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Indigenous Environmental Activism and Media Depiction: Using Critical Dispositioning to Read Protest Photography Ethically[1]

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ABSTRACT
Media bias is a reality of the infoglut we are bombarded with every day. However, we often consider bias to be consigned to the textual realm of information. I argue that anything human-mediated holds bias, including photographs. Because of this, I propose reading the performance of Indigenous-led environmental activism through media representation, specifically photographs used in media coverage of Indigenous environmental activism. This paper considers open-access media photographs of Indigenous-led environmental protests, such as the Kanehsatake Resistance (1990) and Wet'suwet'en Blockade (2020), as springboards for practicing ethical *reading*. As a settler-scholar, this work is mostly geared towards a settler-scholar or non-Indigenous audience interested in Indigenous literary studies, as a way to find tools to engage in this scholarship. The purpose of this article is to elucidate media bias as a way of informing our individual teaching and learning practice, as well as shaping how we engage with and talk about Indigenous issues. While all public activism engages with some levels of performance, the performance itself and larger narrative being told by the activists

1 This paper was first presented at NeMLA's 2023 conference, "Resilience," in Buffalo, NY on March 26th, 2023. It has since been edited and expanded to encompass my more current dissertation research.

is filtered through who is able to tell the story. Here, I use a methodology that I am developing as part of my ongoing dissertation work, Critical Dispositioning, which is an ethical reading praxis designed for settlers to use when engaging with Indigenous literatures. Critical Dispositioning requires community-specific reading of Indigenous materials and rejects settler imposition or appropriation of Indigenous voices and texts. This work is essential in building anti-racist practices and equity, diversity, and inclusion into the classroom space, as well as a tool for consideration when building syllabi.

Keywords
Indigenous Activism; Environmental Activism; Critical Dispositioning; Ethical Reading; Kanehsatake Resistance; Wet'suwet'en Blockade

1. Introduction

Media bias is a reality of the infoglut we are bombarded with every day. However, we often consider bias to be consigned to the textual realm. I argue that anything human-mediated holds bias, including photographs. Because of this, I propose reading the performance of Indigenous-led environmental activism through media representation, specifically photographs used in this media coverage. Using photos from media coverage of two Indigenous-led environmental protests, the Kanehsatake Resistance of 1990 and the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests that began in 2020, I will engage in a *reading* of photographs from mainstream and Indigenous media outlets in what is colonially called Canada.

To situate myself: I am a settler-scholar of Greek descent and Canadian citizenship. I am currently living and learning in Southern Ontario, which is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. As a settler-scholar, ethical engagement with Indigenous texts and material is essential to keep my work grounded in Indigenous frameworks and in order to resist appropriation. Finding ethical reading practices is a foundational part of my research praxis. In this paper, I will find ethical ways to *read* protest photography, keeping Indigenous frameworks and perspectives centred in my reading approach.

Some questions I am thinking about are: Who are taking these photos and who are publishing them? What narrative does the context surrounding the image tell? What details can I pull out of these photos that support these thoughts? How does recognizing bias make me more critical of my own media consumption? And finally, how does considering context help myself do this work? I am influenced by the work of settler-scholars (Pratt; Eigenbrod; McKegney; King) as well as Indigenous scholars (Ermine; Kovach) who are asking similar questions in the vein of ethical engagement with Indigenous texts.

The purpose of this work is to examine the personal bias that we all hold and filter our lives through every day. By identifying and raising awareness of this bias's influence on our lives, we can know where it is necessary for us to distance ourselves from the texts we are analyzing or where to read critically to help minimize bias as much as possible. I would like to be clear that I am not suggesting that it is possible to eliminate bias altogether. However, the effort and awareness to do this scholarly production shows ethical intentions for interpreting Indigenous works.

I will be using a methodological praxis I am developing as part of my dissertation project, called Critical Dispositioning, as a way to do this work ethically. Critical Dispositioning is not necessarily a tool, but rather a framework I believe can be used to position oneself, especially if one is a settler-scholar engaging with Indigenous (or other minority) literature, ethically. This framework sets up an alternative space, one that is separate from both the settler and Indigenous contexts, for settler-scholars to engage ethically with texts. The purpose of this separate space is not to absolve responsibility for a settler and allow them to apply whatever conventions they choose to a text, but is actually a kind of safeguard against appropriation of Indigenous materials. By using a separate analytical space, one can be sure that they are not removing Indigenous texts from their particular cultural or community context, as well as allows for a resistance against settler-scholars who try to enter into Indigenous analysis frameworks (where they do not belong) or risk appropriating Indigenous voices (as suggested by Tuck and Yang). It also prevents settler-scholars from bringing Indigenous texts into settler spaces. Critical Dispositioning, instead, allows the settler-scholar to stay removed from the text without imposing Western methodological conventions onto it, letting them observe and engage with the text from a willful and informed *outsider* perspective.

Considering the critical conversations surrounding ethical scholarship in the field of settler-studies, Critical Dispositioning is drawing on the work of other Indigenous and Black scholars, as well as settler-scholars (Ermine; King; Pratt) that also consider the impact of and potential limitations of settler-scholars engaging with Indigenous texts. Renate Eigenbrod, when trying to bridge her settler and immigrant status, intentionally "problematize[s] [her] subjectivity, the situatedness of [her] knowledge, and the context of [her] subject position in order to underscore partiality and de-emphasize assumptions about the expert" (xv). Similarly to Critical Dispositioning, this practice of Eigenbrod's touches on the necessity of introspective work on the part of the settler before engaging with the texts in question. Sam McKegney, alternatively, "rejected the reigning strategies for ethical disengagement in order to seek out strategies for ethical engagement" (63), which is also in the vein of Critical Dispositioning's call for critical distance. While McKegney does not support "disengagement" in

ethics-based work, he still acknowledges the need for separate spaces for ethical engagement to occur. Critical Dispositioning also does not set up settlers to *disengage* from their positionalities, and therefore the responsibilities they have as settlers doing this scholarship, but instead asks for distance in order to find community-based frameworks to analyze Indigenous materials with. McKegney, interestingly, flags something that Critical Dispositioning inherently remedies, which is the limitations of scholars, who "must be self-reflective" but also "do not need to make themselves the stars of their studies, especially to the ongoing neglect of Indigenous voices" (60).

This work is essential in building anti-racist practices for settler-scholars, as well as centering equity, diversity, and inclusion in the classroom space. This article, as well as the Toolkit included (Appendix A) can be used by teachers and professors as a tool for consideration when building syllabi with ethics at their core. Rather than a definitive and rigid set of rules, both this article and Toolkit are to be considered as potential *springboards* to launch a settler audience into deeper conversations surrounding ethical engagement with Indigenous texts. Taking a note from Eigenbrod's discomfort from her "expected 'expert' position" (xvi), I am providing questions and further reading that helped guide my thinking with enough space for an audience to surmise and interpret based on their own experiences and knowledge base.

Indigenous activism has been ongoing in what is colonially called Canada from the moment of settler's first contact. Through Critical Dispositioning and ethical reading of protest photography surrounding Indigenous activist movements, I hope to elevate Indigenous voices and the activist potential of photography within mainstream Canadian media outlets. I am cautious, as Eigenbrod was, to avoid a kind of reading practice of "Indigenous literatures within the authoritative discourse of a scholarly publication" which could "easily become another 'conquest,' in Todorov's meaning of the term" (qtd. in Eigenbrod xv).

2. Identifying Bias and *Reading* Photographs

While one can hope that those mediating and disseminating information, like journalists, are, as Kimberley Jakeman and Mollie Clark outline, "assumed to be neutral, independent and impartial third parties," it is important to remember that "humans intrinsically have unconscious biases" (695). While this unconscious bias we all hold is, to a degree, "helpful to our survival" (696), we still must be aware of the levels of pervasiveness that bias interferes with in our lives. Some examples that Jakeman and Clarke mention are "culture, gender, traditions, past experiences, religion, race, sexual identity, and age" (696). These aspects that make up our identity are imbued with bias, which we in turn

use to filter our lives through. It is true that anything human-mediated holds this bias, but acknowledgment is the first step towards overcoming it.

Switching gears, when talking about the practice of *reading* photographs, I am drawing on a facet of close-reading. As a literature student, close-reading is a *secret weapon* used to unpack and draw meaning from a variety of different kinds of texts, including photographs. In this case, I will be *reading* specific photos in an attempt to make meaning and decipher bias.

When *reading* photos, it is important to consider the context surrounding composition and publication. Some details to consider are: What is the source of this photo? Where is it being published? Who took the photo? As well as compositional elements, like the background, framing, posture of subject, lighting, editing, and whether it is candid or staged, just to name a few.[2] Visual semiotics (Lister and Wells) of images asks a viewer to acknowledge these structural and denotative elements (qtd. in Wilkes and Kehl 488) for a more wholistic reading of an image's elements and larger conversations and contexts underpinning the photograph.

Considering the praxis of Critical Dispositioning, this methodological lens functions as a kind of postmemory praxis, or a framework linking meaning-making and historical approaches. Critical Dispositioning asks that settler-scholars locate themselves in relation to the voices and contexts of Indigenous writers, do introspective work to unpack their intentions (and any biases they might have) before settling into analysis, and calls for a *pulling back* or *dispositioning* of their positionality to ensure Indigenous texts stay rooted in their community-specific frameworks. Postmemory, according to Marianne Hirsch, is a kind of tool for memory production and preservation for the next generation of a community after the experience of a collective traumatic event. Hirsch states that "postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (5). In relation to Indigenous experiences of colonial imposition and systemic erasure of their language, culture, and communities, postmemory is a way to connect Indigenous peoples with their past, while also finding avenues of futurity. Critical Dispositioning can be used by settlers to understand and unpack this process, while not entering into or taking on the Indigenous struggle of resisting colonial imposition. Similar to settler-scholar Joni Adamson's approach to "narrative scholarship," which she sees as "a middle place between scholarship and experience" (qtd. in Eigenbrod 3), Critical Dispositioning also functions here as a

2 See Appendix A for a more comprehensive ethical *reading* Toolkit for non-Indigenous scholars to use when analyzing Indigenous texts.

space for settlers to distance themselves from their Western perspectives and views of Indigenous connection to community.

3. Kanesatake Resistance

I want to start by first drawing attention to my intentional use of Indigenous-positive naming of this event. Media representation often refers to the 78-day standoff between Mohawk land defenders and the Quebec police and Canadian military as the Oka Crisis. I will be referring to this event as the Kanehsatake Resistance as we are called to do by Mohawk land defenders and activists, like Ellen Gabriel (Kanehsatà:ke).[3] In this, I hope to shift the focus away from rhetoric that positions Indigenous resistance as a *crisis*, or a problem that requires the Canadian government, military, or police to *fix*. Instead, I hope to highlight Indigenous activism and resistance, rather than slip into this settler-centric naming of Indigenous movements.

The Kanehsatake Resistance took place in 1990, from July 11th to September 26th, occurring between the Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk) protesters and the Quebec Police, and later involving the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Canadian Military. The standoff occurred when the town of Oka proposed an expansion of an existing golf course and a new townhouse development. These proposals were supposed to encroach on land that was part of an ongoing land dispute between the town of Oka and the Kanehsatake. Most significantly, this land included a Kanyen'kehà:ka burial ground (Meng).

This standoff was a violent one, resulting in the death of a Quebec police officer and a Mohawk protestor. Ultimately, there were injuries on both sides, with 22 soldiers injured and 75 Mohawks injured "ranging in age from four to 72" (de Bruin). The Resistance ultimately ended on September 26th, 1990, about a month after the Canadian military was called in. When the standoff ended, everyone was leaving the Reserve, and in the shuffle, "a soldier stabbed 14-year-old Waneek Horn-Miller in the chest with a bayonet. She had been carrying her four-year-old sister, Kaniehtiio, to safety after weeks behind the barriers while their mother, Kahentinetha Horn, served as a negotiator" (de

3 I am intentionally referring to this event in Indigenous-positive language, which is in line with Kanehsatà:ke activist and spokesperson, Ellen Gabriel, who calls for this shift. Gabriel asks that people stop referring to this event as the Oka Crisis because, as she says, "the people of Oka did not bear the brunt of colonial and military hostility, Kanehsatà:ke did" (Hassencahl-Perley 277–78).

Bruin). This became a widely publicized moment at the culmination of the Resistance, disseminated widely across both mainstream and Indigenous media outlets.

Fig. 1. Face to Face, by Shaney Komulainen, Canadian Press, 1990. Image used for The Canadian Encyclopedia's page on the "Oka Crisis" (de Bruin, from Canapress).

Turning towards Figure 1, "Face to Face," this is one of the most famous photographs from the Kanehsatake Resistance, found in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (de Bruin). Originally taken by photographer and journalist Shaney Komulainen, this image has received considerable analysis and has been discussed extensively alongside the events of Kanehsatake.[4] In this image, we have a soldier in a face-off with a Mohawk land defender. We can start *reading* this photo by taking in the details of its composition. Firstly, the Indigenous figure on the right is completely covered in camouflage. They are unidentifiable with the camouflage, bandana, and sunglasses. If you look at the lower right corner, you can see the rest of their body is blurred out, meaning the camera is not focussed on them. On the left, we have a Canadian soldier in a tactical uniform and helmet. They are staring up into the sunglasséd eyes of the Indigenous activist, face to face, a stand-off position. As Rima Wilkes and Michael Kehl said, because "the viewer is at arms' length and looking directly at the subjects, the

4 For a more in-depth analysis of "Face to Face" and the politics surrounding this image in media representation, see Wilkes and Kehl's 2014 article.

photo conveys a sense of equality between the viewer and the two men" (489). The responsibility is on the viewer to create a critical distance when observing this photograph in order to stay situated in their present context and not slip into this illusion of equality that Wilkes and Kehl highlight.

The soldier's face is determined, his jaw tense and clean shaven. The camera has trained its focus on this soldier, offering crisper details of his face and body. The bias of the photographer is in this selective focus, a metaphor for the distortion of Indigenous presence and activism by mainstream media in favour of settler issues. Initially, the public response to this photograph in English-language media "was that the image was emblematic of Canadian heroism and Canadian peacekeeping" (490–91). "Face to Face" is an interesting case study, as Wilkes and Kehl are able to trace public response to it over the three decades it has been in circulation. When the photo re-appeared in 2009, it was included in Mark Reid's edited collection called *100 Photos that Changed Canada*, where Wilkes and Kehl flag the written text that was published alongside this image, which stated that "'Face to Face' served as a 'reminder to all Canadians that despite solid steps—such as the 2008 federal apology for residential schools and the creation of a native land claims commission—there is still work to be done to bridge the gulf between [Indigenous peoples] and [settlers] in Canada'" (qtd. in Wilkes and Kehl 482). The overall response to this image has shifted drastically towards being more Indigenous-positive, which I can only hope is reflective of the larger political climate surrounding Indigenous-settler relations.

Fig. 2. Police assaulting a protestor on bridge near Châteauguay, Quebec. Photo by Allan McInnis (The Gazette).

Figure 2 offers a snapshot of the political climate at the time of the Kanehsatake Resistance. This photo was taken by photojournalist Allan McInnis. McInnis, in 1990, was capturing the Mohawk activism and counter-activism of anti-Mohawk protestors. This photo specifically was taken when anti-Mohawk protesters tried shutting down the bridge in St-Louis-de-Gonzague, near Châteauguay (Magder) in response to the Mohawk blockade of the Mercier Bridge. McInnis' photo captures the moment when Quebec police are assaulting a pro-Mohawk protestor. By the protestor's body language, we can see that his back was turned towards the police, in an attempt to retreat. The protestor's arms are raised as a result of the impact of the police baton on his neck, not in self-defence or as an attack towards the officers. This photo captures a clear moment of police brutality.

In an article written 33 years later for the *Montreal Gazette*, McInnis reflects on the events at the time, noting that "there was a bad climate between police and the news medi . . . as well as between police officers and protesters" (Magder). At this protest, police were targeting journalists and destroying their cameras. In an effort to preserve his work, McInnis "removed the film from [his] camera and gave it to a stranger with the instructions to meet him in Châteauguay" (Magder). Through sheer trust and a bit of luck, McInnis was reunited with the film thanks to the stranger, whose name McInnis never learned. Figure 2, as well as the other photos on McInnis' preserved film roll were used as "evidence in the ethics commission hearings" about these events later on (Magder).

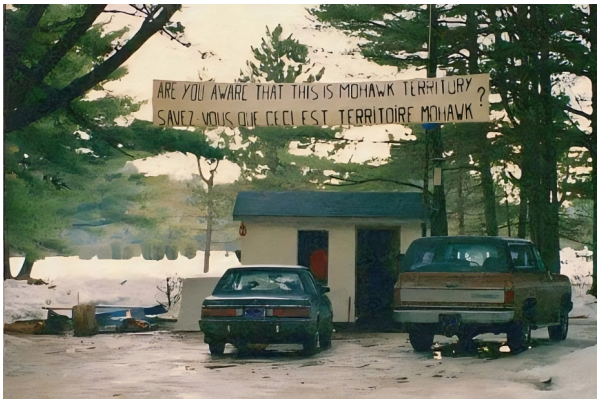

Fig. 3. Image of traditional Kanehsatake land in Oka, Quebec. Photo by Ellen Gabriel (CBC).

Moving to Figure 3, this photo was taken by Ellen Gabriel who was an influential Mohawk spokesperson and activist for the Kanehsatake in 1990. This

image, used in news coverage from CBC on the 20th anniversary of this event, shows a different side of the resistance. The source of this image is a traditional mainstream Canadian news network, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), but the photographer offers a different perspective to the events. The article itself includes other photos from their original reporting on the event which are quite contrasting to Gabriel's image, most of which were not taken by Indigenous photographers like this image was.

Between the tall pines that activists were protecting hangs a sign that reads: "Are you aware that this is Mohawk territory?" in both English and French. The tone is polite and respectful, informing people of the Indigenous claim to this land. The photo itself is peaceful, the muted colours and gritty quality show it is a personal image (kind of like home photography), one from someone who is close to this place. Gabriel's love and passion for this land is imbued in this photo, through the distance that allows the majority of the tall pines to be seen.

Figure 1, captured by a settler photographer and disseminated by mainstream media outlets, focuses on the white soldier figure, positioning the Indigenous activist as a kind of *guerilla* solider in comparison. The Indigenous activist is blurred, seen as a sinister and dangerous threat to the *lawful* plight of the Canadian soldiers. This perspective overwrites the initial land dispute issue, causing viewers to forget that this event was incited by a developer's desire to literally overwrite Indigenous presence and history by taking land used as a traditional Mohawk gravesite to build a golf course. Figure 3, captured by a Mohawk woman who was deeply connected to the plight and activism of the Kanehsatake people, shows an alternative view of the land, one that exhibits how peaceful the place is, how tall and old the sacred pines are, and allows us to sympathize with the Mohawk activists in their desire to protect this place.

Using Critical Dispositioning, we can read each of these images according to the context of their composition and community-framework. I, as a settler, can read the aspects of each photograph, like the focus in Figure 1; the body language of the activist in Figure 2; and the quality and composition of Figure 3, like I would read a piece of literature, focussing on the aspects readily visible in the photo. Ultimately, in order to participate in an ethical reading of these images, it is necessary for me to take a step back from each of these photos and consider the context in which they were taken, as well as the way that they appeared in mainstream media, like who published these photos, what kind of article did they appear in, as well as the temporal distance between their publication and the events they were depicting, especially in Figure 2's case. To do this is to instill a sense of analytical and critical distance between my own perspective and reading, and the photos themselves that Critical Dispositioning calls for.

Distance, while potentially reminiscent of the Euro-Western desire for *objectivity* that aligns with frameworks of their own fabrication, creates a necessary

degree of separation between myself as a settler-scholar and the Indigenous text being viewed. This distance does not, however, equate to a lack of context or elimination of larger political underpinnings. These are both necessary and built into Critical Dispositioning, which demands the onus of additional contextual work and locating community-specific frameworks for analysis on the settler-reader of Indigenous texts. Distance, here, instead allows me to gain this additional perspective and do this added labour. Critical Dispositioning sees the application of Western-based generic frameworks onto Indigenous texts as unethical, just as pulling settlers into Indigenous modes of analysis is equally dangerous as it can easily slip into appropriative modes of analysis. Distance created by this separate third space, this space where Critical Dispositioning takes place, allows for a safe-guard against appropriative analysis as well as ethical models of engagement between disparate communities to occur.

4. Wet'suwet'en Pipeline Protests (2020–ongoing)

Fig. 4. Image used in media coverage of Wet'suwet'en Blockade (The Narwhal).

Moving towards a more contemporary example, I am going to look at some images of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests in Western Canada. These protests arose in 2020 when the Coastal GasLink company planned to build a pipeline through the sacred and unceded lands of the Wet'suwet'en community, but the conflicts over this unceded land and Indigenous land-activism is something that has been occurring in this region since the time of colonial contact.

The Coastal GasLink pipeline is a project that was proposed to cover 670 km (420 mi) from Dawson Creek to Kitimat, in British Columbia. The pipeline runs directly through the unceded territory of the Wet'suwet'en and Gitxsan peoples. The project violates "Wet'suwet'en sovereignty and put[s] the lan . . . of the Wet'suwet'en Nation at risk" (Shah). Through the protests, land rights activism, and blockades, the Wet'suwet'en and Gitxsan peoples have been able to delay the progress of the pipeline project. Ultimately, the "government's response to this land defense has also violated the rights of the Wet'suwet'en and Gitxsan by forcibly removing Indigenous peoples from their lands and not respecting their rights to self-government" (Shah). Finally, in October 2023, the "pipeline installation on the project was 100% complete" (Stephenson), but Indigenous pushback continues.

Taking a look at Figure 4, this image of the blockade was used for The Narwhal's coverage of the Wet'suwet'en protests. This image centres an Indigenous activist, clad in camouflage, arm raised mid-throw, in front of a wreckage of machinery, tarps, and logs used to block the road. The caption for this image on The Narwhal's website reads, "Land defenders fortify a blockade near the Wedzin Kwa ([or] Morice) River as RCMP units advance deeper into the territory" (Simmons). While this caption attempts to place Indigenous activists in a position of power, the photo works to recapitulate the narrative of Indigenous activism as *terrorism*. Lastly, the red containers of gasoline at the protestor's feet and directly beside the forest remind the viewer of the potential danger of this space.

In the centre of Figure 4, spray-painted slogans left on the wreckage of sheet metal and vehicles that made up the blockade are the focal point of the image. One message reads, "RCMP off the Yintah" which is the Wet'suwet'en word for "lands." Another sign reads "LAND BACK," connecting this land-based activism to other activists' movements across the country and the world. #LandBack is an international movement of Indigenous peoples (from Canada, the United States, Australia, etc.) that calls for a universal transferring back of land from settler states to the Indigenous nations that have lived on them for time immemorial, foregrounding Indigenous sovereignty as part of their activism.

As a settler, when I look at Figure 4, I am tempted to think that this image's focal point is, for lack of a better word, a pile of debris. However, when I critically examine my own biases and enact an appropriate distance between myself and the image, as Critical Dispositioning calls for, I can see that there is more happening in this image beyond the pile of objects creating a blockade. The media coverage of such activism usually centres around the effect of the blockades on Coastal GasLink and their workers. The capitalist struggle is centred in the narrative: the number of workers disrupted, the number of days workers have been cut off from work; the halt in the pipeline's progress, etc. It is easy to forget that these pipelines are not lawful; they are not sanctioned by the

Indigenous nations whose land is being used and polluted for the profit of corporations that do not and will not give back to these communities what has been lost. This kind of news coverage effectively dilutes Indigenous voices and decentralizes Indigenous land sovereignty and activism from the actual events taking place. Intentionally creating distance between my initial reaction and the larger political underpinnings in this image is one tool of Critical Dispositioning. Distance, in this sense, is an intentional stepping back for settlers to get a better vantage point within a larger conversation. This is not an opportunity for settlers to use distance to disengage from critical conversations, but is instead a tool used to strengthen one's positionality within such conversations.

While the news coverage is quick to villainize the Indigenous land defenders, we are reminded that in the case of this blockade specifically, "Hereditary Dinï ze' (Chief) Woos, Frank Alec, expressed regret that workers are stuck in the camps behind the blockades" but reminded everyone that they "gave ample notice to [Coastal GasLink] that we were going to act on this" (Simmons). Alec said they gave an eight-hour notice for workers to evacuate, as well as an additional two-hour extension. Despite this notice, of the 500 individuals who were "housed at Costal GasLink's two remote work camps, only a handful left" (Simmons).

Fig. 5. One of three blockades set up in 2019 as part of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline Protests. This blockade, assembled by the Gidimt'en Clan, was to halt Coastal GasLink's drilling under the Wedzin Kwa (Morice River). Photo by Michael Toledano (CBC).

Figure 5 is depicting the blockade that Gidimt'en Clan protestors set up in 2019 as part of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests. This blockade caused "more than 500 pipeline workers" to be stranded (Trumpener). This particular blockade was "set up to halt Coastal GasLink's plans to drill under the Wedzin Kwa (Morice River)" according to the media co-ordinator for the Gidimt'en checkpoint, Jennifer Wickham (Trumpener). This was just one protest set up for this particular movement. Three blockades in total were set up by the Wet'suwet'en Nation to

cut off access to "two work camps in a remote part of northern B.C." (Trumpener). The British Columbia Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General at the time, Mike Farnsworth, said that these "blockades endanger[ed] dialogue and 'good faith commitments' between the Office of the Wet'suwet'en and the province, and also breach a court injunction against blocking access to pipeline worksites" (Trumpener). While Coastal GasLink says that they are "committed to dialogue" they cite the "support of all 20 elected band councils across the pipeline route" as *permission* to violate Indigenous sovereignty and ignore the traditional unceded land rights of the Wet'suwet'en (Trumpener). Unfortunately, the Coastal GasLink company has used internal community politics to pit Indigenous peoples against themselves. While the band council voted in favour of the pipeline, "Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs have opposed the project, saying that band councils do not have authority over land beyond reserve boundaries" (Trumpener).

These protests are essential in protecting and preserving Indigenous land and culture, which are inherently linked to land. For the Wet'suwet'en, we can turn to Unist'ot'en Hereditary Spokesperson, Freda Huson, for a community-specific reading of the importance of land to the Wet'suwet'en. Huson says, the Wet'suwet'en peoples' "belief is that [they] are part of the land. The land is not separate from [them]. The land sustains [them]. And if [they] don't take care of her, she won't be able to sustain [them], as [they] as a generation of people will die" ("Background").

Fig. 6. APTN coverage of Wetsuwet'en Blockade, Amanda Polchies standing off in front of a wall of RCMP officers.

Conversely, Figure 6 offers an alternative perspective. This photo of Amanda Polchies, a Lakota Sioux and Mi'kmaw land defender and activist, was used by APTN (or the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) for their coverage of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests. In the image, Polchies kneels in front of a wall of RCMP officers, an eagle feather held in her upraised hand, her palm open. This position typically is one of vulnerability and submission, but Polchies' spine is straight. We cannot see her face, but her body language tells the officers that while she is beseeching them to stop, she is still not standing down. Her raised arm and outstretched fingers ward them off. Judging by the placement of the RCMP officer's feet, they are standing still, rather than approaching forward. For now, in the moment of this image, Polchies is holding the line and defending the land. The photographer is positioned directly behind Polchies, aligning the viewer's vantage point with her, allowing us to metaphorically stand behind her and take her back.

There is a certain level of performativity at work in public activism. Activists are literally putting their bodies on display in order to make a statement. This perspective can get reflected in the 'reading' of the activism photos. Are the figures that are being highlighted activists or actors? If we are not able to be present at the site of activism, especially in the case of land-based events and movements grounded in land-centred Indigenous issues, often times the closest we can come to experiencing the event is the surrounding media coverage.

The crux of this issues lies in where this media coverage is coming from. Over the course of this research, I have noticed a contrast in coverage, particularly the photographs used in articles and the framing of such images, between mainstream Canadian news and Indigenous news organizations. More mainstream news sources, like the CBC for example, focus on the blockades or violence that sometimes occurs in the conflict between groups. By focussing on the destruction or breakdown of order within a settler society, mainstream news outlets focus on the violence in order to position Indigenous activism as terrorism, positioning the Canadian military and police as *peace keepers*. Conversely, Indigenous news outlets focus more on the on-the-ground activism, especially surrounding the movements of land sovereignty and land-rights activism. These media sources are concerned with keeping Indigenous voices grounded in the activism, as well as a more distinct focus on treaties (and the breach of them), unceded land, and the neglect of these land rights.

In pairing these photos of activism alongside my analysis, I intentionally position these photos as entry-ways into Critical Dispositioning. Critical Dispositioning is a consistent and sustained process. It is a kind of goal to strive for, one that is always incomplete. Critical Dispositioning, as a framework, calls for the settler-scholar's struggle when engaging with Indigenous materials, as this struggle highlights the attempt at ethical engagement, rather than lets the

scholar *off the hook* through an escape of the responsibility everyone has to the material they engage with. Distance is not a tool for settlers to absolve themselves of responsibility, but rather a way to 'widen the lens' and be able to see perspectives beyond the frame of the photo. Because of this sustained struggle, the process is an ongoing one, rather than a tool for settlers to use and apply universally without critical engagement, which is oppositional to the kind of critical distance of Critical Dispositioning. I would like to make it clear that this methodology is not one to be used as a tool for settlers to insert themselves in and claim space within Indigenous texts. It is also not a tool that leads to a final destination, a culmination of ethical engagement. Because this is a process, one that is always in motion, the engagement needs to be continuous, reciprocal, and ongoing.[5]

In the examples of Critical Dispositioning throughout this paper, I have been highlighting moments for settler-scholars to step back, reassess their claim to or bias towards the material being considered, as well as signalled where Indigenous voices and frameworks should be inserted or used to analyze material so as to not inflict Western frameworks upon them. While I make these suggestions through Critical Dispositioning, I also want to make it clear that I do not presume to have erased my own internal biases or to have completely absolved myself of my own preconceived notions. I think that these things are inherent in our identity and while we can become aware of them and when they are filtering our perceptions, it is impossible to remove ourselves entirely of bias. But, I do think it is possible to see the biases that I hold as layers of myself, something that can be peeled away in order to see other positions within and through.

While I know that it is impossible (and highly unethical) to claim to see from an Indigenous perspective as a settler, my hope, through Critical Dispositioning, is to still attempt to observe each text, and in this case photograph, within its own context. Through Critical Dispositioning, I am able to see each image as connected to and within its own framework of cultural specificity, as well as part of deep historical, spiritual, and community-based frameworks of significance. By 'dispositioning' myself, I can become more self-aware of my worldview, my biases, and the privileges I hold and perceive the world with, while also being able to step to the side, to un-position myself and view the world from a different vantage point. Through 'dispositioning,' I can, as I hope other settler-scholars will try to, find the ethical middle ground when viewing and analyzing Indigenous materials.

5 Dialogue and continued reciprocity between settlers and Indigenous groups is essential in order to keep this work ethical (see Ermine; Kovach).

5. Conclusion

Putting this in context, I am reminded of Judith Butler's work in *Frames of War*. Butler reminds us that "When a picture is frame . . . the frame tends to function, even in a minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image, if not a self-commentary on the history of the frame" (35). When considering framing in protest photography, an observer is looking into a fragment of time and space, doing what Butler sees as seeking "to contain, convey, and determine what is see . . . depend[ing] upon the conditions of reproducibility" (36).

Butler's work establishes the frame as an integral part of the reading and meaning-making process. She says that "the frames through which we apprehen . . . are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power" (29). This is essentially highlighting the crux of Critical Dispositioning. Butler, here, is reminding us that the frames used to perceive or understand a work through are inherently steeped in politics. I would like to push this further to consider the implications of bias beyond the political realm. This saturation of bias in our perception highlights the need for an ethical framework like Critical Dispositioning, especially for settlers trying to enter the frame of Indigenous (or minority) texts without ethical grounding or intentions. Convexly, when highlighting the potentialities for unethical work, we are calling the frame into question. Butler sees this as subsequently "show[ing] that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable" (35). The frame itself may seem to help contextualize what it seeks to contain, but cannot contain the image itself. It will never be able to offer the same scope of context than if someone were to experience the event being pictured first hand; the image will never reproduce the actual experience, though it may get close. The best we can hope for from such images is that they serve as a reminder or recognizable signpost to draw our attention towards, to learn more and go beyond what is presented within the frame.

Butler sees the frame as incapable of pinning the frame in place. If we see the frame as the container of the image, especially in the case of protest photography, then the frame's inherent inability to fix its meaning or temporal place must be part of how we read the photographs themselves. Butler reminds us that "the frame does not hold anything together in one place, but itself becomes a kind of perpetual breakage, a subject to a temporal logic by which it moves from place to place. As the frame constantly breaks from its context, this self-breaking becomes part of the very definition" (36–37). If self-breakage becomes a necessary part of the frame's construction, then the frame's inability to pin down an image in one temporal or geographic place highlights this rupture. This, in turn, makes the frame a necessary aspect of Critical Dispositioning.

When using this methodological framework, one needs to know where they stand in relation to the text or image they are analyzing in order to know how and with what limitations they can 'disposition' themselves. In regards to these protest photographs, I know that my positionality as a settler-scholar, as well as someone living in Ontario (within a colonially Canadian context but also removed from Quebec and British Columbia, the two provinces where the activist movements I looked at took place), I need to approach these photos with a degree of skepticism and critical detachment, or *dispositioning*. While images taken by both Indigenous and settler photographers require different modes of interpretation and context, my positionality as a settler remains the same, which calls for an equal need of this self-reflection and critical distance when engaging with both kinds of photographs and contexts.

Being aware of the framing and context of protest images, focusing on their source and the photographers themselves, can all be ways to try to mediate bias. Indigenous land protests and activism are integral to keeping space open for Indigenous voices and presence, and do important work to counter the ongoing process of colonialism and settler imposition. It is necessary for non-Indigenous scholars to consider this framing and context in order to avoid recapitulating narratives of inequality and positioning Indigenous activism in a negative light.

Appendix A

Toolkit for Ethical 'Reading' with Indigenous Texts for Non-Indigenous Scholars and Readers

Note: This Toolkit can be used as a checklist for non-Indigenous settler scholars who wish to engage ethically with Indigenous or other minority texts. This Toolkit is intended for settlers and non-Indigenous scholars of Indigenous literary studies who are interested in prioritizing ethical engagement in their reading practice. My goal is to provide a list of questions to consider when beginning this work of ethical engagement. By no means is this an extensive list, nor can a non-Indigenous scholar use this list to 'justify' not continuing the ongoing process of ethical reading of texts.

Critical Dispositioning is a tool for settlers to use to create intentional and critical distance between themselves (i.e. their positionality and all the biases and preconceived notions they hold) and the Indigenous text they are viewing. This methodology demands the onus for additional research and locating of community-specific theory and frameworks to apply to reading of Indigenous texts be placed on the settler-scholar. This Toolkit is one entry-point for applying

Critical Dispositioning as a methodological lens to future work of settler and non- Indigenous scholars of Indigenous literary and creative production.

This Toolkit can be used as a springboard for ethical course design, developing a personal research praxis, or for interested scholars or non-academic settlers to guide reading of Indigenous texts. This can also be used as a pathway into larger conversations of ethical scholarship alongside Critical Dispositioning to highlight personal bias and find a separate, ethical space for settlers to read, analyze, and engage with Indigenous texts.

Questions to Consider

How to Practice Ethical Engagement with Indigenous Texts as a Settler Scholar

- What kind of text are you examining? (Document, photograph, etc.)
- What source is this text coming from?
- If the text is written by an Indigenous author, what specific community-framework is being applied to the text?
  - When interpreting or analysing Indigenous texts as a non-Indigenous or settler-scholar, it is important to apply community-specific frameworks to these texts, rather than use Euro-Western methodologies.
- What language is this text written in?
  - Consider the implications of reading an Indigenous text in a colonial language (English, French, Spanish, etc.)
  - If the author includes Indigenous words or passages, how is the language treated? Is it set off from the text in italics? Is a translation (on page, footnote, in an appendix) provided?
  - If no translation is provided, examine your reading experience. Do you feel like an outsider from the text? Is there productive *dispositioning* that could arise from this feeling as a way to derive meaning from the text?
- How has the text (or surrounding issue) been framed?
  - Consider Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* for further reading on the political framing of photographs.
  - Whether it is a creative or academic text, what kind of social, political, geographical, economic structures or frameworks is the author drawing on? How do these things, when you are aware of their existence, play a role in your interpretation of the text?
- Does the language surrounding the issue feel charged? Is the bias clear?

  - Either consider the text itself, or the context or captioning of a non-textual document.
  - If yes, what way does the bias lean? Is there political language being used explicitly?
  - If no, then the bias is more hidden, can you close-read aspects of the article or text to find where its *creator* might hide their bias? Why might they do this? Is this a conscious or unconscious choice?
- What details in the text stand out to you? Why?
  - In a piece of literature, look at literary devices.
  - In a photograph, look aspects of its composition and framing.
  - In another kind of text/object, look at what different elements would go into its composition.
- How do these details change or impact your reading of this text?
- Were there any moments that stood out for you, as a settler, that highlighted your removal from the text? Were there any moments where *dispositioning* yourself was necessary?
  - Consider these moments, if you experienced them, and use them to springboard further reading and engagement. Discomfort, while unsettling, has the potential to create a productive space for ethical analysis.

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