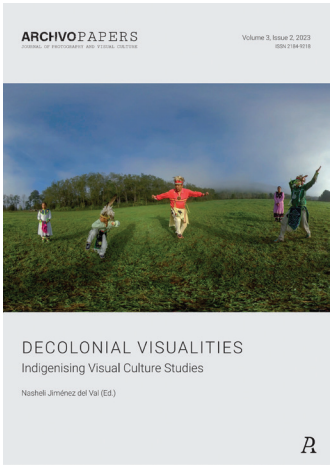

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

DECOLONIAL VISUALITIES
INDIGENISING VISUAL CULTURE STUDIES

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This issue aims to contribute to ongoing discussions in decolonial thought and visual culture studies regarding the potentialities of othered approaches to image-making beyond Western-centred conceptualizations of the image and its visualities. Specifically, this publication looks at the importance of Indigenizing visual cultural studies in order to effectively decolonize an inter-discipline that has historically obviated its Western-centric biases. Drawing upon the concepts of decolonial *aestheSis*, the right to look, and Indigenous visual sovereignty, this issue presents texts addressing the Indigenization of visual culture as a means for decolonizing the fields of visual culture studies and contemporary art studies.

Walter Mignolo has argued that Western-European philosophy has appropriated for itself the category of the "Aesthetic",[1] thereby claiming the idea of sensory pleasure and creative appreciation as a purely Occidental phenomenon. He terms this process the colonization of aesthesis through Aesthetics. That is, from the 17th century onwards Western-European notions of beauty were presented as a universal, naturalized conception that excluded myriad other expressions of image and symbol-making beyond the Western world. In this framework, the images and rituals produced by othered peoples were consistently devalued as "idolatry", "fetishes", "primitive arts", and "artesanía". Given this problematics, Mignolo, along with Rolando Vázquez,[2] and Pedro Pablo Gómez,[3] has reclaimed the possibility of a decolonial aestheSis as the body of ongoing artistic projects responding to, and delinking from, modernity/coloniality.

For his part, visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff has also engaged in the debate for the decolonization of visual culture studies.[4] He suggests that visuality is the product of a historically determined, geographically situated idea of

power as the capacity of the "Hero" to visualize (Western) History. In other words, visuality is the visual regime of coloniality insofar as it legitimizes and authorizes the colonial/imperial enterprise of the West. Faced with this, Mirzoeff vindicates the importance of what he calls "the right to look", that is, the mutual capacity of two people looking into each other's eyes as a claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity. Because the "right to look" is also a claim for the right to be seen, looking and being seen is the starting point for the production of a commons.

In a similar vein, Jolene Rickard champions an Indigenous visual sovereignty.[5] In her work, she maintains that there is an urgent need to take into account Indigenous epistemologies in contemporary visual culture and art studies in order to exercise a decolonial intervention on modernity/coloniality's framing of Indigenous cultures within a metanarrative of the West. Drawing a parallel with economic and political forms of dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and ensuing claims to Indigenous sovereignty, Rickard theorizes visual sovereignty as a dominant expression of self-determination in an intellectual, cultural, and visual expansion of the concept of sovereignty. On the one hand, it is about Indigenous peoples' fundamental right to represent themselves (to look and be seen, in Mirzoeff's words). On the other, visual sovereignty is a central strategy for decolonization that can "serve as an overarching concept for interpreting Indigeneity, the interconnected space of the colonial gaze, and deconstruction of the colonizing image or text."[6]

Within this theoretical framework, some of the guiding questions for this issue were: what categories and/or paradigms in visual culture studies perpetuate and affirm modern/colonial understandings of the image and its visualities? What Indigenous image-making practices can put into question these paradigms? Can an/other (visual) representation serve to decolonize the Western-European modern/colonial imaginary and, if so, how? How can Indigenous visual practices participate in representation without falling prey to the asymmetrical power dynamics therein inscribed? What Indigenous visual practices, image-making knowledges, and cultural traditions reaffirm a right to look and to be seen in the production of a collectivity? What techniques, abilities, practices, and rituals are put into play? In response to these questions, we received an array of texts, visual essays, interviews, and reviews that consistently addressed these issues in very thoughtful and ethical ways. Covering the art of Indigenous peoples in geographical regions spanning from Malayali India to the Democratic Republic of Congo, from Mayan Mexico to the Aymara Andes, from Pataxó Brazil to Cree Canada, and beyond, this issue shows what a truly broad range of cultural expressions are engaging with the decolonisation and Indigenisation of visual culture studies and contemporary art today.

Belén Romero's article on the digitalisation of the Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya archive brings to the fore the issues that arise when engaging in academic work through "other", decolonial methodologies. Specifically, Romero considers the importance of establishing alliances between academia and living cultural processes through the principle of *lekil kuxlejal* [Good Mayan Living] and the

construction of an "us-ness" based on active listening. Her thoughtful description of the fieldwork undertaken in Chiapas has important methodological implications on how to work horizontally and dialogically with Indigenous peoples' living cultural processes. The article "Urban Earthdivers" by Renate Dohmen is a theoretically informed analysis of the work of Cree artist Kent Monkman. In this text, Dohmen sets the figures of the postindian and the urban earth-diver into dialogue with Boaventura de Sousa Santos's post-abyssal thinking for an ecology of knowledges and Walter Mignolo's concept of delinking. This intersection of concepts from Indigenous Studies and decolonial thinking proves fruitful as it opens up the field of contemporary Indigenous art to new strategies of decolonization for visual culture. Nevin Dalvin's article on indigenisation in Syrian Christian churches in Kerala explores the interactions that took place between Portuguese colonizers, the East Syrian church, and the local religion to produce a series of elaborate murals that represent Satan in the guise of Bhagavati/Kali. The parallel that Dalvin draws between colonizers' tactics of syncretism in Kerala and Latin America is particularly interesting, as it pinpoints the ways in which very similar iconographic stratagems were deployed under two very different colonial regimes.

The visual essay "Aesthetics of Poverty: Challenging the Fictitious Separation between Indigeneity and Modernity" by Pamela Gómez, an Aymara artist and photographer, explores and critically contests the stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples as seeped in poverty and relegated to faraway places in time and space. By presenting her body in contemporary architectural settings, using evocative poses, and further intervening her black and white images with colorful embroidery, she effectively comments on the relationship between labour, racialisation, and the Indigenous agent's place within modernity/coloniality. Soraya Vasconcelos offers us an intriguing visual essay entitled "Daemonicycles" which considers the phantoms of colonialism that inhabit a series of photographs taken in 1914 for a border delimitation mission of the Angolan/Congolese (DRC) frontier. Her thoughtful intervention of the found image, as well as her thorough research of the photograph's archive and her production of an interactive online collage, speaks to the importance of shining a light on the invisibilized colonial subjects of history.

Laura Burocco's interview with contemporary visual artist Arissana Pataxó provides an interesting exchange that contributes to a more complete understanding of the genealogy of contemporary Indigenous art in Brazil. While describing her professional trajectory as an artist, Arissana also maps out the current situation of Brazilian Indigenous artists full stop, highlighting important exhibitions, such as *¡Mira! Contemporary Visual Arts of Indigenous Peoples* (2013), which opened the doors for the serious inclusion of Indigenous artists in the contemporary Brazilian and Latin American arts scenes. The review of the exhibition *We Live Like Trees in the Footsteps of Our Ancestors* (2023), curated by Mariana Cunha and Marianna Tsionki for the Blenheim Walk Gallery at Leeds Arts University, addresses the link between contemporary Indigenous artists' work and the environmental emergencies taking place in Latin America today. Looking at the works of artists Marianne Hoffmeister

Castro, Jeannette Muñoz, Renata Padovan, and Maya Watanabe, this review highlights the importance of showing the impact of environmental disasters on Indigenous communities, as well as suggesting ways of denouncing and resisting these forms of material and cultural extractivism. The review of the *Photography's Enduring Life* exhibit (2023), presented at the Kunstwerk Museum in Sammlung Klein, Germany, explores the genre of Native American photographic portraiture by Edward Sheriff Curtis in the early 20th century and its decolonisation in the works of contemporary Diné photographer Will Wilson. For the exhibition, both artists were set in dialogue, thereby contrasting the representational dynamics of portraiture photography of Indigenous peoples when done first by an outsider and then re-mixed by an Indigenous artist.

Lastly, Yaqui-Jewish visual artist Tahila Mintz presents her latest project *Ancestral Gratitude Bridge. 360 Virtual Reality Experience* (2023). In this artist's portfolio, Mintz explores gratitude in response to the high suicide rate of Indigenous youths in her community. The immersive gratitude experience is a reminder that humans hold dear relationships with all our surroundings, be it animate or inanimate, from nature. Utilising virtual reality technology, Mintz invites the viewer to re-see these relationships and experience the gratitude that their presence elicits.

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2 Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *SocialText* Online, 15 July 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/.

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4 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

5 Jolene Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 81-84.

6 Ibid, 81.