



What does the term “settler-colonial art history” mean to you? What are the opportunities and problems of the method for writing art history in the Canadian context?

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I start – and stop, for now – at the word “settler.” I want to find the French term. I work in French, I sometimes write and publish in French, giving francophone editors an even harder time than anglophone ones, and above all, I teach in French (although English words frequently stray into the space I make with my students). My teaching position is labelled “Histoire et historiographie de l’art au Québec/Canada avant 1900.” In my research I specialize in satiric visual representations from the historical period up to 1960; in the teaching attached to my position, I lead a broadly-based undergraduate class that is now called “Les arts au Québec et au Canada, 16e–19e siècles.” This title used to include the words “Nouvelle France, Bas-Canada et les Canadas avant Confédération,” but this left little space for anything beyond an admittedly fascinating Quebec-centric canon. When I describe the class to students or colleagues or people who are not art historians, I say “from Quebec slash (barre oblique) Canada from contact to about 1860” and they seem to understand what that means. Notions such as Middle Ground and Eastern Woodlands have made their way into the class (“le monde partagé,” “les Forêts de l’Est”) but not into the geopolitical constructs that name the class. There is something compelling about the idea of being able to rename the class. “Settler art history in Canada” has a ring to it. But what about the time period? What is meaningful? 16th–19th century? Contact to . . . Confederation? The Indian Act? As soon as I try to think about or voice the French translation of the term “settler,” I am stumped. Collins English-French online gives a pithy “colon.” “Histoire de l’art colon?” “Histoire de l’art colonisatrice?” “Histoire de l’art des colons?” The Grand dictionnaire terminologique (<http://gdt.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/Resultat.aspx>), an official translation tool of the Quebec government, gives me some options, none of them “colon.” “Immigrant” is a possibility: “Histoire de l’art immigrante” – accorded to the gender of the word “histoire,” of course, because it would be an *histoire* made by the *immigrants*. But back

Edward Chatfield, *Nicholas Vincent Tsawenhohi*, 1825, 19th century, lithograph, 33.3 × 29 cm, McCord Museum, M20855, Gift of Mrs. Walter M. Stewart. (Photo: © McCord Museum, Montreal, QC)

in the 19th century, when ultramontane ideology and government support combined to ‘open up’ northern Quebec, *colons* went off to *défricher* the *terre* all over again. The *immigrants* were often the suspect peoples coming in from elsewhere – Eastern Europe, for example – and they were coded into specific forms of alterity. The Grand dictionnaire terminologique also provides the possibility of *décanteur*: “Fosse permettant la séparation de liquides ou de matières en suspension, par ralentissement de la vitesse d’écoulement permettant l’action de la gravité.” Ditch, flow, separation, arrested movement, settling, forming into groups – some key concepts are still present in this term which, of course, is only used in the mining, natural gas, and forestry industries. By a neat and unplanned irony, these natural resources are at stake in the displacements signalled by the term “settler” which is at the forefront of our discussion.

I still have not made it out of the circle that I have drawn around the word “settler.” It worries me. I am lead scholar for a team that has taken the name “Équipe de recherche en histoire de l’art au Québec.” Not *du Québec*, which would be of Quebec, so not necessarily about Quebec – but *au Québec*: in, at, over at, that has taken place in Quebec. Interestingly, in French, we cannot make neat inversions that turn nouns into adjectives. No *art histoire* for us, even less *colon-*, or *immigrant art histoire*. In English, we can do this: we can take *Settler art history*, or *settler-colonial art history* for granted – noun and adjective hyphenating nicely – just as we have long taken *art history* as read. English seems to enjoy a syntactical elasticity that makes naming so very easy. Sometimes, *Settler art history* conjures up what it is supposed to, on a primary and very direct level. It must be the art history – or the history of art – written by Settlers. This is quite clear: the naming acknowledges instantly what was effectively implicit in the term, in the practice. If I am an art historian in Canada, it is quite likely that I am speaking from a Settler position, or at least, it is quite likely that it will be inferred that I do. Thanks to Damian Skinner’s text, I understand the term on a second level. We are dealing with a field that is engaged with the construct of Settler-art-history across many jurisdictions, on several continents. In francophone historical writing, Gérard Bouchard’s *Genèse des nations et cultures du Nouveau Monde* (1998) has had a comparable impact on Louise Vigneault’s research and theorization as formulated since 2000. I can also bear witness to the fact that Vigneault’s work on Wendat-Huron artist Zachary Vincent has had a transformative impact, especially for the students in my undergraduate class. With Vigneault, we trace the path from Antoine Plamondon’s (1804–1895) portrait of Vincent as *Le dernier des hurons* through to Vincent’s painted and photographic self-portraits. Her research has also helped us to consider the practices of contemporary First Nations artists (Domingo Cisneros, Kent

Monkman) to facilitate reading contact period and colonial periods of art history in Quebec/Canada. But we have not yet taken to asking if we can speak of what would have to be an *histoire de l'art formulée et écrite à partir de la colonisation*. This may be because there is sometimes a blind spot in our notions of *colonisation*. I worked at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts at a time when there was virtually no collecting or exhibiting of art by First Nations artists. The sense of the outrage of colonisation among my then-colleagues might erupt – with respect to France! *Non mais quoi, on est colonisés maintenant?* If you have to ask . . .

I could continue with all kinds of anecdotes, but I want to return to our shared starting point. What does the term settler-colonial art history mean to me? Que signifie pour moi le . . . (Term =) *Terme? Concept?* Or perhaps better, *la pratique?* (since the question we have been asked goes on to evoke the method outlined in Damian Skinner's text). *Que signifierait pour moi la pratique d'une histoire de l'art qui tiendrait compte de ma position de colonisateur et dans laquelle on tiendrait compte des relations entre colonisateurs et Premières nations, et qui s'imbriquerait dans une pratique . . . globale, internationale, transnationale, plurinationale, répandue sur les "nouvelles collectivités" . . . ?* Enfin, j'arrive près d'une question, telle que je pourrais commencer à y répondre. Et je le fais à partir d'une position qui est instable sur le plan linguistique. Mais je ne peux, je ne saurai y répondre seul. Ce n'est plus pensable; le modèle du chercheur unique, triomphal, fait partie d'un problème qui définit des balises épistémologiques, et c'est ce modèle même, j'en suis convaincu, qu'il faut déplacer au profit des projets qu'il y a maintenant à faire. Commencer par dire, pour le moment, que l'Équipe de recherche en histoire de l'art au Québec regroupe (au départ) sept professeurs (Laurier Lacroix, Gilles Lapointe, Pierre-Edouard Latouche, Didier Prioul, Esther Trépanier, Louise Vigneault et moi-même) tous titulaires de postes portant sur l'art au Québec et/ou au Canada; qu'elle est donc limitée par une perspective universitaire; qu'elle commence des travaux qui visent à faire le bilan sur 40 ans de recherches, pour préparer une synthèse mais aussi pour identifier les zones qui ont été laissées à découvert, autant sur le plan des sujets que des méthodes et théorisations; dire aussi que la question du "Settler art history" y trouve sa place mais est encore sans réponses, et que le travail de construction du problème est à faire en partage.

Finally, for now, I can also say that the question has great resonance for me but I really have no way of answering it simply. I have addressed it with students in my undergraduate class and said: we need to work at this – but I do not yet know the way. I teach from a corpus of European artistic practices that engage with place, people, beliefs, visual traditions in a space that Ruth Phillips, Louise Vigneault, Richard White, and many

others, show us is shared. The course I teach made little place for First Nations cultural practices, but the years go by, and the unanswerability of some of the questions I raise intensifies. I bring in Phillips, Vigneault, White, alongside canonical studies by François-Marc Gagnon and other canonical texts that rehearse the colonial displacements from one metropolis to another, from the dominance of catholic iconography to landscape iconography. Other displacements to settled ways of teaching come from opening up to print culture, to textiles and to the possibilities offered by an anachronistic approach. The most intense episodes in the class often come with reading Jesuit narratives aloud and having to hear and think about the full meaning of Jesuit descriptions of First Nations visual, social, political and spiritual practices; with the presentation of Ursuline embroideries as part of a fully-fledged artistic sphere with complex relationships to European sources and First Nations practices; and with the invitation to study directly from objects that are available in public spaces (admittedly, visibility and display emerge as key problematic areas in Damian Skinner's text). Students are finding porcupine quillwork from the contact period, souvenir art from later on. They are asking critical questions about exhibition practices. They are contrasting what they see in museums of fine arts and what they see in spaces like the Musée de la civilisation in Quebec. They are changing the paradigm with each passing year. Now I have three MA students working on these questions, asking them better, more precisely and in interdisciplinary frameworks: Michelle Paquette, through feminist studies; Laurence Desmarais, through the Dialog network that hosted a Nomadic university at Concordia this summer; and Véronique Gagnon, through engagement with First Nations contemporary art museology. Each of them is addressing the problematics of decolonisation.

I do not know how all this will play out in *writing* art history, yet; I think it depends on who is writing. What is crucial for me is that our students are writing now, and that they will be writing over the next 5, 10, 20 years, as they take over from us. We in the ERHAQ team can work to build complex and rich research tools for them to use, and to invite them onsite to help do the building. They will invite others. By the time they are done, or are farther enough along, the terms should have changed. Will we be even be talking about Quebec? We started from the position that, after 40 years of research, it was finally time to write a survey of the historical work on visual arts in Quebec. But how? And from what conceptual standpoints? This too will depend on who is forming the concepts. What will the linguistic framework be? Comment seront posées ces questions en abénaki, en algonquin, en attikamek, en cri, en inuktitut, en micmac, en mohawk, en montagnais et naskapi ? The framework we have imagined so far may not be the one that

gets us to the point at which we can even hear those questions asked. If it is not clear whether or not the space around the word *settler* is inclusive, this problem might be negotiated in a heterolingual framework.

As for me, first generation Quebecois and Canadian, my engagement with this question is in the context of what has become a lifelong imaginative leap, or borrowing, or appropriation. On s'approprié son territoire, après tout; this does not imply full ownership, but it is an easy way of affirming, of letting language complete and yet cover with an aesthetic tinge the dense, historicized, seductive meaning of *to own*, when land, and the relationships to land, are after all what has been at stake. Je vais donc assumer (but again, a way of saying, to take ownership of . . .) la posture d'être, après tout, *un settler parmi tant d'autres*.