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Curating Dissent: Indigenous Artistic Interventions as Counter-Narratives in Settler-Colonial Archives

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A B S T R A C T

Settler-colonial archives have historically functioned as instruments of state power, perpetuating narratives that erase or marginalize Indigenous peoples' histories, knowledges, and sovereignties. This study investigated the growing phenomenon of contemporary Indigenous artistic interventions within these institutions, framing them as critical acts of "curating dissent" that challenge the archival claim to objective truth. This research employed a qualitative, comparative case study methodology to analyze three distinct, institutionally-sanctioned artistic interventions in major settler-colonial archives in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand between 2020 and 2024. A multi-modal data collection strategy included visual analysis of the artworks, textual analysis of archival records, and thematic analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with artists, curators, and community members. The analysis revealed three primary strategies of intervention: (1) "Re-contextualization and Juxtaposition," which disrupts colonial classifications by placing Indigenous epistemologies alongside archival records; (2) "Embodied Knowledge and Affective Encounters," which uses performance and sensory elements to reanimate ancestral connections within the archive; and (3) "Digital Sovereignty and Archival Remixing," which leverages digital tools to reclaim and re-narrate colonial documents. Institutional responses ranged from enthusiastic collaboration to forms of negotiated resistance and containment. In conclusion, within the specific context of sanctioned projects, Indigenous artistic interventions function as potent decolonial practices that create new spaces for Indigenous knowledge and memory to flourish. This study proposes the concept of "Archival Acupuncture," a theoretical framework for understanding how these targeted, therapeutic interventions can systemically alter the narrative body of the archive to foster restorative justice. These acts signal a critical shift, demanding archives become active partners in a more just future.

1. Introduction

The archive in the settler-colonial context has long been understood not as a neutral repository of historical fact, but as a technology of governance and a key apparatus in the architecture of colonial power.[1] Institutions such as national archives, state libraries, and ethnographic museums were established to collect, classify, and preserve the records of colonial administration and settlement.[2] In doing so, they enacted a form of epistemological violence, systematically erasing, misrepresenting, or pathologizing Indigenous peoples, their knowledge systems, and their experiences of colonization. As articulated by scholars like Ann Laura Stoler, the colonial archive was fundamentally an "instrument of rule," where the very grain of the paper and the ink of

the ledger inscribed the logic of dispossession.[3] The documents held within—treaties, maps, census data, and ethnographic photographs—were curated to legitimize the settler state while framing Indigenous peoples as relics of the past or subjects to be managed.[4] This curated silence has had profound consequences, used to deny land rights and undermine Indigenous sovereignty by positioning the colonial narrative as the sole authoritative version of history. For many Indigenous communities, the archive remains a site of trauma, a collection of documents chronicling their own subjugation. In recent decades, this paradigm has been challenged from multiple fronts. Critical archival studies have deconstructed the myth of archival neutrality, exposing the power dynamics inherent in preservation.[5] Concurrently, a powerful movement towards decolonizing institutions has gained momentum, demanding that archives confront their colonial legacies. It is crucial, however, to recognize that this shift is not entirely new, nor is it driven solely by external pressure. For decades, internal critiques from activist archivists and sustained pressure from community leaders have created fissures within these monolithic structures, leading to the development of new policies around repatriation, consultation, and collaborative curation. These internal reform efforts, while often slow and fraught with contradiction, form a complex and sometimes contested backdrop for the more visible artistic interventions that are the focus of this study.[6]

It is at the confluence of these critical turns—and in dialogue with a longer history of artistic institutional critique from the 20th century—that the Indigenous artistic intervention has emerged as a particularly potent form of activism.[7] Diverging from earlier forms of institutional critique that often focused on the economic or ideological underpinnings of the Western museum, these Indigenous-led interventions are rooted in specific claims to sovereignty, kinship, and epistemological justice. Contemporary Indigenous artists have begun to engage directly with settler-colonial archives not as passive researchers, but as active agents of change.[8] They enter these highly regulated spaces to disrupt their logic, challenge their authority, and reanimate the records they contain. Using a diverse array of media, these artists "write back" to the archive.[9] They seek not to erase the colonial narrative, but to expose its artifice and juxtapose it with the enduring truths of Indigenous knowledge. These interventions function as powerful counter-narratives that contest and subvert dominant master narratives. By inserting Indigenous voices, bodies, aesthetics, and epistemologies into the heart of the archive, artists perform a kind of institutional critique that is at once deeply personal, politically charged, and epistemologically transformative.[10] They curate dissent, creating the potential to transform the archive from a tomb of static records into a vibrant forum for dialogue, memory, and justice.

The primary aim of this study was to conduct a systematic and comparative analysis of the strategies, impacts, and conceptual underpinnings of Indigenous artistic interventions within settler-colonial archives. While individual interventions have been the subject of art criticism, a broader, multi-sited investigation into the methodologies and theoretical implications of this practice was found to be lacking in the existing literature. This study sought to identify and categorize the primary techniques employed by Indigenous artists to generate counter-narratives and to evaluate the complex institutional responses they elicit. By moving beyond a purely aesthetic analysis, the research aimed to understand these interventions as a critical form of decolonial praxis with significant implications for archival theory and curatorial practice. The novelty of this research is threefold. First, it introduces a comparative framework that examines interventions across different national contexts (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) and artistic modalities, allowing for the identification of transnational patterns in the decolonization of archival spaces. Second, it synthesizes the findings into a new theoretical framework termed "Archival Acupuncture." This concept is proposed to articulate how targeted, precise artistic interventions can have a systemic impact on the larger "body" of the archive, targeting specific points of colonial narrative blockage to release suppressed histories and reactivate dormant flows of Indigenous knowledge. This framework

provides a new language for understanding the mechanics of sanctioned interventions beyond simple "disruption," framing them as acts of therapeutic and restorative justice. Finally, the study's reliance on a rich dataset including multi-stakeholder interviews provides a polyvocal perspective that captures the complexities, negotiations, and affective dimensions of this work.

2. Methods

This study was designed as a qualitative, multi-sited comparative case study. This methodological approach was selected for its suitability in conducting an in-depth, context-rich investigation of complex social phenomena. A comparative design was chosen to facilitate a nuanced exploration of how different colonial histories and institutional cultures shape the practice and reception of archival interventions. The selection of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand was deliberate. While all three are English-speaking settler-colonial nations, they represent distinct trajectories of Indigenous-state relations. The presence of historical treaties in Canada and New Zealand creates a different legal and political context for negotiating sovereignty compared to Australia, where treaty processes are largely absent at the federal level. Comparing these contexts allows for an analysis of how these foundational legal differences may influence both artistic strategies and institutional anxieties. This comparative lens enables the study to move beyond a single narrative and identify both transnational solidarities and locally contingent practices in the global movement to decolonize archives. Three cases of Indigenous artistic intervention were purposefully selected based on a set of predetermined criteria: (1) the intervention occurred between 2020 and 2024; (2) it took place within a major national or state-level archival institution; (3) the artist self-identifies as Indigenous; (4) the cases represent a diversity of artistic media; and (5) the intervention was officially sanctioned or temporarily permitted by the host institution. This final criterion is a crucial and deliberate methodological choice that defines the scope of this study. It is essential to acknowledge that this creates a significant selection bias. This study focuses exclusively on the dynamics of negotiation, collaboration, and containment that occur when artists and institutions agree to work together. It systematically excludes the entire spectrum of unsanctioned, "guerilla," or antagonistic archival interventions, such as data leaks, artistic acts of sabotage, or protests that operate in a mode of outright refusal.

The inclusion of such cases would undoubtedly lead to a different, likely more conflict-oriented, theoretical framework. Therefore, the findings and the "Archival Acupuncture" model presented herein are not intended to represent the totality of Indigenous archival activism, but rather to provide a deep analysis of the specific, complex, and often contradictory dynamics that unfold at the authorized intersection of Indigenous art and the colonial archive. The three selected cases were: Case A: The Digital Weave (Canada): A 2022 AR project by Anishinaabe artists overlaying oral histories on digitized treaties. Case B: Classified Living (Australia): A 2023 installation by a Wiradjuri artist juxtaposing Indigenous objects and knowledge with misidentified museum artifacts. Case C: Breathing into the Silence (New Zealand): A 2024 series of tolerated performance pieces by Māori artists reanimating ancestral photographs through sound and breath. The research adhered to principles of Indigenous research methodologies by centering Indigenous perspectives and protocols. As a team of Indigenous and settler-allied scholars, we acknowledge our own positionalities and the power dynamics inherent in academic research. Our engagement was guided by a commitment to reciprocity and a relational ethics model. Formal ethics approval was obtained from our institution, and all research protocols were developed in consultation with the participating artists and their communities. Informed consent was an ongoing process, and all participants were given full control over the attribution and use of their words. In line with OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) principles, all interview data remains the intellectual property of the participants, and its use in this publication has been explicitly approved.

A multi-modal data collection strategy was employed over an 18-month period. Data sources included: (1) Visual and Material Analysis of high-resolution documentation of each intervention; (2) Archival and Textual Analysis of a corpus of related documents, from colonial records to institutional press releases; and (3) Semi-Structured Interviews with 25 key stakeholders, including artists (n=5), curators/archivists (n=6), Indigenous community members (n=9), and non-Indigenous visitors (n=5). All data were analyzed using a three-phase thematic analysis approach. During the analysis of interview data, particularly with institutional actors, we maintained a critical reflexivity, remaining attentive to how institutional narratives of progress and collaboration can sometimes mask underlying structural resistance or serve public relations functions. The emergent themes were developed through an iterative process, and were then synthesized and interpreted in relation to critical archival studies, postcolonial theory, and Indigenous studies, leading to the conceptualization of the study's central theoretical framework.

3. Results and Discussion

This strategy, most prominent in Case B, involved artists actively disrupting the archival logic of classification by inserting Indigenous interpretations directly alongside colonial records. This act of juxtaposition created a dialogic space where the colonial narrative was forced into direct confrontation with the Indigenous perspective it sought to erase. For example, a carved wooden object labeled in 1910 as a "Primitive Ritualistic Bludgeon" was juxtaposed with a 3D-printed replica and a new label written by a Wiradjuri Elder, identifying it as a "Gwayal (message stick)" and stating, "The story you were told was wrong". An artist stated the goal was to show the archive as "a place of arguments". This was effective, with one visitor noting, "The juxtaposition made the museum’s authority feel... fragile". Figure 1 provides a detailed schematic and graphical analysis of the study's primary finding, "Re-contextualization and Juxtaposition," as exemplified by the artistic intervention in Case B, "Classified Living." This visual model is not merely illustrative; it functions as an analytical tool that deconstructs the core semiotic and political conflict enacted by the artist within the institutional space of the settler-colonial archive. The figure's binary structure, organized into two distinct columns, visually represents the fundamental epistemological chasm between the colonial archive and the Indigenous counter-narrative. The left column, "Settler-Colonial Archive Classification," rendered in muted, aged tones reminiscent of archival paper, encapsulates the historical process of misrepresentation. In contrast, the right column, "Indigenous Artistic Intervention & Re-Classification," presented in vibrant, living colors, signifies the assertion of contemporary, living knowledge and cultural continuity. A central, pulsating arrow connects each pair, symbolizing the active, directional, and transformative process of the intervention—a deliberate act of re-narrating the past to reclaim the future. The figure systematically breaks down three distinct instances of this juxtapositional strategy, each targeting a different facet of colonial misrepresentation. The first row analyzes the transformation of "Object A-01," labeled by the archive as a "Primitive Ritualistic Bludgeon." This classification is a potent example of colonial framing, imposing a narrative of inherent violence and irrational superstition onto the object. The term "primitive" serves to locate Indigenous peoples in a savage past, while "bludgeon" reduces a multifaceted tool to an instrument of brute force. The artistic intervention directly contests this by re-inscribing the object's true name, Gwayal, and its function as a "Message Stick." This is not a simple correction but a profound epistemological shift. The intervention reframes the object as a sophisticated instrument of diplomacy, literacy, and inter-tribal law—a "document" in its own right. This act dismantles the colonial stereotype and replaces it with a narrative of complex social and political organization. The second row examines the colonial dismissal of Indigenous knowledge and labor through the classification of "Object B-04" as a "Crude Native Carry-all." The pejorative adjective "crude" implies a lack of skill, while "carry-all" reduces a culturally significant item to its

most generic utilitarian function. This label effectively erases the deep ecological knowledge of plant fibers, the complex ancestral weaving techniques, and the central role of the object in women's lives and knowledge systems. The intervention re-centers the object as a Guman (Coolamon), a multi-purpose vessel essential for carrying everything from water to infants. By highlighting the "ecological knowledge and ancestral weaving techniques," the artist makes the invisible labor and intellect embedded in the object visible once more, asserting its place within a sophisticated cultural and technological matrix. Finally, the third row addresses the colonial negation of Indigenous science. The archival classification of "Object C-11" as "Aboriginal Game Pieces or Charms" relegates a complex intellectual tool to the realm of children's play or irrational superstition. This act of labeling is a subtle but powerful form of intellectual dispossession, denying the existence of Indigenous scientific rationalism. The intervention's re-classification of the objects as "Stone Sky-Knowledge" exposes them as integral components of a mnemotechnical system for tracking astronomy and seasonal calendars.[11] This reframing is a powerful assertion that Indigenous peoples have always possessed complex scientific traditions.

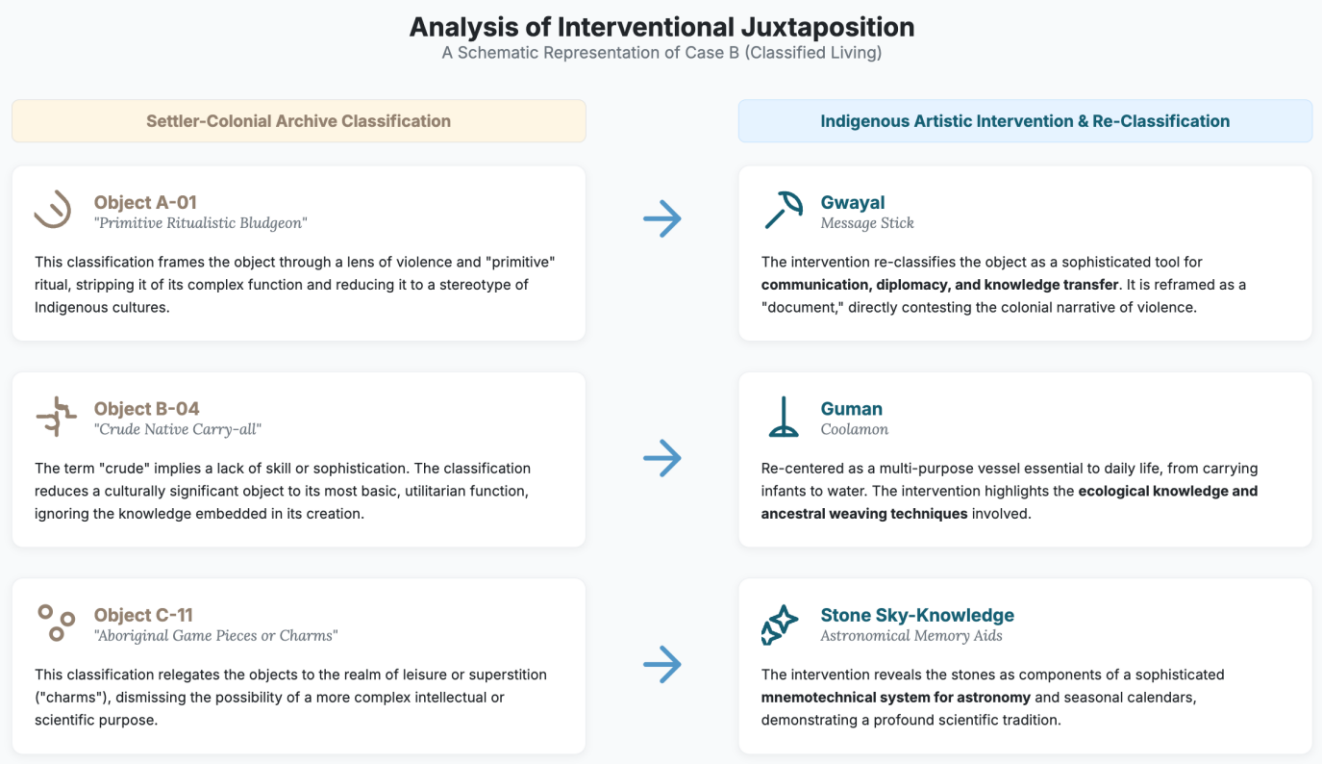

Figure 1. Analysis of interventional juxtaposition in Case B (Classified Living).

This theme, powerfully illustrated in Case C, highlights the use of performance, sound, and presence to reanimate the archive and transform it into a space of living connection. In a series of unannounced performances, Māori artists used taonga pūoro (traditional instruments) and recited whakapapa (genealogy) in front of photographs of their ancestors, breaking the enforced silence of the reading room. One performer described the act as "breathing life back into that space... reminding my ancestor... that we are still here". A curator noted the effect: "It wasn't research anymore; it was reunion". This

strategy introduces an affective and sensory dimension that the dispassionate logic of the archive cannot contain. Figure 2 presents a schematic deconstruction of the key elements identified in the performance-based intervention of Case C, "Breathing into the Silence." This graphical analysis serves to anatomize the multi-layered strategy of "Embodied Knowledge and Affective Encounters," moving beyond a mere description of the performance to a deeper analysis of its constituent parts and their specific functions. The figure is structured as a four-quadrant grid, with each quadrant dedicated to a core component of the performance: Whakapapa (Genealogy), Taonga Pūoro (Instrumental Sound), Hā (Breath), and Gaze. This structure visually articulates how the artists wove together multiple sensory and conceptual layers to create a holistic and powerful counter-narrative. Each quadrant analyzes the specific Action undertaken by the performer, its profound Symbolic Meaning within both Māori epistemology and the archival context, and the documented Affective Response from observers, drawn from interview data. This analytical model reveals the performance not as a singular event, but as a meticulously choreographed suite of decolonial gestures designed to directly challenge and remedy the disembodied, sterile environment of the archive. The first quadrant, Whakapapa, examines the foundational act of reciting genealogy. The performer's action of audibly speaking the names of ancestors creates a direct, unbroken line from the individual in the 19th-century photograph to the living person in the 21st-century archive. This is a potent political and spiritual act. Symbolically, it functions to rescue the ancestor from archival anonymity—where they exist as a decontextualized ethnographic specimen—and re-inscribes them into a living, breathing network of kinship. It asserts that the person in the image is not a historical object but a *tūpuna*, an ancestor with ongoing responsibilities and relationships. The affective response, described by an observer as shattering "the illusion of historical distance," confirms the success of this strategy in collapsing the temporal and emotional gap that the archive is designed to maintain. The second and third quadrants, Taonga Pūoro and Hā, analyze the introduction of sound and breath, two elements fundamentally absent from the visual and textual logic of the archive. The playing of the *kōauau*, a traditional flute whose sound is intimately linked to the human voice, filled the enforced silence of the reading room.[12] This act is symbolic of re-infusing the space with Indigenous life, spirit, and a different mode of knowledge transmission—one based on oral and aural experience. Similarly, the offering of *Hā*, or breath, onto the glass separating the performer from the photograph is a deeply intimate gesture. In Māori cosmology, *Hā* is the essence of life. This simple, ephemeral act of fogging the glass was a direct, physical offering of life force, a momentary reunion that powerfully transgressed the archival boundary between the living and the recorded. Observers described these sensory inputs as making the "air feel thick with presence" and as an "act of profound intimacy," highlighting how non-textual interventions can fundamentally alter the affective climate of an institution. Finally, the fourth quadrant, Gaze, dissects the politics of looking within the archive. The colonial photograph is an artifact of a one-directional, non-reciprocal gaze, where the Indigenous subject is captured and objectified. The performer's final act of standing in silent, sustained gaze with the photograph is a powerful reversal. Symbolically, it transforms the colonial act of looking *at* into a decolonial act of seeing with.[13] It is an assertion of reciprocal recognition, a moment of communion between ancestor and descendant that challenges the extractive nature of the ethnographic gaze. The affective response of being made "acutely aware of the act of looking" reveals how the performance successfully politicized the seemingly neutral act of viewing archival materials. Taken together, the elements deconstructed in this figure demonstrate a sophisticated, embodied methodology for reanimating the archive, transforming it from a space of silent records into a site of living reunion.[14]

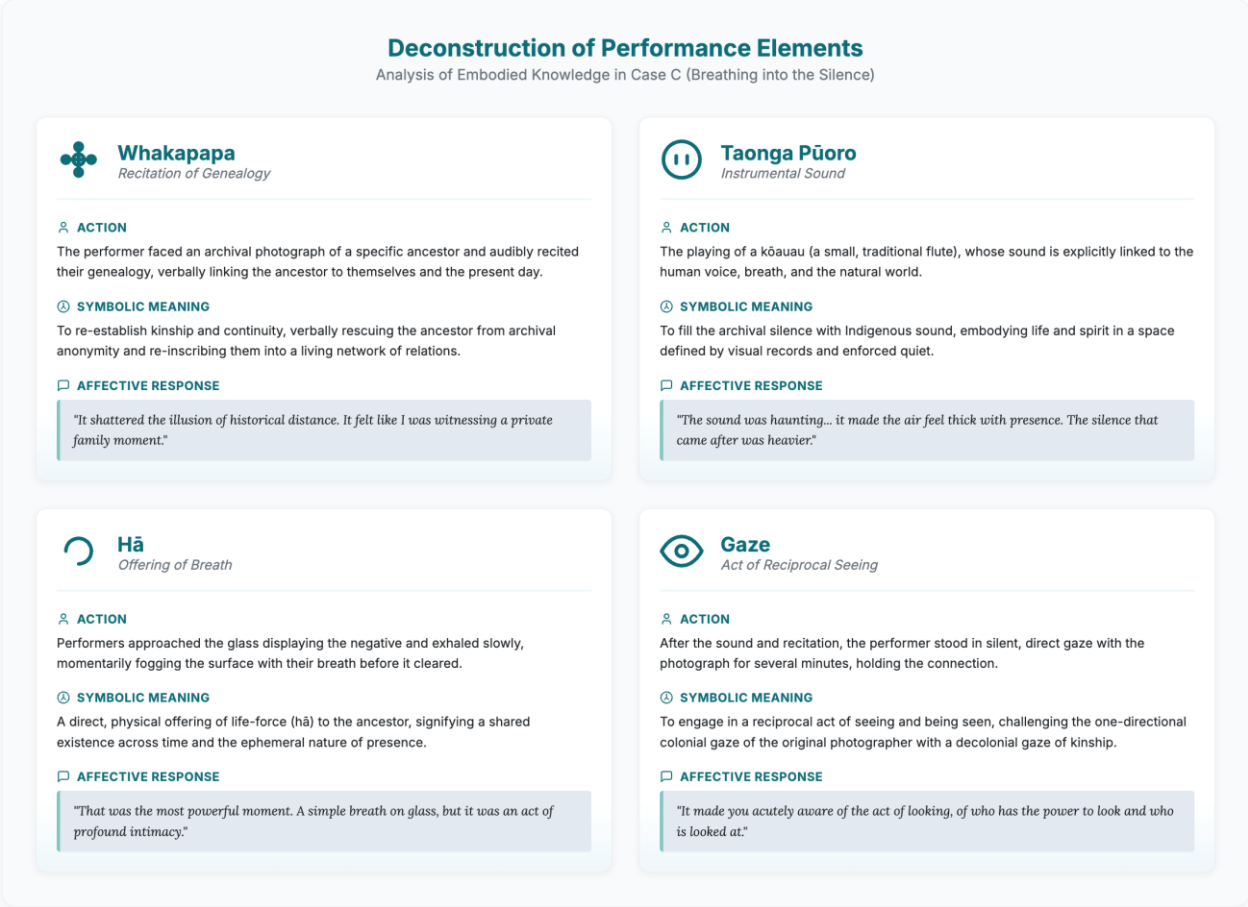

Figure 2. Deconstruction of performance elements in Case C (Breathing into the Silence).

This theme was central to Case A, where artists leveraged new media to assert digital sovereignty over their cultural heritage. The Anishinaabe artists' AR application created a new, Indigenous-controlled layer of information on top of digitized treaties. Animated beadwork patterns and audio recordings of Elders explaining the true meaning of the agreements in Anishinaabemowin were overlaid on the colonial document. The lead artist described this as an act of "re-weaving the story" and "digitally repatriating its meaning". The strategy powerfully asserted Indigenous interpretation without altering the "original" artifact, bypassing institutional anxieties about archival integrity. Figure 3 provides a graphical and schematic analysis of the augmented reality (AR) intervention detailed in Case A, "The Digital Weave." This figure visually deconstructs the methodology of "Digital Sovereignty and Archival Remixing" by illustrating how Indigenous-controlled digital layers are superimposed onto a static, colonial archival document. The layout is intentionally structured to emphasize the dynamic relationship between the fixed historical record and the fluid, multi-sensory counter-narrative deployed by the Anishinaabe artists.[15] At the center of the schematic sits a representation of the physical treaty document—a symbol of settler-colonial law and text-based authority. Flanking this central artifact are four distinct modules, each representing a specific AR "overlay." This design choice visually communicates the core strategy of the intervention: not to erase or alter the original document, but to envelop it in a web of Indigenous meaning, effectively re-contextualizing its authority and challenging its singular, monologic truth claim. Each of the four AR modules is designed to analyze a specific decolonial function. The modules are labeled with the conceptual target of the overlay—Land & Sovereignty, Economy & Reciprocity, Signatories & Kinship, and Authority &

Agreement—and specify which part of the colonial text is being targeted.[16] This detailed breakdown reveals the precise, almost surgical nature of the intervention. The artists did not apply a single, uniform critique; rather, they developed four distinct digital responses to four specific points of epistemological violence within the treaty text. For instance, the first overlay targets the legalistic language of "Cede, Release, Surrender," countering it with a visual layer of a Turtle Shell pattern (representing the continent as Turtle Island) and an audio layer of an Elder's voice clarifying the Anishinaabe understanding of shared stewardship. This directly contests the colonial concept of land as a transferable commodity. Furthermore, the schematic elucidates the multi-modal nature of the digital counter-narrative. Each module details both the Visual Overlay (what the user sees on their screen) and the Audio Layer (what the user hears), demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of how to engage audiences on multiple sensory levels. The digital intervention thus becomes more affectively resonant and epistemologically richer than the silent, static text it annotates.[17] For example, the final overlay targets the British Crown Seal, a potent symbol of unilateral colonial authority. The intervention covers this seal with an animated Wampum Belt—a symbol of Indigenous diplomatic technology and sacred, mutual agreement—accompanied by the sound of a drumbeat. This act of digital replacement is a powerful assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, arguing for a nation-to-nation relationship that the written document erases. Ultimately, Figure 3 serves as a critical analytical tool, mapping not only what the artists created but also how their digital intervention functions as a complex, multi-layered act of cognitive restructuring. It reveals how digital tools can be used to "re-weave" the historical record, challenging the primacy of the written word and digitally repatriating the meaning of cultural heritage held within the colonial archive.

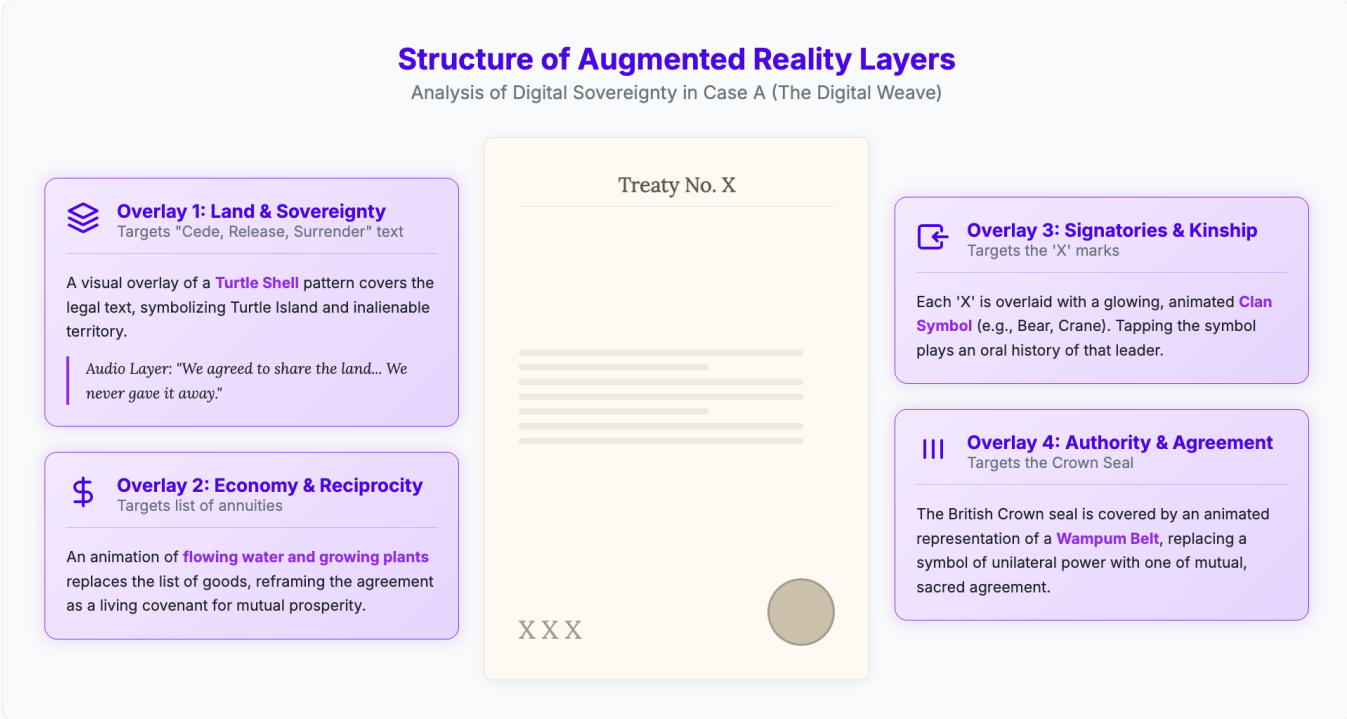

Figure 3. Structure of augmented reality layers in Case A (The Digital Weave).

Across all three cases, institutional responses were complex and multi-layered, never entirely open nor entirely closed. The interviews revealed a spectrum from collaboration to resistance. In Case B, an allied curator described her role as "running interference" to get the project approved. In Case A, archivists

expressed anxieties about the "ephemerality" of digital media and loss of control, a form of resistance cloaked in the language of professional standards. The response in Case C, "strategic inaction," is particularly revealing. A manager explained the decision not to enforce the rules against the performances as a way to allow something "authentic" to happen without bureaucratic delay. While this can be interpreted as a supportive, flexible response, it can also be read through a more critical lens as a subtle form of institutional power. By allowing a temporary, ephemeral performance to occur—one that leaves no permanent trace on the catalog or the archival structure—the institution effectively contains the dissent. It gains the appearance of being responsive and decolonial while avoiding any need for permanent, structural change. These varied responses indicate that while decolonial aspirations are present in institutional discourse, their practical implementation remains a site of significant friction, negotiation, and, at times, sophisticated containment. Figure 4 presents a schematic and analytical framework for understanding the spectrum of institutional responses to the sanctioned Indigenous artistic interventions examined in this study. This figure moves beyond a simplistic binary of "acceptance" or "rejection" to map a more nuanced and politically complex terrain of engagement. The three-column grid visually represents three distinct modes of institutional reaction that emerged from the interview data: Enthusiastic Collaboration, Bureaucratic Resistance, and Strategic Containment. Each column functions as a detailed analytical module, defining the response type, providing a direct evidentiary example from the case studies, and, most critically, interpreting the "Underlying Logic" that motivates the institutional behavior. This structure is designed to serve as a key interpretive tool, allowing for a deeper understanding of the power dynamics, professional anxieties, and strategic calculations that shape the reception of decolonial work within settler-colonial archives.[18] The first column, "Enthusiastic Collaboration," identifies the crucial role of individual allies within the institution. Characterized by active partnership and facilitation, this response is often driven by curators or archivists who see their professional goals as aligned with the decolonial aims of the artists. The quote from the curator in Case B—who saw her role as "running interference"—perfectly encapsulates this dynamic, highlighting how allies must often navigate internal institutional friction. This mode, while positive, underscores the degree to which successful collaboration can depend on the presence and political will of specific individuals rather than on broader, systemic institutional change. In stark contrast, the central column, "Bureaucratic Resistance," details a more oppositional, albeit often passive, form of engagement. This response is characterized not by outright refusal but by the deployment of professional standards, protocols, and policies as mechanisms of control. The archivist's concern in Case A about the "ephemerality" of digital media is a prime example of this logic. Framed as a neutral concern for archival "best practices," such resistance often masks a deeper institutional anxiety about ceding interpretive authority, engaging with non-traditional media, or setting new precedents that might challenge the archive's foundational principles of permanence and control. Perhaps the most analytically significant category is the third column, "Strategic Containment." This identifies a sophisticated managerial response that is neither overtly supportive nor oppositional. The manager's "calculated risk" in tolerating the unsanctioned performances in Case C exemplifies this strategy. By allowing a temporary, ephemeral intervention to proceed without formal approval, the institution gains the public relations benefit of appearing progressive and responsive. However, this strategy effectively contains the dissent by ensuring it leaves no permanent mark on the institution's policies or structures. The event is celebrated as authentic and powerful, but its impact is carefully managed to remain temporary and non-disruptive to the archive's core operations.[19] Together, these three categories provide a critical framework for analyzing the complex and often contradictory ways in which colonial institutions engage with decolonial challenges, revealing a landscape of negotiation and containment that is far more intricate than it may first appear.

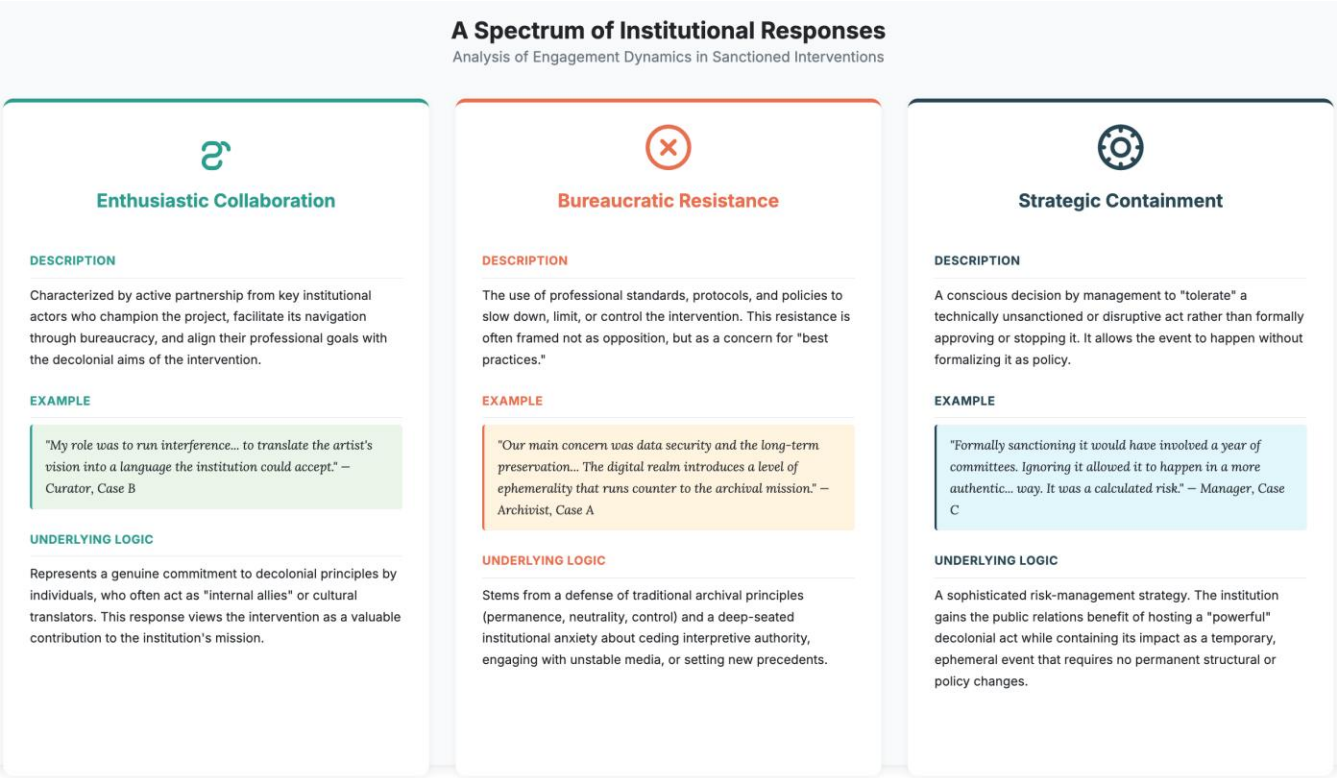

Figure 4. Analysis of institutional responses to interventions.

The results of this comparative study provide compelling evidence that Indigenous artistic interventions are a sophisticated and potent form of decolonial praxis. These interventions move far beyond mere institutional critique; they are generative acts of world-building that actively create counter-narratives within the very structures designed to suppress them. However, a critical discussion requires grappling with the theoretical language we use to describe these acts and acknowledging the profound complexities of power at play. Figure 5 provides the central theoretical framework of this study, presenting a schematic model of "Archival Acupuncture." This figure synthesizes the entirety of the research findings into a cohesive, tripartite visual argument that is designed to be both analytically rigorous and conceptually intuitive. It moves beyond a simple presentation of data to offer a theoretical interpretation of the underlying mechanics of sanctioned decolonial practice within the archive. The structure is organized around three core columns, visually articulating a causal and restorative process: the diagnosis of specific Archival Pathologies (center), the application of targeted Artistic Interventions (left), and the achievement of specific Restorative Outcomes (right). By framing the archival institution as a body politic afflicted by the chronic conditions of colonialism, and the artistic interventions as precise, therapeutic "needles," this model offers a new vocabulary for understanding how Indigenous artists are not merely critiquing the archive, but actively working to heal the historical record. The central column, "The Archival Body: Identified Pathologies," functions as the diagnostic core of the model. Rendered in a clinical red and set against an aged, paper-like background, this column identifies the three primary systemic ailments of the settler-colonial archive that emerged from our analysis. These are not isolated issues but interconnected symptoms of a deeper colonial logic. Narrative Monoculture refers to the violent and systematic exclusion of Indigenous epistemologies to uphold a single, authoritative colonial history. Affective Sterility describes the archive's enforced atmosphere of emotional detachment, which severs the kinship and spiritual

connections essential to Indigenous ways of knowing. Finally, Textual Supremacy denotes the privileging of the written colonial document as the sole form of valid evidence, thereby dismissing the authority of oral history, performance, and material culture. These three pathologies represent the points of blockage where colonial power is most concentrated and where historical harm is continuously reproduced. Branching from these diagnoses are the two outer columns, which detail the therapeutic process. On the left, "Artistic Intervention (The Needle)," rendered in a precise, clinical blue, outlines the three primary artistic strategies identified in the case studies. Each strategy is presented as a specific "needle" designed to target a corresponding pathology. Re-contextualization directly treats Narrative Monoculture; Embodied Knowledge addresses Affective Sterility; and Digital Sovereignty challenges Textual Supremacy. The connecting arrows visually represent the intentionality of these acts—they are not random protests but are akin to a knowledgeable practitioner applying a specific treatment to a specific ailment. On the right, the "Restorative Outcome (The Effect)" column, rendered in a restorative green, articulates the result of each successful intervention. These outcomes are not merely the inverse of the pathologies but represent the generation of a new, healthier archival state. The application of Re-contextualization leads to Epistemological Pluralism, a state where the archive is forced to hold multiple, competing truths. The performance of Embodied Knowledge fosters Affective Reconnection, transforming the archive from a site of sterile extraction into a space for reunion and witnessing. The assertion of Digital Sovereignty results in Narrative Multivocality, creating a polyvocal record where oral, digital, and material knowledge hold equal weight to the written text. This final column demonstrates that the ultimate goal of these interventions is not simply to deconstruct the old archival order, but to actively construct a new one—one that is more plural, more affective, and more just. Ultimately, the figure serves as a comprehensive theoretical map, illustrating a decolonial praxis that is at once diagnostic, strategic, and profoundly generative.

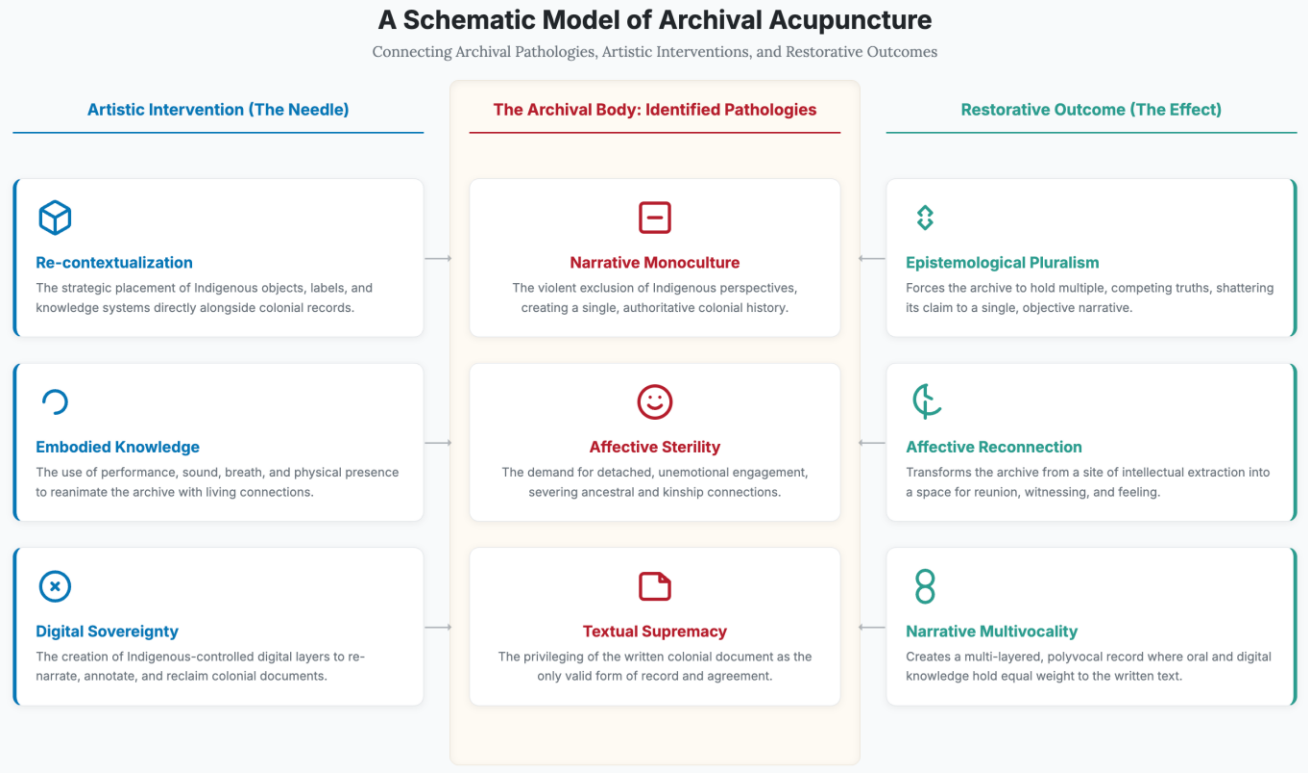

Figure 5. A schematic model of archival acupuncture.

To fully grasp the interventions' significance, it is useful to diagnose the underlying mechanisms by which the colonial archive enacts harm, a process this paper initially frames as its "pathophysiology". The archive functions as a machine that produces colonial "truth," creating a "narrative monoculture" that violently excludes Indigenous knowledge. This harm is affective and somatic, enforcing an emotional sterility that demands disembodiment from Indigenous peoples. However, it is crucial to approach this medical metaphor with critical self-reflection. While the language of "pathology," "symptoms," and "treatment" is rhetorically powerful for conveying systemic harm, it risks depoliticizing what is fundamentally a political struggle. A "pathology" suggests an illness to be cured, rather than an apparatus of power purposefully designed to uphold the settler state. This framing can obscure the agency and intent behind colonial structures, recasting political problems of sovereignty, land, and power as technical problems of institutional health. Therefore, while we use the language of therapy and healing in the following sections to analyze the effects of the artworks, we do so cautiously, understanding that these are metaphors for a political process of contestation, not a clinical procedure. The strategies observed in the results are best understood as targeted political acts. The "dialogic therapy" of re-contextualization (Case B) shatters the archive's monologue. By forcing conflicting narratives into the same space, it performs an act of epistemological pluralism that reveals the monologic certainty of the museum as a political choice, not an objective state. The somatic healing of embodiment (Case C) is a direct political challenge to the archive's enforced disembodiment. The introduction of breath, sound, and kinship is a reassertion of an Indigenous sensorium, a way of knowing and being that the institution was designed to sever.[20] It is an act of re-membering the living community to the fragmented record of the ancestor. Finally, the cognitive restructuring of digital sovereignty (Case A) is a political act of reclaiming narrative control. It connects directly to Indigenous data sovereignty, asserting the right to control one's own information and challenge the state's monopoly on the historical record.

This study's central theoretical offering is the framework of "Archival Acupuncture". Within the specific context of the institutionally-sanctioned cases studied here, this model helps to explain how precise, often subtle interventions can have systemic effects. It posits the archive as a body politic, with colonialism as a chronic condition creating blockages in the flow of knowledge. The interventions act as "needles" applied to specific "acupoints"—a miswritten label, an enforced silence, a deceptive treaty text—to release these blockages. This framework offers a vocabulary of "balance, flow, and restoration" that captures the stated intent of many artists engaged in this type of work, recognizing them as "healers" with a deep understanding of the archive's ills. However, it is imperative to interrogate the limits of this metaphor. "Archival Acupuncture" is not a universal theory for all forms of decolonial action. Its therapeutic and healing connotations presuppose a particular set of conditions that were met in our case studies: institutional permission and a degree of shared, if contested, space. The metaphor implies a consensual relationship akin to that between a practitioner and patient, which does not reflect the fundamentally antagonistic relationship between Indigenous peoples and the colonial state/archive. For unsanctioned, guerrilla, or more confrontational acts, other frameworks are more appropriate. A model of "Archival Insurgency" or "Trickster Hermeneutics" might better describe acts of refusal and disruption that do not seek to "heal" the institution but to undermine its legitimacy. A framework of "Archival Hacking" could apply to digital acts that expropriate and redeploy archival data without permission. The "Acupuncture" model is thus proposed here as a specific theory for a specific mode of engagement: the negotiated, sanctioned intervention. Its primary utility is in helping us understand the complex and often paradoxical results that emerge when dissent is curated in partnership with the very institution being critiqued.

Finally, any analysis of sanctioned interventions must grapple with the risk of institutional co-optation. The discussion of "strategic inaction" in the results

hints at the capacity for archival institutions to absorb and neutralize critique. By welcoming Indigenous artists, institutions can "perform" decolonization for a public audience, gaining legitimacy and the appearance of being progressive without making substantive structural changes to hiring practices, repatriation policies, or governance. The artistic intervention, in this cynical view, can become a "decolonial PR" asset, an ephemeral event that creates goodwill but leaves the underlying power structures untouched. The artists and curators interviewed were acutely aware of this risk, often speaking of a constant, exhausting process of negotiation to ensure their work was not tokenized. This highlights that the success of these interventions is not guaranteed; they exist in a precarious space between authentic transformation and institutional recuperation.

4. Conclusion

This research has systematically investigated the ways in which contemporary Indigenous artists are engaging with and transforming settler-colonial archives through institutionally sanctioned interventions. The study demonstrated that these are sophisticated political, intellectual, and spiritual acts of decolonization. Through strategic practices of re-contextualization, embodied performance, and digital reclamation, these artists curate dissent against the colonial narrative. They expose the archive as a site of power and argument and boldly insert Indigenous epistemologies into its very core. The principal contribution of this manuscript is the conceptualization of "Archival Acupuncture," a theoretical framework specifically designed to articulate how these precise, targeted interventions can stimulate systemic change within the context of negotiated projects. This concept provides a lens to understand these practices as restorative and healing, designed to unblock colonial narratives and reactivate suppressed flows of Indigenous knowledge. However, this study also acknowledges the limits of this therapeutic model and the profound risks of institutional co-optation that accompany such sanctioned work. Ultimately, the interventions examined here signal a critical shift. While their long-term transformative power remains an open question, they undeniably create crucial, vibrant spaces of encounter and contestation. They demand that institutions move beyond being passive keepers of a violent past and become active, accountable partners in a more just and truthful future. The work of these artists proves that the archive need not be a mausoleum; it can be a site for the difficult but necessary work of truth-telling, and a platform from which powerful counter-narratives can emerge to reshape our collective understanding of history.

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