

Beyond the violence of colonial civility: The art of Raven Davis

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The genocidal history of civility in “Canada”¹

Canadian civil society as-such transpires within and is part of an unfinished genocide towards Indigenous peoples. This genocide is also a wholesale politicicide, where a settler-colonial social and governmental apparatus has sought, and continues to seek, to systematically eradicate every vestige of Indigenous political autonomy in the name of clearing the land for white-preferential settlement and capitalist exploitation.²

In what is now the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, where our story takes place, this process began almost as soon as Europeans invaded, and especially after the conquest of the region by the English in the mid-18th century. Even before they arrived and imposed their legal and political system on the Indigenous Mi’kmaq people--quite literally at the point of a bayonet--the previous French colonists had already set out to lethally undermine Indigenous civil society.³ For instance, French Catholic missionaries explicitly set out to use patriarchal Christian scriptural texts and ideology to attack Mi’kmaq women’s power, authority and respect within their communities, with the aim of saving souls but also eradicating In-

igenous modes of political and civil organization with what they imagined to be a more “civilized” order.⁴ Likewise, French merchants and fur traders surmised (rightly) that the commercial capacities and territorial authority of Mi’kmaq people were integral to their forms of self-governance and civil life, and explicitly aimed to dissolve it by using liquor to implant forms of addiction that led directly to social breakdown.⁵

The settler historical record, as well as Mi’kmaq oral histories, make clear that, like many other Indigenous peoples, the Mi’kmaq were shocked by the *incivility* of European invaders. As Mi’kmaq historian Daniel Paul notes in his aptly titled book *We Were Not the Savages*, Mi’kmaq pre-invasion social and political institutions were based not on the authority, legal codes or might of sovereigns, but on multiple interlaced living relationships that valued interdependence and autonomy.⁶ As such, what Europeans would term “civility,” in terms of values like politeness, dignity, respect, persuasiveness, tolerance were central to daily life and integral to the political culture of what Glen Coulthard calls the “grounded normativity” of social reproduction: the complex relationality of humans and the earth.⁷ If civility is, to some extent, the ability to coexist in peaceful and mutual-

ly enriching ways with one's human and non-human neighbours the Mi'Kmaq social, spiritual and political system clearly held such a virtue in high regard. In contrast, the crass merchant-adventurer entrepreneurs, the dispossessed and exploited press-ganged sailors, the second-rate political appointees and the missionary zealots European powers sent to the Americas, organized as they were under rigid and lethal hierarchies, surely appeared to the Mi'Kmaq as an unimaginable nadir of civility.

When the British arrived, traditional Mi'Kmaq political and social organization, to the extent it had survived the first waves of invasion, was either directly outlawed or rendered functionally impossible by the imposition of British law, gunboat diplomacy or the theft of land and resources that aimed to make Mi'Kmaq people dependent on the colonial system.⁸ This followed decades of intentional and unintentional biological warfare that reduced the Mi'Kmaq population to less than 10% of its pre-invasion population, and with the dead was also lost many of the key political and civil traditions, stories and oral histories that were key to autonomous Mi'Kmaq political life. To add insult to injury, by the early 19th century the British (and later the governments of the Colony of Nova Scotia and the Dominion of Canada) had directly forbade or refused to acknowledge Mi'Kmaq traditional forms of governance and imposed on them a political form that was designed to maximize the potential for corruption, clientalism and the systematic theft of what little Indigenous land remained.⁹ As became unavoidably clear when the colonial-settler government began to seize children from their families and place them infamous in church-run residential boarding schools (where they were subjected to unspeakable forms of abuse and high rates of death) in the name of civilizing people they deemed "savages," the goal was

genocide: the systematic obliteration of Mi'Kmaq and other Indigenous people.¹⁰

The results and resonances of this violence continue into the present day, and are too numerous to mention here. Indigenous people in Canada now live on less than a fraction of 1% of their traditional lands, under a system of colonial management orchestrated from Ottawa.¹¹ While legal apartheid policies have been formally relaxed since the 1970s, their impacts have far reaching consequences. At various times since Canada's confederation 150 years ago Indigenous people were barred from using modern farming technology, from gathering in groups of more than three, from leaving reservations without an authorized pass from the white Indian Agent, from practicing their political, cultural, medical and educational traditions, from hiring lawyers, from owning private property and in some cases from marrying outside their community.¹² The Canadian government saw fit (and in some ways still sees fit) to determine who is and is not Indigenous.¹³ The destruction of sustainable traditions has meant the entrenchment of a system of deadly dependency wherein Indigenous health and social indicators are dramatically worse than those of Canadian settlers.¹⁴ The Assembly of First Nations (the coalition of state-recognized Indigenous governments) sums up the situation in a few brief statistics from 2011:

One in four children in First Nation communities live in poverty. That's almost double the national average. Suicide rates among First Nation youth are five to seven times higher than other young non-Aboriginal Canadians. The life expectancy of First Nation citizens is five to seven years less than other non-Aboriginal Canadians and infant mortality rates are 1.5 times higher among First Nations. Tuberculosis rates among First Nation citizens living on-reserve are 31 times the national average. A First Nation youth is

more likely to end up in jail than to graduate high school. First Nation children, on average, receive 22% less funding for child welfare services than other Canadian children. There are almost 600 unresolved cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada.¹⁵

It is vital to recognize that all of this was done in the name of civility and the expansion of settler-colonial civil society. It was justified with recourse to the work of philosophers of civil society including Locke, Hume, Smith and Rousseau.¹⁶ While much of this genocidal work was carried out directly by the state, much of it was franchised out to settler civil society: business, churches, community groups, individual families, universities, all had roles to play in, ultimately, the eradication of Indigenous forms of civil society.¹⁷ And indeed, the sustainability and vitality of these civil institutions depended, ontologically, financially and in terms of legitimation, on this eradication. A fine example is the 1857 *Act to Encourage the Gradual Civilization of Indian Tribes in this Province, and to Amend the Laws Relating to Indians*, passed by the pre-Confederation government of Canada that, under the guise of “enfranchising” Indigenous men deemed by the state to be “able to speak readily either the English or the French language, of sober and industrious habits, free from debt and sufficiently intelligent to be capable of managing his own affairs,” stripped them of Indigenous status and folded them into the body politics, ultimately severing them from their communities, assimilating them into the settler polity (as second-class, racialized citizens) and abrogating their treaty rights.¹⁸

Settler-colonialism, as Eileen Moreton-Robinson makes clear, is a joint enterprise, where settlers and their non-government organizations and initiatives are enrolled into participation in, and profit from, a state-led

process.¹⁹ Ideologically and affectively, what ties the state and its citizens together in this project is a weaponized notion of civilization and civility that, as Daniel Coleman illustrates, associates these virtues with a normative (if flexible) notion of whiteness. Studying a corpus of early Canadian literature and documentation, he argues that “white civility” was the mobilizing discourse of a national project that was ultimately predicated on the theft of Indigenous lands, the subjugation of Indigenous bodies and, importantly, the complete erasure or abjection of Indigenous forms of political, social and cultural life.²⁰

Sherene Razack and others have, more recently, shown how Canadian civil society is still predicated on a notion of civility that demands constant reaffirmation.²¹ Razack takes up the case of Canada’s military and allegedly humanitarian participation in neo-imperialist “civilizing missions,” almost universally in support of NATO or US strategic objectives. In these conflicts, Canadian soldiers, peacekeepers, police-trainers and aid workers are cast as benevolent angels of civility sent to benighted zones of barbarism. In this way, they draw on and reproduce myths of Canada’s colonial foundations: bringing civilization and enlightenment to allegedly savage peoples. Likewise, following her previous research into the racist mythscape of Canadian multicultural nationalism, Eva Mackey has recently turned her attention to the righteous rage awakened in settlers whose lives, communities and expectations are “unsettled” by Indigenous protests, arguing in part that the accusation of the latter’s “lawlessness,” “disrespect” and “barbarism” are thinly veiled racism dependent on a notion of “civilization” associated with a normative whiteness.²² Similarly, numerous scholars have illustrated the way that Islamophobia and restrictive laws and security protocols in post-9/11 Canada have depended on coding the Arab or Mus-

lim “other” as not only uncivilized, but also a threat to Canadian civilization itself.²³

At issue here is the way the legacies of genocidal settler-colonialism leads to a cultural politics in which “civility,” “civilization” and “civil society” continue to function as keywords of power. Particularly, they are keywords by which the project of the state, which has now wedded a logic of settler-colonial extraction to one of multicultural neoliberalism, build racialized and racializing allegiances with citizens and civil society.²⁴ The myth of Canadian “civility,” the patrimony of a European “civilization” and the alleged freedom of “civil society” all work not only to erase the decidedly *uncivil* and violent history and present of Canadian settler-colonialism, as well as a history and present of racialized exploitation and oppression of non-white people. It also serves to smuggle these violent Canadian traditions into the present under the blanket of a set of unimpeachable euphemisms. These terms create an often invisibilized matrix of cultural power that normalizes the economic, social and cultural reality of a nation still very much organized around settler-colonialism and racialized oppression and exploitation.

The Violence of Civility in Today’s “Canada”

An example of the use of civility to normalize settler-colonialism and white supremacy has been the accusations of incivility levelled against numerous recent activist and social justice initiatives that have sought to fundamentally challenge that reality. In the winter of 2012, for instance, a grassroots non-violent uprising of Indigenous people from a wide diversity of nations within Canada, most of them led by young women and gender nonconforming people, manifested as Idle No More.²⁵ This decentralized but still coordinated movement was most pub-

licly characterized by large marches in all major cities and many towns across the country, as well as Round Dances, where Indigenous people and their allies came together to occupy public space (parks, streets, shopping malls, government offices) with drums, singing and a signature collective dance where participants joined hands and, facing centre, moved in collective rotation.

While we should not underestimate the degree to which these powerful displays of resilience, conviction and solidarity shifted the perceptions and ideas of many non-Indigenous Canadians, it also awakened a massive nation-wide racist backlash, much of which was directed at the perceived “incivility” of protesters who had the gall to disrupt civil space and inconvenience law-abiding citizens.²⁶ As we have seen, this narrative of Indigenous “interruption” of otherwise civil space, as we have seen, has a sordid pedigree.²⁷ Further, it erases and normalizes the genocidal violence that rendered that space available for colonization, and also invisibilizes the forms of Indigenous “civil action” (though we should be careful about imposing this terminology) that might have existed *before* the invasion of European nation-states and the implantation of settler civil-society.

Likewise, as part of the massive uprising against racist police violence known as Black Lives Matter, Black activists in Toronto and other Canadian cities have mobilized to challenge these dynamics in Canada.²⁸ For instance, in the past decade (and indeed, for decades prior) there have been a number of high profile murder of black and racialized people by police in Toronto, and the Service continues to enforce a practice of “random” street checks (so-called “carding”) in spite of the fact it has been widely condemned as impractical and, more importantly, racist.²⁹

Fighting an uphill battle against a self-satisfied culture that believes Canada to be a refuge of tolerance, peace and multiculturalism when compared to its southern neighbour, the US, Black Lives Matter Toronto activists have made the tactical decision to target liberal and cosmopolitan institutions, rather than only conservative and reactionary ones.³⁰ In part because of the high number of queer, trans and gender non-conforming participants, in part because of the very public and high-profile presence of the Toronto Police, one of these targeted institutions was Toronto's annual Pride Parade, one of the largest in the world and a major draw for tourists and locals alike with by some estimates over one million participants. In the summer of 2016, Black Lives Matter Toronto captured headlines and outrage across the country by staging a demonstration against the police participation in the march and the general exclusion of Black people from the planning and public face of the march and festivities.³¹ The demonstration halted the extremely carefully choreographed march—which included Canada's Prime Minister and other prominent politicians as well as representatives of many Canadian banks and corporations—for over half an hour. Such an action not only drew attention to the importance of Black lives, it also contributed to a recent history of resistance to the corporatization and mainstreaming of Toronto's Pride parade in the name of a neoliberal homonationalism.³²

This (ultimately highly successful) action, however, brought down a “whitelash” firestorm of criticism, much of which, once again, mobilized the notion of (in)civility.³³ As Rinaldo Walcott and Jared Sexton among others has shown, the character of anti-Black racism in Canada and elsewhere figures blackness as the very antithesis of a notion of civilization coded as European and white.³⁴ The legacies of the world-defining transatlantic slavery, as well as centuries of

oppression and violent representations have fixed in the civic imagination the notion of blackness as fundamentally incivil. Hence, the disruption staged by Black Lives Matter arrived to many liberal and reactionary observers as both an unspeakable affront to civil space and also as a justification of what they always already thought they knew about blackness. The online comments sections, letters and editorials of local and national newspapers made this evident: in short, the argument typically implied that the incivil behaviour of Black Lives Matter itself demonstrated something about Blackness and black people that *necessitated* the harsh police treatment of Black people in the first place.³⁵

A pattern is, by now, surly becoming clear: the hegemonic notion of civility is used in these cases precisely to exclude certain groups from participation in civil space.³⁶ That these groups are uniformly racialized reaffirms the historical record which demonstrates that, even in an allegedly multicultural nation, the notion of civility, and therefore the legitimacy of civilization and the character of civil space presumes white supremacy and settler-colonialism.³⁷

Another example has been the remarkable attack on those who would offer criticism of the policies state of Israel on Canadian campuses, especially on those who propose or defend the campaign, called for jointly by Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations, for a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign aimed at pressuring the Israeli government to obey international law. In the United States, much media attention was paid to the recent case of the abrupt termination of Professor Steven Salaita from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign after his “uncivil” discourse on Twitter.³⁸ Notably, his academic and social media discourse centred around the continuities between Israeli and American settler-

colonialism.³⁹ His firing made international headlines thanks to revelations that the president had abrogated Salaita's academic freedom and superseded the will of his colleagues after coming under strenuous pressure from donors and Board members.⁴⁰

The accusation of "incivility" is now being widely used by university administrators to attack and undermine the academic freedom of faculty.⁴¹ While new policies of collegiality, civility and civil speech have the pretense of responding to the very real problem of racism, sexism and other oppressive speech and action on campuses, as well as to rampant (highly gendered and racialized) bullying and antagonism among the professoriate, these policies and orientations serve, in actuality to place the university further in the hands of an non-academic administrative elite. The growth (in size, power and remuneration) of this elite has been part and parcel of the neoliberal turn in government policy and, more generally, in governmentality since the 1980s, with universities increasingly seen as semi-privatized zones wherein student-customers are given the chance to (go dramatically into debt to) "invest" in their own human capital, and where, as a result, academic education is reduced to a rudimentary, skills- and performance-based degree mill devoid (as much as possible) of critical or radical thinking.⁴² For Turk, the (ab)use of "civility" aims precisely to defend and expand these trends.

Beyond/beneath civil action

It is possible to fathom and analyze all these movements and conflicts within the capacious frame offered to scholar by the language of civil action. But to do so in this context would elide or erase the very real and deadly complicity of this terminology not only in the historic processes of white supremacy and settler colonialism, but, as we have seen, their career in our present

moment. If we wish to cultivate the radical imagination⁴³, that is to say an imagination that fundamentally challenges the status quo by seeking out its roots, then we should ask questions like: what forms of political and social organization, which today we might characterize as a form of civil society or civil action, existed *before* the invasion? What might we learn from them, and from how they inform the struggles of those who inherit their legacies, which is to say Indigenous people. Likewise, if notions of civility and civilization to some extent gain their definition through a fundamental anti-Black history, as always-already gaining their positivity and legitimacy from their abjection or erasure of blackness, what forms of political and social organization, which today we might characterize as a form of civil society or civil action, might emerge from the experience of Black diaspora? What might we learn from them, and from how they inform the struggles of those who inherit their legacies, which is to say Black people?

These unsettling questions are not meant to be answered here; they are meant only to disrupt an impulse we might have to fold the forms of radical action we discussed above into a Eurocentric framework that would domesticate them. The radical imagination, as Alex Khasnabish and I have argued, grows through the incommensurable encounter with alterity, though the irreconcilability of thoughtworlds that demands not only better thinking, but the work of solidarity.⁴⁴ As Yellowknives Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard and Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson both argue, in different way, Indigenous political and social organizational forms rarely translate well into European or Eurocentric frameworks because they are intimately bound up with the nexus of land, language, community, tradition, history and relationships.⁴⁵ A good example from the Mi'kmaq world is the term *Netukulimk*, which is translated in many

different ways but indicates the intricate, living, shifting inter-reliance of human and non-human actors in maintaining equilibrium.⁴⁶

The mere fact that, I, a native-English speaking professor with a PhD in English, have such trouble crafting a phrase to explain the meaning of Netukulimk (after years of trying) not only indicates my ignorance of the Mi'Kmaq language, it also indicates the untranslatability of the concept when it is severed from the living lifeways, relationships and land of which it is a living part. Yet Netukulimk might be precisely the sort of term that “civil action” or “civil society” or “civilization” ploughed- and paved-over. When my proverbial ancestors (not biologically speaking; rather those who handed-down my settler-colonial and white privileges and worldview to me) ripped Indigenous children from their families and incarcerated them in residential schools, when they beat them for speaking Mi'Kmaq or practicing their culture, when they insisted those children name their beloved parents and ancestors as semi-evolved barbarians, all in the name of “civilization,” my ancestors aimed to erase Netukulimk from the world.

For the theorists of the Frankfurt School, especially for Herbert Marcuse, the role of art was to refuse what they called the “reality principle:” the idea that things need to be the way they are, that the capitalist system can potentially satisfy all our desires.⁴⁷ The cultural industries, as well as the broader network of relations and institutions of capitalist modernity don't simply exploit and oppress us, they also shape our imaginations into believing that this state of affairs, this order of desire and pleasure, this form of social and political organization is all that could possibly exist. It is a civilization in which progressively everything is instrumentalized, where everything and every per-

son is judged and valued based on its capacity to serve other ends, archetypically the ends of productivity for profit and the reproduction of state authority. For these thinkers, art was one of the few spheres of activity that still maintained a degree of autonomy from this logic, an irreducible kernel of purposelessness that resisted any expediency. For Marcuse, art needn't be explicitly political in its form or content; good art (which is to say thoughtful, careful and transformative art) has the latent ability to make us question the reality in which we find ourselves, to light a spark within us that, for a moment (or possibly longer) believes that nothing needs to be as it is.

For Alex Khasnabish and I, this spark is the radical imagination, and we have suggested that it is not something that we own but something we practice, and something that is not experienced primarily as an individual, but in collective and collaborative settings.⁴⁸ Art can awaken it, but it is also awakened in social movements and collectives that struggle against injustice and oppression. In my own work, I have even suggested that this spark is always with us, pregnant even in the most oppressive and exploitative conditions: it is a holographic shard of human cooperative potential lodged within each of us.⁴⁹ As Cornelius Castoriadis suggests, this is really the substance of the world: all social institutions are composed of the solidification of the imagination into durable forms.⁵⁰ Marriage, royalty, the nation: all are abstract concepts given force by the conscription of the imagination that affords them legitimacy. While they may manifest as material objects or be held in place by violence, they are fundamentally formations of the collective imagination which, in turn form the imagination. Until such time as the radical imagination, that tectonic force within us and at work in society, emerges to challenge this solidification... Castoriadis likens it to a volcanic magma that erupts in

liquid form and cools into rock, only to be swept away in the next liquid eruption.⁵¹

In this sense, the role of the artist is, from one angle, to quicken the flow of the magma, to awaken the eruption, to erode or dislodge the petrified imagination, and to hold open the door for something else to arrive. Yet while for those of us who work in the Eurocentric tradition hold open a certain door to the future, still hoping in some way for the promise of a Western progressive modernity, many Indigenous artists hold open a different door.⁵² It is not a door simply to the past because, as numerous authors have shown, Indigenous modes of temporality are not so simple. It is a door held open to a word like *netukulimk*, that overflows the categorical borders of my imagination and of the settler-colonial thoughtworld. And in that overflowing, such a notion might help reconfigure the world otherwise.

The work of Raven Davis

To elucidate this discussion, we now turn to the work of Raven Davis, an artist and activist working in Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia. Davis, who was raised in Toronto (Canada's largest city) is Anishinaabe and their work encompasses media including performance and relational art, graphic design, painting and sculpture and installation. Much of Davis's recent work has involved placing their body in public and gallery settings in order to create a moment where the past and present of Indigenous and colonial history can become visible and to instigate critical questioning and reflection among invited guests and passers-by.



Figure 1 - courtesy of the artist

In the Spring and Summer of 2017, for instance, Davis presented a series of works aimed at disrupting the state-funded celebrations of Canada's 150th anniversary. Thanks in large part to the charisma of its sanitized and romanticized British colonial heritage and architecture, tourism remains one of Halifax's key industries with visitors from around the world flocking to the city especially in the summer and fall.⁵³ As part of a commission by the Mayworks Festival for Working People and the Arts (an annual week-long cultural event funded by the city's trade union movement and dedicated to social justice), Davis staged participatory performances at a number of the city's key colonial landmarks. These included Citadel Hill, the colonial-era fort built by the British to wage war on the Mi'Kmaq and French populations of Nova Scotia, and the controversial downtown statue of Edward Cornwallis, the British aristocrat who is credited with founding the city (on stolen Mi'Kmaq land), but who also is infamous for placing a bounty on the severed scalps of Mi'Kmaq children, women and men.⁵⁴ Cornwallis's actions were consistent with, and helped reinforce, the methods of colonial violence

that were implemented and resonated well beyond Mi'Kmaq: in a sense, he is synecdoche for a much larger process



Figure 2 - Courtesy of the artist

During their performance, Davis had themselves bound with ropes to these landmarks, asking audiences to consider how the civil and orderly spectacle of Halifax's and Canada's history and built-environment are bound up in a violent colonial history, which in turn binds up the bodies and fates of Indigenous (and, differently, non-Indigenous) people and acts as a constant and visual reminder of the genocide Indigenous people have endured and continue to face. Facing the landmark, Davis placed, for the duration of the performance, two pieces of furniture. One was a custom-built church pew, designed by Davis, complete with a pad for kneeling in prayer. However, upholstered on the kneeling pad is the image of the Canadian flag, inviting the audience to question the national project of "civilizing the Indian" as the (literal and figurative) basis and support for their own hopes, aspirations and prayers, as well as the ways in which religion was used as an oppressive force against Indigenous people to separate them from traditions, community and land. To compliment this intention, Davis created replicas of an actual 1971 prayer book titled "Look and Live" which was customized specifically to proselytize to Indigenous people in Canada and featured stereotypical and demeaning

images and text that implicitly and explicitly denigrate traditional Indigenous cultures and spirituality. Beside the pew, a small table also held a box of a dozen white eggs, each emblazoned with a red maple leaf, the symbol of Canada that appears at the centre of the nation's flag.



Figure 3 - Courtesy of the artist

As Davis explained, the audience was invited to make a choice about how to respond to the Indigenous body bound to the nationalist monument: will they react violently and throw the eggs and publicly act on hate and racism in a public forum? Or will they take a moment for a deep, spiritual questioning of the way the impacts of history "ripple" through the present? Such ripples form both the audience and performer as subjects and shape the complex conditions of power and resistance that define contemporary Canadian society. Here, Davis insists, they are interested in transforming the audience into the performer. In this way, Davis points towards colonialism as not merely an over-and-done history, but a living series of performances of which settlers are typically unaware.

For Davis, this moment of a spiritual reflection is central, and emerges from a history in which, as they explain, foreign religion and spirituality were forced on Indigenous people in the name of colonialism's "civilizing"

mission. Identifying as a queer and two-spirited person (an umbrella Indigenous designation for those who do not identify with the colonial binary gender and sexuality system, long part of many traditional Indigenous societies in the Americas), Davis notes that reclaiming an Indigenous spirituality is key to reclaiming and rebuilding resilient community in the face of continued violence, especially as it targets Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirited people. Such a spiritual practice is one that is not confined in space to a house of worship or in time to one day a week. Informed by discussions with Indigenous elders, Davis understands spirituality as a practice that can happen in any place, and is located in the body, and is a force of transformation. This means that political art can also be forms of prayer: “Every protest is a prayer, every fight is a prayer, in a way,” they inform me. “Prayers don’t necessarily mean being in a church.” Davis speak of art as also a tool of healing and communicating civility in a gallery space. “It is often safer than performing on the steps of Ottawa’s parliament buildings. Activist art is also a tool of healing and protest and can also include prayer.”

Hence a year prior to the Canada 150 performances Davis staged a four-day event in Halifax main town square, named Grand Parade which is located between the city’s oldest building, an Anglican Church (an institution central to British colonial power, and which ran many of the nation’s notorious Residential Schools), and its city hall, and which contains several war memorials. Here, Davis temporarily renamed to square, Grand Pray, lit and maintained a Sacred Fire to honour and commemorate those Indigenous youth lost to an epidemic of suicides largely due to lack of mental health and other infrastructure on remote reservations, poverty, the effects of residential schools, isolation and also the mass neglect of Indigenous youth in cities across the country.

Bringing this spiritual tradition of a scared fire, practiced by many different nations, uninvited, to the heart of Halifax boldly asserted the persistence of autonomous and “unauthorized” Indigenous presence on the land and forced the colonial-settler state to accept the right and sovereignty for an Indigenous person to pray and set up ceremony anywhere on this land. Meanwhile, it invited passers-by in this busy thoroughfare to engage with an act of politicized grief, mourning and questioning. Davis also notes that this was an “opportunity to hold sacred space in memory and prayer for those who are still alive and suffering from a lack of mental health services and access to traditional ceremony.”

Once again, Davis’s ambitions with this piece were multiple and complex. On one level, this assertion of Indigenous presence directly defies a notion of civil space that is coded and presumed as normatively white, and that assumes that an unruly Indigenous presence can safely be relegated to the colonial past. On another level, it is a direct challenge to the increasing policing and surveillance of public space that has ratcheted-up in recent years thanks to the politically expedient spectre of terrorism; as Davis explains, art can and must be used to fight back against the hyper-masculine militarization of culture and the increasingly authoritarian politics of security. On still another level, this work replaces the colonial realm of civil society and civil discourse, which erases the perpetuation of anti-Indigenous violence, with an autonomous, renegade and grassroots temporary zone of encounter and discourse. Uninvited and technically “illegal” (such manifestations typically require permits from City Hall, and open fires are almost all forbidden), Davis’s spiritual event and art performance challenged the colonial ordering of space, time and authority. Finally, on still another level, Davis’s piece countered the civil order of mourning, insisting

that the suicides of Indigenous youth across the country needed to be grieved and accounted for in public, not merely in the private realm of family and friends.

It would be simplistic to ascribe works like these only to the realm of public art, performance art or participatory art within civil space and civil society. They are not contributions to but *interruptions of* the colonial ordering of civil space and time. They do not exist to be consumed within a capitalist multicultural society but to reveal the shared historical, conditions of colonial violence on which that society rests and on which it continues to depend. Davis's work, like that of many Indigenous artists working today, thoughtfully yet seamlessly weave together artistic practice, spiritual resurgence and activist energies to manifest a resurgent Indigenous thoughtworld in the midst of the colonial norm. Davis takes care to create circumstances where Indigenous and non-Indigenous bodies and minds must meet on a new social terrain, which is also always-already the denaturalized terrain of history and colonialism, and craft their social relations anew. These acts, rather than simply provoke and antagonize, implore us to recognize that *other forms of civility are possible* and waiting to be (re)discovered, and that the colonial (white) civility that rules today is, in fact, deeply uncivil, even by its own skewed standards.

Davis reflects that, as an Indigenous performance artist, institutions of the Canadian colonial settler state, including institutions they target in their work (historical sites, government bureaucracies, etc.) are keen to "include" work they presume will be amenable to their expectations. They are eager to incorporate traditional Indigenous dance, drumming and regalia into civil spectacles. Davis suggests that, while the beauty of these performances should indeed be honoured, this hunger for "tradition" erases the lived

and political realities of Indigenous people. Likewise, Taiaiake Alfred, among others, has noted that key to the particularly Canadian forms of settler-colonialism is the cultural "inclusion" of Indigenous people, so long as this inclusion is seen as one aspect of a multicultural fabric of Canadian civil society. At the point when Indigenous culture and spirituality challenge the bedrock of the Canadian colonial settler-state—for instance, when Indigenous people reclaim stolen land, or defend the land from ecological terrorism, or insist on making ongoing colonial violence an unavoidable public issue—the much-fabled tolerance, politeness and civility of Canada and Canadians disappears and is often replaced with virulent anger. Eva Mackey refers to this moment as one of "unsettled expectations" where settlers' presumption of their right to continue to enjoy the lands, resources and "peace" promised by the settler-state is imperiled by the actuality of Indigenous presence and protest.⁵⁵

I read Davis's work as aimed precisely at using the space and power that art provides to unsettle expectations. By placing their Two-Spirit Indigenous body in allegedly civil space, but resolutely insisting that the silenced history and present-day reality of colonial violence be addressed, and by crafting ambivalent, agent-driven public spectacles, Davis aims to quicken a form of radical questioning that, while it occurs within the spaces and architectures of colonial civil society is not *of* that civil society, but poses deeper question about what, precisely, society, community and civility might mean on stolen lands.

Yet Davis also notes that their intention is not simply to speak to and disrupt the expectations of settlers. While this is important, Davis insists that the most vital aspect of their work is to speak to Indigenous people and people of colour in Canada and

in their community, especially to youth. The parent of three teenage sons Davis reflects that “anything I do is, in some way, for my children, and for the future generations.” They continue that “It doesn’t bother me if a middle-aged person comes to the gallery and loves the work or hates it. I want to know: what does a young person seeing themselves reflected in the work think?” Davis is critical of many conventional galleries that are not welcoming to or interested in young BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) people and what they have to offer.

At work here, I would suggest, is a challenge towards the role of art in colonial social reproduction. Appreciation of art is encouraged by the school system, but largely in ways that use the gallery to force young people to be civil subjects: dutifully filing past famous works of art in silence in galleries, not so much casting their gaze on the artworks but having the artworks and the institution as a whole cast its disciplinary gaze upon them, insisting they behave and conform. This resonates with Davis’s observations about the way conventional religion has been used as a disciplinary force to “civilize” young people, especially Indigenous youth. Davis’s work, on the other hand, encourages a different form of engagement between young (and not young) people and art, one that incites a moment of anti-colonial recognition.

For Glen Coulthard, this moment of (dis-)recognition is key.⁵⁶ Drawing on the work of Franz Fanon, he argues that the revolutionary moment comes when the colonized subject ceases to look to the colonizer for recognition and, instead, begins to look to their own traditions and struggles for a sense of power, solidarity and value. For Coulthard, such a rejection of the “colonial politics of recognition,” which extends to the political realm where Indigenous people and nations are encouraged to seek standing

with and rights within the colonial-settler legal and financial apparatus, is central to the survival of Indigenous people as more than one minority among many. As the late Patrick Wolfe explained, once they abandon the politics of direct genocidal elimination of Indigenous people, colonial-settler states turn towards an equally but more subtly genocidal politics of “inclusion” that aims to subsume Indigenous people into a body politics and supplant them by appropriating, claiming and appointing itself the “protector” of Indigenous culture.⁵⁷ To accept such a status would undermine the forms of relationality to land and “grounded normativity” that is at the heart of Indigenous life and thoughtworlds. Hence, for Coulthard, the need to struggle, on the cultural and the material level for autonomy, solidarity and collective power – indeed, in ways that reject the separation of cultural and material realms.

I see Davis’s work as precisely operating at the fraught juncture of recognition politics. Not only does it disrupt and reverse the conventional politics of “inclusion” of the category of “Indigenous Art” within Canadian multicultural capitalist civil society, it also holds open a space—a spiritual, material, artistic and activist space—for new forms of recognition to occur. This is the artistic manifestation of a living Indigenous sovereignty, which should not be mistaken for a sovereignty on the model of the colonial European nation-state, nor the sovereignty of the white masculine subject germane to Western liberal philosophy. Rather, this is, as Joanne Barker suggests, a sovereignty of living, place-based relationality. In this sense, the model of civility and civil action at the core of Davis’s work, and at the core of Indigenous resurgence and resistance to colonialism in Nova Scotia and beyond, cannot simply be incorporated into or subsumed under the reigning Eurocentric and colonial models. Not only do they occupy the same

usurped space (anathema to the colonial model of sovereignty), they also do not speak the same language.

In our conversation, Davis elucidated a key point: Canada is (grudgingly, and belatedly) a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, the landmark international document that sets forth protections for Indigenous life, culture, spirituality, economic vitality and land rights. Yet the reality of the Canadian economy (based in large part on extractive industries and the expropriation or poisoning of Indigenous lands) and society (which is disproportionately physically, bureaucratically and culturally violent towards Indigenous people) are constantly in violation of this declaration. For Davis, this renders the Canadian state and society in a constant--one might say ontological--state of incivility and disrepute. While the nation may be based fundamentally on a myth of (white) civility, the reality is the opposite. It is precisely in and at this contradiction that Davis aims their interventions.

Notes

¹ The author is indebted to many conversations and relations that led to the insights in this text, primarily to Raven Davis. Thanks also to Phaniel Antwi, Daniel Coleman, Karin Cope, Alex Khasnabish, Gary Kinsman, Lisa Kortweig, Evan Mauro, A.L. McCready, Craig Meadows, David Peerla, Sherry Pictou, Marth Stiegman, Carla Taunton, Cassie Thornton and Erica Walker.

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