

# Book Review

Erin Morton, Editor

*Unsettling Canadian Art History*

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In 2011, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang published “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” a prescient rallying call to young scholars who no longer identified with the euro-centric, “Old Master” favouritism of conventional art history.<sup>1</sup> The same year, the College Art Association (CAA) hosted a panel, “The Crisis in Art History” at which eighteenth-century specialist Patricia Minardi bemoaned the statistics that showed a growing number of students focusing on 19th and 20th-century art and a lessening of interest in the early and pre-modern periods. For Minardi and others on the CAA panel, the crisis they saw was a new favouring of contemporary art among emerging scholars that they ascribed to the economic sway of the art market.<sup>2</sup> Erin Morton’s 2022 edited volume, *Unsettling Canadian Art History*, is evidence that Minardi could not have been more wrong about the future of art history. *Unsettling Canadian Art History* is an unrelenting examination of the omissions, elisions, and mendacities of white settler history that pervade Canadian art history.

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no.1 (2012), 1-40

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *The Crisis in Art History*.

From the archive to the gallery to the teenager's journal to the bodies of slaves and the earth itself, this volume offers eleven case studies of how scholars, artists and curators are unsettling the practice of Canadian art history by bringing forgotten and hidden truths to light. In the text, BIPOC and settler scholars, artists and activists make contributions from fields and positions as disparate as critical theory to ethnomusicology to filmmaking, with methodologies ranging from object-based examinations of material culture, archival and curatorial practices to first-person reflections on family history. The result is a cutting-edge snapshot of the polyphony, dynamism and militant earnestness that is transforming the discipline.

The book benefits from the inclusion of chapters that push the conventional scope of art history. For instance, Carmen Robertson's chapter on Norval Morriseau articulates an iconography informed by the artist's worldview— an approach called for by Charlene Spretnak's *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered* (2014). Robertson shows the potential for unlocking new meaning when art history is practised against the urgent backdrop of climate change. Charmaine Nelson's chapter expands the discipline by centering visual interpretation in her text-based archival research on fugitive slave notices. It lays bare the hypocrisy of slave-owning Canadians and the forgotten truth that Canada was a slave-owning society for 200-plus years. The chapter on Dayna Danger's work introduces the reader to a living, sovereign, creative body of work that refuses to be categorized. Their work opens itself to honesty, desire, and play, becoming a revelation of hope, an assertion of strength, and a testament to the living spiritual and social power of Indigenous ritual and relationality.

Andrew Gayed's discussion of the work of Moroccan Canadian photographer 2Fiq (Toufique) opens the complexity of diasporic identity construction. Crucially, Gayed shows how 2Fiq's work exposes the oversimplified identity politics which are imposed by heteronormative,

patriarchal colonialism. Elaborating on Tuck and Yang, Gayed’s work clarifies that identifying with socially progressive causes and identities does not complete the work of decolonizing. He shows how, through the imposition of being “out” and “queer enough,” homo-colonialism continues to move the goalposts for inclusion in modernity and the “civilized” world.

The closing chapter by Shaista Patel features a scholar’s open contemplation on how inadequate their own well-intentioned grasp of decolonizing has been. Patel demonstrates how an ethical art history practice is marked by a posture of openness and humility in the face of complicity and complexity— a willingness to care, a willingness to keep things open as opposed to favouring simplicity, tidiness, and certainty. As Morton says in her introduction and juggernaut-like literature review, “the terminological and conceptual terrain remains messy out of ethical necessity”.

In the early 21st century, the moral crisis in art history around (de)colonization was largely understood as a crisis of representation. At the CAA panel, Maxwell Anderson contended, “Perhaps the biggest problem facing our discipline is that art history is a white field in an ethnically diverse world”<sup>3</sup>. While his assessment may appear to be more accurate than his co-panellists, his proposal to fix it —“attract undergraduates of colour into the art museum profession with grants supporting tuition reduction in exchange for professional experience” — sounds almost facile in light of Morton and her colleagues’ work. ‘Dexter and Taunton’s chapter, “Embodying Decolonial Methodology,” explores unsettling depremacy and embodying treaty, two immediately applicable approaches for rigorously ethical scholarship.

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *The Crisis in Art History*, 337

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 340

In Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price’s extensive 2020 article, “Decolonizing Art History,” Indo-Canadian Art Historian Kajri Jain states, “If postcolonialism denaturalizes colonial categories of thought, decolonization needs to literally un-settle colonial spaces, a far taller order”.<sup>5</sup> The chapters in Morton’s book track practices that unsettle gallery and museum spaces using parafiction (Cheetham’s “Settlers, Arrivants and Place”) and archival excavation (Hamilton’s “Memory Work”). This book fills Jain’s order and achieves its titular goal. Morton loves puns, and “Unsettling” is both a verb and an adjective. The art history presented in Morton’s volume is deeply unsettling: slavery in Canada, homocolonialism, process-oriented epistemology, disciplinary transgressions and innovations of scope. It actively teaches how to unsettle. The generosity, acuity, complexity and humour that permeates the book refuses the propriety and tidiness of the old art history. The disciplinary soul-searching exemplified by the CAA panel and Grant and Price’s article has (finally) given way to a new wave of non-settler textbooks that make decolonization literal. Far from a lack of history or unbalanced contemporaneity, the book demonstrates a new, vital commitment to and belief in the power of art and history to advance truth and possibly even reconciliation.

*Unsettling Canadian Art History* shows the rich fruits that come from rigorous inclusivity and relationality. It is sometimes cumbersome and unbalanced in its parenthetical identification of each author’s heritage. For instance, specific Indigenous and mixed-heritage identities are detailed, and specific nations are named. At the same time, the more general term “white settler” is used for those of European descent, but one might say that this swing of the pendulum is overdue. It is a

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” *Art History* 43, no. 1 (January 22, 2020), 29.

tool for building allegiances and evolving solidarity. Even more importantly, it builds on the work of Tuck and Yang, aggressively blocking and unmasking the moves to innocence that tend to foreclose on the real work of decolonization. Additionally, the love and sincere relationality with which it was crafted and which is promised in the introduction holds the reader through periods of discomfort, raw testimonial, and personal/scholarly/artistic reflections on the pernicious violence and imposed silences of colonization. As a result, this scholarly text achieves what all good art achieves: affirmation of the human condition in all its complexity through a hope-ridden grappling with materiality. Experiential knowledge and razor-sharp critical theory combine to create a humane and profoundly relevant collection of essays that is a must-read by broader audiences than art historians and their students.

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