

Lowriding as Social
Form: Anishinaabe
Grandfather Teachings as
Decolonial Vehicles
of Resistance

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.

**–Franz Fanon,
*The Wretched of the Earth***

In the spring of 2011, in East Lansing, Michigan, artist Dylan Miner organized a series of workshops that brought together high school youth, college students, and traditional elders to build a group of seven lowrider bikes (fig. 1). This was the beginning of Miner’s ongoing art project *Native Kids Ride Bikes*, a series of workshops wherein Anishinaabe cultural teachings were used as inspiration for the bikes’ designs. Taking place over a six-month period, the first iteration of the project convened the intergenerational group to learn about the history and culture of the Anishinaabe people, who are from the Great Lakes area. The lowrider bike is a form Miner first learned about as a youngster in rural Michigan; he built bikes with his friends, and they would go cruising through their neighborhood, showing off their accomplishments.



fig. 1 Dylan Miner. *Native Kids Ride Bikes*. 2011: installation view at the LookOut! Gallery, Michigan State University, September 2011; Multimedia installation consisting of seven custom-built lowrider bikes.

It is this collective spirit that Miner evokes in Native Kids, using the lowrider bike as a mechanism to not only build community but also—through the use of people-powered vehicles—to help youth think about issues of environmental degradation and the role they play in creating a sustainable future. In September 2011, after the conclusion of the workshops, the bikes were exhibited at Michigan State University's LookOut! Gallery (fig. 1).

Miner's workshops and the lowrider bikes in Native Kids operate as parts of a socially engaged decolonial process in which historical and cultural teachings are used as tools to resist cultural disintegration and reintroduce cultural knowledge that was once an integrated part of everyday life but has nearly been lost. Implementing such strategies, artists like Miner use their artwork in a process of recovering traditional cosmologies and spiritualities while remaining grounded in the contemporary realities of detribalization, displacement, and globalization.

To define a socially engaged decolonial practice, I use the following approach: I first explore how Native Kids connects participants with a worldview premised on sustainability, one in which humans, living creatures, and the physical environment are understood as interconnected, thus allowing participants to consider the importance of people-powered vehicles as alternatives to fossil fuel-burning modes of transportation that pollute the environment. Second, I examine Miner's methodology of visiting, which involves workshops that bring youth participants together with elders to create a space of collaboration, conversation, and making in which everyone is able to contribute to the design and construction of the bikes. Lastly, I show how these workshops establish a decolonial pedagogy through the use of The Seven Grandfathers, a set of Anishinaabe teachings that define how humans should live with each other. Together, these practices generate a dialogue among participants about traditional indigenous culture, the ways in which it has been disrupted, and how it is being reaffirmed through their work.

Decolonization is a process that actively challenges coloniality, which social critic María Lugones has described as the reduction of indigenous people to a racial classification that renders them as less than human beings.¹ This process has produced a society in which Western culture has been privileged over the indigenous cultures of the Americas. As indigenous scholar Gerald Taiaiake Alfred argues, this disconnection from culture

is the precursor to disintegration, and the deculturing of our people is most evident in the violence and self-destruction that are the central realities of a colonized existence and

the most visible face of the discord colonialism has wrought in indigenous lives over the years.²

¹ Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 745.

² Gerald Taisiaske Alfred, "Colonialism and State Dependency," *Journal of Aboriginal Health* 5, no. 2 (2009): 12.

To counteract the effects of the violence and dehumanization that has destabilized indigenous people's lives, Miner engages the help of elders, who introduce participating youth to Anishinaabe history and sacred teachings as a form of cultural recovery. Miner's research thus becomes a participatory pedagogy.

Native Kids originated through an Artist Leadership research grant that Miner received in 2010 from the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. For two weeks, he conducted research on indigenous modes of transportation that were used in the Great Lakes and plains areas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The intention of his research was to learn how his ancestors traveled before fossil fuel-burning cars and coal-burning trains were introduced to the areas. Two revelations of his research were the use of the birchbark, a canoe made of birch bark used by the Anishinaabe to travel the Great Lakes, and the prevalence of the Red River cart (fig. 2), built by the Métis, indigenous people of the Red River territory near Manitoba, Canada. The all-wooden cart was used through most of the nineteenth century on the Canadian prairie and northern plains of the United States to haul buffalo meat and hides during yearly hunts.³ It was this research that inspired Miner's Native Kids. Although connections between the cart and the lowrider bike might not be readily apparent, they share some basic features. Both are simple, two-wheeled machines that do not require a fuel-powered engine. They are easy to take apart and put back together, easy to repair and customize. Both are inspired by European means of transportation but are upgraded with indigenous materials. Lastly, both are slow-moving vehicles that allow passengers to experience their surroundings. Based on these similarities, Miner used the Red River cart as a model for the lowrider bikes and for teaching young people about living in a way that doesn't harm the environment.

³ Dylan Miner, artist statement, from the exhibition *Native Kids Ride Bikes*, LookOut! Gallery, East Lansing, MI, September 2011.

As models of environmental sustainability, the bikes were the project's starting point. But Miner didn't select just any bikes. He chose to incorporate the lowrider bikes that he learned to build with neighborhood friends in his youth. These bikes have their origins in Chicano car clubs, whose members work together to customize



fig. 2 Ernest Brown, *Red River Cart and Driver*, c. 1860s.

fig. 3 Youth participants assembling one of the seven lowrider bikes built during the workshop. Photo: Dylan Miner.

lowrider cars that they use to go cruising and show off their artistic skills at competitions. This process of collective making inspired the emergence of the lowrider bike as an alternative for those too young to drive cars. Like the cars, these bikes are built by small groups or clubs that go cruising through their neighborhoods to show off their work. For Miner, Chicano lowriding is “an Indigenous way of moving through the world, that contrasts the speed needed to succeed in the contemporary capitalist world.”⁴ Lowriding provides youth with a way of experiencing the world that isn’t focused on moving through life as fast as possible. Instead, the bikes’ slow pace inspires riders to use their bodies to power their vehicles and to take time to experience the world around them. Miner captures this collaborative spirit of making through workshops in which students learn to design and build a series of bikes and learn about a way of making art in which experience is an important part of the making.

⁴ Dylan Miner, *Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding across Turtle Island* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 3.

Native Kids participates in the field of contemporary art known as socially engaged art or social practice. These genres are not solely concerned with the creation of objects but use the processes of collective discussion and collaborative making as forms of active engagement, resulting in experiences that become part of the artwork (fig. 3). In this manner, the workshops provide a space where aesthetics are explored through hands-on experiences that include conversations about Anishinaabe cultural materials and forms like the deer hide drum, the Métis panel bag, peyote stitch beading, and leather working. Participants had the opportunity to adapt these traditional forms and create decorations that use the objects and the values they embody to enhance not only the appearance of the bikes but their meaning. Through this pedagogical relationship with making, participants engaged with each other while learning about the history of these crafts and how they relate to people’s everyday lives.

In this spirit of collaborative making, Miner incorporates his “methodology of visiting.” He defines this as an approach of meeting people and spending time with them, understanding their perspectives, and paying special attention to the knowledge elders contribute while engaging in conversation and collaboration.⁵ This process has its origins in a 2007 oral-history project that Miner led in Detroit, which consisted of a series of group interviews with retired Anishinaabe autoworkers. Elders in the group raised the topic of community building, emphasizing that the social practices of visiting and gathering that once represented a central part of tribal life have nearly been lost. This rupture followed the disintegration of social bonds brought about by the decentralization of the

Anishinaabe people. The elders' critique of contemporary society inspired Miner to develop the "methodology of visiting," which he translates into praxis by hosting workshops or intimate gatherings to create constructed situations and activities that foster convivial spaces where people can come together, get to know each other, and build community. Artist and author Pablo Helguera defines this type of work within the tradition of conceptual process art, characterized by "its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence."⁶ Critic Claire Bishop, furthermore, ties this history to an aspiration to free the public from "the dominant ideological order—be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship."⁷ She explains that artists respond to such issues through participatory practices that aim "to restore and realize a communal collective space of social engagement."⁸ This form of artistic intervention brings the act of making into everyday spaces, such as schools, where participants become co-creators.

⁵ Dylan T. Miner, "Makataimeshekiakisk, Settler Colonialism, and The Specter of Indigenous Liberation," in *Re-collecting Black Hawk: Landscape, Memory, and Power in the American Midwest*, by Nicholas A. Brown and Sarah E. Kanouse (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 14.

⁶ Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 2.

⁷ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 275.

⁸ Claire Bishop, "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?" in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011*, edited by Nato Thompson (New York, NY: Creative Time, 2012), 36.

In Miner's case, the project took place at Eastern High School with students from the Indigenous Youth Empowerment Project and East Lansing High School's Native American Club. What makes Native Kids unique as a socially engaged artwork is the manner in which it incorporates a decolonial pedagogy. It teaches participants about the issues that led to the poverty and alienation experienced in indigenous communities and uses Anishinaabe traditions to counteract this legacy by incorporating traditional knowledge with art making. As LeQuan Cannon, a participant in the workshops, explains: "[we took] something that is man-made and manufactured usually in factories...[and] going back to our roots we put our heritage on it...showing that it's not forgotten."⁹ Through the lessons the participants learned, they were able to articulate how their culture persists in today's world, regardless of the obstacles their ancestors faced.

⁹ *Anishnaabensag Biimskoweshkigewag*, dir. Christopher Yépez. YouTube video, 17:36, posted by Dylan Miner, February 4, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5tR2TsbPzU>.



fig. 4 *Native Kids Ride Bikes*. 2011: Installation view at the LookOut! Gallery, Michigan State University, September 2011: Multimedia installation consisting of seven custom-built lowrider bikes. Photo: Dylan Miner.

Miner's introduction of The Seven Grandfather teachings incorporates a decolonial pedagogy that calls for teachers, students, and the community to participate in a rigorous critique of their society in order to develop an understanding of the conditions that shape their way of thinking.¹⁰ Participants learned about the effects of the colonial history that disrupted Anishinaabe culture, while the workshops created a space for them to consider how this process has shaped their lives. The teachings were presented as a strategy to help participants understand the Anishinaabe worldview as comprised by the concepts known as the Seven Grandfathers: Nbwaakaawin (wisdom), Zaagi'idiwin (love), Minaadendamowin (respect), Aakwa'ode'ewin (bravery), Debwewin (truth), Dibaadendiziwin (humility), and Gw ekwaadiziwin (honesty).

¹⁰ Ming Fang He, Brian D. Schultz, and William H. Schubert, eds., *The SAGE Guide to Curriculum in Education* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2015), 171.

When the bikes were exhibited at the LookOut! Gallery, six lowriders were arranged in a row down the middle of the space, with the seventh on a pedestal in the window. The lead bike in the row was accessorized with a wooden birch basket on the handlebars, painted buckskin wheel covers, and, rising from the back-wheel mount, a tall metal antenna wrapped in green felt and decorated with nine eagle feathers draping from the top (fig. 4). The bike's basket is similar to those once used to collect berries in the forest; the wheel covers represent the drum and the heartbeat of Mother Earth; and the eagle staff is a symbol of the integrity and honor of a warrior. Alone, each of these items has a purpose and meaning; placed together, they embody the teaching of Respect. This bike is a warrior's vehicle, made for a person who respects all living things and whose sense of Respect drives the struggle to protect the people and the environment. Those who ride this bike understand that they must put others before themselves. But the teachings are never stand-alone ideas; they work in conjunction with each other. In this manner, Respect is also tied to Love, because a warrior cannot find Respect for life without having Love for all living things. These are the kinds of lessons participants learn by making the bikes—life is multidimensional.

This hybridizing of cultural forms and teachings exemplifies Miner's decolonial aesthetic. As Macie Vermillion, a workshop participant, says, "Before this I had never heard about The Seven Grandfather teachings, ever. I come from a Native American background so...it was cool to learn about something like this, especially, because that is where I come from."¹¹ Learning about these cultural traditions changed participants' lives, giving them new perspectives through which to reconnect with their ancestral culture and, in effect, decolonizing their understandings of themselves and their

community. The bikes become more than mere documentation of the participants' experience; they are touchstones of Anishinaabe culture that represent a mixture of traditional and modern identities.

¹¹ *Anishnaabensag Biimskowebshkigewag. Yépez.*

It is this type of interaction that, I believe, shapes a socially engaged decolonial practice. Miner does not just bring participants together to share an experience but also teaches participants about the history of cultural disintegration experienced by local indigenous people. At the same time, he presents them with the tools to counteract this process in the present day, helping them learn the lessons necessary to living a good life while working together in a community to produce beautiful art. Using their bodies to power the bikes they built, the East Lansing students learn to re-experience the world as they move slowly through space.