

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Question 2. De/constructing the Human: In what ways do contemporary artists and designers challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as feminist theory, posthumanism, queer critique, or psychoanalysis? How do such practices trouble the boundaries between self, other, and machine?

How does Candice Lin use spatial and sensorial embodied strategies to disrupt the visitor's colonial method of understanding, enabling them to practice anti colonial embodiment?

Abstract

This essay uses Candice Lin's installation art to demonstrate how the colonial sensorial methods of understanding can be disrupted using embodied methods. The essay starts by describing the aspects of embodiment (scale, distance and visual mastery) and analysing their use as a colonial tool. Tuhwani Smith's writing on division and power as a colonial tool explain the use of scale, Azoulay and Said explain how observation and research from a distance are a tool for domination. Howes explains how vision is considered the most objective, rational sense in colonial cultures and that cultures who prioritised the other senses were considered intellectually inferior. Betasamosake Simpson's article is used to analyse how an engagement with all the senses and an immersion in the land are used as relational, anti hierarchical tools of vulnerability in indigenous culture. These embodied, somatic tools and their functions are then applied to the installations in three of Candice Lin's exhibitions: g/hosti, Pigs & Poison and Natural History. It is explained how in g/hosti, the visitor's body is positioned so their experience of scale is disrupted, and they will experience the bodily consequence of sensory engagement in Pigs & Poison and Natural History. The consequences of these bodily, somatic experiences disrupt the visitors' colonial sensorium and method of experiencing the world, enabling them to experience the installation vulnerably, relationally and anti-hierarchically. This enables them to have an anti colonial somatic experience and experience learning through the body instead of the mind.

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Introduction

Colonial cultures use certain tools, such as visual dominance, distance and spatial organisation to create authority and power over others. These tools create a colonial embodied experience where meaning, knowledge and power are formed through the body, instead of the mind, due to the conditions which the body is put in. This influences how we experience the world and how we create and experience art in colonial cultures.

Colonial cultures value and prioritise rational, abstract thought following the Enlightenment and the development of Descartes' Cartesian Dualism theory, where he posited that humans are composed of two distinct substances: a non-physical, thinking mind and a physical, extended body.

Some installation art, when experienced, can disrupt colonial knowledge systems with body positioning. By disrupting the physical experience of visual dominance, distance and spatial organisation, installation art routes thinking through the body and forces the exhibition visitor into a somatic way of knowing in order to form meaning. By placing the visitor's body in conditions where senses other than vision are used, in proximity with the art and with their sense of scale disorientated, their colonial mode of experiencing the world is challenged. Due to the bodily consequence visitors will experience of the art, such as being forced to physically navigate it or involuntarily take in smells or sounds, visitors will experience the art somatically. This challenges their colonial relationship with the world, such as being able to safely observe and understand from a distance. The viewer will experience relationality, a lack of hierarchy, and vulnerability due to their physical experience of the art.

This essay begins by describing the physical, embodied aspects of the colonial experience: scale, distance and visual mastery and how these tools have been used as part of the colonial project to enact power and authority. It then describes the anti colonial aspects of embodiment: utilising all the senses and being immersed in the environment. These aspects are analysed for how they are used as tools for relationality, anti hierarchical approach and vulnerability in indigenous cultures. Using Candice Lin's installation art, these aspects and their bodily conditions will be used to analyse the relational, anti hierarchical and vulnerable somatic effects which they create within the exhibition visitor.

The aspects of the embodied experience **a) The colonial embodied experience**

This section outlines how colonial power structures embody experience through scale, distance, and visual mastery. These tools aren't neutral, but enact hierarchy, authority and dehumanisation. These aspects of the embodied experience will later be analysed in terms of the artists' works I am discussing. I will begin by describing the aspects which make up the colonial embodied experience, so that it's opposite, the anti-colonial embodied experience, will be revealed.

Tuhiwai Smith explains how scale is used as a tool for colonialism: "Space is often viewed in Western thinking as being static or divorced from time. This view generates ways of making sense of the world as a 'realm of stasis', well-defined, fixed and without politics." (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, 52) Tuhiwai Smith talks about three spatial concepts of colonialism: the line, which maps territory and establishes boundaries, the "centre," which orientates society towards the system of power and the "outside," which positioned people outside of colonial power, such as indigenous Australians who did "not exist." She talks about how space is used as a tool to divide physical space and the people in it according to colonial values, assigning hierarchy. These spatial divisions work at a world, rather than individual level, organising not only territory but deciding whose bodies are recognised as existing, belonging, or human.

Tuhiwai Smith also talks about how colonisers used the division of space to divide colonised people from their cultures: "imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonized peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world." (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, 28) She goes on to write about how the displacement and loss of context of indigenous cultural objects to museums and the division of aspects of indigenous life among academics were a "consequence of imperialism."

Museums and educational institutions aren't just sites to enact colonial power in their use of space, but also of enforcing distance between the coloniser and colonised, or their possessions. Azoulay writes: "People and artefacts have become objects of observation and study, conversion and care, charge and control by two seemingly unrelated sets of disciplines, institutions, and their scholars and experts." (Azoulay, 2019, 20) Colonisers use museums and educational institutions as sites to control and enact power over colonised people and their historical and cultural artefacts. They are tools which divide up colonised peoples lives and histories to be consumed by colonisers, creating a power dynamic of observer and observed, consumer and consumed. The tools of museums position the colonisers as authoritative on the colonised people.

Edward Said writes that the industry of orientalism was created to enact power over colonised people, claiming that it "can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it... Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand." (Said, 1978, 3-7) Orientalism was a tool to enact domination over colonised countries. He explains that distance functions not just physically, but in terms of knowledge: the coloniser doesn't need to be near the colonised or enter into a bodily relation with them in order to maintain authority over them.

Tuhiwai Smith explains the effect of colonial distance: "To consider indigenous peoples as not fully human at all, enabled distance to be maintained and justified various policies of either extermination or domestication."

Howes speaks about how the use of space, in terms of mapping and division, is applied to colonised people's bodies as a tool in the colonial project. He explains how this positioned Europeans as those in authority: "Many of the first encounters of Europeans with the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Oceania occurred in the context of voyages of exploration and cartography. It is not surprising, therefore, that not only the lands, but also the bodies of the peoples living there were subjected to measurement and mapping... In the very act of measuring the body parts and registering the sensory acuity of "primitive" peoples, anthropologists were constituting themselves as rational Europeans and their subjects as sensuous savages." (Howes, 2003, 4) Colonisers thought that the vision prioritising and spatial division of research and mapping performed upon colonised people and their land, they were intellectually superior. Tuhiwai Smith explains, "people were observed as research objects." (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, 81). Colonisers used vision and distance to dehumanise, objectify and make judgements on colonised people under the guise of science and knowledge. Colonisers use sight as a tool to create a hierarchy, since they can observe, measure and understand the bodies of the colonised without needing to place themselves in a position of vulnerability.

He goes on to explain how the Europeans perceived their preference for vision as intellectually superior to the colonised: "Since sight and hearing were traditionally linked with intellectual activity and civilized behaviour in European culture, while taste, touch, and smell were associated with animality, it was imagined that "primitive" peoples would show a predilection for the "lower" or "animal" —in short, "primitive" —senses... Although the data itself was inconclusive, it was interpreted to support this hypothesis... The Reports of the Torres Strait expedition (Haddon 1903) reinforced the classic European concept of the opposition of body and mind, savagery and civilization." (Howes, 2003, 4) Colonisers made claims about colonised people using their own internalised bias due to their culture, which, even lacking conclusive evidence, they interpreted to support their hypothesis. The colonisers priority was proving that colonised people's lack of reliance on their vision meant that they lacked intellect, instead of gaining a genuine understanding or conducting unbiased research on the people of the Torres Strait. This left them with an incomplete knowledge of the people.

Colonisers used vision as a scientific tool to claim objectivity and intellectual superiority while mapping, naming, recording and observing. Howes tells us how this method of research and observation flattened and simplified the world: "Such devices [as cameras and phonographs] reinforced the association of sight and hearing with rationalism by appearing to register cultural expressions in a direct, unmediated, objective fashion. As these technologies necessarily excluded all other sensory phenomena, they also presented cultures as purely visual or auditory manifestations. Thus what seemed to be real was a world devoid of scents, savors, temperatures, and textures."

(Howes, 2003, 6) The documentation from these devices would then have been used to teach others, thus disseminating incomplete, over simplified information. The authority assumed by these devices would only be true because of the lack of other sensory or informational data.

Scale, distance and visual mastery work together to create a colonial embodied experience which enacts hierarchy, detachment and control. The examples given here show how these tools were used to enact dominance by colonisers over colonised people. Anti-colonial practices disrupt these effects and we will next examine academics who discuss these aspects of the embodied experience in an anti colonial context.

b) The aspects of the anti-colonial embodied experience

Drawing on Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's account of Nishnaabeg intelligence in *Land as Pedagogy*, this section explains how embodiment isn't defined by the absence or presence of intellectual capacity, but as a different understanding of knowledge which is created through relational, sensory and land based practices. This understanding challenges colonial assumptions that equate rational abstraction with authority or moral legitimacy.

As contrasted with the priority of abstract, rational intelligence of colonial cultures, Betasamosake Simpson argues that "coming to know is the pursuit of whole body intelligence." (Betasamosake Simpson, 2013, 7) Betasamosake Simpson explains that in Nishnaabeg culture, knowledge isn't just created in the mind, as per Descartes' Cartesian dualism theory which is a foundational framework of many colonial academic institutions, but in the whole body. This whole body knowledge disrupts the colonial values of creating distance, manipulating scale and prioritising sight because the learner will learn through being close with something, which positions them in a vulnerable, reciprocal relationship with it and includes learning with all the senses.

Betasamosake Simpson goes on to explain the importance of practical, immersive learning: "If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body on to the land and do it. Get a practice... That doesn't mean you don't read books, or don't talk to people with all kinds of intelligences... It does mean, get out, get involved and get invested." (Betasamosake Simpson, 2013, 17) Betasamosake Simpson explains that in Nishnaabeg culture, placing oneself in a position of vulnerability and reciprocity is considered the most valued method of learning. She emphasises that this isn't exclusive of other methods of learning, but it is about using physical, active, experiential and close methods of learning. This is in direct contrast to the abstract, distanced method of learning encouraged in colonial cultures.

Betasamosake Simpson talks about the anti-hierarchical approach of Nishnaabeg education: "Education comes from the roots up. It comes from being enveloped by the land." (Betasamosake Simpson, 2013, 9) This is in direct contrast to the colonial knowledge system which prioritises hierarchy and authorial knowledge which is collected by one person or a small group, as demonstrated by Howes writing about the Torres Strait expedition, and disseminated to others from a position of authority. Betasamosake Simpson argues knowledge is gained sensorially and reciprocally, through engagement and immersion in the land, rather than abstractly, rationally and from a distance as described as part of the colonial knowledge system above.

As Betasamosake Simpson explains, anti colonial knowledge systems value engaging with all the senses, close up experiences and immersing oneself bodily.

2. How Candice Lin's work enables learning through anti colonial embodiment

In the following section, I will apply anti colonial theories of embodiment to Candice Lin's work which, could be argued, enable the audience to gain knowledge using anti colonial methods. This essay does not argue that all embodied experiences which disrupt colonial ideas of scale, distance and visual mastery are anti colonial or that all artists who create installation art are inherently anti colonial, just that this specific aspect of their work creates an embodied experience as a way of learning which can disrupt the colonial sensorium.

Candice Lin's work often disrupts colonial ideas of scale, distance and visual mastery. She also directly engages with themes of colonial violence and power in her work, so it could be argued that

her work is an exemplar in terms of anti colonialism, although many other artists' work performs the same function.

Lin's 2025 exhibition, *g/hosts*, demonstrates her disruption of the colonial use of scale. The exhibition is described in the catalogue: "the space will host one of the largest paintings displayed throughout the institution's history - a vast landscape covering the surfaces of an intricate curved labyrinth fashioned from tall panels of cardboard. The scale of the work disturbs the conventional relationship between a gallery visitor and a painting." (Foote & Tawadros, 2025, 7) The tall walls obscure the visitors' view and obstructs them from seeing the entire art and exhibition in one go, disrupting their understanding of the exhibition and ability to view it in a compartmentalised way or divide it up. This forces them to move through it in order to experience it, thus enabling them to experience the exhibition with their whole bodies in proximity to the art, rather than at a distance.

Lin explains her plan for the exhibition: "I imagined you would enter the space and be invited into a narrow corridor made of flimsy painted cardboard walls... Nevertheless you become absorbed by this painted world as you wind your way through it. Because there are sounds of things you can't see (the animations in the distance), there's a sense of something you are missing. There's also the experience of perspective and scale - the close-up tactility of painting, where it's just a collection of textures and colour, and then moments where you might get a little distance and the representational image you are inside of (a landscape, a wolf, a carcass in the background) comes into focus." (Lin, 2025, 21) Lin explains how the visitor must immerse their entire body in to the exhibition in order to experience it. She observes how the anti colonial embodied experience of not being able to see everything, but being able to hear it, could have a disturbing effect on the visitor and challenge their perception of their knowledge and authority. Her use of perspective and scale, where the visitor varies between close up and further away images, disrupts the visitors' embodied experience.

Lin developed a cocktail or 'tincture' for an event marking the publication of the exhibition catalogue mixed from a secret recipe of herbal, sweet and fishy ingredients. Foote & Tawadross explain the immersive qualities of the effect of the drink: "The uncertain and possibly unwelcome taste of the beverage exemplifies how Lin pulls viewers in to physical entanglements with her work, in this case causing them to consume and digest its materials, leaving a lingering taste." (2025, 7) The "physical entanglements" of her drink mean the exhibition visitor's body is implicated by the work, disrupting colonial knowledge systems. The visitor can't help but be physically affected by it, using their taste and smell scents, as they experience it, creating a relational, vulnerable experience.

Lin's *Natural History* (2020) comprises of a full-scale ceramic representation of herself reclining with her future cat which references Etruscan funerary sculptures from the 9th-2nd centuries BCE. Above the sarcophagus are a series of glass aquariums containing Dermestid "flesh-eating" beetles, which will consume a series of works resembling human bones made of a meat-paste substitute combined with Lin's own dried skin and fingernails (Pitzer College, 2020)

Michelle Lee's paper about decompositional forms references the immersive quality of the exhibition and scale in terms of dividing things up: "The scientific discourse of decomposition as "failure to keep things apart" provides an interesting metaphor with which to think about curatorial practices and the embedded colonial logics of the museum." (Lee, 2023, 100) Lee explains that categories by which museums often divide up cultural objects are often constructed by the institution, rather than objective. Lee observes that the act of decomposition disrupts the use of scale in museums and educational institutions because it resists division of objects because things can no longer "keep apart." By resisting easy compartmentalisation and division, the art can no longer be easily understood.

Lee observes the sensory effect, thus the physical implication, of decomposition: "Though the glass maintained a visual boundary, the sour, acidic scents, released as byproducts reminded me that neither I nor the artist are safe from the processes of decomposition." (Lee, 2023, 96) Lee explains that despite the visual boundary, the visitor bodily consequence of the decomposition; it is not possible to experience the art in an abstract, rational and distanced sense without experiencing it with ones' body and senses. This forces the visitor to experience the art in a relational, vulnerable way.

Lin's exhibition, *Pigs and Poison*, from 2022 "immerses the visitor in these forgotten histories of Chinese migrants, with installations such as a locked barricade with a razor-wire entrance, sculptured

figures with ceramic muzzles, a trebuchet disposing of corpse-like masses and mouldy books atop a table. The show includes scenes of Chinatowns in San Francisco and Honolulu painted on wood panel with pigments made of wax and lard to recall the animals with which the Chinese were associated. The exhibition also features four drawings executed by the artist while under the influence of tinctures she brewed from plants like field poppies (opium), sugar cane and tobacco, soaked in alcohol for six weeks. Elsewhere is a statue of a plague doctor, whose leather helmet encases a virtual reality headset; donning the helmet, the viewer observes a murky, apocalyptic world filled with ill-defined bodies and industrial debris." (Lowe, 2023, 21) The visitor experiences the exhibition sensorially; experiencing the sounds and smells of the "corpse-like masses," mouldy books and Chinatown paintings. Cai, Leckie & Stanhope argues that the exhibition is "experienced through the ears, nose and skin as much as through the eyes" (2023, 5) The multi-sensory experience of the exhibition enables the visitor to engage with it using an anti colonial framework by resisting the authority assumed by the prioritising of vision in colonial culture. The work resists the colonial assumption that knowledge can be produced without bodily consequence and the hierarchy assigned to the senses by creating a multi sensory experience.

Lin includes a VR headset for the visitor to wear in her exhibition, physically immersing them in her virtual world: "The VR presents an alternate world where the objects in the exhibition are animated... the Flesh Lumps bounce and ooze as they are slung by the wooden trebuchet towards the viewer who, staring down at their feet, finds themselves covered in a pile of carcasses." (Lin, 2023, 74) The visitor becomes physically part of the experience in the VR world. The visitor is physically implicated as part of what is happening in the VR world, unable to place themselves at a distance. This disrupts the colonial tool of scale and distance as mastery and moral safety to ensure those who are learning aren't physically implicated in the experience.

To analyse Lin's work in the wider context of anti-colonialism, Lin explains in the Pigs & Poison exhibition book that she isn't attempting to convey an objective, authorial viewpoint with her work: "People often ask me if [my work] is pedagogical in intention, but I don't think it is. I lay out materials and histories, but the works are more a web of associations than a lesson I want to impart. Rather, I hope the work offers an embodied experience that the viewer takes inside of them, and that haunts and changes them in some small way." (Lin, 2023, 74) In line with the anti colonial values of non-hierarchical learning and learning through embodied, sensory experiences, Lin doesn't claim authority with the research in her work or her voice.

An anti colonial practice which Lin regularly features in her work is working with non human collaborators: "Lin's work critiques these colonial systems and how they shape scientific discourse by engaging intentionally with decomposition not only as a process which occurs after death, as if to mark the departure of an animal from its organic, material, objectivity, but also as a process of relation-making with nonhuman actors." (Lee, 2023, 101) By featuring the Dermestid Beetles in her work, Lin's work deconstructs hierarchy between humans and non humans by creating art collaboratively, challenging the colonial value of human superiority and extractivism.

Lin's work challenges the colonial idea of the intellectual and moral superiority of vision, distance and scale by forcing the visitor to experience it with all their senses and physically be in proximity to it. By implicating the visitor bodily with her work, they have relational, vulnerable experiences.

Conclusion

This essay has explained the physical aspects of somatic embodiment and meaning making, mapping how they can be used in a colonial and anti colonial context. It has then demonstrated how the physical conditions created as part of Candice Lin's exhibitions implicate the exhibition visitor's body to challenge their feelings of authority and hierarchy through the senses, proximity and physical immersion. This is a physical experience rather than abstract, intellectual or representational. It maps out how meaning is made through physical experiences.

In *g/hosti*, the visitors' sense of scale and immersion were disrupted as they wound their way through the maze. In *Pigs & Poison*, the exhibition visitor was both physically and virtually immersed in a world where they were faced with the history of Chinese migrants. The exhibition utilised smell as a valuable sense in its wax and lard paintings and the projectiles made of lard, wax, oil and bone-black

pigment which were fired by the trebuchet. In Natural History, the visitor again experienced the bodily consequence of the exhibition smell of decomposition.

This essay doesn't claim that installation art which disrupts the colonial sensorium is inherently anti colonial or creates an anti colonial effect, but that it creates those conditions. Through positioning the visitor in a position of bodily exposure, the work undermines the mastery and power typically afforded by art whose bodily experience works within the colonial sensorium, but it doesn't automatically create anti colonial art or an anti colonial experience.

Although Candice Lin is the exemplar of these tools in installation practice, these practices can be used and applied by many other artists. This can be seen in the sensory, immersive and spatial experience of Joseph Beuys' *Fonds* and in the sensory elements and position of the audience in his performance work, such as *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and *Plight*. The physical, sensory and bodily conditions outlined in this essay can also be experienced in Richard Wilson's *20:50*, in the disorientation and smell created by the oil. I would analyse this in a longer essay. However, the wider context of their place in anti colonial work would also be analysed, such as how Beuys *does* propose answers to society's issues in his work, taking an authoritative hierarchical stance albeit arguably anti colonial, and how *20:50* is an installation which disrupts the colonial sensorium but doesn't embody other anti colonial values and is merely superficial in experience.

The practices demonstrated in this essay can be applied to wider experiences. Central to indigenous philosophy is that learning must take place in relation with the land, community and without hierarchy. Lin's installation work and other embodied experiences, with art or anything else, could help practice relationality and anti hierarchy. This would deconstruct colonial values and help people somatically, not just intellectually, practice and understand anti colonial values.

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