might imagined hope, as Jill Dolan “create the *condition* for action; [it] pave[s] a certain kind of way, prepare[s] people for the choices they might make in other aspects of their lives” (cited *Hungry Listening* 217)? To what extent might utopian hope in compositional/sound art practice serve as a non-performative utterance (Chapter 5), as something that forecloses upon action?