

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/864031qg>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 39(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

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Publication Date

2015-09-01

DOI

10.17953/aicrj.39.4.frei.njootli

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Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions

Jeneen Frei Njootli

JENEEN FREI NJOOTLI is a Gwich'in artist and a founding member of the ReMatriate collective. In 2012 she earned a BFA from Emily Carr University as well as completing visual art studio work at The Banff Centre. As an uninvited guest on unceded Musqueam territory, she is currently pursuing an MFA at the University of British Columbia. Frei Njootli's practice concerns itself with indigeneity in politics, community engagement, and productive disruptions. Having exhibited across Canada, her work is in the collections of The Yukon Permanent Art Collection and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. Most recently she had a solo exhibition at Vancouver's GAM Gallery. She is represented in Vancouver by Fazakas Gallery and Macaulay & Co. Fine Art.

Author's Note: *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions* engages archival material depicting the artist's peoples, who make up the Gwich'in Nation and have made their border-spanning home in the Arctic since time immemorial.



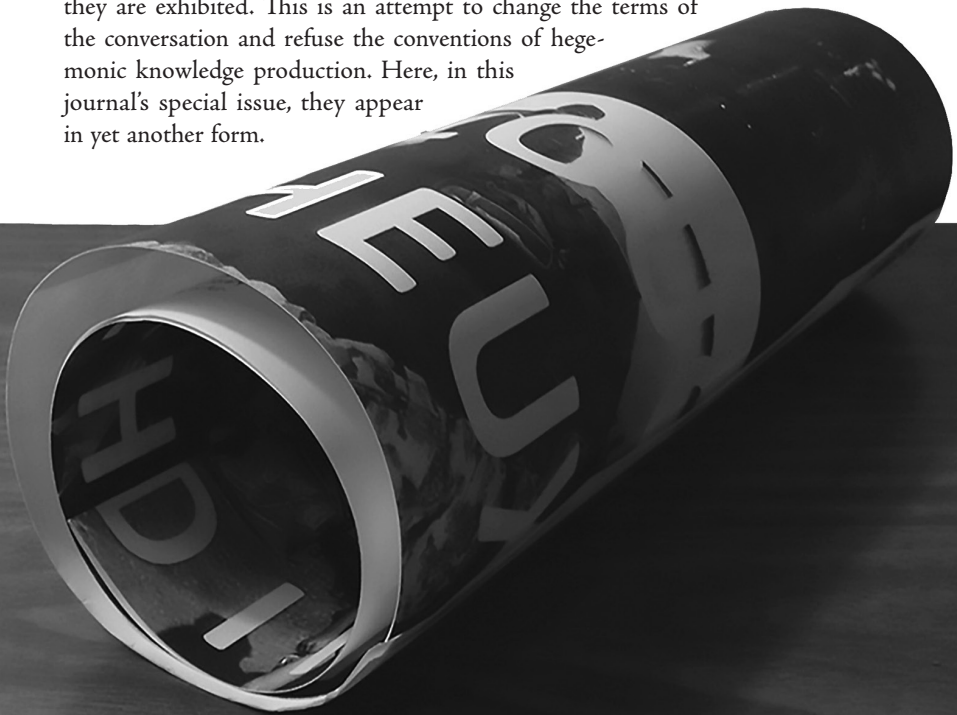
THE IMAGES/PROJECT

In *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions*¹ I have chosen not to distinguish images I found in the archive at the Newberry Library from those in my personal collection. The text has been selected in a similar spirit, highlighting terms that I came across while marinating in the archive that were in the company of names we Gwich'in have used for ourselves over the last two centuries. In some cases the text obscures the figures in the photographs, which speaks to concepts surrounding access, privilege, and language. This is a gesture of reclamation on my part. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes about the power of the photograph. He claims that the photograph reproduces to infinity what has occurred only once.² It takes. It claims to represent a truth. In taking a picture of a person, one reduces him or her to body parts by means of cropping, editing, and, in most cases, objectifying. The images in *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions* push up against photographer/subject/institution/viewer relationships, and fracture the inherent voyeurism of the photograph. For me, this project is a way to find a sense of autonomy within the archive and ethnographic representations of my people. It has been challenging to engage with the images and publications at the library and attempt to produce something that is honest and avoids self-anthropologizing or further entrenching the fetishization of Indians in the rugged North. Through *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions* I hope to find ways to further nuance, complicate, and disrupt the conventions of how these images have previously existed, including their viewers' perception of them. *Mahsi cho.*³

THE PROCESS

On July 30, 2014, at 3:30 p.m., the geography of the seminar room at the Newberry Library in Chicago shifted as sheets of paper measuring 52 by 12 inches fell across laptops and notebooks. The people in the room were being challenged to transform from passive listeners into engaged makers—a role potentially foreign to an academic. In visual art one would refer to this as an interruption. It is an action that is aware of its context and wishes to provide what Walter D. Mignolo might call a de-linking from the “theological and the ego-logical politics of knowledge and understanding” of that socially coded academic space.⁴ Together we created knowledge by communally making an edition of eighteen artist books. I offered this event in lieu of making a formal presentation of my research. This artwork is part of a developing series of projects collectively titled *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions*. The work began during the Newberry Consortium for American Indian Studies Summer Institute (NCAIS)⁵ and has now taken the form of a book and an exhibition at Gallery Connexion's Project Space.⁶ Part of Gallery Connexion's mandate is to “promote experimental contemporary art practices, with an emphasis on emerging artists and issues of social urgency.”⁷ The exhibition was composed of five photographic works measuring 40 by 30 inches. *Kagwaadbat Brought Us Here* is now in the permanent collection of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. The collection prides itself on being “the first federal government institution to support the development of Canadian Aboriginal art in the 1960s.”⁸ Additionally, another work from this series, *He Has No Middle Name*, will be part of Gallery 44's annual Canadian emerging artist exhibition, Proof 23, in Toronto, June 2016.

My goal for *Dinjii Zhuh: Productive Disruptions* is that it will never exist as a static producer or product of knowledge, but will persist in flux and in production as a knowledge-in-politics. Each book was marked as a “draft” and *Dinjii Zhuh* will continue to shift in its different iterations, just as the images will be displayed differently each time they are exhibited. This is an attempt to change the terms of the conversation and refuse the conventions of hegemonic knowledge production. Here, in this journal's special issue, they appear in yet another form.



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CONTEXT

As indigenous peoples, we are tied up in the spectacle of history, not only in the Americas, but globally. In a world that is mediated by images,⁹ it is not surprising that many indigenous artists find themselves contemplating archival photographs, the gazes that have fallen upon them,¹⁰ the contexts in which they were taken, and the narratives into which they were placed. How are indigenous artists reappropriating these images to create new and divergent art forms? The answer is as complex and diverse as the artists themselves, but I will highlight two that impact and influence my practice. The work of James Luna confronts the ways that Indians and photography have had a largely problematic and one-way dialogue. In his multifaceted work *Ishi: The Archival Performance*, Luna looks at the life of another indigenous California man named Ishi who was deemed the last of his tribe in 1911 and lived out the rest of his days as a live specimen at the University of California, Berkeley.¹¹ Luna gives voice and emotion to the static sepia images of our past.¹² This is particularly significant in the case of Ishi, whose language was never deciphered, and there is limited documentation of what he thought and felt.¹³ Another important, powerful, and political work that confronts the archive is the performance of Inuk throat-singer Tanya Tagaq, winner of the Polaris Prize in concert with the 1922 silent film *Nanook of the North*. In 2012, at the Toronto International Film Festival, Tagaq created and performed a soundscape of Inuit throat-singing in collaboration with composer Derek Clarke, percussionist Jean Martin, and violinist Jesse Zubot. Some might call this intervention decolonial.

DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS

From the first time I heard the term I wanted to hang out with it, get to know it, be seen with it. Maybe we could even exhibit together and I could love it at a cool, respectful distance. *Decolonial aesthetics.*

In my work, I aim to address the complex sites on indigenous lands where mixing of contemporary indigenous art practices and decolonial thought is being activated.¹⁴ I started out here as an uninvited guest on unceded Musqueam territory, in what is now known as Vancouver. I wanted to invest further in the decolonial aesthetic, to situate my practice within this growing field, and to find a stronger voice in my writing while undertaking a master of fine arts degree at the University of British Columbia. As the infatuation faded and puppy love left my heart, I became more critical of my newfound theory bestie. Who is this terminology accessible to? Does it perpetuate a binary? Why are those heralding its radical, *hot* message predominantly male? As Sophie Flather, my friend and fellow moosehide-tanning Gwich'in, pointed out, "why do we always have to be situating ourselves in relation to colonialism?" The more that I steeped myself in decolonial aesthetics and contemplated the decolonial project, the more estranged from it I felt. I became concerned by its inability to resonate and echo beyond institutional walls, and concerned that the terminology is largely inaccessible and alienating to the people it claims to speak next to.¹⁵ I do not want my artwork or my writing to do that.

So, how do I not lose my voice?

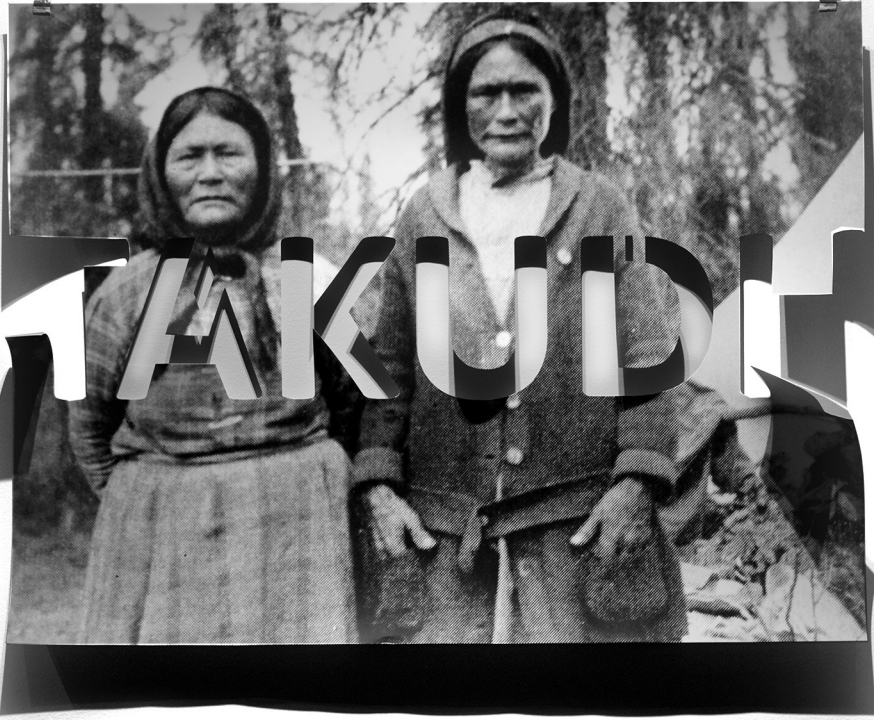
I had the opportunity to talk with Gwich'in ethnobotanist and activist Alestine Andre, who spoke of the danger of abstracting knowledge. She also spoke of the importance of not writing from the outside looking in, but writing as a Gwich'in woman looking out with a Gwich'in gaze.¹⁶ As a result, as an alternative to Walter Dill Scott's epistemic de-linking, I formulated the term "bushed theory," which also would refute Loucheux, an offensive word used to describe and name Gwich'in people.¹⁷ The word roughly translates to "slanted or cross-eyed" and implies that one's thought or way of being is tilted in the head. Because bushed theory has always been there, it provides an alternative epistemology that rejects colonial modes of thought. It hasn't slept—it hasn't rested. It has been surviving, as we have, since time immemorial. Decoloniality, post-coloniality, and de-linking are terms for alternative modes of thinking and being that come from the academy. These words are in peril of being found only on paper, forever lacking any lived implications in the social fabric of a larger indigenous public. Theory can be important, but it can also be a plinth, a veil, a net, or a self-perpetuating philosophical detachment from the people and land-based knowledges with which these modes of thought preoccupy themselves. Bushed theory is a radical, grassroots way of being that the aforementioned brands of thought can't even know about. Busy with symposiums, buttoned shirts, and airports, most decolonial theorists have probably never had caribou blood or fess guts on their hands.¹⁸ In contrast, bushed theory does not try to neo-craft post-post branches onto existing bodies of thought rooted in or using the rhetoric of Eurocentric philosophy. It is 100 % NDN.¹⁹ It is, for me, a less anxiety-ridden way of navigating among different indigenous and non-indigenous socially coded environments and diverse ways of knowing. In beginning to write about bushed theory, this led me to conversations with artist and curator Tania Willard, who created #BUSH Gallery in 2012. The initiative takes place off her rez and is a space for a multitude of occurrences such as residencies, conversations, curations, and contemplations, as well as her collaboration with Gabe Hill and Peter Morin, who form the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective. Willard is in the process of writing the gallery's manifesto, which is definitely bushed theory's secret sister. NDNs have these ... secret siblings. I met mine in August.



UNINTELLIGIBILITY

Perhaps writing is like cutting up meat for me. It can be done so gracefully, with purpose and ease. The grain of what was once warm in your hands, in your heart, and in your mind falls away cleanly, making thin enough slabs that could even sustain you in the winter. They could be disseminated. They could be a thesis. If you aren't seasoned, and are in fact, quite green, you may end up with many small pieces of varying thicknesses, too small or awkward for the pole, the printer, or the shelf. I still find this tool awkward to hold, even though I need it for survival here. Will you come over for tea instead? I want to let the words seep into my marrow so that I too can one day make good soup.

I incised the words TAKUDH, LOUCHEUX, DINJII ZHUUH, GWITCHIN, KUTCHIN into five black and white images. Their titles are: *What if We Were Cousins*, *He Has No Middle Name*, *80 Miles North of the Arctic Circle*, *Kagwaadhat Brought Us Here*, and *I Wish I Knew Her Then*. The letters form a pile on my studio floor that is as unintelligible as the word *Loucheux* would have been to my ancestors.



SISTERS ON NAMING

Our sisters are a phantom limb. An ache in a bone you cannot see. A missing limb, cut from the tree. Our sisters have been rendered nameless in the trajectory of someone else's history. It is possible to be actively erased while being photographed, regardless of how many people see your image. In the archives I could not help but think—what if we were cousins? What laughter is behind the stern stare you gave the photographer who did not care to write your name? They recorded everything, so why not your name? Was it too difficult for them to remember? Were these women illegible to ___?

two takudh women

#sayhername #solidarity

Where is the strike? Where is the draft? Which part is the scab? Which half is the blood that is coarse enough to act as an igniting pad? Could the instance happen anywhere like the back of my teeth?

Acknowledgments

The project discussed in this creative piece was conceived during a fellowship with the 2014 Newberry Consortium for American Indian Studies Summer Institute (NCAIS) at the Darcy McNickle Center and Newberry Library in Chicago, which focused on indigenous speech, representation, and the politics of writing.

NOTES

1. "Dinjii Zhuh" is the Gwich'in word for "people." Stanley Njootli Sr., deputy chief of the Vuntut Gwitchin government, argues that this is the most honest name that Gwich'in can call themselves, as it was what Gwich'in called themselves before the terms *Indian*, *Aboriginal*, *Native American*, *Indian Act*, or *First Nations* became part of our vocabularies.
2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 34.
3. Gwich'in for "many thanks."
4. Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 459, doi 10.1080/09502380601162647.
5. NCAIS takes place at the Darcy McNickle Center for American Indigenous Studies in the Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.
6. Gallery Connexion's project space is in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. The exhibition took place from September 18 to November 28, 2014.
7. "Mandate," *Gallery Connexion*, <http://www.connexion.org>.
8. "Aboriginal Arts," *Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. Government of Canada*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca>.
9. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2004), 7.
10. Dana Claxton, "Wisdom for All through Identity Politics: A Hopeful Idea," *In the Wake of the Komagata Maru: Transpacific Migration, Race and Contemporary Art* (Vancouver: Surrey Art Gallery in collaboration with On Main Gallery and Kwantlen Polytechnic University Fine Arts, 2015), 46.
11. Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 122.
12. James Luna, *Ishi: The Archival Performance*, performance art (2015; Black Box Theatre, Kelowna).
13. Performance artist James Luna, discussion with the author, August 2015.
14. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
15. Trinh T. Minh-ha and Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby," in *Visualizing Theory, Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990–1994*, ed. Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994), 433–52.
16. Tania Willard, curator and artist, in discussion with the author, November 2014.
17. The term Loucheux is the earliest and most offensive name for my people, first found in Emile Grouard's letters home about tribes surrounding what is now Lac La Biche in northern Alberta, about 2000 kms. away from where we were living. To search for our oldest records this term must be used.
18. When texting locally to find out who has caught fish for sale or trade, *fish* is written "fiss." In some places this is also how we pronounce *fish*.
19. NDN is a common word that NDNs have been using for a few decades as a reclamation of the colonial, *terra nullius*-conjuring label "Indian."