Indigenous Graffiti as Postcolonial Resistance

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
Indigenous Graffiti and Street Art as Resistance

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and we can all move on
we can be reconciled
except, i am graffiti.
except, mistakes were made.

— Leanne Simpson, *i am graffiti* (excerpt), 2015

The inscription of graffiti and street art by indigenous writers and artists onto rural and urban topographies enact strategies of resistance by radically critiquing settler colonialism. In August 2014, several graffiti writers and street artists, including Red Bandit, Tom GreyEyes, and Cam, converged upon Montreal, Canada, to participate in the first annual Decolonize Street Art event. This was no ordinary gathering of creatives; the textures of indigenous resistance were appended with critical graffiti and street art here. Decolonize

The author asks the reader to observe that he is of Euro-Canadian descent.

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Street Art functions as a grassroots political organization funded by online crowd-sourcing and private donations that sponsors graffiti writers and street artists from Canada and abroad to create unsanctioned art interventions, engage in critical workshops, and speak-out during panel discussions. In the spirit of praxis, of social action in the public sphere, the organization calls attention to matters of (de)colonization, European imperialism, and survival encountered by indigenous peoples of the Global North and South. Further, they provide an instructive model for how the aesthetic occupation of walls, street-level activism, and mutual solidarity can perform a cacophony of “anti-colonial resistance” (Decolonize Street Art, 2015). The following year, in 2015, graffiti writers and street artists who identify as indigenous or people of color assembled upon Montreal again—this time proceeding under the theme “Unceded Voices”—to emphasize the urban city’s physical encroachment on unceded Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) territory, known to the Mohawk people as Tiohtià:ke. Indeed, the participants intended to stage an uncompromising reminder of who the land belongs to.

Decolonize Street Art engineers gestures of protest that vehemently critique the sufferings of indigenous people living under settler colonialism and its damaging aftermath. “Unceded Voices” produced a myriad of collaborative and independent large-scale painted murals, ephemeral markings, transmedial street-level performances, and thrown-up wheatpaste stencils. Among these was Melanie Cervantes’s stencil works featuring the Americas rendered in fire-engine red and flanked by the text “TERRA INDIGENA” meaning “indigenous lands.” In her work, Cervantes underscores axioms that settler paradigms of land ownership are embedded in the occupation of stolen indigenous territory. Various other works uncompromisingly address how settler colonial governments are wholly responsible for the systemic and structural violence affecting indigenous women and girls today. Until only recently, newly appointed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has called for a national public inquiry into murdered and missing indigenous women and girls in Canada, a policy measure that his predecessor Stephen Harper routinely and pathetically refused. Along these lines, Jessica Sabogal’s towering tri-color mural This Type Love (Fig. 1) represents a woman perched slightly above another woman who wears a backwards baseball cap scrolled with the words “Women are Perfect.” Presumably, the above figure is an allegory of Mother, who voices the aphorism written in bold French lettering “Ons
Walls play a seminal role in the political economy, particularly in matters of dissensus, whereby the status quo political apparatus is challenged by subaltern communities (c.f. Rancière, 2010; Reisner, 1971, p. viii; Spivak, 1994). The works of Cervantes and Sabogal, among several others, endeavor to snap random passersby out of their omnipresent submissiveness and desensitization to contemporary indigenous social concerns. As a result, they become implicated in the protracted and painful history of European colonialism in Canada and its hegemonic domination over Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples; more specifically, how the vectors of colonialism have produced—and continue to produce—conditions of cultural loss, intergenerational trauma, violence, suicide, destruction of land and resources, reservation, and racism encountered by indigenous peoples in Canada since Contact. According to some scholars, little has changed; North America is still very much a colonial society (Miner, 2015, p. 221). In order to better understand how this historical matrix constructs the oppositional politics espoused by scores of indigenous graffiti writers and street artists—whereby each inscription is executed with the spirit of resistance—necessitates an examination of how indigenous relations to settler colonialism remain desperately unresolved.

In this chapter, I propose that indigenous graffiti and street art is interconnected with the political mobilization of indigenous groups who actively oppose the structural and systemic history of violence suffered by indigenous people through settler colonialism. Indigenous graffiti and street art works to destabilize colonial occupations of indigenous territory, thereby drawing attention to the ways that the existence of settler colonial infrastructure and architecture operates as material evidence of indigenous suffering. By attempting to reclaim the constructed spaces of colonialism through modes of socio-aesthetic intervention, I maintain that the work produced by indigenous graffiti writers and street artists unfold productive strategies of decolonization. These seemingly little marks carry large consequences for indigenous autonomy over unceded tribal territory. Elemental to this critical methodology is determining how colonial topographies, the indigenous body, and revolutionary subject matter enact strategies of resistance while reconceptualizing the nomenclature of capitalist public space. Readers should observe that I employ the terms graffiti and street art in a broad sense here to acknowledge the post-graffiti condition, a term used to describe the expanded field of graffiti production and the throng of approaches and styles that comprise graffiti production across the world today. Finally, my analysis raises questions about the radical potential of indigenous graffiti and street art to critique and delegitimize the oppressive social conditions forced upon indigenous people. In their attempts to redress such narratives, they strategize towards reclamation, renewal, and recovery.

Surface Marks, Deep Cuts

The near-lack of critical literature on the subject of indigenous graffiti and street art yields substantial gaps in its historical narrative; however, more recently, it is drawing closer scrutiny by critics and scholars who deem it a powerful expression of indigenous socio-aesthetic circumstance (e.g., Farmer & Milos, 2012; Ignace, 2011; M. Ignace & G. Ignace, 2005; Martin, 2016; Ritter & Willard, 2012; Skendore, 2016; Smith, 2015/2016). While an exhaustive ontological definition of graffiti and street art is currently being penned and negotiated, credence is given to the perception that graffiti discourse first appeared during the Western era of antiquity (McCormick, 2011). Inversely, the circuitous history of graffiti or “wall painting” far exceeds the extraordinarily tight—and undoubtedly Eurocentric—2000-year window stipulated for the earliest productions of what we deem graffiti. The co-option of graffiti as a European phenomenon not only ignores the possibility of it existing elsewhere, but it also points to the proclivity of critics and scholars to claim graffiti as theirs, as elementally European in origin. Predating the graffiti of ancient Rome and Greece by tens of thousands of years, ancient tribal communities on Turtle Island (North America) marked their surroundings with pictographic and petroglyphic iconography, which tended to denote travel experiences, sacred visions, and the nuances of vernacular life (Ignace, 2011; Ritter & Willard, 2012). For curator Tania Willard, the graffiti “tag”—the autobiographical inscription of the writer’s chosen pseudonym—has become a metaphor for indigenous relationships to land. “The tag is really about marking the land […] We see that in ancient ways with pictographs and petroglyphs in our territory, marks that our
ancestors made [...] And we see it as well, today, in graffiti work. The tag really focuses on this continuum” (quoted in Ball, 2012). Graffiti is writing in communal space. In this context, the aesthetic vocabulary of pictographs and petroglyphs can be construed as some of the earliest occurrences of graffiti since each inherently makes use of topographical inscriptions and markings in tribal or public space.

In recent years, indigenous graffiti writers and street artists have returned to the aesthetic and social potential of mark-making on urban and rural topographies as a way to (re)connect with the practices of the past. For Nlaka’pamux graffiti writer and educator Chris Bose, the process of inscribing the land with colored pigment is also an intensely spiritual gesture that draws a transhistorical line between one’s ancestors and their descendants. For this reason, it is most sacred:

I come from a nation where we wrote our dreams and visions on the rocks in sacred places. To me the land is sacred, all of it. We wrote pictographs before contact, and I’m doing my interpretation of pictographs after contact. Back then they painted about the animals, the seasons, ceremonies, and the people. I’m part of a continuation of that, and I paint about the land, the environment, the seasons, and the people as well, with or without permission. I still take paint with me when I go out in the bush, and when I find a good spot, I’ll paint pictographs or something new and fresh. I want to get...ochre and make my own pigments for projects on the land. I never tell anyone where I’ve done this. If someone finds it that’s cool; if not, that’s cool, too. (quoted in Smith, 2015/2016)

Not only is indigenous graffiti and street art political because it engages settler colonialism and its aftermaths, but because it continues the rich tradition of pictographic and petroglyphic representation employed by ancient tribal communities, a tradition that was historically suppressed and disavowed under the framework of colonialism. As Bose makes clear, his conception of (un)sanctioned pictographic graffiti fulfills a transmedial form of storytelling that indexically references the vernacular narrative of his life. This close relationship to the creative process once utilized by his ancestors is unquestionably sacred and worthy of preservation in the sense that it represents a spiritual practice connecting the artist to the land, to his tribe, and to earth—as-Mother. Because of the forced assimilation of indigenous people into settler society as part of government policy, particularly in Canada through the Residential School system, indigenous visual culture was under threat of erasure. The method of continuation-as-preservation whereby the creative process functions as an archive for indigenous histories is one of the ways that graffiti writers and street artists can resist the hegemonic regimes of representation introduced into indigenous visual culture by settler colonialism.

Likewise, the objective of many contemporary indigenous graffiti writers, street artists, and visual artists is to modernize pictographic and petroglyphic techniques, designs, and symbols that protract tens of thousands of years to the present day. For instance, in 1998 visual artist and educator Marianne Nicolson from the Dzawada’enuxw Tribe of the Kwakwaka’wakw scaled a rock face in Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia, to paint an enormous pictographic mural dedicated to her ancestral village of Gwa’yi (Fig. 2). The pictograph represents a coded signifier of Gwa’yi tribal history that stages a space of remembrance and sense of solidarity to the local tribal community. It also serves as a beautiful and poignant honor to the suffering experienced by the Dzawada’enuxw people in their claim to traditional lands and hunting grounds threatened by colonial and capitalist encroachment. When asked how the work came into being Nicolson replied:

Anyone coming into that territory cannot miss this large declaration of the land of these ancient relationships. That painting is of our original story, so to tie this back to our origin story, they say the beginning of time, which translate as when the waters receded and the land was revealed, that’s when our people arrived to this land. I wanted to privilege that perspective, I wanted to be very public, and I wanted it to be of strength to the community, because legally—especially when it came to our relationships to government and industry—it was extraordinarily inconvenient for us to have this little village in the middle of all this logging. We were basically inconvenient and in some ways almost nonexistent. That has shifted and changed somewhat in the last 20 years, but I wanted to make this strong political statement, and in recognition of the community, I was going to acknowledge our perspective and worldview. (quoted in Smith, 2016, pp. 68-69)

Incursions into traditional tribal lands by industry and the Canadian state, such as those occupied by the Dzawada’enuxw, through commercial
logging, fishing, and petroleum interests, continue to threaten indigenous livelihood and the precious resources necessary for survivance. If “A sense of location and relationship to the land produce a political statement on the way that Indigenous notions of belonging and place transcend colonial apparatuses of legal ownership,” then Nicolson’s pictographic inscription of the land performs resistance to settler-colonial theft, appropriation, and misuse of tribal territory. This vehement rejection to protocols of state-imposed land ownership by Nicolson’s unrelenting declaration of place reveals how indigenous political opposition can materialize through forms of contemporary pictographics. Conversely, Nicolson’s declaration of place doubles as a (re)occupation of space, thus seeking a type of spatial recovery from the clutches of empire.

Petroglyphs may also be a locus for indigenous political resistance. The systemic and structural racism masquerading as logos or emblems for professional North American sports teams—including the Washington Red Skins football team, the Atlanta Braves baseball team, and the Chicago Blackhawks hockey team—relentlessly caricaturize, shame, and defame indigenous peoples of North America. At the intersection where accepted forms of racism meets sports entertainment emerges Tlingit/Aleut artist Nicholas Galanin’s (2012) series Indian Petroglyph, based on the decades-old insignia of the Cleveland Indians baseball team (Fig. 3). In the work, Galanin uses a conventional cement cutter to etch the word “Indians” into rock, cement, or stone as a means of quite literally (re)
embedding indigenous origin and presence back into the land. As a method of détournement, of aesthetic hijacking, Galanin’s proposition serves to delegitimize such culturally preferred ideologies in a political struggle, disrupting their authority and influence over the status quo (Hall, 1994, p. 98; Žižek, 2012, p. 281). While “Indians” has been etched throughout the Pacific Northwest, New York City, and elsewhere, it was most conspicuously etched into the cement outside the Vancouver Art Gallery by the Hornby Street entrance as part of the travelling exhibition “Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture” organized by the Art Gallery of Vancouver. Not only is the city of Vancouver located on unceded Coast Salish territory, but the Vancouver Art Gallery was originally built to serve as the province of British Columbia’s courthouse, which, consequently, administered punishment to indigenous people for partaking in banned or outlawed ceremonies such as potlatches. “I now embrace my position as a contemporary indigenous artist,” says Galanin, “with [the] belief that some forms of resistance often carry equal amounts of persistence” (quoted in Bernstein, 2012, p. 32).

The work of Nicolson and Galanin participate in an expanded field of representation which maneuvers between graffiti, street art, and contemporary art by collapsing the categorical (and legal) distinctions separating them. For this reason, their works appear to satisfy the nuanced definition of post-graffiti, which describes the renaissance of public graffiti forms and unsettles traditional categories of graffiti and street art during the 1990s (c.f., Wacławek, 2011; Whitehead, 2004). Still, the most axiomatic expression of conventional graffiti resides in the tag, which became popularized in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during the 1960s by writers such as Cool Earl and Cornbread. The tag is an autobiographical signature; it can be likened to a symbolic form of identity construction in that it declares the physical presence of the writer during and after the process of inscription. After its emergence in Philadelphia, the tag shifted geographies to infiltrate the shipping yards, subway systems, and streets of major urban centers such as New York City. By no means, however, is the tag restricted to urban settler-colonial topographies, but rather it continues to flourish in remote rural areas and reserves as well. The tag accompanies a strange paradox in that it gathers praise among the graffiti and street art subcultural community by way of its visual “overexposure,” while, simultaneously, the writer’s individual identity remains anonymous to passersby (Wacławek, 2011). The graffiti tag remains instrumental in determining how indigenous writers mobilize to enact political resistance against the conditions of (post)colonialism with critical aesthetics. In the Canadian context, indigenous youth most often occupy “the bottom of almost every available well-being index including education levels, housing conditions, [and] per-capita incomes” as a result of systemic and structural damage inflicted by the lingering project of colonialism. The process of becoming present and visible to one another and to one’s community-at-large is precisely where the once-powerless perform a counter-hegemony which fundamentally shifts the character of political autonomy in their favor (c.f., Ignace, 2011, p. 208; Sassen, 2011, p. 574). In this sense, the overexposed tag occupies a privileged position among indigenous graffiti writers, particularly indigenous youth, because it represents a communicative apparatus of empowerment that strengthens the social bonds of this subaltern community.

The appropriation of hip hop culture by indigenous youth is central to any understanding of contemporary indigenous graffiti and street art. The collective interest in the predominantly black and urban cultural phenomenon indicates a commensurate level of social marginalization experienced between indigenous and urban black communities in North America. Since hip hop first appeared in the boroughs surrounding New York City in the 1970s, hip hop fashion, music, dance, and aesthetics have become a mode of political resistance and cultural legitimacy that speaks to the struggles of black experience and secondary citizenship in the American historical context. On this latter point, the veritable lack of clean water, food, housing, health care, and employment opportunities among Inuit, First Nations, and Métis in Canada has normalized a state of extreme poverty. It should come as no surprise, then, that indigenous youth identify with the ghettoization of their black brothers and sisters in the USA. Counter to the xenophobic stereotypes found in settler colonial communities, indigenous peoples respond to new cultural influences such as hip hop as a way to redress their own, contributing to mainstream popular culture while actively redefining it (Ritter & Willard, p. 9). Homi Bhabha categorizes this discursive liminality as the “Third Space,” a type of (non)site whereby the hybrid character of cultural identity is
generated and productively negotiated (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 36–39). Taking his cue from Bhabha, Edward W. Soja interprets “Thirdspace” as one “fully lived space, real and imagined, actual and virtual, a place for individual and collective experience and agency” (2000, p. 11). This stresses the idea that the physical body functions as an archival vessel of memory, information, and experience that also informs how cultural identity is represented and performed.

In the Third Space of the present, indigenous graffiti and street artists passionately adopt hip hop culture to transform and express the myriad ways that indigenous stories can be articulated to indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Their work represents a potential continuation and evolution of traditional modes of storytelling, of oral traditions passed down through generation upon generation since time immemorial; traditional stories are still being told, but the manner of their telling has shifted from the sound of the voice to the spray of the paint can (in addition to other means of cultural expression including video, film, and the Internet). The oral tradition of many indigenous tribes clearly demonstrates how critical events in history or sacred legends impacted on tribal communities and what moral values can be learned from these transactions. The sociopolitical conditions of European colonialism emphasize the necessity of political resistance through graffiti and street art as a means of cultural survivance. To this end, indigenous graffiti and street art, much like indigenous “rez rap,” proposes an interconnected mode of storytelling (Cruikshank, 1998, 2005), which draws on colonial narratives of trauma, loss, and social alienation to critique the frequency of suicide, drug use, gun violence, illness, and murder that afflict many indigenous communities (Ignace, 2011, pp. 204–208). It is in these types of stories that the potentiality of active resistance is everywhere to be found (Kermoal, 2010, p. 172).

Notwithstanding, the vast majority of tagging or text-based graffiti and street art found in Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and other colonized nation states throughout the Global North and South continue to be written in the English language, which points to the unshakable hegemony of colonial semantics among indigenous people. Like the land and people, the signifier itself is colonized. To approach a truly decolonized graffiti and street art aesthetics, one must first decolonize the European systems of communication that constitute modes of self-expression; that the production of decolonized aesthetics which makes use of European languages simply re-inscribes the conditions of cultural loss that writers and artists supposedly react against. The inherent obstacle is that, as a direct result of colonialism, countless indigenous languages have been destroyed by agents of state government and subsequently lost forever; though, at present, the paradox is that there is a steady resurgence of indigenous language teachings brokered by the colonial systems of communication such as the Internet, social networking, and mobile apps.7 The movement towards restoring indigenous language graffiti as a powerful mode of cultural renewal is slowly but steadily manifesting itself among the topography of North America. What could a new regime of graffiti and street art representation that mandates indigenous languages and syllables such as Anishinaabemowin, Inuktitut, or Cherokee (Tsali) look like? One would assume it would look like resistance.

Contested Spaces, Protested Places

The inscription of graffiti and street art by writers and artists activate the wall in a matrix of contested space. On the date of his birthday, 11 January 2013, a monumental statue of Canada’s first Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald was “vandalized” by red and white graffiti featuring the words “THISISSTOLENLAND,” “MURDERER,” and “COLONIZER.” While romanticized by many Canadians for uniting the Dominion of Canada under a national government and building the Canadian Pacific Railway, MacDonald’s relationship with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis demands closer scrutiny. In Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life, James Daschuk proposes that MacDonald committed ethnocide by deliberately starving indigenous peoples of the plains in order to clear land for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the establishment of white settlements (2013; Goar, 2014). Daschuk’s reformed narrative paradigmatically shifts the historical record from MacDonald’s achievement of Canadian nationalism to his systematic erasure of indigenous peoples from Western Canada.
Artist and educator Tanya-Lukin Linklater argues that settler colonialism is often realized on and through the physical body of indigenous peoples (Turions, 2016). Overlooking the role of bodily presence in relation to indigenous graffiti and street art is problematic since it fails to account for the body as a political apparatus used to symbolically reclaim sites of social exclusion. Along similar lines, indigenous graffiti and street art serves to assert indigenous rights to place through the physical embodiment of space itself (David and Wilson quoted in Lennon, 2014, p. 243). If MacDonald committed acts of ethnocide against indigenous peoples of the plains, for which there is mounting evidence, then inscribing counter-narratives in red paint, while embodying previously disavowed space, represents a radical gesture of protest. The deconstruction of public spaces where monuments such as MacDonald’s inhabit reifies national ideologies, thereby exposing painful narratives that are commonly silenced or hidden from the “official picture” projected by government (Lauzon, 2011, pp. 79–80). The result is a transformational shift in the notion of space from public to protested, from constructed to contested, and with it the belief that unsanctioned graffiti, though often illegal and ugly, can rupture false truths.

The MacDonald graffiti example provides evidence of decolonizing aesthetics. The prefix “de” in “decolonization” symbolizes an etymology of “privation, removal or separation,” a proverbial “undoing of colonialism;” however, it remains unclear as to what this meaning actually implies (Turions, 2016). In their article “Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang suggest that the metaphorical usage of the term decolonization should be carefully avoided, citing that it “is not converting Indigenous politics to a Western doctrine of liberation; it is not a philanthropic process of ‘helping’ the at-risk and alleviating suffering; it is not a generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes […] By contrast, decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (2012). If the process of decolonization necessitates the repatriation of indigenous land, then the reclamations of space through dynamic processes of indigenous graffiti and street art can be perceived as one of the first steps towards decolonization. For Thom Charron, a member of the 7th Generation Image Makers, indigenous people “are in this urban setting where there’s concrete everywhere and buildings, and you see all this colonization. For us, when we create those
centuries of the systematic disavowal of indigenous visual culture, but he also recovers such spaces as indigenous. This insistence on presence is spurred on in part by the gross assumption of the “vanishing” or “dying Indian,” which destabilized indigenous cultural identity in North America while creating an industry of collecting indigenous artefacts before they were supposedly lost forever (Francis, 1992). Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the sticker Salmonhead/LIFE affixed to a gas station pump in Washington State. Here Bulpitt unearths debate over the proposed expansion of the Keystone XL pipeline leading from the Canadian oil sands to refineries in the Southern United States, which would cut across treaty lands above and below the fortieth parallel, ultimately threatening water, food, heritage sites, and public health.10 Essentially, it is a trickster shift, an event of serious play, which anticipates a political transformation in the viewer that prompts them to envision the world in a different way (Ryan, 1999, p. 5). The black-and-white sticker’s close proximity to the handle of the gasoline pump culture jams the existing corporate logo while potentially serving as a subtle yet damning reminder to the consumer of how land and people can suffer under the capitalist exploitation of natural resources. The question of who “gets” the message, however, is open to interpretation; but this much is clear: there exists a collective disconnect between how resources are extracted and how they are used.

Warraba’s strategy is similar to Bulpitt’s in that he politicizes capitalist constructions of public space by restoring it as indigenous tribal land that has become unceded or broken of title. In large-scale mural works featuring the word “SOVEREIGNTY” Weatherall pursues a decolonized aesthetics by illegally marking walls with the coloquy for the repatriation tribal land, self-determination, and independent governance. As Weatherall is well-aware, the determinacy of graffiti and street art as unsanctioned and therefore “illegal” by law enforcement further complicates the issue of indigenous sovereignty by throwing into question: how can so-called illegal activities such as graffiti and street art happening on unceded land be recognized and prosecuted as such when the authority of one sovereign nation exercises power over another? Skenandore comments on this complex socio-judicial relationship by stating:

I have always felt that the illegal nature of graffiti is about as ridiculous as the very concept of claiming ownership of land. Indigenous peoples of North and South America have always marked the land in respect (and with respect) to the land […] Contemporary spaces are continued to be treated as areas for the creation of art and the telling of stories regardless of what a municipality has decided. It is the very transformation of these spaces that calls in to question the colonial concepts of “ownership” and “territory” and considering that our Indigenous arts are not bound by these ideas, no laws will contain them either. It has been my feeling that this kind of art actually reclaims that which is taken, even if only for a moment. (2016)

Graffiti and street art enact spaces of protest to regimes of visual representation dominated by European colonialism, what Stuart Hall terms “Presence Europhenne,” which also structures the ideology and social identity of colonized peoples (1990, pp. 232–233). Since most, if not all, urban environments in colonized nation states are assaulted with imagery and text from advertising industries, public space is increasingly under attack, fast becoming occupied by the visual rhetorics of consumer capitalism. Any if not all unsanctioned transformations to the topography of public space represent a form of rebellion against the capitalist construction of space itself (Waclawek, 2011, p. 73). The veritable production of indigenous graffiti and street art in urban environments offer protest against the sanctioned (and sterile) capitalist imagery encountered in colonized public space and land.

It is also crucial to understand the ways that indigenous graffiti and street art enact resistance by anesthetically occupying and disavowing the infrastructure and architecture of European colonialism that territorializes, and terrorizes, North America. In their book Freight Train Graffiti, Roger Gastman, Darin Rowland, and Ian Sattler describe how the growth of freight trains swelled from twenty-three miles of railroad in 1830 to 254,000 in 1916, thereby romanticizing American ingenuity without mentioning how the railroad system was elemental to manifest destiny, contributed to the displacement and suffering of indigenous peoples of the plains and prairies, or how it exploited immigrant labor. Since Contact, settler colonial expansion pushing West across the continent
forced the annexation of indigenous land, the ethnic cleansing of indigenous lives, and the destruction of indigenous culture. This schema was, of course, motivated by the discourse of manifest destiny, the belief that American settlers were bound by God and duty to spread west to the Pacific Ocean while cultivating (so-called) idle lands into agricultural settlements. Manifest destiny resides as a core belief of settler colonialism, whose object of desire is possession of the land rather than the exploitation of indigenous labour found in most states under European colonial rule (Miner, 2015, p. 221).

The protest gesture of taking settler-colonial space underscores the idea that the process of decolonization begins and ends with the retrieval of traditional indigenous land and the protection of land rights (c.f., Chmielewska, 2009, p. 272). For instance, a massive graffiti inscription reading “THIS IS INDIAN LAND” (Fig. 5) haphazardly scrawled across a rusty railway bridge at Ketegauensebe, (Garden River) near Baawating (Sault Ste. Marie) emphasizes how the history of the transcontinental railroad system in North America is interconnected to the settler-colonial appropriation of indigenous lands. Indigenous graffiti writers and street artists such as Breez, Water CR, Grue, TNR, Lefto, Unek, and Hator generate subjectivities of reclamation by (re)occupying and (re)possessing settler-colonial railroads. “Trains were a vehicle of change,” writes Oneida/Ogala Lakota/Luiseno street artist Hoka Skenandore, “bringing death and destruction to the culture of the Indigenous peoples of the Plains, so to paint trains can transform a symbol of death into a [sic] image of beauty” (2013). The détournement of freight and commuter trains—as critical signifiers of indigenous loss—delegitimizes the railroad system’s destructive history of hegemonic power over indigenous land and people through the process of its aestheticization.

Conclusion

Indigenous graffiti and street art are integral to the political mobilization opposing settler colonialism in North America. When the National Park Service of the USA paid nearly $1.5 million dollars to restore a 250,000-gallon tank and a 103-foot steel tower on the prison island of Alcatraz in 2012, they also carefully replicated the graffiti “Peace and Freedom. Welcome. Home of the Free Indian Land” marking the tank as well. The red-lettered text, eerily similar to that placed on MacDonald’s monument, was originally executed during the nineteenth-month occupation of Alcatraz, from 1969 to 1971, by Indians of All Tribes, a group of civil rights activists made up mostly of students. Alexandra Picavet, a spokesperson for the National Park Service, was quoted as saying, “Normally, the federal government is not in the business of preserving graffiti;” however, the political inscription of the water tower epitomized the movement’s objective while remaining a crucial part of the island’s history (quoted in Wollan, 2012). Although then-President Richard Nixon ordered the removal of indigenous protestors from the island, the resistance helped to galvanize the indigenous civil rights movement, which led to other sit-ins, occupations, and protests throughout North America. It also led to various federal policy reforms affecting indigenous
peoples in the USA, including the right to self-determination; of course, these changes were nominal at best, but they were changes nonetheless.

On the one hand, the conservation of the Alcatraz water tower graffiti alludes to a subtle co-optation by government to procure tourist capital on the island by creating a spectacle out of protest; on the other hand, it provides convincing evidence as to how political graffiti is emblematic of the critical messages, events, and stories of social movements. When indigenous graffiti and street art accumulates enough symbolic power to warrant its conservation by federal authorities, then it clearly and succinctly transgresses settler-colonial hegemony over regimes of representation. This archetypal shift from approaching graffiti as a mode of visual pollution to valuing graffiti for its historical significance implies a sea change in thinking about the political potential of indigenous graffiti and street art. To understand it, we must first set aside what it looks like and instead draw our attention to the dynamics that placed it there.

Notes


2. The title of Robert Reisner's book Graffiti: Two Thousand Years of Wall Writing implies that graffiti emerged in Ancient Rome and Greece, overlooking the notion that occurrences of "wall writing" in the forms of petroglyphs and pictographs far exceed 2000 years of age.


5. The critical success of the travelling exhibition "Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture," organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery in cooperation with grunt gallery, illustrates the conceptual, aesthetic, and political relationship between hip hop and Indigenous cultures.

6. In Canada, the RestART community mural painting program in Vancouver, the Graffiti Art Programming not-for-profit community arts initiative for youth in Winnipeg, the Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Programming (SCYAP) art and culture program for youth-at-risk, and the 7th Generation Image Makers art and mural program for Indigenous youth in Toronto, provide Indigenous youth the means to develop friendships and create sanctioned graffiti in positive and safe spaces.

7. Digital apps such as FirstVoices Chat make use of Indigenous writing systems to communicate in over 100 Indigenous languages. See: http://www.firstvoices.com/en/apps

8. Ironically, Daschuk's book was awarded the 2014 Sir John A. MacDonald prize for the best academic book based on a subject in Canadian history.


10. For more on the controversy surrounding expansion of the Keystone XL pipeline, see: The Globe and Mail, Digging In: A Deeper Look at the Keystone XL Pipeline (Bloomington, IN: Bookcango, 2013).


12. I thank Dylan A. T. Miner for reminding me of this example in our conversation.

13. I thank Hoka Skenandore for assisting me with the tags of indigenous freight and commuter train writers.
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