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**Overburden: Reading/Imagining
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Introduction

Editorial

Overburden: Reading/Imagining Extra-Canadian Ecologies

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In this special issue, we draw on the concept of *overburden* to question forms of excess, both material and metaphorical, that accumulate upon and within peoples, structures, and systems. Overburden is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it can mean an excess load (on anything or anyone) that becomes a burden to carry. It is also a geological term that stands for what Radhakanta Koner and Debashish Chakravarty call “dump materials” in the mining sector (1311). These kinds of materials (e.g. topsoil, sedimentary rock, surface and groundwater) are “byproducts of [mining] operations over a number of years” that have “minimal or no economic value” (1312). As a verb, overburden turns our attention to the act of overloading something or someone with an extra tangible or intangible burden. It is a process of imposing an unbearable excess on a person or a structure. Overburden in both cases signifies an obstruction, a surplus layer that must be shed in the process of generating economic value or restoring efficiency. Overburden then signals a waste, an imposition, and a difficulty.

Recognizing these complex, overlapping and overwhelmingly negative connotations, we take up the rich generativity of *overburden* to explore the context of its signification within the production (ecological, cultural, political, technological, economic) of Canada as a settler colonial project. As Dene scholar Glen

Coulthard argues, settler states maintain colonial domination through capitalist structures of dispossession that “continue[] to frame Indigenous peoples’ relationship with the state” (120). Decolonial environmental humanities scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris elaborates the “extractive view” that defines these structures, rendering “territories and peoples extractable... through a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence” (5). This logic reorganizes Indigenous territories and communities, animals, plants, and other life “into extractable data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation” (5). In considering the centrality of extraction to the nation’s identity, we extend the concept of overburden beyond its technical designation of the soil, sedimentary rock, surface water and groundwater that lie in the way of a mining site to consider the situation of all the beings—plants and animals and Indigenous/minority peoples—who are regarded alternatively as resources for the settler colonial Canadian project and obstructions to its realization.

These extractive frameworks help illuminate the contradictions that structure Canada’s contemporary global image as a settler colonial society. Canada projects itself as a leader in environmental stewardship, humanitarian diplomacy, women and gender equality, and technological innovation. Yet these narratives disregard and erase the colonial-capitalist infrastructures that sustain Canada’s resource extraction on Indigenous territories both within and outside its national borders, historically and into present times. The articles in this special issue explore how environmental discourse, technological development, and cultural production intersect in shaping Canada’s global image. They examine how Canadian policies and infrastructure support settler logics of land extraction and violence both inside and outside of Canada. The issue also highlights Indigenous, artistic, and diasporic practices that challenge Canada’s image as a benevolent, multicultural nation without a colonial past and present and represent alternative ethics of relationship and inhabitation.

Ishaan Selby traces how the fur trade transformed the beaver into a national figure in the economic and cultural formation of Canada. Through readings of *The Pump* by Sydney Hegele and *A Short History of the Blockade: Giant Beavers, Diplomacy, and Regeneration in Nishnaabewin* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Selby demonstrates how contemporary literature unsettles the nostalgic symbolism of the beaver by exposing the colonial extraction and ecological violence embedded in Canada’s national mythology. Specifically, through an analysis of Simpson’s work, the beaver is centred as a relation within Indigenous resurgence, linking animal infrastructures, such as a beaver dam, to contemporary blockades against extractive industries. **Arielle Lavine** also unravels the nostalgic underpinnings of settler colonialism in their her analysis of the intertwined histories of summer camps and Indigenous residential schools.

By analyzing the architecture and design of both institutions, the article demonstrates how landscapes themselves become infrastructures of colonial governance in counterpoint with one another: the dispossession and disciplining of Indigenous children through residential schools worked in contrast but also in tandem with summer camps' mission of cultivating settler youth identities grounded in ideas of wilderness, *playing Indian*, and national stewardship. The article reveals the persisting entanglement of Canadian environmental imaginaries with colonial spatial practices and ongoing Indigenous dispossession. **Iheoma Joakin-Uzomba** challenges nationalist myths of Canada's green technological progress to explore how digital infrastructures reproduce settler colonial relations. The article introduces the concept of *techno-extractivism* to describe how digital systems extend extractive logics into new domains of governance and resource capture. Through a reading of *Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Waubgeshig Rice, Joakin-Uzomba contrasts the fragility of settler technologies with Indigenous practices of relational knowledge, language preservation, and land-based *survivance*. Drawing on Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance," the article argues that Indigenous cultural practices are an active continuance of Indigenous survival and resistance that form an *Indigenous techne* and challenge Canada's technological futurism. **Tamsyn Riddle** explores how Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) promotes a narrative of gender equality and humanitarian care while Canadian mining companies continue to generate gendered violence and ecological harm in the Global South. The article highlights the neoliberal and colonial underpinnings of Canada's feminist diplomacy that result in the mischaracterization of gender-based violence as variously an unavoidable natural phenomenon, a limited technical problem, and a symptom of *backwards* gender norms. This misreading, compounded by Canada's self-characterization as a benevolent actor, perpetuates the normalization of gender-based violence in the country's international mining industry. **Gideon Umezurike** assesses the concepts of transculturalism and multiculturalism against the complex relations of racialized immigrants and Indigenous peoples to the nation of Canada. His article uses Mark Sakamoto's memoir, *Forgiveness*, and Lisa Bird-Wilson's novel, *Probably Ruby*, to illuminate how histories of colonial violence and trauma shape contemporary Canadian society. While *Forgiveness* describes a qualified path to national belonging for Japanese Canadians, *Probably Ruby* illuminates the structural erasure of Indigenous identities that confounds the possibility of bidirectional settler-Indigenous cultural exchange that would fulfill the aspirational promise of transculturalism. **Susie O'Brien** explores the theme of borders and bordering in Mariam Pirbhai's short story collection, *Outside People*. The article focuses on the stories' illumination of the ways in which the selective domestication of the world outside Canadian borders, through practices ranging from the

Temporary Foreign Worker program to overseas adoptions, works to support the settler colonial good life. In addition to exposing the mechanisms of racial capitalism and environmental destruction that underpin myths of Canadian-ness, *Outside People* highlights possibilities for human/non-human alliances in support of alternative, undomesticated forms of inhabitation. Beginning with the discourses of racist hostility towards international students that arose in Canada throughout the 2020s, **Samuel Ikueze** uses Edward Said's contrapuntal theory to illuminate an artistic response to prevailing images of international students as an invasive species. The article focuses on *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*, a sculpture by Nigerian artist (and former international student) Roland Samuel, that highlights international students' complex ways of being and relating with Canada while critically raising awareness of the different ways that Canada and international students demonstrate fragility. **Zahra Tootonsab** shifts the focus to diasporic practices of sheltering within settler colonial society by drawing on Métis and Bakhtiari crafts. Tootonsab defines sheltering as the ongoing labour of sustaining ethical relationships with human and more-than-human beings through collective care and socio-ecological mutual orientation. By engaging with Métis and Bakhtiari textile traditions and artwork, the article traces points of contact and differentiation that, woven together, shape and reinforce what Tootonsab terms an *ab-be-ab* ("water-to-water") pedagogy. For Tootonsab, this is a diasporic pedagogy that unsettles Canadian notions of belonging within settler/extractive economies, guiding how she practices sustainable sheltering within watersheds.

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Articles

Beavers, Blockades, and Animal Capital In Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *A Short History of the Blockade* and Sydney Hegele's *The Pump*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the beaver as a symbol and resource for Canadian national identity. It brings together the fields of animal studies, Indigenous critical theory, and critical political economy to read Sydney Hegele's Ontario Gothic short story collection *The Pump* and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's lecture *A Short History of the Blockade* zeroing in on the representation of beavers as staging criticisms of a settler colonial politics of extraction within Canadian history and national literary archetypes.

Keywords

Animals; Capitalism; Settler Colonialism; Indigenous Resistance; National Emblem; Beavers

1. Introduction: Animal Studies, Settler Colonialism, and Capital Accumulation

In 2011, Canadian Senator Nancy Eaton called for polar bears to replace beavers as Canada's national symbol, calling the beaver "a dentally defective

rat" and a "toothy tyrant" (Poliquin 188). Her hatred of beavers seems to have been prompted by a family of beavers damaging her cottage in rural Ontario. This episode combines the vicious poetry of anthropocentrism with the prose of property ownership and not a little amusement. I suggest that at the centre of this strange story sits a fraught relationship between the beaver and the history of the Canadian nation state, including a history of colonialism, national identity, the production of commodities and capital flows, and literary and cultural representations that have come to represent or subvert imaginings of Canadian national identity through the beaver. While this might seem a much too bold and sweeping claim, the beaver has been central as symbol and lively, material entity to Canadian statecraft, national identity, and self-representation, as well as a sometimes disavowed, sometimes celebrated history of colonial extraction and commodity production. It is in the realm of culture that such processes are worked out, contested, and condensed into a series of shared symbols.

Marxist theorist Nicole Shukin begins her book *Animal Capital* by reading a *Maclean's* ad featuring a scientific diagram of a dissected beaver. She writes: "The beaver is already an iconic symbol, a fetishized sign of the nation whose familiarity and recognition are presupposed by the ad's 'inside' joke" (3). From there, she thinks about how the beaver has functioned as two types of capital: one as a colonial pelt and the other as a "postcolonial brand," especially following the beaver's official adoption as a national symbol in 1975 (3). For Shukin, such a representation of the beaver "consolidated the economic and symbolic capital accumulated in the sign of the beaver over three centuries of Euro-Canadian traffic... presenting it as a natural, self-evident sign of the nation" (3). Drawing on Marx's theory of the commodity fetish, where "the definite social relation between men themselves... assumes here... the fantastic form of a relation between things" (*Capital* 165), Shukin argues that the beaver is "Canada's fetish insofar as it configures the nation as a lifeform that is born rather than made... and insofar as it stands in for an organic national unity that does not actually exist" (3). This paper then argues for a thinking together of political economy and cultural representation, as well as the particular role played by non-human animals in both economies of commodity production and economies of representation. It is specifically interested in thinking through the material and symbolic economies of the Canadian nation-state as a settler colonial nation.

The mediation between culture and economy is a longstanding one in the tradition of Marxist cultural studies. In the oft-cited preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx argues that "it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production... and the... ideological forms in which men become conscious

of this conflict and fight it out" (21). Such a distinction has been refined and complicated by Marxist cultural studies, especially the work of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, but it nevertheless speaks to the dialectical relation between political-economic structures and aesthetic forms. While the Marxist cultural studies canon has generally not considered the role of the animal as representation or material resource, animals have played a crucial role in the fundamental categories by which capital organizes social, political, and cultural life, for example, the beaver as capital, resource, and symbol of the nation.¹

How does the animal come to stand in for the nation and for a specific idea of the nation? This question takes on a specific resonance, given the formation of Canada as what Arthur Manuel calls "the biggest land theft in the history of mankind" (20), prompting the question of how we understand the beaver as the national sign of a specifically settler colonial nation. How do we understand the coextension between animal sign and national identity in contexts of settler colonial dispossession, when Indigenous peoples maintain relationships that pre-exist and counter settler modes of identification? How, then, do Indigenous nations' own relationships with the beaver imagine beavers beyond and against commodification?

I pose these questions to interweave a literary criticism that takes seriously the idea of Canada as stolen land alongside a critique of anthropocentrism central to literary animal studies. I explore the intersection between the production of animal capital and settler colonialism through the beaver and fur trade. I zero in on representations of the beaver in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Simpson's use of the Anishinaabe stories of beavers (*Amik*) in her lecture *A Short History of the Blockade: Giant Beavers, Diplomacy, and Regeneration in Nishnaabewin* to think about historical and contemporary Indigenous resistance to Canadian settler colonialism.² I read this text together with Sydney Hegele's short story collection, *The Pump*, which features man-eating beavers in an economically underdeveloped post-industrial town in Southwestern Ontario to think about the extractive politics of settler colonialism. The first two sections of this paper set out the theoretical stakes of the project, thinking through the way animal studies and critical Indigenous thought can inform each other, specifically alighting on the beaver. I then move to read Simpson and Hegele together as they use the beaver within their texts and show how the beaver as a

1. For some major exceptions see Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital* and Leigh Claire La Berge's *Marx for Cats*.

2. Simpson's book started as a lecture delivered as part of the Canadian Literature Centre's Kreisel Lecture Series, speaking to the way Canadian literature has sought to grapple with Indigenous critique in a time of the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty.

material creature and polysemic symbol is mobilized to think about the politics of settler colonial capitalism. I read them together as both are interested in the question of human and animal relationality and how such relationality exists in the context of settler colonial capitalism. I understand settler colonial capitalism as a political and economic system that is dependent upon Indigenous dispossession and elimination and that offers an economy of representations that exist within that structure of dependence. Ultimately, I am interested in the constellation that emerges from taking seriously an animal studies focused on the real lives of animals and their symbolic representation alongside an attention to political economy and Indigenous struggles for self-determination.

The beaver as a symbol and material creature has long been yoked to ideas of Canadian identity and material history. As Harold Innis argues, talking about the beaver, it is "impossible to understand the characteristics of the trade or of Canadian history without some knowledge of its life and habits" (3). Occluded or under-emphasized in this framing is the colonization of the lands later known as Canada: a "sweeping reterritorialization" accomplished through "a range of violent and coercive means over centuries" (Scott). The beaver as a symbol functions as a connective tissue through different periods of settler colonialism: the beaver as emblem and commodity produced by the Hudson's Bay Company, as a symbol of the Canadian Pacific Railway (the engine of westward expansion and the *clearing of the plains*), and as an innocent symbol of a multicultural nation state. Even after the formal end of the fur trade then, Canadian national identity is haunted by this foundational act of settler colonial accumulation represented by the beaver. This haunting is subtended by the continuance of colonial dispossession under the aegis of the expansion of capitalist markets via processes of accumulation.

Culturally, the beaver has a long history of representing Canada as a resource colony, especially by being associated with money: "Even before Canada existed (confederacy was not until 1867), the beaver was Canada's mascot... In 1937 a beaver appeared on Canada's nickel where it still remains, and in 1975 the rodent became the official symbol of Canada's sovereignty" (Poliquin 118). The beaver then functions to shore up the "imagined community" of Canada; a symbol that unites the members of that nation in imagined relations of commonality to one another and different from other national communities (Anderson 6-7) and functions as a stand in for capital as such, symptomatically revealing the links between animal commodification and capital. Colleen Boggs writes that the animal was "an invention that goes hand in hand with the emergence of colonial modernity" (24). Following Boggs, I argue that the commodification of animal life in this period set the stage for the regime of animal-human relationship and colonial politics within the settler colonial nation-state known as Canada. The beaver exemplifies these larger processes and histories.

The fur trade was one of many forms of accumulation in the Americas by European colonists that served as the motive force for capitalist development, settler colonialism, and the inception of animal life into capitalism. Innis hypothesizes that the lack of fishing in the interior, as opposed to the coast was, one of the reasons for the emergence of the fur trade in the late fifteenth century, continuous with these broader operations of capital accumulation in the Americas (9). The beaver is a potent symbol and material creature, the exploitation and killing of which in the fur trade spawned a complicated structure of identification and disavowal that serves as a metonym for the history of settler colonialism in its ambivalent modes of destruction and sentimental nostalgia. In contradistinction to these modes, Indigenous worldviews offer a challenge to the human-animal distinction and the confinement of animals to commodities and/or mere symbols in alliance with the beaver and against an anthropocentric distinction between humans and animals as part of a resistance to settler colonialism. I turn in the next section to laying out the theoretical stakes of thinking together settler colonialism with animal studies.

2. Settler-Colonialism and Animal Studies

I see my work here in alliance with Cree writer Billy-Ray Belcourt's contention that animal studies has "failed to center an analysis of settler colonialism" and his claim that "animal domestication, speciesism, and other modern human-animal interactions are only possible because of and through the historic and ongoing erasure of Indigenous bodies and the emptying of Indigenous lands for settler-colonial expansion" (3). In other words, Belcourt is arguing that it is precisely through settler colonial relations and infrastructures that human-animal relationships take shape. Implied in Belcourt's analysis of the relationship between humans and animals is the history of capitalism in settler colonial social formations. I zero in on this history of capitalism as it yokes together animal and Indigenous bodies within material economies of extraction and economies of representation. I see Canadian settler colonialism and the fur trade as sitting at the centre of a vast transnational network of commodity production, the very engine of modernity itself that in turn is premised on Indigenous erasure, settler colonial expansion, and the conversion of animals into commodities. In terms of a literary and cultural studies focused on animals, beaver representations (and animal representations more broadly) are, as Boggs argues, "a complex site where the construction of subjectivity occurs by affective means and pedagogical methods that hinge on the literal relationship to animals and on their figurative representation" (2). In other words, the literal and the figurative are interwoven through animal representations and in

the context of settler societies, such an interweaving is subtended by settler colonial capitalism.

The transit of the beaver is a synecdoche and a vivid example of the flow of commodities from North America to Europe. As writer Rachel Poliquin explains, “for the better part of three centuries tens of millions of beavers were exterminated... to make hats” (91) across what is now the U.S. and Canada. She notes that “Canada, in particular, was made by the beaver” (88). The beaver sat at the center of a whole world system that combined the colonization of North America with inter-European trade networks and specialized knowledge in particular regions all within an incipient global economy:

From the beginning of the fur trade until the later eighteenth century, the typical route from beaver to hat usually began with French and English traders purchasing pelts from aboriginal trappers, who might have already travelled long distances, perhaps trading the furs from other communities. European traders then transported furs across the Atlantic and sold them to Dutch middlemen, who shipped the pelts to Russia. Once Russian furriers had combed out the underfur, they sold it back to Dutch merchants, who in turn sold it mostly to French and English hatters. (103)

The Hudson’s Bay Company, which exercised corporate sovereignty over what would later be called Canada, “was a logistics empire from its founding, benefitting enormously from sole access to a sea route by which English ships carrying goods could arrive at Hudson Bay and return to England with furs inside of half a year” (Scott). Such an abundance of resources allowed for an idea of Canada’s self-definition as possessing limitless resources “and the beavers had taken the brunt of this self-serving fantasy” (Poliquin 160) as the material resource used by this network of global trade. It is this material history of the capture of a lively commodity that subtends a whole colonial history and economy of representing so-called Canada.

The beaver later (in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) comes to symbolize something precarious and needing to be preserved from the ravages of capitalist modernity just as it comes to symbolize the nation and be taken on as a marker of sentimental nostalgia for a period of settler expansion. Pauline Wakeham explains that in the early twentieth century, a discourse of conservation emerged among the Canadian elite, which “worried not so much for nature’s sake but for the continuance of superabundance that was key to the health of the white body politic and the vitality of the nation’s commercial interests” (19). Wakeham also points to the emergence of “a complex structure of nostalgia” in the early twentieth century, in the wake of the defeat of Indigenous resistance in the 1885 North West Uprising (20). The defeat of Indigenous resistance and

the subsequent population decimation “intertwined the semiotic figures of disappearing animals and vanishing Indians as linked species sharing a similar fate” as a move toward settler innocence and appeal to the supposedly natural progress of history (20). The modes of preservation enacted by conservation and colonial ethnography enabled “Euro-North American society to further exploit wildlife and native peoples under the guise of heroic rescue” (21). The mobilization of the beaver within this discourse relied on a settler colonial optic of Indigenous disappearance that presents Indigenous peoples and beavers as under the threat of elimination and in need of a benevolent settler intervention. This sentimentalized representation of the beaver has pervaded literature and popular culture in Canada; such associations are almost automatic or tautological. For example, representations of contemporary Canada in tourism invoke cute images of beavers. In Margaret Atwood’s classic study of Canadian literature, she identifies animals as being mobilized to represent a profound vulnerability in the face of American imperialism (83-105). I extend and complicate this analysis by focusing on the way such an innocence is contingent upon settler colonial modes of accumulation and dispossession. I want to turn now to Hegele’s text that defamiliarizes the beaver through an engagement with Gothic fiction and social realism. I argue that Hegele critiques the sentimentalized imaginary of the beaver in Canadian culture to think about the way such sentimentality conceals the operations of an extractive settler capitalism.

3. Man-Eating Beavers and Colonial Extraction: Sydney Hegele’s *The Pump*

The Pump, by Sydney Hegele, is a series of interconnected short stories all set in a fictional Southwestern Ontario town (the Pump) in the wake of deindustrialization, with the people undergoing various forms of what Lauren Berlant calls “slow death,” which they define as “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (95).³ Hegele’s text dramatizes these forms of slow death as resulting from economic depression and environmental toxicity in the wake of industrialization. The population of *The Pump* is subject to organized abandonment, left to die or be debilitated. The central fantastical element in the text is the presence of man-eating beavers. The injection of this fantasy into a broadly realistic setting serves to defamiliarize a familiar account of the post-industrial town and to comment on the beaver as a self-evident, sentimentalized sign of the nation.

3. *The Pump* was previously published under the name Sydney Warner Brooman.

The Pump is part of a broader trend in Canadian literature that yokes the lives of animals to the anxieties, fears, and fantasies of the nation-state. In the introduction to *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*, Janice Fiamengo makes the claim that animals “are so fundamental to our [Canadian] writing that it might indeed be said that our literature is founded on the bodies of animals—alive or dead; anthropomorphized or ‘realistic’; indigenous or exotic; sentimental, tragic, magical, and mythical” (5-6). As Fiamengo goes on to argue, animals have informed much of the project of Canadian literary criticism, especially the types of criticism that were interested in “broad patterns and recurring motifs” from CanLit luminaries like Northrop Frye and Atwood (9).

Sydney Hegele’s prose is attuned to these debates, at least in spirit, about the relation between animal representation and national identity in their non-idealized treatment of Canadian nature. As Hegele remarks in an interview about the collection, referring to the beavers, they “wanted something that honoured the Can lit tradition while also turning it on its head—a part of nature that is typically non-violent, especially towards humans” (“The Sydney Hegele Interview”) and in Anuja Varghese’s review of *The Pump*, she notes that the beavers provide “a deeply unsettling bit of magical realism and also an interesting disruption of the beaver as a patriotic Canadian symbol.” What kind of disruption does *The Pump* stage to Canadian patriotism? As I argued above, the beaver as a sentimental symbol exists in the wake of the fur trade intertwined with a colonial form of sentimentality that shores up the operations of accumulation fundamental to settler modes of sovereignty, even within contexts of multicultural and/or ecologically attuned modes of recognition. The beaver is now a *cute* and innocent symbol representing a postcolonial brand of multiculturalism that has more recently been recruited to narratives of resilience and sustainability. My reading of the beavers in *The Pump* centers on the non-idealized yet fantastical treatment of the beavers as a counter-imaginary of sentimentality and settler moves to innocence. The symbol of Canada in *The Pump* literally consumes non-elite subjects, even as these settler subjects are unmarked by colonialism as such.

The Pump is located in The Greenbelt (a site of contest between development and conservation), where the mother of the character Jo (whose story bookends the collection) enters.⁴ Rather than being greeted with a lush, untrammelled-upon nature, the reader sees graffiti “spray-painted in bright blue” and learns about the polluted water that is a feature of several stories, and we

4. I use The Pump (without italics) to refer to the town and *The Pump* (with italics) to refer to the text.

learn "the beavers cry like wolves" (Hegele, *The Pump*).⁵ Such a de-idealized treatment of the non-human world sets the stage for a cycle of stories that play out against a hostile environment where survival is less bound up in rugged, heroic individualism than in crummy, ordinary activity, most fulfilling when taking place collectively, such as the moment of queer escape in "Mal aux Dents (or Toothache)" which tells the story of two queer teens finding moments of joy in each other's company and "Home" where Jo leaves The Pump with her non-binary partner.

The fur trade plays out in a small, bathetic way in *The Pump*. In the story "I Can Outrun You, Too!" Jacob Jameson, the mayoral candidate, is encouraged by his son to "talk about the beavers" and tell the people they can hunt beavers to "make soft-as-fuck hats for... rich people" and that this will lead to becoming rich people (Hegele, *The Pump* 67). Ultimately, this does not work out; the promises of the good life were never available. Indeed, it is implied that the beavers need to be fed on human flesh and that feeding the beavers is necessary for Jameson's political career (68). The beaver therefore symbolizes colonial capitalism and the sacrifice it demands of those embedded in it to attain power within the system. At the end of the story, Jameson confronts a beaver, telling it that he will make it into a commodity, "I could make a hat out of you" (70). The beaver responds with, "I can outrun you, too" (70). This failed attempt to recreate the prosperity of the fur trade enables a reading of the beavers as fetishized national sign that is subverted by representing the nation-state as extractive. Throughout the text, nature has turned on the humans of the Pump as revenge for degradation and pollution, with the beavers enacting a non-intentional vengeance. In the story "Life Giver," we learn that beavers have been killing for long enough that it has become a quotidian fact of life (83-95). I understand this as a kind of *slow death* represented as a revenge of nature downstream from a long history of colonial capitalist modes of extraction.

In the epilogue, where Jo's mother leaves The Pump, she encounters the beavers that "were here first, but The Pump does not belong to them. The Pump belongs to people" (Hegele). This at first seems like anthropocentric fantasy, the conquest of nature; however, the Pump, belonging to the people, in fact means that "Everything is touched by humans- fleshy and fragile, boisterous and greedy" marked by dead trees and toxic waste where "dams should be" (Hegele). What fantasy of domination is this? What at first reads like and indeed is the displacement of animals for human extractive capitalism is stripped away from a romantic imaginary and euphemism of such displacement. And

5. The frame story of Jo's mother entering and leaving The Pump does not have page numbers.

yet, nevertheless, the beavers are removed from *The Pump*, positioning the humans and beavers as locked in a struggle over belonging to land, as degraded as that land is within the context and history of colonial extraction.

The beavers do not figure as *characters* per se and, with the notable exception of the beaver speaking to Jameson, are mute figures, part of the background of *The Pump* that the human characters encounter through violence or tales thereof. Indeed, character is less important than a social world where inhabitation as such is a *problem* to be lived through. This problem of inhabitation is dramatized in the conflict between humans and the outside world that is itself shaped by human activity. The beavers are taken as a fact of life, a magical realist element in a quotidian story about survival. The idea of survival in a harsh landscape could be read as a kind of settler fantasy but, rather than the untrammelled wilderness, the characters encounter the realities of modern life that exists in the wake of colonial extraction. The idea of competition between beavers and humans is a common one in contemporary public culture, with Poliquin reporting how farmers in Canada have objected to the beaver destroying their farmland, with one farmer in Ottawa declaring “it’s really a war” (189). The partisans of the beaver-as-ecologist draw on this language as well with Glynnis Hood jokingly arguing that the beaver is “one of the few animals that can go head to head with humans and win” and so humans and beavers are locked in a “battle for world domination” (9), as exemplified in Nancy Eaton’s conflict with beavers with which I began this essay. The abstract human Hood invokes here is locked in struggle with the beaver. Left unthought here are the relationships between humans and animals that are mutually forming and mutually opposed to a settler colonial politics of extraction. I turn now to Simpson’s exploration of those relationships as a tool for decolonial resistance.

4. Blockades and Beavers: Leanne Simpson’s *A Short History of the Blockade*

In a similar way to *The Pump*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *A Short History of the Blockade* is concerned with the ways beings live on and encounter one another under a colonial politics of extraction. Simpson is interested in the political struggle against these circumstances and includes animals as co-strugglers alongside humans. In contrast to the beaver as industrious figures or nuisances, Simpson invokes “these Indigenous bodies” that “know different” (12).

On January 4th, 2020, the Unist’ot’en camp posted a call to solidarity actions against a Coastal Gas Link oil pipeline that had received approval for

construction through Wet'su'wet'en land.⁶ The call was answered by solidarity blockades across the country. As writer and organizer Cam Scott argues, these modes of direct action

have a long history in colonized North America—and as ever-greater integration and concentration of enterprise creates the conditions for new mass actions, collating geographically disparate struggles and paradoxically empowering regional interventions within global markets, these means acquire persuasive force, with the potential to enlist vast solidarities between anti-capitalist cohabitants on stolen land. (Scott)

In short, the blockades created possibilities for anti-capitalist solidarity in settler colonial contexts.

While generally framed by mainstream Canadian media as protests, the blockades are more properly understood as the “resurgence of Indigenous legal practices,” as Leanne Simpson puts it. Simpson defines blockades as a “generative refusal” (10) since they both reject the imposition of the settler state and capital, and generate a reproduction of Indigenous lifeways, economies, and laws. In the words of Shiri Pasternak, blockades are not, then, “symbols of past attachments to the land or signs of a backward economic outlook. They are, rather, one of the most important contemporary examples of where Canadian law meets modern Indigenous societies on the ground” (33). The specific tactic of rail blockades emerges both politically from this understanding and practically because, as Kwakwaka'wakw writer and artist Gord Hill notes, railways “are so vulnerable to this type of action... because they were punched through reserves” (qtd. in Andrew-Gee).

Ultimately, blockades are both forms of direct action and dynamic sites premised on different logics than the extraction endemic to capitalism and instead can be understood as a kind of counter-sovereignty to the sovereignty of the settler colonial state. Such struggles are fundamentally about a relationship to land otherwise than extraction and domination. As Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard puts it,

Indigenous struggles against capitalist imperialism are best understood as struggles oriented around the question of land—struggles not only for land, but also deeply informed by what the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship... ought

6. The camp is located in Northern British Columbia and is a site of Wet'su'wet'en resistance to the Coastal Gas Link pipeline and broader invasions by the settler state of Canada.

to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way. (60)

Within this understanding, place names a set of ethical relationships wherein

humans held certain obligations to the land, animals, plants, and lakes in much the same way that we hold obligations to other people. And if these obligations were met, then the land, animals, plants, and lakes would reciprocate and meet their obligations to humans, thus ensuring the survival and well-being of all over time. (61)

Such a reciprocal vision of the relation between human and non-human stands in stark contrast to a politics of extraction and exploitation that is ravaging the earth; one that privileges a normative white humanity.

Given the broader shifts toward logistics and supply chains in the global capitalist economy, Joshua Clover points out that blockades “will be central to any successful social movement toward liberation, but this does not make blockades inherently liberatory.” Clover has in mind protests such as the Freedom Convoy, which blockaded the streets of Ottawa and several Canada-U.S. border crossings ostensibly in protest of Covid mitigations but more substantively wedded to a revanchist vision of Canadian national identity based on patriarchal white masculinity undergirded by fossil capital, within the borders of the state. The “greatness” (a transnational settler echo of the conception of greatness that animates the Trumpist right in the United States under the banner of MAGA) that the Freedom Convoy was determined to remake draws on a history of corporate sovereignty over Indigenous land. Lisa Guenther describes this conception of Canada as “a massive fur warehouse with an ad hoc assemblage of governors, constables, and carceral enclosures to stabilize trade relations and secure what would later be called the ‘critical infrastructure’ of global capitalism” (655). The massive “fur warehouse” is founded on the making of beavers into commodities and making such commodity production into the material and psychic substrate of a revanchist idea of the nation premised on a settler colonial politics of extraction. Shiri Pasternak and Tia Dafnos write, “Indigenous peoples interrupt commodity flows by asserting jurisdiction and sovereignty over their lands and resources in places that form choke points to the circulation of capital” (741). The role of Indigenous political action in interrupting capitalist energy regimes should be understood as the basis for a broad-based solidarity against capitalism and toward environmental justice in North America. For Simpson, Coulthard, and other Indigenous writers, such a solidarity would also include solidarity with non-human animals such as the beaver.

Departing from this symbolism of the “fur warehouse,” Simpson contrasts the idea of the beaver as “a money-making attraction to supply the continent

with nifty felt hats" to a Nishnaabeg idea of the beaver as a relation (*A Short History* 12-13). The beaver dam for Simpson and Nishnaabeg ways of knowing is a blockade that is "life giving." She contrasts "beaver infrastructure" with "colonial and capitalistic infrastructure" that typifies settler colonial economies of extraction. In contrast, colonial infrastructure such as the Trent-Severn Waterway was erected "in violation of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg and beaver diplomacy" (30-31). Simpson uses the term diplomacy to think about the relations of reciprocity that existed between the Nishnaabe nation and the beaver nation prior to and in defiance of colonization. Tlingit anthropologist Anne Spice has identified how the Canadian state has mobilized the term 'critical infrastructure' to "transform oil and gas infrastructures from industry projects into crucial matters of national interest" (42). Spice draws from Unist'ot'en camp spokesperson Freda Hudson's appropriation of the term critical infrastructure as it "inverts the promise and inevitability of settler infrastructures but does not replace it with a network that works within the same epistemological and ontological relations to land and kin" (40). Instead, these ontological and epistemological relationships "require caretaking, which Indigenous peoples are accountable to. And they are relations that are built through the agency of not only humans but also other-than-human kin" (42).

This positive decolonial vision as political project and ethical orientation challenges modes of extraction that are invoked as marks of supremacy by formations like the Freedom Convoy truck blockades, both in seeing beavers as other than resource and through its vision beyond the colonial nation-state. In her book, *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson explains that internationalism does not take place just between Indigenous nations but "is a series of relationships with plant nations, animal nations, insects, bodies of water, air, soil, and spiritual beings in addition to the Indigenous nations with whom we share parts of our territory" (56). Such a conception always-already challenges both an anthropocentric imaginary of human supremacy and dominion over nature and a narrative of humans and animals in conflict, instead presenting an alliance, worked out over the agonistic relationships of equality and democracy. By attending to the centrality of Indigenous political action that includes seeing the beaver as kin, literary animal studies and Canadian studies can think through the ways animals are mobilized and extracted from in shoring up ideas and structures of the Canadian nation-state.

In her lecture, Simpson tells four beaver (*Amik*) stories to think through different modes of and challenges to Indigenous resurgence. One of these is a 'modern' retelling of the fight between Giant Beaver (*Amik*) and Nanabush, where eventually Amik learns to use his skills for good and becomes the beaver we know today (23). In Guenther's reading of the story, she wonders "what might happen if Giant Beaver kept their size but used their mighty tail to bust

up pipelines and convoys with their new friends" (658). And indeed, later in her lecture, Simpson blurs distinctions between humans and non-humans by talking about beavers engaging in the disruptive but life-affirming action of solidarity with the Unist'ot'en camp (50). The beavers for Simpson are not delimited by the Indigenous/settler binary or the human/animal binary, a binary that is both clarified and problematized in situations of anti-colonial rupture, such as resistance to colonial capitalism through blockades. If the human-animal distinction is constituted by the colonial relation and bound up with that relation, then anti-colonial rupture challenges that constitution and fundamental relation.

In the next section, I read these two texts together specifically, in the different ways they read human-animal intimacy and coexistence. For Simpson, such intimacy is present and based on a long history of Indigenous resistance that necessarily includes a challenge to anthropocentrism. On the other hand, Hegele makes a negative critique, offering a line of flight from a damaged future.

5. Extractive Capitalism, Coexistence, and Decolonial Critique

The second story Simpson tells is a version of "The Woman Who Married a Beaver."⁷ In this story, an Anishinaabe character meets someone who is later revealed to be a beaver. The beaver would leave for periods of time and return with gifts. As Simpson reads this, drawing from an Anishinaabe hermeneutic, this represents an ethical exchange between the beaver who is killed in exchange for gifts from the Anishinaabe and the Anishinaabe hunter (*A Short History* 29-30). For Simpson, this story shows the forming of a reciprocal relationship between the Anishinaabe and beavers, the basis for an internationalism beyond the human and indeed where such categories as human and animal are not salient distinctions (31). In opposition to the extractive politics of settler colonial capitalism, the story "reminds us that one can build and live in a world predicated on consent. It builds a world where the political economy of the Nishnaabeg and the beavers is founded upon consensus, sharing, and mutual respect" (Simpson 55). Simpson's use of political economy here is an invocation of a social order built otherwise than through extraction and one that includes beaver participation. Simpson is ultimately concerned with what we do in this moment: those of us committed to decolonial futures can "stand beside the pile of sticks blocking the flow of the river, and complain about

7. Simpson changes "woman" to "person."

the inconveniences, or we can sit beside the pond and witness the beavers' life-giving brilliance" (56). The blockade represents this witnessing and joining in the creation of "Indigenous Worlds. Black Worlds. Beaver Worlds" (57), mapping out the affirmative solidarities that cross the species line.

The Pump ends with Jo's mother escaping *The Pump* just as the beavers are also leaving. Hegele both invites and withdraws an interspecies parallel. Jo's mother comes upon a beaver lodge and "almost hears the family inside. She almost hears their conversation" (Hegele). The narration here conditions an interspecies connection by introducing the "almost." In contrast to Simpson, who imagines and draws from an interspecies ontology, Hegele seems more interested in the limits of coexistence and situations where such coexistence is thwarted. *The Pump* is notably marked by an absence of an elsewhere and otherwise than this environment of toxicity. The narrator cannot tell us where Jo's mother goes, only saying that she goes "Somewhere else" (Hegele). The beavers also escape to an unnamed place. By contrast, while Simpson does not specify the nature of the worlds she imagines, they are grounded in a mode of living beyond settler extraction. Simpson draws on the memory of Indigenous resistance, citing the Dene's opposition to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline and the resistance of the Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawake to the city of Oka building a golf course on their burial grounds (57). Simpson begins her address by situating her epistemology in a "Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg way of life" that is predicated on "a deep relationality" to both other humans and animals (3).

These two texts illuminate one another by offering different critiques of an extractive settler capitalism that is premised on a particular relationship of exploitation of nature. Hegele offers a negative critique of this structure, representing how settler capitalism damages even those subjects and reduces their life chances. Simpson centres the experience of Indigenous and especially Anishinaabe life worlds and an historical resistance to colonialism over the past five centuries.

6. Conclusion

The beaver has been recruited to all kinds of narratives, including that of ecological preservation, where beavers become, Poliquin explains, "synonymous with the health of woodlands, wetlands and riparian habitats" (163). The idea of learning from the beaver is a welcome one if the alternative is seeing the beaver as an exploitable resource or sentimental object, but I am suspicious of the way the beaver is figured as resilient to climate change and can *teach* that resilience to humans. For one, Susie O'Brien has recently examined how resilience has been mobilized in the cultures of the Global North to shore

up existing hierarchies while accommodating itself to difference (20). I am also suspicious of this *pedagogical* relationship to which the beaver has been conscripted, as it makes the beaver into a cipher for a resilient ecology. What would it mean instead to be in a relationship of reciprocity with beavers? The blockades both continue and have come down in many places. Regardless, they prompt a reckoning with the colonial violence of so-called Canada and present a livable alternative to the present, full of obligations to and (hopefully) reciprocity with the beaver. The task I see for Canadian literary criticism and animal studies is nothing other than this obligation to other-than-human life and Indigenous resistance to capitalism.

My hope is that such considerations of the centrality of settler colonialism to Canadian national identity and Canadian literature are also ones that must consider the role of animals as resources and symbol in such colonization. This project has involved thinking together a historical materialist account of settler colonialism alongside Indigenous critique and bringing to bear such a synthesis on animal representations in literature. It dialectically mediated between animals as symbols, material creatures, and resources toward anti-capitalist resistance on stolen lands and a life lived otherwise than settler colonial capitalism and its politics of extraction.

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Unreconciling the Summer Camp: Revisting the Assimilation Era Through the Architectures of Education for Indigenous and Settler Children, 1880-1950

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ABSTRACT

Through a comparative analysis of the architectures of two antithetical Ontario “educational” spaces—the summer camp for Settler¹ children and the residential school for Indigenous children, this paper explains how both worked in parallel to privilege Canada’s settler-colonial agenda. Between 1880 and 1951 the Canadian government—following the recommendations of the 1879 *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half Breeds* (The Davin Report)—committed to the development of a system of residential schools; that coincides with the founding of summer camps at the start of the twentieth century. Back-to-nature summer camps ensconced white settler children in bucolic wilderness settings “playing Indian” (Deloria) and bonding with the landscape as they learned to canoe, build fires, and live away from urban environments. Indigenous children, meanwhile, were torn from their families—who had inhabited those lands for millennia—and relocated to residential schools designed explicitly to “civilize,” Christianize,

1. This paper capitalizes the term Settler to align with Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker’s articulation of “Settler” and “Indigenous” as identities “always in relationship” (16). These mirror identities describe broad collectives of people with distinct relationships to land and colonial power (2, 15-17).

and sever their relationships with their languages, ways of life, and land. By focusing on how curricula orient children towards, or away from, land, I set parallel images from case studies operating in Ontario in overlapping years thus contributing to an alternative perspective on the intersection of white children playing Indian at summer camps with the targeting of Indigenous children for assimilation. I set location, landscape, and architectural design as key components to the consolidation of Settler possession and Indigenous dispossession. Recognizing the role that summer camps played in colonialism creates a mandate to reorient the sites as spaces for reconciliation-and perhaps decolonization, in the present.²

Keywords

Assimilation; Colonial Architecture; Playing Indian; Reconciliation; Residential School; Summer Camp

1. Relationality and Distortion of Narrative in Two Images

Two photographs: teepees in the foreground and a large, semi-isolated structure, introduce relatively common scenes-between about 1880 and 1950-at *educational* institutions across Canada's *wilderness*. *Educational*-as they were historically labelled³-and *wilderness*-foregrounds settler colonial separation of civilization from untouched territory; or as Tiffany Kaewen Dang pointedly describes the lands around urban fabric: "resource hinterlands from which capital is extracted for the benefit of settler dominated metropolises" (67). Dang's quotation summarizes the spatial strategy of settler colonialism and its emphasis on mapping, land divisions, and private property. The built environment in its organization and reinforcement of these strategies is the interface through which Indigenous peoples interact with Settler state power. This paper investigates two architectural types originating from within Canada's settler colonial project.

2. Parts of this paper are based on the author's master's thesis completed at the Architectural Association (AA) School of Architecture in 2024 under the guidance of Hamed Khosravi, Platon Issaia, Anna Font, and Doreen Bernath in the Projective Cities Programme. The thesis is available on Issuu: https://issuu.com/projective/docs/dissertation_arielle_lavine.

3. Geoffrey Carr posits that the Indian Residential School (IRS) should not be considered a school, as this suggests a "kinship" to other educational institutions (ii). He instead aligns his architectural survey of the IRS with Erving Goffman's concept of a "total institution": a closed social setting where individuals are controlled by a single authority with the intent of reshaping their identities (Goffman 11; Carr 12, 74). While agreeing with Carr's designation, I argue that the "school" label remains relevant in looking at colonial ideologies informing the IRS as well as other institutions at the time. The summer camp demonstrates the unequal treatment of children and prescription of an "education" but also shares with the IRS a pedagogical focus on orientation to land and social engineering.

Unreconciling the Summer Camp: Revisiting the Assimilation Era Through the Architectures of Education for Indigenous and Settler Children, 1880-1950



Fig. 1. O. B. Buell, *Distant View of Fort Qu'Appelle Indian Industrial School*, 1885.



Fig. 2. Camp Ahmek, *Indian Village and Log Theatre*, 1927-28.

Figure 1 is a photograph taken by Oliver Buell in 1885 of the Qu'Appelle Indian Industrial School (1884), a government managed boarding school designed to sever Indigenous children from their communities in order to “civilize”

and Christianize them. The most striking element is the scene captured outside the fence of the tents, carts, and teepees likely belonging to Métis and other Indigenous families who travelled long distances to be near their children, who had likely forcibly been enrolled at the school. At the core of the federal government's educational agenda was the policy of assimilation (Milloy, *A National Crime* 88-90). Chronically underfunded, Indian Residential Schools (IRS) delivered an extremely low quality of care, particularly during what John Milloy outlines as the "Industrial Era" between 1879 and 1923 (71). The structures of these institutions—both Day Schools (initially on-reserve) and Industrial Schools (quite a distance off-reserve)—were, as scholar Carr defines, a first generation of schools "designed to hasten full assimilation." He continues, "second generation schools mainly built between 1910 and 1930 served a segregationist program" (42n3).

Summer camps in Ontario emerged independently in the first decade of the twentieth century supplementing the provincial public schooling (legislated in 1871). As historian Sharon Wall explains, camps offering seasonal returns to "primitive" living were believed to counteract ailments of modern urban life (*The Nurture of Nature* 5). Contiguous with the "back-to-nature" movement was the creation of managed forest reserves on crown land; notably, Ontario's first Provincial Park, Algonquin (1893). The year it opened, one of Ontario's first camps acquired permanent space there (10). In 1921, Camp Ahmek was founded on Canoe Lake. Figure 2 is a photograph of Camp Ahmek in 1927, captured in a way that it appears strikingly similar to Buell's photograph of Qu'Appelle.⁴ In the foreground is Ahmek's "Indian Village," featuring child sized teepees and birch bark canoes laid artfully on the ground with the whole ensemble enclosed in a more primitive-looking fence. The photograph was printed in Ahmek's brochures as an advertisement, and one of numerous images featuring the camp's novel immersive built environment; its many activity areas adorned with "Indian" motifs.⁵ Ahmek's founder, Taylor Statten alluded to the idea that that the motifs signified to campers that they were outside of the civilized world (Dimock and Statten). Architectural historian Abigail Van Slyck confirms that Indian symbols reinforced the implication that children were secure in their (white, colonial) identities while also indulging in the fantasy of "playing Indian" ("Shaping Modern Boyhood" 46).

There is an important distinction to be made: while summer camp was temporary and voluntary, residential school was long-term and carceral. Beginning in 1920, the *Federal Indian Act* legislated mandatory attendance for all

4. Figure 2 has been reproduced with the permission of The Algonquin Park Archives & Collections who provided me with this reproduction.

5. The quotation marks around the term "Indian" will hereafter be implied.

Indigenous children between the ages of 7-15 (Residential School History). This mandate, in turn, barred Indigenous children from pursuing any other form of education. That same year, at least nineteen summer camps that Wall identifies were operational across Ontario (*The Nurture of Nature* 11). Meanwhile, across the IRS system the poor treatment and inappropriate curriculum for children persisted, and though there was a 1944 decision to integrate with the public school system, closures took four decades (Milloy, *A National Crime* 73-74). The institutions remained open as catchments for children whose families were deemed neglectful by children's aid societies and the Indian Affairs branch (73-74). Meanwhile, the summer camp movement continued to expand, not only as an escape from urbanity, but as a status symbol. Only parents who had both time, and money, could invest in extra-curricular education for their children. Nevertheless, the summer camp quickly became an unshakable symbol of Canadian identity and pride.

The comparison of images makes plain the irony in the dual educational agendas: Indigenous children forced to assimilate into Euro-Canadian culture through residential schooling, and Settler children encouraged to play Indian through programming designed to connect them with stolen Indigenous lands. The teepees outside the fence in Buell's photograph symbolize exclusion, while Ahmek's Indian diorama is part of the artificial fabric of the rebranded Canadian wilderness. Ahmek's Indian Village operates as a playground for white children, essentially for staging cosplay.

Significant academic attention has been paid to the harms of "playing Indian" in summer camps in the United States (Slyck, *Manufactured Wilderness*) and in Ontario (Wall, *The Nurture of Nature*), including studies specific to Camp Ahmek (Slyck, "Shaping Modern Boyhood"; Wall, *The Nurture of Nature*; Shore). My work is situated in the context of scholars who have hinted, in varying degrees, at a relationship between the IRS and the camping movement. Amanda Shore, for instance, concludes that based on correlating timelines and narratives, "summer camps benefitted from legislated Indigenous erasure" (21). Wall has similar findings and notes the lack of dedicated scholarship on the issue. She writes: "nothing, it seems was ever said about the fact that, as white campers played at being Indian, contemporary Native children were the target of aggressive campaigns aimed to rid them of their 'Indianness'" (*The Nurture of Nature* 245-46). Mary Jane McCallum's MA thesis on *Girl Guiding in Indian Residential Schools* is significant as she recognizes a double role reversal: Indigenous girls were taught to go *camping*: that is, they were essentially taught the Settler way of impersonating Indians (24). The anthology *Depicting Canada's Children* invited a comparison between the summer camp and the IRS—institutional material culture in particular—by setting consecutive chapters on the cultural landscape of Camp Ahmek (Slyck, "Shaping Modern Boyhood")

27-48) with “haunted” photographic depictions of Indigenous children at residential schools (Racette 49-84). Jennifer Henderson’s literary study picks up similar intersections of narrative and timeline. Discussing education reform in the first decade of the twentieth century—through Lucy Maud Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and Ernest Thompson Seton’s *Two Little Savages* (1903)—Henderson asserts that Seton’s Woodcraft program for practical education “owes much to the ambitious project of Indian education implemented in Canada twenty years earlier” (474). She notes that while policy makers of the 1880s believed wholeheartedly that assimilation would be successful and benefit the Indigenous population, by the turn of the century, the project was seen as impractical and impossible (474). Each of these academics conclude that the two programs reinforced one another, yet a typological comparison has not been developed.⁶ I parallel the architectural spaces of both institutions, focusing on how they are represented in promotional materials.

Four major archives were visited across Southern Ontario: Algonquin Provincial Park Archives & Collections; Library and Archives Canada; Shingwauk Residential School Centre; and Trent University Archives. All contain patterns of records—in the form of architectural drawings; promotional brochures, maps, and photographs; and educational manifestoes—which present the institutions as forward looking and innovative throughout their founding decades. They detail the construction of systems of education and the ideologies that backed them up. By reorganising the Settler archive, I reveal a dynamic relationship between contested sites that goes beyond a useful analogy. I demonstrate frictions and associations in the strategies and built manifestations of the dual programs. I show that each materially impacted the other. For example, a 1927 brochure from the Christian Summer Camp Manitou boasts of a hiking trip that led a group of white boys not only through an “Indian burial ground” but also to visit a nearby IRS in Spanish, Ontario (*Camp Manitou* 11). The brochure describes the children’s excitement “since it affords the boys their first opportunity of seeing a school from the outside looking in” (11). They were told that Indian children were being taught useful trades.

Through juxtaposition of otherwise separate bodies of material and scholarship, moments of intersection become suddenly visible in what cultural studies scholar Mary Louise Pratt defines as “contact zones,” spaces in which “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical

6. Carr is the first scholar who has studied the IRS as a unique architectural typology (45). Abigail Van Slyck’s *A Manufactured Wilderness* is the first architectural analysis of the American summer camp. Slyck, Wall, and Shore each discuss the built environment of the summer camp, but none put the two typologies (IRS and summer camp) in direct conversation.

relations of domination and subordination" (7). Given that residential schools were eventually, belatedly, eliminated, my aim is to propose ways of repositioning summer camps. Recognizing the role summer camps played in colonialism creates a mandate and an opportunity to reorient the sites as spaces for reconciliation.

2. A Double Vision Of The "Forest Children"⁷



Fig. 3. Confirmation Group, Saint Paul's Church, His Majesty's Chapel of the Mohawks, Brantford, Ont. 1918.

A photograph from 1918 (fig. 3) documents a group of Indigenous children at the Mohawk Institute Residential School (1828-1970), or "Mush Hole" as it also became known, dressed for the church confirmation ceremony. The children stand rigidly in the foreground overseen by three authority figures behind

7. Founder of the Shingwauk IRS Reverend E. F. Wilson refers to the Indigenous pupils in his institution as "Forest Children" in the title of his periodical "Our Forest Children and What We Want to Do with Them."

them; girls with hair cut to shoulder length and boys with heads shaved. It was common practice to cut children's hair on arrival to physically rid them of their identities. Many photos like this—including the widely discussed before-and-after photos of Thomas More Keesick taken in 1897—were popular forms of propaganda, confirming the saintly work of the schools (Milloy, 'Suffer' 8-10; Carr 48; Racette 49-52). By way of contrast, Camp Wapomeo—sister camp to the boys' Camp Ahmek—printed a postcard in the 1920s featuring a photograph of a group of thirteen white girls dressed up as generic Indians.⁸ The girls in the postcard are dressed in strikingly similar costumes to that of Keesick's "before" photograph. Milloy describes the costume in the "before" photo:

[Keesick is] in his beaded dress, his hair in long braids, clutching a gun. Displayed for the viewer are the symbols of the past-of aboriginal costume and culture, of hunting, of the disorder and violence of warfare and of the cross-cultural partnership of the fur trade and of military alliances that had dominated life in Canada since the late sixteenth century. ('Suffer' 9)

The girls in the Camp Wapomeo photograph are made-up in similar loosely fitted fringed garments, wearing long, layered beaded necklaces, their hair in long braids wrapped with customized headbands painted with fictitious Indian names. They are not carrying guns, and unlike young Keesick's stern, frightened expression, or the rigid, military like conformity of the confirmation photo, the girls at Camp Wapomeo appear without adult supervision, leaning into each others' knees and radiating a feeling of camaraderie, an imagined version of the Indian of the past.

"Playing Indian"—the phrase coined by Philip J. Deloria—in the context of cultural genocide is not an indication of cultural appreciation. It is cultural appropriation, and as the Wapomeo postcard indicates, was embedded in summer camp culture from the start. The pedagogy of the summer camp, grounded in G. Stanley Hall's recapitulation theory, explains Slyck, assumed that white children were closer to "Indians" than white adults and so needed time to be their natural selves before willingly engaging in the trappings of civilization ("Shaping Modern Boyhood" 33). Camp names were selected to suggest connections with long-gone Indigenous tribal cultures. The educational agendas of both the summer camp and IRS depended on who was allowed to *play* and *dress up as the Other*. By juxtaposing images of Indigenous children dressed to look

8. I point readers toward the Taylor Statten Camps' History Page. The postcard can be found in the 1920s Wapomeo folder, <https://taylorstatten camps.com/the-taylor-statten-camps-history/>.

civilized with those of white children dressed to look *Indian*, the biopolitical operation underlying both educational agendas is instantly visible. Entering the nation-state as a civilized adult requires the death of the Indian⁹—both the real and the fake.¹⁰

Behind the photographs of children are broader changes in perspectives on education and childhood in the early twentieth century, characterized by rapid colonial and industrial transformation. In responding to environmental and societal fears, the child became the locus of attention; the target for accelerating change to secure colonial advantage. As Alison Prentice explains, educators at the turn of the century believed that “schools ought to be and could be better than the society which created them” (46). If, as Jennifer Henderson notes, homes were believed to be at the root of social problems, education was the cure (463). Educational institutions (camps included) were considered as “special environments for the raising of a generation of children who would be better than the generation that had gone before” (Prentice 46). Those beliefs set the stage for both the IRS and the summer camp as immersive environments for social reform. One of the reasons that residential schools didn’t receive a lot of scrutiny was because of faith in education as a positive force. Those in charge of residential schools were essentially handed a license to do what they liked with little concern about ethics, save the widely ignored report by Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce in 1907 describing residential schools as “a national crime” (Bryce; Milloy, *Suffer* 75). The combination of home as the problem and school as the cure contextualize the belief systems underlying both residential schools and summer camps. As education was equated with success, both systems aligned to consolidate Settler rights to the land by forcing Indigenous conformity to Canadian identity.

9. The IRS system is responsible for at least 4,117 deaths of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children so far documented by the NCTR and TRC, now systemically defined as cultural genocide.

10. Joshua Whitehead usefully frames the summer camp as a “paradoxical” space in its “desire to capitalize on Indigeneity as a transformative space for white adolescents to enter and emerge from as civilized adults” (227). See also Bryanne Young’s article on the ethos of the IRS system “to kill the Indian in the child” and subject-formation (63-76).

3. A Double Vision Of Wilderness

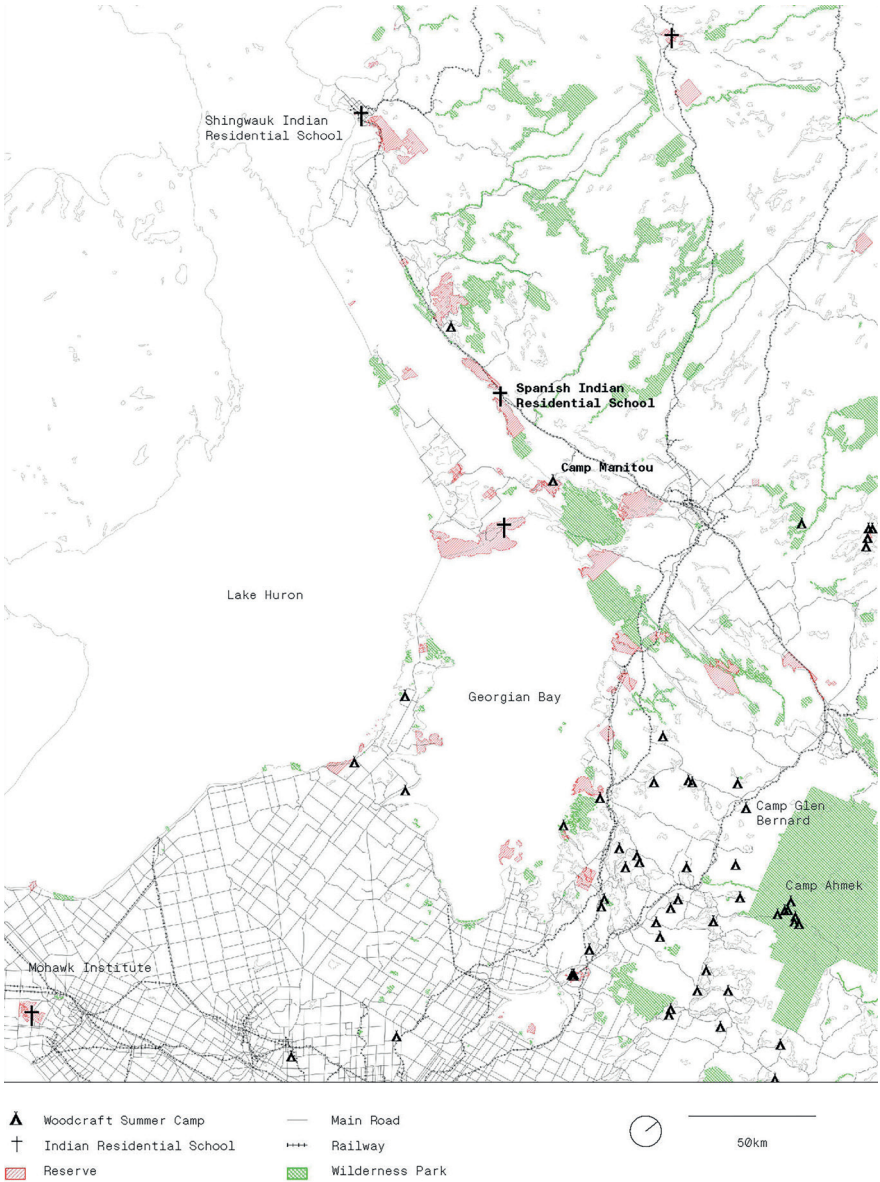


Fig. 4. Arielle Lavine, *Map of Presently Operational Summer Camps and Formerly Operational Residential Schools in an Enclave of the Great Lakes Region, 2024.*

Figure 4 shows the relative remote locations of residential schools and summer camps. The landscapes of both are constructions, aspects of what Nisga'a architect Luugigyoo Patrick Reid Stewart describes as the "colonial grammar" of the settler state (219). Spatial delineations, he says, like linguistic grammar rules, are essential ingredients in the creation and maintenance of a colonial state. Institutional architecture, including schools, act as agents of occupation and control. The spatial vocabularies of both the IRS and the summer camp rely on a common understanding of land with colonial separation of civilization and wilderness giving initial shape to the sites. But their relative wilderness settings were chosen in response to divergent objectives.

The 1879 Davin Report marked the beginning of the federal government's parental role in Indigenous residential school education, as the report, as Milloy observes, confidently brought together "ideology and rationale" (*A National Crime* 70). A crucial part of this ideology was a clear territorial strategy. In the report, Inspector E. McColl (under Nicholas Flood Davin) asserts, "The moment there exists a settlement which has any permanent character, then education in some form or another should be brought within reach of the children" (Davin 11). McColl emphasized that schools should be established near trading posts, and natural resources, on suitable soil for farming and agriculture. While the directive of "aggressive civilization" was present from the start,¹¹ clear in suggestion that Indigenous children should be kept in the circle of civilized conditions, by the end of the Industrial era once the confidence in assimilation was scrapped (Henderson 474), the remote settings of the institutions took on a second, more sinister purpose: the children would be kept segregated and isolated.

The wilderness setting held a different meaning for summer camps. Though brochures describe "rugged rocky country" and lakes of solitude (*Camp Manitou* 3), they were only a short distance from civilization as made clear in figure 4. Summer camps benefitted from various types of government support through the years. In 1938, the Ontario Camping Association (OCA, founded 1933) appealed to the Provincial Planning and Development Department for funding and help securing the most appropriate land for summer camps.

In their siting in remote, isolated locations, both the IRS and the summer camp reinforce the colonial separation of civilization and wilderness and simultaneously contribute to the formation of a spatial hierarchy of education. For white children, the wilderness was a rite of passage, and a compliment to their

11. Much of Canada's Indian Industrial School system was formally inspired by the American Industrial school system based on a policy of "aggressive civilization" inaugurated by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869 (Davin 1).

education and life in urban centres. Urban education became associated with progress and intellectual life and remained inaccessible to Indigenous children.

4. Representing Utopia Through the Site Plan

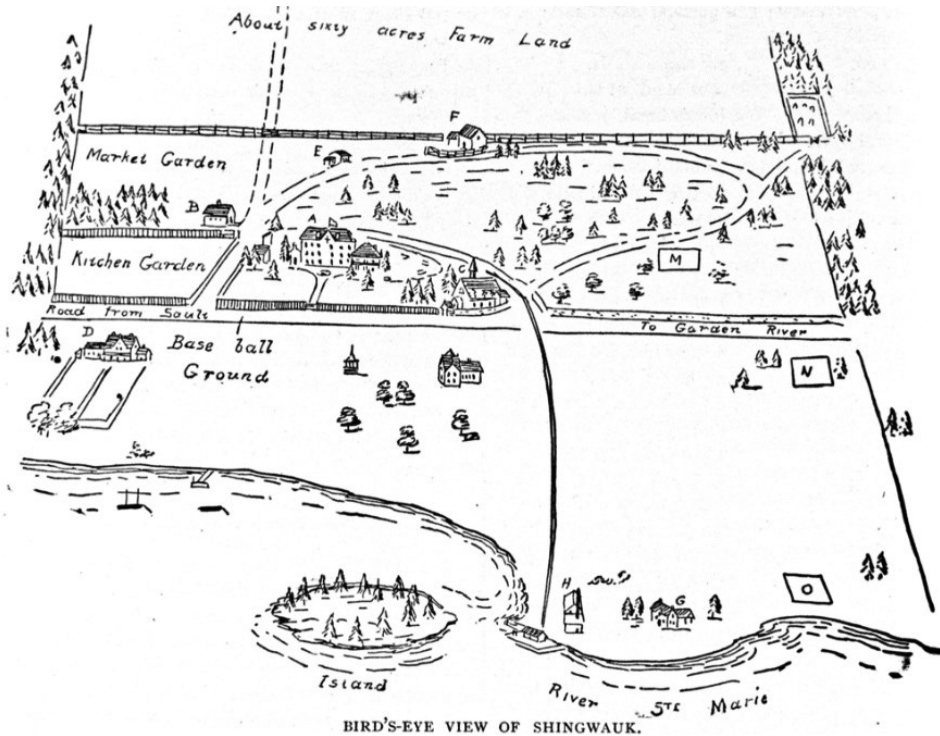


Fig. 5. Rev. E. F. Wilson, *Map of the Shingwauk Home*, 1890.

Illustrated site plans populating periodicals and brochures helped founders of residential schools and summer camps imagine and convey the character of their landscapes and systems of education. Figure 5 is an illustrated map of the Shingwauk Home (1873-1970), drawn by the institution's founder and principal, Reverend E. F. Wilson, and printed in the first pages of the 1890 edition of his periodical, "Our Forest Children and What We Want To Do With Them." Wilson's map for Shingwauk and his accompanying description in the periodical offered readers—mainly members of the British public who were solicited for donations—an optimistic (if also biased) vision of Shingwauk's curriculum. Wilson explains the various structures that make up the site. Aside from the

four-storey Shingwauk home (1874) and stone chapel (1883), the site would also include "stables," "a hospital," "a farm-man's cottage," "barn and cattle sheds," "a furniture factory," "a bandstand," and another workshop for shoe-making, tailoring, and weaving ("Our Forest Children" 118).¹² Wilson describes alterations of the landscape: "we had the entire front space of land between our institution and the river, which was formerly a wilderness of rocks and hill-ocks and hollows, nicely graded and sown with grass... now this fine open grassy slope has become quite a pleasure resort" (118). In Jennifer Harvey's analysis of the IRS in Spanish, Ontario (1913-1965), she describes the effect of the IRS landscape. Under the demands of agriculture and surveillance, the site is clear-cut and fenced off, utilizing forests and water as natural boundaries (xix-xxi). Harvey stresses that there was no access to land that was familiar to the children, or on which they could play (xix-xxi).

Wilson's decoration of Shingwauk as a "pleasure resort" ("Our Forest Children" 118) reflected his ideals of cultivated landscape. On arriving at an Indian reserve for any extended period, Wilson's first impulse was to erect buildings which for him symbolized civilization, progress, and respectability. His descriptions of his surroundings were informed by the fact that they were foreign to him. Ironically, Wilson repeatedly describes enjoying a "camp-out" for its adventure and novelty, though he regarded those moments as brief interludes between his returns to more civilized comforts (*Missionary Work* 14-32, 61). As Wall argues, Wilson didn't extend his own permissions (for enjoying a camp-out) to the Indigenous children in his care. Instead, he advocates to "modernize" Indigenous people through a "cultural transformation directed almost wholly from outside aboriginal communities" ("To Train" 30). Wilson writes, "... in the matter of procuring a livelihood let us, for their own good, induce them to lay aside the bow and fish-spear, and... put their hand to the plough, or make them wield the tool of the mechanic" (*Missionary Work* 244; Wall, "To Train" 29). Wall highlights this quotation from Wilson to demonstrate the "token nature" of his pedagogy of "cultural synthesis" ("To Train" 29-30). The quote also serves to demonstrate that Wilson shares much of the same philosophy of camping with the founders of summer camps. Both saw white people as sufficiently civilized, and therefore able to indulge in the modern pleasures of camping. The format of Wilson's periodical, "Our Forest Children" as well as the

12. The Shingwauk and Wawanosh Schools have particular histories that predate the formal IRS system and the involvement of the government. The idea for the school was initially supported by Chief Shingwaukonse, who imagined a great teaching wigwam promoting cross-cultural learning (Wilson, *Missionary Work* 56; Little Pine, and Wilson; Miller 4-7). Chief Shingwauk's vision was not realized in the institution that Wilson founded.

soft illustrative style of his map of Shingwauk presage stylistic and ideological connections to camping literature of two decades later.

A map of Taylor Statten's Camp Ahmek from 1928 (drawn by Harold V. Shaw) serves a useful parallel to Wilson's map.¹³ Printed on the cover of Ahmek's 1932 brochure, the map demonstrates Statten's focus on manufacturing an immersive wilderness environment (Slyck, "Shaping Modern Boyhood" 27-29). Like in Wilson's map, liberties are taken: buildings are scaled up to sufficiently detail the camp's many activity areas and the artist himself admits in a blurb in the corner of the map that the "size of Canoe Lake had to be greatly reduced" (Shaw). The campsite is arranged around the lakeshore with a few large structures for gathering—including the dining hall, log theatre, and Indian Council Ring. Numerous smaller buildings populate the site including sleeping cabins and purpose-built activity structures. Unlike how the isolated locations and physical boundary markers around residential schools were designed to keep the children in, the edges of the summer camp were generally intended to keep outsiders out. The sites of residential schools had an inward focus, with open fields framing a central, massive structure. Ahmek's accumulation of small pavilions created the opposite effect: a fort encircling the lake. Shaw's map depicts a panopticon of surveillance—less so over the children as over the landscape.¹⁴ The map reassures parents that Algonquin is a place where their children are free to play, with encouragement and guidance always at a safe distance. The natural environment also served as a critical part of the site design. Unlike the clear-cut sites of residential schools, the forest is invited inside the boundaries of the summer camp—effectively blurring the property boundaries without the reliance on fences. By the water, docks, swimming structures, and boat launches encourage children to become accustomed to the water and hikes and canoe trips departing from the camp's boundaries echo that the landscape is theirs alone to possess.

Wilson's and Statten's map curiously share a resemblance to a genealogy of maps made that invent imaginary places, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) or of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). These maps served as a storytelling device or philosophical exercise rather than a geographical record. Wilson and Statten's maps detail their grand visions for the transformation

13. A scan of Harold V. Shaw's illustrated map of Camp Ahmek has been digitized by the Trent University Archives. See "My Couchie Book: A History of Taylor Statten Camp" 53-54, <https://archives.trentu.ca/index.php/imc-143>.

14. A technicality: all the private camps in Algonquin Park, including Ahmek and Wapomeo, only lease their properties from the province. In 2002 after years of negotiations, Algonquin Park camps were quietly granted 60-year lease extensions.

of the natural and build world in pursuit of creating an immersive learning environment. Neither Wilson's nor Statten's maps indicate—or acknowledges—land purchases or property. Aside from locating the institutions by the water and surrounded by forest, there is nothing in these images to identify *specific* land. Both authors saw illustrating their institutions as imperative to their respective missions of social reform. Though Wilson and Statten were creating maps of places designated for separate populations, both were, knowingly or unknowingly, speaking to the same white audience. Their maps further translate the educational manifesto onto a territory perceived as empty, injecting it with Settler place markers.

5. Classrooms of Alienation & Classrooms of Belonging

At their most basic function, both institutions incorporated spaces for eating, sleeping, and instruction. The details of the construction of these spaces—their materiality, formal arrangements, and how they organize power relationships reflect the social and political environments from which the structures originate.

A diagrammatic sketch of the ground floor for an Industrial School (fig. 6). This can be described as a parti diagram—a type of architectural drawing that captures the core organizing idea of an architectural project as simply as possible, often defining the spatial logic and programmatic relationships of a building. Stripped of material and scale, this diagram distills the function of the residential school building into three programmatic pillars, organized into a crucifix form. It shows a trades department in the left wing, a school department in the right wing, and religious instruction at the back (fig. 7). Linear and efficient corridors comprise the circulation between each wing, which discourages gathering and makes surveillance efficient (Carr; Milosz). These structures would also contain dining rooms, workshops, and dormitories. The Davin Report further extrapolates: "Experience has demonstrated that it is better to have the dormitory separated from the school... Thus, the children are kept from spoiling the building" (Davin 2). Carr asserts that rather than schools, these structures represent coercive devices targeting colonised Indigenous subjects who were taught to "no longer feel at home in their own societies" (ii, 45-46). Across scales, the designs of residential schools were guided by the sentiment of alienation.

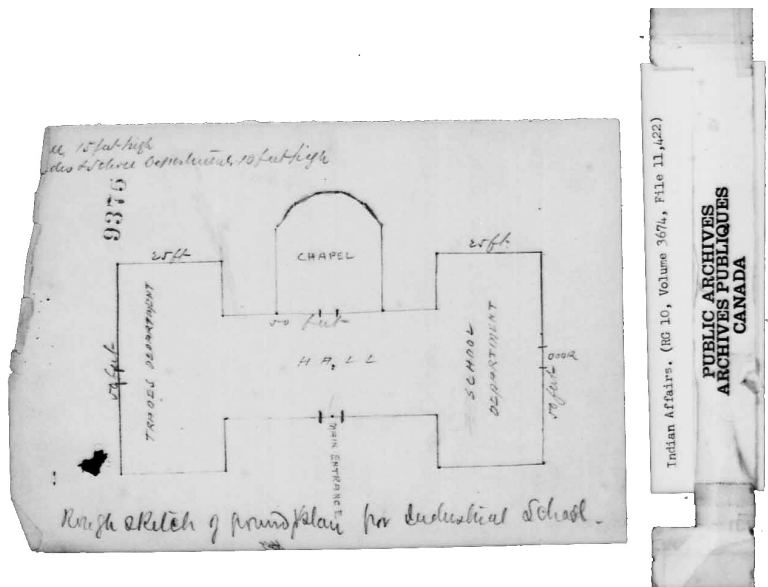


Fig. 6. [Father Lacombe?], *Diagrammatic Plan of the Ground Floor for an Industrial School*. From correspondence regarding the construction of an Indian Industrial School near the mouth of High River [near Calgary], 30 July 1883.

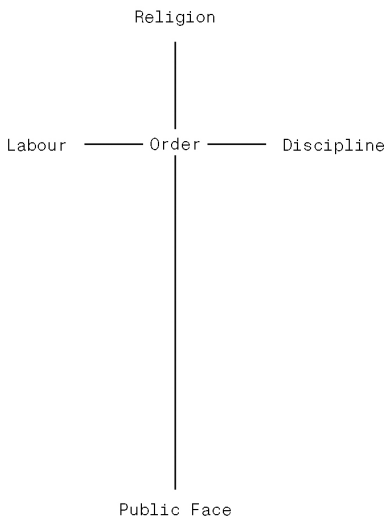


Fig. 7. Arielle Lavine, *Dissection of Diagrammatic Plan of the Ground Floor for an Industrial School*, 2024.

Unreconciling the Summer Camp: Revisiting the Assimilation Era Through the Architectures of Education for Indigenous and Settler Children, 1880-1950

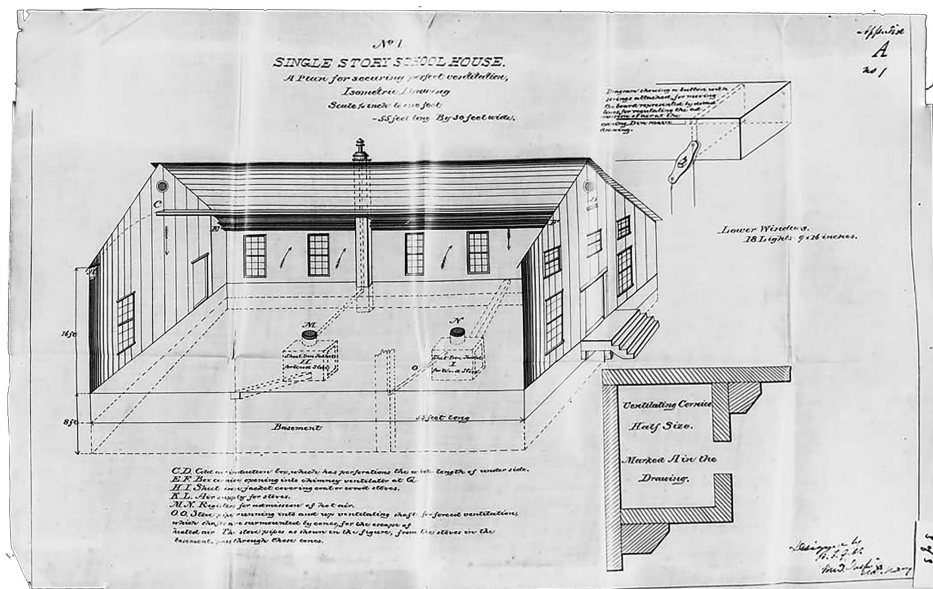


Fig. 8. Nicholas Flood Davin, *Drawing of a Single Room Schoolhouse with Below Floor Heating System*, 1879.

An isometric projection of a single room schoolhouse with below floor heating system (fig. 8). Isometric and axonometric projections are a drawing technique common to architecture and engineering which allows for clear visualization of multiple sides of an object simultaneously, making it easier to understand complex designs. They are fabricated views that distort the object and prioritize technical measurement over realism. This design for a single-story schoolhouse is relatively typical across day school construction, not only for Indigenous children.¹⁵ This particular drawing, and its reference in the appendix of the Davin Report, is curious. Represented in isometric projection, the drawing highlights the use of a heating and ventilation system which runs invisibly in the floors and through the walls of the building, precisely so that it doesn't disrupt the hierarchical seating arrangement of the classroom. The design is particularly troubling when compared to traditional Indigenous formats

15. Prentice discusses a very similar rural schoolhouse design from Hodgins The School House: Its Architecture, External and Internal Arrangements, 1857. Prentice argues that mid-nineteenth century ideas about education were concretely embodied in these plans. See Prentice 97.

of learning. Among many Indigenous peoples, pedagogical practices emphasized the three L's: looking, listening, and learning (Miller 16). The longhouse, typical to Iroquoian-speaking peoples, organizes communication following a non-hierarchical social structure—often in a circle, and often incorporating storytelling. This schoolhouse design subtly upturns another Indigenous design principle. The heating source, an element traditionally visible and central, with smoke rising through an opening in the sky, is now hidden in a system of ducts and vents.

In contrast, these same Indigenous design principles are appropriated for the summer camp. Real and make-believe Indigenous artifacts and technologies litter the camp landscape and give form to various educational spaces. Far from the hierarchical rigid spaces typical of classrooms, the summer camp surrounds children with different kinds of structures that encouraged, rather than prohibited, community and self-expression. Most representative of the summer camps' pedagogy is, of course, the Indian Council Ring. This one (fig. 9) built for Camp Ahmek in 1922.

A redrawn example of the the council ring—the archetypal *classroom* of the summer camp (fig. 9), in matching isometric projection to the drawing from the Davin Report, removes the idyllic Settler fantasy of wilderness common to the camps' promotional materials. Brochures, pamphlets, newspaper ads, and post cards, all obscure the absurdity of positioning camp structures in the lake-side landscape. The "distorted" isometric view corrects the distorted imagery found in the archives, squaring the summer camps' landscape with the one Wilson envisioned for the Shingwauk school: "formerly a wilderness of rocks and hillocks and hollows, nicely graded and sown with grass... now this fine open grassy slope has become quite a pleasure resort" ("Our Forest Children" 118).

Ahmek's council ring consists of tall walls surrounding an arena of tiered benches, and a central fire pit creates a stage for playing Indian with totem poles overlooking the affair.¹⁶ Typical of colonial insensitivity to existing borders between nations the totem poles adorning the council ring are a faint pastiche of traditional craft practiced by the Indigenous nations of the Pacific Northwest, transplanted to Algonquin. Although following a similar architectural form, unlike real council rings Ahmek's is non-porous, it's walls keep out the uninitiated, insulating its patrons from meaningful dialogue—further entrenching values and traditions within the camp. In a mirrored form, the summer camp's total institution allowed white children to take on their predetermined

16. Wall offers a description and analysis of rituals performed in these structures, including Camp Ahmek's and Camp Glen Bernard's. She concludes that the key ingredients were spirituality with a backdrop of nature. See Wall, *The Nurture of Nature* 224.

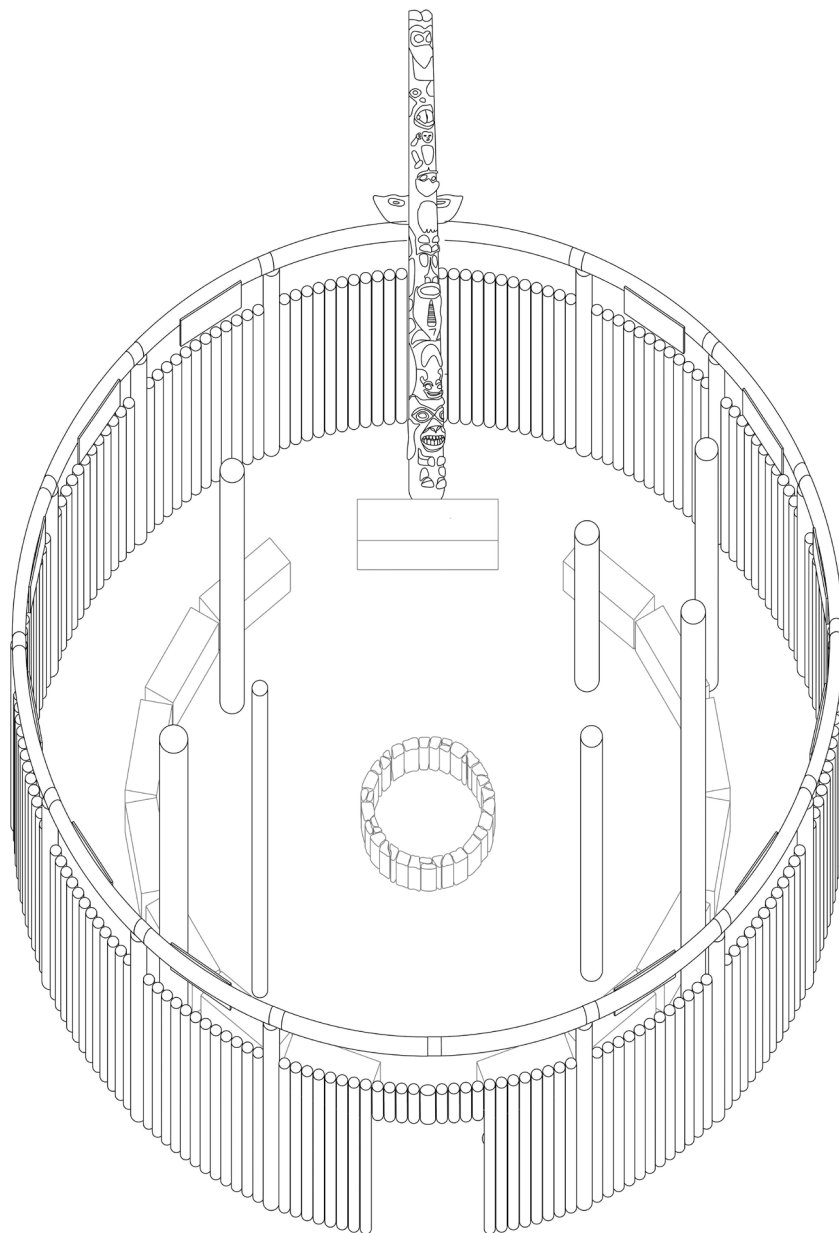


Fig. 9. Arielle Lavine, *Isometric Drawing of Camp Ahmek's Indian Council Ring, Deconstructed with Ernest Thompson Seton in 1924-24, 2024.*

white Settler identity. The architects of these enduring summer camp classroom forms seemed to understand Nicolas Flood Davin's remarks all too well: "the influence of the wigwam was stronger than the influence of the school" (qtd. in Milloy, 'Suffer' 12).

The process of standardizing the architectural language of the summer camp began in the 1930s. At this point, Ahmek, and numerous other camps operating had set the standard, to which many other camps emulated. In 1938, *Park and Recreation Structures* by Albert H. Good—architectural consultant for the National Park Service—was published by the United States Department of the Interior. It was the first of larger, consolidated attempts to formalise and define the architecture within National Parks (including administration and basic service facilities, recreational and cultural facilities, and overnight and organised camp facilities) and used at Summer Camps under a common description and ordering. This was closely followed by the 1946 *Layout, Building Designs, and Equipment for YMCA Camps* developed by the American National Camping Commission of the Association of Boys' Work Secretaries and the Program Services Staff of the National Council. The YMCA manual described a site strategy and architectural planning and building system for an organised youth camp for 125 boys, demonstrating a camp layout on a generic site of 45 acres.

During the Second World War, camping knowledge, especially woodcraft, was recognized by the Canadian Federal Government and by the Canadian Department of National Defence as an important skill for the survival of the army and regular citizens alike and they were branded as characteristically Canadian, even though they were largely derived from Indigenous ways of life. In a draft manuscript for a book on how to catch a fish, the editor changed the term "native" with "local inhabitants," to emphasize fishing as a Canadian skill (Bell). The camping movement only continued to grow after the Second World War. In 1947, the Ontario Department of Education recognized the Summer Camp as a potent educational factor, its program elements supplementing the formal work of the school. In 1948, Canada's "backwoods" became a classroom for Canadian youth. The University of Toronto developed a formal educational programme for training camp directors in "historic" skills which "now are almost forgotten" (University of Toronto Alumni Association). Included was instruction on how to navigate forests and streams of the wilderness and so contributed to the consolidation of Indigenous cultures into a unified Canadian national identity. By the 1960s, various institutions had developed to govern, standardise, or institutionalise the spread of skillsets, traditions, cultural practices, and crafts. The OCA developed new standards for camping and its programming. Accredited camps granted specialised types of diplomas and certifications.

An upsetting example of the continued harm of assimilation and playing Indian is found in a 1987 "Native Child Welfare Prevention Program" created by the Children's Aid Society of Sudbury and Manitoulin (Gorman). In a move that undermined authentic Indigenous knowledge, the Society's "Native Cultural Resource Directory" compiled educational materials from summer camps running Indian Programs. By doing so, the Aid Society effectively deputized these camps—suggesting they could "help" struggling Indigenous communities by reassembling their cultural knowledge repository. Of course, these Settler-curated curricula only reinforced the colonial frameworks that brought child welfare intervention in the first place.

6. Conclusion

By juxtaposing the historical traces of Residential Schools against those of summer camps, I've demonstrated how both were able to consolidate a colonial agenda: while white Settler children were enticed into appropriating Indigenous lifeways in order to consolidate their dominance over the land, Indigenous children were stripped of their inheritance by being forced into pseudo-European institutional structures. The structures and legacies of settler colonialism linger. The grounds around decommissioned residential schools (that haven't already been demolished or repurposed) are being carefully searched with ground penetrating radar technologies to identify potential unmarked graves, confirming long-held survivor testimonies. On the other side, summer camps are still inaccessible on private properties. Efforts to subvert, reclaim, and redefine the summer camp hold immense value as a way forward that breaks from a long history of cultural appropriation. Unreconciling the summer camp means recognizing its colonial intertwinement. Decolonizing summer camp could mean diverting the funding and land holdings of camps—especially those in National and Provincial Parks—to Indigenous groups seeking resources for healing and learning on their lands. Glimpses of summer camps standing in opposition to the competitive and elite camps are beginning to revitalize the landscape: O:se Kenhionhata:tie Land Back Camp is one example. The camp was built out of a community need and grassroots efforts, offering a safe space for Two-Spirit, IndigiQueer, Queer/Trans, LGBTQIA+ Indigenous youth to reclaim language and skills related to the land.

An outward turn to support decolonial work begins with a very deep and dedicated inward turn. As part of coming to the truth—to multiple truths—rather than calculated, collective amnesia, strategic remembering offers an option as the parallel, multi-scalar framework I sketched demonstrates. As Indigenous dispossession goes hand in hand with Settler possession demonstrating how

architectural spaces interpellated Indigenous and white children into the colonial project helps us to see the harms of each institution more vividly. Though archival scholarship is starting to decolonize the historical record, further interventions are needed in-situ. Historic summer camp sites offer opportunities for correcting historical records that had been erased and moving instead towards lived truth and reconciliation in the built environment.

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Techno-Extractivism and Settler Circuits in Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the technological divide between Indigenous communities and metropolitan centers in Canada reflects underlying settler colonial assumptions about value, visibility, and futurity. National discourses that position Canada as a leader in green and technologically advanced development often rely on extractive systems (digital, ecological, and social). Corporate narratives of innovation and inclusion, particularly those centered on *bridging the digital divide*, tend to reproduce familiar hierarchies even as they promise connection and progress, revealing the unsustainable entanglement between settler identity and technological domination. Within this context, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Anishinaabe author Waubgeshig Rice offers a speculative space for rethinking technology, sustainability, and community. The novel's depiction of grid collapse and systemic failure invites reflection on the dependencies embedded within Western infrastructures while highlighting Indigenous practices of kinship, land-based knowledge, and adaptability as what I call forms of world-making. This paper considers how Rice's work suggests alternative ways of imagining futurity in the digital age.

Keywords

Digital Colonialism; Indigenous; Settler; Techno-Extractivism

1. Precarious Technologies and Canada's Green/Just Myth

Across Canada, stark disparities persist between metropolitan zones of technological abundance and the infrastructural precarity experienced by many Indigenous communities. While urban centres are marked by dense broadband coverage, grid modernization, and visible investments in renewable energy, numerous Indigenous communities remain off-grid or dependent on aging diesel generators and intermittent service. Despite Canada's professed commitment to decarbonization, approximately 292 northern rural and remote communities (170 of them Indigenous) continue to rely on diesel fuel for electricity (MacArthur et al. 2). This technological polarity exposes a fundamental dissonance between Canada's international self-presentation as a climate leader and the lived realities within its borders. Such dissonance invites a critical reassessment not only of what is framed as *sustainable*, but of whose lives and futures are prioritized within national narratives of green progress.

This contradiction is sustained by what might be described as a green mythos: the reification of Canada as "the world's most just, inclusive and hopeful society" (Breznitz), a reputation increasingly tied to renewable energy targets, climate commitments, and the promise of a green economic transition. Public-facing initiatives such as the *Pact for a Green New Deal* emphasize decarbonization alongside Indigenous reconciliation and equitable development through environmental stewardship and job creation (MacArthur et al. 1). Canada's green branding is further amplified by ambitions to position itself as a "global export leader" in green mining technologies (Breznitz), reinforcing an image of technological innovation aligned with sustainable use. This narrative coherence, however, depends on a selective visibility by foregrounding technological solutions and policy aspirations while backgrounding the material infrastructures and social relations that make such solutions possible.

What remains largely obscured in this discourse are the extractive infrastructures (ecological, technological, and social) that underwrite Canada's green transition. As Mohamad Issa and colleagues report, greenhouse gas emissions from Canadian mining "surged from 4.3 to 6.4 million metric tons of CO₂ equivalent between 2015 and 2019," with further increases anticipated due to growing demand for raw materials essential to renewable and digital technologies (1). More broadly, despite Canada's abundance of renewable energy sources, over 80 percent of national greenhouse gas emissions remain energy-related, driven primarily by "export-oriented fossil fuel production and non-renewable electricity generation" (MacArthur et al. 2). These figures point to a troubling continuity: rather than marking a departure from extractive development, the green transition often reconfigures extraction in new technological forms.

The consequences of this continuity are geographically and socially concentrated in what are increasingly recognized as sacrifice zones-spaces and peoples rendered expendable in service of national prosperity. Chemical Valley, located near Sarnia, Ontario, exemplifies this dynamic. Situated downstream from Aamjiwnaang First Nation, the region has long borne the toxic burden of petrochemical production, revealing what Warren Cariou and Isabelle St-Amant describe as a “biopolitics of injustice” that stands in sharp contrast to Canada’s self-congratulatory environmental rhetoric (9). While some green recovery initiatives gesture toward justice and inclusion (Stewart 3; Thompson 1), critics have repeatedly noted that equity and reconciliation are often treated as secondary concerns, added rhetorically but structurally sidelined, in transition strategies that continue to prioritize profitability, scalability, and infrastructural expansion over Indigenous lived realities (MacArthur et al. 1).

Historically celebrated as “the industry that built Canada,” mining has long functioned as a central symbol of national prosperity, technological ingenuity, and economic sovereignty (Breznitz). In contemporary discourse, this symbolism has been reactivated through green-transition rhetoric that positions mining as a cornerstone of a sustainable future different from its extractive past. In an October 2024 *Globe and Mail* op-ed, Dan Breznitz calls for a renewed “vision of Canada” with “more Canada in it,” explicitly advocating for the revitalization of mining and mineral-processing technologies as key drivers of a “green and prosperous future.” This vision extends beyond domestic extraction to the global export of Canadian mining technologies and expertise. Indeed, the formulation risks tethering sustainability to technological development while leaving largely unexamined the extractive logics that structure both the production of technology and its unsustainable environmental and social effects.

This coupling of technology with progress is hardly accidental. Within dominant Western imaginaries, technology is routinely aligned with vocabularies of advancement, innovation, sophistication, and development. These terms carry a presumption of ethical neutrality or even moral good. At the same time, critical discourse often swings toward the opposite pole, casting technology as inherently alienating, destructive, or imperial, locked in a simplified nature-culture binary that equates technological mediation with domination. Neither characterization is sufficient. As the history of the concept itself makes clear, technology is not intrinsically extractive or emancipatory; rather, it is historically contingent, shaped by the epistemological, economic, and political formations in which it is embedded.

The term *technology* derives from the Greek *techne*, meaning art, craft, or skill, and when paired with *logos*, it denotes a form of knowledgeable making, a practice through which humans engage the world in ways that are at once material, symbolic, and relational. In this classical sense, *techne* does not

presuppose domination over nature but implies attentiveness, intentionality, and reciprocal shaping between maker and made. This relational orientation, however, was gradually displaced through a series of epistemic shifts beginning in the Renaissance and accelerating through the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. As Carolyn Merchant observes, “The Scientific Revolution sanctioned the exploitation of nature as a machine rather than a living organism,” effecting a profound transformation in how humans understood their relationship to the nonhuman world (2). Nature came to be conceived as a system to be measured, controlled, and optimized rather than as a network of relations.

By the nineteenth century, cultural and scientific practices had crystallized into what David Nye famously terms “the technological sublime,” a belief that industrial and scientific progress represented the apex of human achievement (10). The factories, railways, and telegraphs of the Industrial Revolution did more than transform material life; they generated a moral narrative in which technological advancement became synonymous with civilization itself. As Lewis Mumford critiques, modern humanity was increasingly rendered “a passive, purposeless, machine-conditioned animal,” whose functions were “fed into the machine or strictly limited and controlled for the benefit of de-personalized, collective organizations” (3). Enlightenment ideals of progress thus merged seamlessly with colonial expansion, naturalizing the exportation of European technologies as instruments of civilizational uplift.

It is within this historically specific entanglement of industrialization, technology and capitalism that extractivism in its rather broad sense emerges as a dominant logic that reconfigures *making* as resource capture. As Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel argue, extractivism names more than the act of extraction; it refers to “an ideology and cultural logic that permeates social imaginaries,” where “nature become[s] figured as a resource” for use and accumulation by “imaginative, cognitive, economic, and other material operations” (505-08). With this logic, technology becomes a means of extending extractive relations across space and scale, reorganizing environments, bodies, and knowledge systems in service of growth.

Techno-extractivism, as I use the term here, names this convergence: the operation of extractive logic through technological systems that render land, life, and information legible, transferable, and monetizable. This does not imply that technology is inherently extractive, but that under colonial-capitalist conditions it is frequently mobilized to sustain extractivist ends. One contemporary manifestation of this dynamic appears in what scholars have termed digital colonialism. Shoshana Zuboff describes how digital infrastructures transform lived experience into “behavioral surplus,” the raw material of what she calls “surveillance capitalism” (127). Zuboff writes:

If Google is a search company, why is it investing in smart-home devices, wearables, and self-driving cars? If Facebook is a social network, why is it developing drones and augmented reality? This diversity sometimes confounds observers but is generally applauded as visionary investment: far-out bets on the future. In fact, activities that appear to be varied and even scattershot across a random selection of industries and projects are actually all the same activity guided by the same aim: behavioral surplus capture. Each is a slightly different configuration of hardware, software, algorithms, sensors, and connectivity designed to mimic a car, shirt, cell phone, book, video, robot, chip, drone, camera, cornea, tree, television, watch, nanobot, intestinal flora, or any online service, but they all share the same purpose: behavioral surplus capture. (127)

As written above, Zuboff espouses the whims of digital colonialism, where humans are datafied for resource capture. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias similarly argue that digital colonialism entails “the appropriation of human life through data,” extending colonial relations into the immaterial domains of code, attention, and affect (337). When British mathematician Clive Humby declared in 2006 that “data is the new oil,” he meant that data, like oil, is not useful in its raw state. The phrase has since come to signify not only the extraction, refinement, and circulation of data for profit within global capitalist systems, but also the widespread perception that these processes are cleaner, immaterial, and environmentally benign in contrast to oil’s now widely acknowledged harms—harms long identified and resisted by Indigenous communities, even as states and corporations only more recently codified them into policy.

Crucially, digital colonialism is not synonymous with green technology, though the two frequently intersect. Smart grids, renewable energy monitoring systems, and digital infrastructures for climate governance are often promoted for sustainability (which arguably, they may in some contexts advance efficiencies, broaden energy access, or support participatory governance), yet they simultaneously reproduce extractive relations by centralizing control or commodifying data. As Julie L. MacArthur and colleagues caution, those “currently denied a place at the policymaking table or in well-paid energy sector jobs are not necessarily more likely to benefit from green technology than they did with fossil fuels” (1). Techno-extractivism, then, is best understood as an extractive logic that travels across domains, exceeding single sectors or technologies like green mining and digital infrastructure. It operates through epistemic and representational practices that make land, life, and futures intelligible to the settler state as objects of management and value. Mapping technologies offer one of the clearest examples through which this logic manifests in the contemporary settler colonial Canadian context.

In Canada, cartographic technologies, ranging from nineteenth-century survey maps to contemporary Geographic Information Systems (GIS), have been foundational to the organization of settler space. These technologies have historically facilitated treaty-making, land claims adjudication, and resource extraction by translating Indigenous territories into coordinates, parcels, and layers legible to state and corporate actors. As Cree scholar Dallas Hunt and settler scholar Shaun Stevenson observe, "The surveying of lands and the production of maps remain an integral mode of solidifying nationalist, and indeed, settler colonialist constructions of Canada's geography" (375). This process is particularly pronounced in what they describe as Canada's "resource-driven, so-called 'modern treaty era,'" where mapping underwrites extractive development while presenting itself as technical, rational, and consensual (375).

The relationship between mapping and extractivism is constitutive. As Penelope Edmonds and Tony Banivanua-Mar note in their introduction to the collection *Making Settler Colonial Space*, settler colonialism has produced "a profound and extensive rearrangement of physical spaces and peoples," resulting in "new meaning and social demography carved and asserted over existing and enduring Indigenous spaces" (1). Maps are central to this reterritorialization, often by reorienting colonial attention, value, and governance toward particular lands and resources while rendering others peripheral or invisible. Beyond representing space, they actively reorder it and transform Indigenous relationships with land into property relations that can be surveyed, owned, and exploited. The imposition of grids, borders, and coordinates privileges a settler ontology of land as static and divisible, as *terra nullius* or *empty land*. This displaces Indigenous spatialities that are built on kinship and relational ecology.

Hunt and Stevenson underscore that this dynamic of reterritorialization endures despite technological change. They argue that

whether through traditional topographic mapping, or increasingly advanced digital data-based mapping processes such as Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, geographical knowledge continues to be produced, acquired, and imposed as a fundamental technique of shoring up dominant conceptualizations of the Canadian landscape. (375)

In other words, digital mapping only intensifies the colonial practice of finer-grained surveillance, predictive modeling, and integration with extractive industries such as mining, hydroelectric development, and pipeline construction. At the same time, it is crucial to avoid collapsing mapping technologies into a monolithic instrument of domination. Indigenous nations have long possessed, and continue to practice, complex spatial technologies that predate and exceed Western cartography. Oral maps, craft and art works, story trails, place-based

naming practices, and ceremonial geographies function as sophisticated systems of navigation, governance, and knowledge transmission. Dismissing this would risk reproducing a reductive opposition between technology and tradition.

Instead, as Hunt and Stevenson argue, many Indigenous communities engage in what they call "hybridized technologies": the deliberate reappropriation of settler tools toward Indigenous ends. In "Decolonizing Geographies of Power," they note that Indigenous nations "utilize available technologies and work in collaboration to produce hybridized forms of maps, drawing on while subverting some of the techniques associated with European cartography" (378). This hybridity matters because it refuses purity politics. The question is not whether technology is used, but how and for whom. Contemporary Indigenous GIS projects offer concrete examples of this reconfiguration. Hunt and Stevenson highlight initiatives such as the Living Atlas and the Fort Albany First Nation's use of GIS mapping to "foster intergenerational knowledge transfer, using mapping techniques and tools to reconnect youth with the surrounding land" (379). Here, mapping enables a relational practice oriented toward care, continuity, and resurgence rather than extraction or control. These projects mobilize digital tools to strengthen land-based relationships, not to render land abstract or exploitable.

Nevertheless, these engagements remain negotiations within constraints. Indigenous GIS projects operate within broader infrastructural systems (satellites, databases, cloud servers) founded upon colonial extractive economies. The same satellite that enables land-based resurgence also enables surveillance; the same database that safeguards cultural knowledge can expose it to appropriation. As Joanne Barker and colleagues warn, neoliberal regimes frequently co-opt the language of care and inclusion while maintaining hierarchy, mobilizing "the values of democratic processes and the 'progress' that must surely follow" to legitimize ongoing control (34). In such cases, digital inclusion becomes another frontier of potential techno-extractivism.

Federal broadband programs such as Canada's Universal Broadband Fund are frequently considered as advancing reconciliation by extending high-speed internet to Indigenous communities, yet they often reinforce digital redlining by consolidating infrastructural and data control in the hands of external telecommunications firms rather than community-governed networks. Under the banner of access and innovation, these initiatives fold Indigenous territories more tightly into extractive data economies, where connectivity is conduit for surveillance, commodification, and governance by proxy. This risk intensifies as Canada accelerates its investment in artificial intelligence. As Natiea Vinson, CEO of First Nations Technology Council notes, Canada's proposed \$2.4 billion investment in AI is frequently justified through projections of economic growth, potentially boosting the economy by \$230 billion, yet such figures obscure a

more pressing question: “Who will truly benefit from AI advancements, and who risks being left behind?” For Vinson, the danger lies in the reproduction of digital colonialism through systems “built on Western frameworks that do not necessarily reflect or serve Indigenous community needs,” thereby continuing “the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, values, and governance models.”

Margaret Yun Pu-Tu also cautions that “for Indigenous communities around the world, AI is not merely a technological development. It is a potential new form of colonization—one that risks marginalizing their languages, cultures and agency unless meaningful safeguards are established.” Her insistence that Indigenous peoples must be recognized not as “mere beneficiaries of digital policy, but also as rightful leaders in shaping it” underscores how inclusion without sovereignty reproduces colonial hierarchies rather than dismantling them. AI systems trained on Indigenous languages, health data, or cultural knowledge without robust governance frameworks such as OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) risk repeating older extractive patterns: collecting, abstracting, and monetizing Indigenous life without free, prior, and informed consent. It is within this tension that Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s call for an “ethic of incommensurability” becomes critical: an ethic that “recognizes what is distinct and what is sovereign for project(s) of decolonization” and resists collapsing Indigenous futures into settler substructures of accessibility and control (1). Techno-extractivism facilitates such a collapse, extending settler logics across multiple spheres of innovation while cloaking extractive violence in the rhetoric of sustainability and progress.

This paper, therefore, asks a two-fold question. First, how does *Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Anishinaabe author Waubgeshig Rice expose and resist the settler colonial logics embedded in the technological imaginary? And second, in what ways does the novel challenge the dominant myth of a green and just Canada by reimagining Indigenous technologies of world-making. Following the discussion above which contrasts Canada’s green and just myth with the realities of settler techno-logic, Section Two considers how Canada’s ongoing settler colonial structures shape law, policy, and technology in ways that sustain and reproduce extractive control. In Section Three, I offer a literary analysis of Waubgeshig Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow* to show settler dependency and the difference in the Indigenous methods of world-making. I conclude by positioning the text within broader conversations on decolonial refusals.

2. Settler Colonial Logics Of Extraction

Settler colonialism in Canada operates as an ongoing structure that continues to shape political, technological, and ecological life. Patrick Wolfe’s

oft-cited formulation that “settler invasion is a structure not an event” directs attention away from moments of conquest toward the contemporary institutions, policies, and infrastructures through which territorial power is continually reorganized (388). From this perspective, law, policy, and technology cannot be read with neutrality as mere instruments of progress; they function instead as ambivalent mechanisms that may gesture toward repair while remaining embedded in the very architecture of dispossession they purport to redress. This section traces that ambivalence, showing how legal recognition and reform coexist with, and often facilitate, new iterations of extractive control.

At the core of settler colonialism, Wolfe identifies a territorial logic that exceeds racial animus or episodic violence. “The primary motive for elimination is not race,” he argues, “but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (388). What follows from this insight is that legal and administrative regimes are fundamentally concerned with regulating land, authority, and futurity. Lorenzo Veracini extends this analysis by describing settler colonialism’s reliance on what he calls a “non-encounter”: a recurring epistemic maneuver that disavows Indigenous presence in order to naturalize settler occupation and governance (2). Together, these frameworks clarify how reforms can appear to acknowledge Indigenous rights while leaving intact the deeper logics through which land remains available for extraction, management, and development.

This tension is evident in the Supreme Court of Canada’s landmark decision in *Tsilhqot’in Nation v. British Columbia* (2014). The Court affirms that “Aboriginal” title includes “the exclusive right to decide how the land is used” and “the right to benefit from those uses,” including “the economic benefits of the land” (73). On its face, the ruling marks a significant shift in Canadian jurisprudence, recognizing Indigenous authority over land use and stewardship in ways that challenge earlier doctrines of terra nullius. However, the Court simultaneously preserves the Crown’s ability to infringe upon the title where it can be justified in the name of broader public interests, including economic development. In practice, then, Indigenous authority is recognized only insofar as it remains compatible with a constitutional order structured by Crown sovereignty. The land is newly legible as Indigenous, but it remains extractable under state-defined conditions. Legal recognition is thus simply a recalibration of how extraction is authorized.

This dynamic exemplifies what Dene scholar Glen Coulthard critiques as the “politics of recognition,” in which Indigenous rights are acknowledged primarily on terms that remain legible to, and governed by, settler sovereignty (3). Recognition, on this ground, does not dismantle colonial power but reorganizes it, allowing the state to appear responsive while retaining authority over territory and development. Seen through this lens, Canada’s self-representation

as a postcolonial or reconciled nation becomes increasingly fragile. As Veracini notes, “references to a postcolonial condition appear hollow as soon as indigenous disadvantage is taken into account” (3). Settler colonial studies insist on this point by showing that the colonizers never left; rather, they adapted. This is especially visible in what Shuswap leader George Manuel termed the “Fourth World,” referring to Indigenous nations rendered structurally invisible within modern nation-states, even as their lands remain indispensable to national economies.

In its most positive iterations, the turn to green energy and digital inclusion can be genuinely corrective to the ecological devastation of fossil capitalism. Community-led renewable energy initiatives such as Sacred Earth Solar which is “operating across multiple tribal lands in the U.S. and Canada,” works in close collaboration with “Native communities to co-design and install solar microgrids to replace diesel reliance and empower local leadership” (“Empowering”). What distinguishes this initiative is its governance. As Katarina Savic and Christina Hoicka observe in the Canadian context, Indigenous communities consistently emphasize that “ownership of a project is more beneficial than [impact and benefit agreements],” which they describe as “short lived,” because ownership “denotes control over a project” and aligns more closely with Indigenous self-determination (1).

The project of techno-extractivism functions in tandem with what Renata Avila Pinto describes as “a continuation of former colonial relationships, this time through technology” (2). In this model, lives are not simply at the margins of infrastructure; they are reimagined as raw material, datafied, surveilled, and scripted into techno-futures. Morgan Margulies poses a critical question when examining the global link between environmentalism and nationalism: “What are the underlying elements of ethnic and civic nationalism that make environmentalist sentiments so appealing?” (1). Indeed, the appeal lies in the ability to perform progress while upholding settler colonial ideals. The emergence of green nationalism, as marketed through energy transitions and climate resilience, disguises the extractive imperatives behind connectivity and renewable infrastructure. Canada’s eco-nationalist ambitions are therefore inseparable from its desire to become a global leader in Big Tech, by which I refer to large-scale digital platforms, data-driven infrastructure, artificial intelligence systems, and the global technology firms that supply or partner with them.

As Alana Lajoie O’Malley outlines, technoscientific infrastructures such as pipelines “physically rearrange[] lands and people in ways that help settler colonial states secure and maintain control over land,” and as my earlier discussion of mapping technologies have shown, they operate within such sociotechnical imaginaries that perform desired futures (8-9). These digital layers including GIS, remote sensing, satellite imagery and web-mapped land registries,

translate Indigenous territories into datasets that are legible to state and corporate agents. The standardization of such cartographic regimes rest on "the doctrine of discovery and its related concept of *terra nullius*," wherein "land [is] an empty space to be appropriated, commodified, and exploited" (Cariou and St. Amand 10). This signification of land very much negates the Indigenous understanding of it. In her "Technological Colonialism and the Politics of Water," Barri Cohen analyzes the James Bay hydroelectric project in Quebec, demonstrating how the Cree and Inuit resistance to Hydro-Québec's flooding of 350,000 square kilometres "unravelling a complex braid of conflict between radically different knowledge systems and representations about land and territory, progress and survivability" (33). For the state, the hydroelectric grid symbolized green modernity and national development with flowing water producing low carbon power and a means towards enabling global decarbonization for lower operating costs; for the Cree and Inuit, it enacted dispossession and ecological devastation.

The RCMP raids on Wet'suwet'en territory in 2020 further demonstrate that green rebranding does not diminish extractive projects' reliance on coercive territorial control. Rather, they exemplify what Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim describe as "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures" that sustain "certain forms of social life while working to eliminate others" (4). Like the Canadian Pacific Railway once imagined as "the spine of the nation," Coastal Gas Link (CGL) operates as a national symbol of energy security and sovereignty (O'Malley 63), revealing how extractive infrastructure remains central to settler futurity.

Within settler futurity, connectivity is often presented as a civilizational benchmark. Canada's off-grid northern communities, many of them Indigenous, are frequently seen as *disconnected* and in need of technological salvation. As Avila Pinto observes, global tech companies increasingly ordain themselves as "new envoys" of connectivity, offering what she describes as "shiny but ultimately extractive" arrangements that result in "the silent privatisation of the digital infrastructure of entire nations" (5). Pinto points explicitly to initiatives such as Facebook's *Free Basics* program and Google-backed connectivity projects, which promise free or low-cost Internet access while tightly enclosing users within proprietary platforms that harvest data, limit informational autonomy, and entrench corporate control over communications infrastructure. In these models, access is conditional, partial, and surveilled, transforming connectivity itself into an extractive relation.

The dynamics traced here extend the concerns raised earlier through Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of digital colonialism. As she writes, "Google is a shape-shifter, but each shape harbors the same aim: to hunt and capture raw material," whether through phones, maps, wearables, or platforms that appear

distinct but together form “the continuous expansion of the extraction architecture” (127). What is extracted is behavioral data converted into “prediction products” sold to advertisers, such that “customer satisfaction” ultimately refers not to users, but to the markets that profit from their monitored lives (127). Within Indigenous and remote communities, this architecture equally reframes everyday digital participation from communication to navigation and language use for value capture.

Pinto further warns that these connectivity “programmes act with urgency to connect as many people as possible,” while routinely neglecting consent, long-term sustainability, and basic literacy around privacy and security (18). She characterizes this expansion as a “race to connect the next billion people to their ‘walled garden,’” in which control over critical infrastructure functions as a neocolonial strategy (1). What this reveals is a mutation in settler colonial territoriality: the objective is no longer land alone, but infrastructure. As Pinto puts it, the imperative is to “get their hands on the missing datasets of the global poor” and convert them into value through data extraction and surveillance capitalism (1).

Yet, as Jason Young reminds us, Indigenous peoples are not passive recipients of these techno-colonial incursions. Rather, they are “actively using the Internet to push back against some of the discursive tactics being deployed to responsabilize them for their own adaptation and resilience” (237). Young argues that Inuit are “engaging in digital forms of politics that re-scale Inuit vulnerability, highlight dimensions of Arctic resilience beyond the ‘traditional,’ and call on qallunaat to take responsibility for their role in the colonial processes that produce environmental vulnerability” (237). In this light, there is a complexity undergirding these technological infrastructures and their broader use beyond being a neoliberal burden.

To further interrogate these dynamics, this paper turns to Indigenous literary production for reflection. Indigenous speculative fiction, in particular, offers engagements with technology, sovereignty, and futurity that complicate dominant notions of progress. Within this field, Waubgeshig Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow* provides a rich framework through which to examine how settler colonial logics structure the technological imaginary. I argue that Indigenous literature operates as a decolonial analytic, illuminating how even ostensibly *hybrid* or reconciliatory technological forms remain embedded within settler colonial regimes of value and extraction. By staging infrastructural collapse and its aftermath, Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow* demonstrates that the problem is not simply technological exclusion but the colonial logics that organize technology itself. In response, I introduce the concept of Indigenous techne: technologies of world-making grounded in care, continuity, and ecological reciprocity that exceed and refuse settler techno-modernity.

3. Collapse And Contagion In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*

Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018) follows the onset of winter in a northern Anishinaabe community. With gradual power failure, phones stop working, deliveries cease, and contact with the southern cities vanishes. What begins as a slow and disorienting breakdown of infrastructure spirals into full social collapse as settlers from the South arrive at the rez, bringing with them fear, violence, and eventually, cannibalism. At the heart of the novel is the protagonist, Evan Whitesky, a young father learning to survive in this uncertain world. But survival in Rice's novel soon morphs into a collective practice of memory, language, and cultural resurgence. The novel interrogates the relations of dependence, control, and extraction through which particular technologies are embedded.

Scholars have rightly positioned *Moon of the Crusted Snow* within discourses of decoloniality, ecological violence, and energy transition. Reuben Martens, for instance, reads the novel as a critique of "petromelancholia," a psychic and infrastructural grief induced by settler colonial dependence on hydrocarbons. For Martens, Rice's work "forms the ideal setting to explore how settler colonial energopolitical violence forces and triggers petromelancholia through infrastructure" (198). Martens emphasizes how the Ojibwe community's dependence on southern power systems, imposed during mid-20th century electrification, becomes a condition of literal and symbolic precarity. Similarly, Marina Pingler situates the novel in what she terms the "Colonial Anthropocene Imaginary." Although *Moon of the Crusted Snow* never directly references climate change, Pingler argues that it "creates productive frames for considering how ecological vulnerability is experienced unequally and links climate change to long histories of colonial environmental exploitation" (150). She points to subtle signs such as altered migratory bird patterns and unpredictable weather that register planetary crisis within a specific colonial context.

Other scholars probe the novel as part of a broader decolonial canon. Do-ina Ciochina reads *Moon of the Crusted Snow* alongside Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, highlighting both novels' concern with residential school trauma, cultural erasure, and Indigenous futurity. Ciochina foregrounds the intergenerational struggle to reclaim language and cultural practices suppressed through "church-run schools that had imprisoned stolen children" (60). In Rice's novel, this reclaiming is material: Evan and Nicole vow to raise their children in Ojibwe, choosing Anishinaabemowin names (Maiingan and Nangohns) that "link their offspring to both the natural world and the cosmology" of their people (61).

While these perspectives offer insights into the novel's intersection with energy and colonial tactics, few have yet to explore how *Moon of the Crusted*

Snow critiques technological dependency and digital colonialism within the larger architecture of settler collapse. I extend current conversations by examining how the novel presents settler infrastructures (power grids, communications networks, surveillance systems, and governance) as fragile and parasitic systems that collapse under their own weight. I propose that Rice's novel unveils a key feature of techno-extractivism: the entanglement between settler identity and technological domination.

Preceding Rice's text is a long history of Indigenous activism articulated through literary, artistic, and cultural production. Indigenous artists have consistently mobilized aesthetic practice as a means to "counter the normalization and the acceptance of destruction and desecration in their multiple and changing guises" (Cariou and St-Amand 13). Poetry, film, storytelling, and the novel function here as modes of making that intervene in colonial epistemologies and reconfigure how land, memory, and responsibility are understood. This genealogy is perhaps most succinctly theorized through Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor's concept of *survivance*. Vizenor explicitly rejects readings of Indigenous existence that position Native peoples as passive victims suspended between life and death. He critiques this position in part by reversing Jacques Derrida's use of *survivance* as an indeterminate condition devoid of agency.

In *Survivance* and subsequent work, Vizenor redefines *survivance* as "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; it is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent" (1). *Survivance*, for Vizenor, names a creative and generative practice rather than a condition of endurance. What distinguishes *survivance* from survival is precisely its emphasis on agency, making, and narrative continuity. Vizenor makes clear that the shift from *-al* to *-ance* signals a refusal of colonial narratives of victimry and a commitment to what he calls "narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (*Native Liberty* 1). *Survivance* functions as a form of Indigenous *techne*: a situated practice of worldmaking that sustains life by shaping relationships between people, land, language, and history outside the extractive logics of settler modernity.

It is within this lineage that Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* can be situated. The novel follows what Cree scholar Neil McLeod describes as a "body poetic," as he conceptualizes Indigenous poetics as a form of epistemological resurgence, one that "connects our living bodies to the living Earth around us" (89). Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* opens with the image of a successful hunt and the ritual that follows, where Evan kneels to offer tobacco to the land, establishing the relational and reciprocal nature of the Anishinaabeg. The narrator tells us, "He whispered a prayer and placed the tobacco on the ground in front of the moose. It was the Anishinaabe way, as he understood

it" (8). The simple act of offering introduces the "body poetic" of world-making, subsisting in care, ecology, and spiritual obligation.

In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, technology is not figured as an external imposition that Indigenous communities either accept or refuse. Instead, Rice traces how settler infrastructures are incrementally integrated into everyday life, normalized as progress, and ultimately exposed as structurally unsustainable. Prior to the collapse, the reserve is deeply enmeshed in modern energy and transport systems. As the narrator explains:

The old diesel generators that had run their lightbulbs and appliances for decades were still around, but they didn't need them anymore. They remained for backup... The hydro lines had also opened up a permanent service road that ran some three hundred kilometres south and connected to the main highway... now had the freedom to drive out on their own, theoretically. The weather and lack of maintenance often played havoc with that fine thought, though. (19)

This passage registers the conditionality of settler technology. The generators are relegated to contingency status within a system that presumes uninterrupted access to the grid, the service road, and southern supply chains. Mobility and autonomy are promised only *theoretically*, while their material realization remains dependent on maintenance regimes that are inconsistent and largely external to local control.

The fragility of this arrangement becomes explicit when the grid fails. Addressing the community, Terry explains that the diesel reserves are limited and that new supplies are expected only once winter roads allow transport trucks to reach the community (Rice 57). Diesel, food, and maintenance equipment are all synchronized around the anticipated return of the grid; survival is organized through the expectation that the system will resume. When someone from the crowd interrupts Terry, asking whether they must simply "wait around and hope this shit returns to normal?" (57), the irony of this "normalcy," structured by technological dependence on the settler state, comes sharply into view. The anxiety here is not caused by the absence of electricity alone but by the recognition that agency has been displaced outward, deferred to systems that may never return.

Rice complicates this dependency by revealing a parallel infrastructural logic already in place, one oriented toward communal preservation rather than external supply chains. The reserve maintains a hidden emergency cache:

Stored in a bunker below the garage at the water treatment plant was a massive cache of non-perishable food... Thousands upon thousands of cans and boxes had been stored there for nearly two decades... goods that could keep upwards of five hundred people fed for at least two years. (90)

This reserve infrastructure reflects Vizenor's *survivance*: an active, anticipatory mode of presence that refuses to anchor survival to settler systems alone. The novel therefore does not narrate the end of the world so much as the end of one world and the continuity of another. The breakdown of Western infrastructure, from mobile phones to energy grids and televisions, is treated less as tragedy than as inevitability. No explanation ever arrives for the collapse, and the state remains conspicuously absent. What persists are the rhythms and relationships the community had preserved despite the long reach of colonialism. As Aileen later tells Evan, "Our world isn't ending. It already ended... But we always survived. We're still here" (Rice 140).

This disavowal of apocalypse redefines what crisis means for a lot of Indigenous peoples and within *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. Aileen tells Evan, "Yes, apocalypse! What a silly word. I can tell you there's no word like that in Ojibwe. Well, I never heard a word like that from my elders anyway" (139). The community has already endured what settlers would call apocalyptic events: forced displacement, residential schooling, and environmental dispossession. For them, the end of the world has occurred many times over. The apocalypse, therefore, is an ongoing condition produced by colonialism. From a Western perspective, however, the end of the world happens through technological collapse and the disruption of routines dependent on settler infrastructures. Colonial modernity relies on the uninterrupted operation of these sociotechnical systems, which are designed to extract labor, resources, and compliance. Francoise Vergès' question, "Who cleans the world?" (vi) resonates here, as Rice's characters inherit the consequences of technological failure while never having accrued its promised benefits, revealing the entanglement between settler identity and technological systems.

In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, Scott arrives at the rez after the collapse. When asked why he has come, he replies: "I'm here for the same reason everyone else is: to breathe the fresh northern air. I also want to taste the finest moose meat... And I hear the hospitality of the Ojibwe is unrivalled" (Rice 97). Scott's language already lays bare his motive for extraction. His view of the community is transactional: a place to take from, not to belong to. The community's values of sharing and kinship are not only alien to him but something he considers for exploitation. His arrival at the rez hospital, which is supposed to be a space of care and vulnerability is symbolically significant. In times of crisis, hospitals are often double-edged: on the one hand proposing healing and on the other, contagion. Scott embodies this duality. Initially tolerated for his apparent usefulness. Terry convinces the other men that Scott "could pull more weight than a lot of the deadbeats in this goddamn rez" (Rice 103). However, Scott's presence soon proves toxic.

Scott as a villainous character emerges as a figure of contagion, a human virus whose arrogance mirrors the ideological strain of settler colonialism.

His behavior is dismissive, domineering, and ultimately cannibalistic. He tells Evan and Isaiah, "When I got here, you people barely had your shit together. There was no plan. People were going hungry already" (Rice 190). His strategy is that of settler saviorism: having caused the crisis, he now positions himself as its solution. Yet this rhetoric collapses under its own weight, revealing the unsustainability of settler masculinity, which equates dominance with survival and suppresses interdependence in favor of control.

Scott's obsession with productivity, with trapping and providing and measuring worth by individual output, reveals a larger capitalist logic incompatible with the community's ethics. His descent into cannibalism is certainly allegorical. As Scott boasts of "experimenting" with human remains, he openly ridicules Indigenous ceremony and tradition: "I know how you people have all kinds of ceremonies and voodoo and shit about your dead" (Rice 190). While his words carry the sting of colonial derision, they also reveal fear. Scott senses the limits of his dominance in this space and reacts by amplifying violence. In doing so, he embodies what Doina Ciochina describes as the ongoing trauma of settler intervention: a force that "breaks down traditional Indigenous ways of life" and reintroduces rupture under the guise of order (58).

His eventual execution and the expulsion of his body functions as a form of relational and spiritual cleansing. The rez, threatened by his presence, restores its balance by removing the settler virus that had destabilized the community. Scott, a symbol of winter, stagnation, and death, must be cleared for renewal to take hold: "The collapse of the white man's modern systems further withered the Anishinaabeg here. But they refused to wither completely" (Rice 198). The novel here enacts *survance*: "an active sense of presence over absence" (1). This is established through the continuation of Anishinaabe life, memory, and agency beyond colonial destruction.

4. Conclusion

In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, the settler logic of extraction is laid bare. Rice's text unmask the structural precarity of Western systems which ensure dependency. The collapse of settler infrastructures, and the ensuing violence, reveals the coercive mechanisms through which the settler state has historically asserted control. Against this backdrop, however, the novel centers Indigenous world-making, what Diné writer Lou Cornum describes as "living" practices of care, continuity, and relational stewardship. These practices enact decolonial refusals by foregrounding Indigenous modes of knowledge that assert alternative futures. Taken together, this work unsettles Canada's national myth of green/just modernity and benevolent progress. To center Indigenous

practices of world-making in our broader visions of the future demands a structural reorientation of how relations to land, technology, and one another are organized. It demands that we not only critique settler circuits but begin to live otherwise: to tell stories, build systems, and manage relations that prioritize reciprocity over ownership and continuity over collapse.

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Extractive Equalities: Gender-Based Violence and Canadian Coloniality in the Feminist International Assistance Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the *post*-colonial relations of power of Canadian international development policies and programs. As a supposed leader on gender equality, Canada has implemented its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) to integrate gender equality concerns into its international development programs, and yet Canadian resource extraction companies operating abroad continue to be linked to cases of sexual violence with little accountability. I examine this contradiction through looking at how the FIAP serves to depoliticize and decontextualize sexual violence. I examine how the policy defines and conceptualizes sexual and gender-based violence as part of Canada's efforts to take a so-called *feminist* approach to international development, and what work this conceptualization enables on behalf of the Canadian government. Drawing on interpretive and critical policy analysis, I show how this policy employs ideas of gender equality and individualized, depoliticized understandings of sexual violence that create a benevolent image of Canada, erasing the power dynamics that facilitate and enable sexual violence, as well as Canada's role in perpetuating colonial global power inequalities.

Keywords

Feminist Foreign Policy; Sexual and Gender-Based Violence; Feminist International Assistance Policy; Coloniality; Canadian Foreign Policy

1. Introduction

Canada is often seen as a leader on gender equality, praised for its gender-balanced cabinet and its purported integration of gender equality concerns into its foreign and domestic policies (UN Women). Programming related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has been key to this feminist approach,¹ with specific funding announcements declaring that addressing these forms of violence is “a priority of Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy” (Global Affairs Canada, “Canada”).

At the same time, Canada’s foreign relations are marked by its dependence on extractivism; for instance, 75 % of the world’s mining companies are based in Canada (Global Affairs Canada, “Minister Ng”). Many of these companies have been linked to high rates of SGBV in the communities where they operate, mostly in the Global South (EarthRights International et al. 2-3). Some have argued that this violence is not incidental but inherent to the capitalist and colonial exploitation of Indigenous territories (Manning 585-86).

In this paper, I examine the apparent contradiction between Canada’s feminist brand and its political economy of resource extraction to understand the role feminist foreign policy plays in obscuring the violence of extractive industries. This occurs through “purplewashing,” a practice in which governments use professed commitments to gender equality to improve a country’s image, for instance as part of Zionist narratives of Palestinian “backwardness” on gender equality (“Purplewashing”). I use the term *extractive equalities* to denote purplewashing related to gender-based violence specifically. Extractive equalities are forms of anti-violence intervention that reinforce or do not challenge coloniality and as such enable gender-based violence to continue. I examine how Canadian government discourses, exemplified by the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), work to maintain the country’s positive image by obscuring its political economy of resource extraction and the violence on which this depends. Thus, sexual violence cannot be separated from or said to be incidental to the activities carried out by these companies, implicating Canada as a country where many mining companies are based; this connection shows the importance of a political economy approach to understanding sexual violence, and demonstrates what is lost in the FIAP’s depoliticized approach to violence. Analyzing the policy through a feminist political

1. In November 2025, new Prime Minister Mark Carney said that Canada will no longer have an official feminist foreign policy, though he stated that Canada’s foreign policy would continue to uphold similar values of supporting LGBTQ rights and combatting gender-based violence (Robertson).

economy lens, which examines the links between the economic, political, and social realms (True 42), makes clear how the policy fails to address the structural roots of SGBV, and how this failure relates to the forms of violence enabled through its extractive industries.

Using critical discourse analysis, I examine how the FIAP conceptualizes sexual and gender-based violence as well as the role of Canada, to argue that the policy serves to define gender-based violence as a part of nature and as a technical problem with technical solutions, like training and awareness-raising, over structural ones. These discourses situate gender-based violence outside of existing power dynamics, which themselves are naturalized as Canada positions itself as a benevolent actor instead of the beneficiary of hegemonic power relations.

2. What Produces Violence

2.1. Context: Canadian Extractivism and SGBV

According to a never-released report by the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada in 2009, 63 % of high-profile corporate social responsibility violations were linked to companies from just five countries, including Canada ("Suppressed Report"). More specifically, according to *MiningWatch Canada*, "Canadian mining companies are involved in more than four times as many violations as the next two highest offenders" ("Suppressed Report"). Civil society groups have called for increased transparency and regulation in the mining sector, with EarthRights International (ERI), MiningWatch Canada and the Human Rights Research and Education Centre Human Rights Clinic at the University of Ottawa submitting a report in 2016 to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that accuses the Canadian government of not doing enough to prevent and address human rights abuses, including gender-based and sexual violence, in conjunction with the activities of Canadian mining companies (EarthRights International et al.). After detailing some of the academic research establishing the link between mining operations and sexual violence generally, I move to describing in more detail the example of Barrick Gold's operations in Papua New Guinea.

There are many ways that sexual violence is linked with mining operations, which this section will detail. To begin, past scholarship has understood mining cultures as steeped in hypermasculinity (Tobalagba 349). Sarah Lauwo's research on women working in mining notes widespread sexist work practices, including the denial of requests for maternity leave, and a feeling among women workers that their complaints of harassment would be futile (697-701).

In other words, the culture of mining work contributes to an atmosphere in which gender-based violence is dismissed and allowed.

Mining industries also contribute to violence in communities more broadly. Tobalagba notes that numerous articles have shown the gendered impacts of mining operations across a variety of contexts, including through high rates of SGBV (348). Tobalagba writes that the influx of male workers modifies these communities' gender dynamics (349). Siri Aas Rustad and others describe how SGBV often increases in post-conflict situations, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where men feel destabilized by changing gender norms, especially when these changes go against patriarchal traditions (477). Leah S. Horowitz describes how Indigenous women in many contexts have been opposed to mining operations, but silenced by male-dominated institutions that were created and empowered during the implementation of patriarchal structures through colonialism (1420).

Their implicit defense may be that communities are already sexist; for instance, in 2011 Peter Munk, founder of Barrick Gold, dismissed questions about gang rape by security guards in Barrick Gold mines in Porgera, Papua New Guinea (PNG) by referring to gang rape as a "cultural habit" over which the company had no control (Posner). This comment, in addition to its racist and colonial overtones, ignores the role of mining and coloniality in creating and fostering gendered inequalities in the first place. There are documented cases of sexual violence linked to private security and other forces used to displace communities to build mines and to enforce their securitization (Jenkins 33). In the Eastern DRC, Rustad and others note how rape is often used strategically to drive populations out of areas where mines are being built (477), as well as to prevent entry to mining sites and to discourage artisanal (informal, illegal, small-scale) mining around the sites of larger mines run by multinational companies in various contexts (Tobalagba 349).

The example of Porgera, Papua New Guinea, shows how mining cannot be understood outside of the context of coloniality, the continuation of colonial power dynamics after the end of official state colonialism (Quijano 533). Barrick Gold received increased international attention for the rape of local women by private security guards hired by the company, which is based in Canada (Jenkins 334). It is worth noting, as Susan Manning does, that mines in Porgera hired more than half their employees from outside of the community (578). Their justification was based on low levels of education and technical training among locals; local men mostly work in "low-skilled" positions (578), while the highly-compensated board and leadership of Barrick Gold is mostly composed of white men living in the Global North (585), reinforcing colonial hierarchies of power.

Manning also describes how sexual violence committed by private security forces towards women linked with illegal mining activities in PNG enables

further violence towards these women, as the shame and stigma associated with sexual violence leads to worse treatment by men in their communities (581). Meanwhile, Barrick Gold's remediation framework only covers violence committed by its employees during work hours (582), thus validating patriarchal views of women who have experienced violence as undeserving of justice.

Shin Imai and others note that Canadian mining companies often play a large role in establishing practices of police (non)intervention, with one example of a company paying a mayor directly to "keep the peace" (31-2); in Papua New Guinea, Barrick Gold directly oversees the members of the country's police force charged with protecting mine sites (Manning 580). Imai and others note that it is clear that companies are aware of the violence and unrest that often accompany the construction of a new mine, for instance mentioning it in disclosure documents (21)-but the lack of accountability means that they do not have to act on these risks.

In spite of all this, Canada still has no clear regulations for mining companies based in Canada to adhere to human rights in their operations abroad (Simons 428), with the Canadian government claiming to have "no legal means to prevent or sanction Canadian companies operating in zones of weak governance" (419). The influence of the resource extraction sector can clearly be seen in Canadian policy-making, which Ricardo Grinspun and Jennifer Mills say "focuses explicitly on creating the ideal conditions for extractive industries," particularly in international relations (138). Export Development Canada, despite being a state agency, is "secretive about its operations" and helps Canadian companies get financial support with minimal regulation (139). When there has been legislation proposed that would more heavily regulate mining companies it often fails, for instance with Bill C 300, which was defeated after lobbying by mining industry associations (142). Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the profits Canadian mining companies generate for Canada through, for instance, the Canada Pension Plan, which is invested in Barrick Gold (Manning 584). Indeed, Penelope C. Simons writes about how this regulatory gap is gendered, with "women's issues" relegated to realms of law, like international law, where there is no enforcement (429).

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Canada's FIAP treats SGBV as a purely technical issue, one whose causes are complicated and technical, or else attributable to backwards cultural norms, but never stemming from coloniality as an ongoing project and Canada's role in producing it (Quijano 533). However, this lens is missing from much of the existing research on Canada's FIAP, and on feminist foreign policy more broadly. For instance, Annika Bergman Rosamond and colleagues describe how the colonial legacies of Canada and Sweden shape their feminist foreign policies, but frame their critique through a framework of "care needs" that still assumes it is possible that the Canadian

state could provide “care” to Indigenous communities (17). In a similar vein, Sheila Rao and Anne Delorme identify continued challenges in the implementation of the FIAP from the perspective of partner organizations, but offers primarily technical solutions, such as “participatory grant-making as feminist practice” (12). They mention colonial power dynamics only briefly as something that can be rectified through technical policy change, as if this would disrupt the broader structures of coloniality that foster violence. Hanna Chidwick and others discuss in more detail the impacts of coloniality on power differentials between Canadian funders and organizations working in the Global South, but ultimately do not develop this critique to suggest anything more than technical, surface-level changes, such as the use of more participatory methods like “photovoice” and “body-mapping” that reconfigure knowledge dynamics but primarily, it seems, on the interpersonal level (15).

3. How the Fiap Reframes Violence

3.1. Invisibilization of Root Causes

The FIAP does not actually offer an analysis of what gender inequality is, or what SGBV is. Instead, the policy follows two introductions by the relevant Canadian ministers by delving into different issue areas it aims to tackle: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls (core action area), Human Dignity (health and nutrition, education, humanitarian action), Growth that Works for Everyone, Environment and Climate Action, Inclusive Governance, and Peace and Security (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). Instead of beginning with what gender equality is and understanding what causes it, which would come back to questions of political economy, the policy segments these different areas to point towards narrow and technical solutions, as if gender equality in health care is inherently different from gender equality in the humanitarian sphere.

Indeed, the FIAP thus mostly mentions such issues, including SGBV, by listing them when describing the types of initiatives that it will introduce to tackle them. In this way, it presents a shallow analysis of how SGBV comes to exist: these issues are presented in isolation, removed from their root causes. For instance,

Canada will ensure that investments in education include provisions for separate and appropriate washroom facilities, as well as systems to help manage menstrual hygiene, and that support is given to programs that help prevent and respond to school-related gender-based violence. (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”)

The policy also lists the type of health programming it will lead Canada to focus on, which include “initiatives that help fight infectious diseases through equity-based approaches and a focus on diseases, such as HIV, that particularly affect women and girls... and that address the ongoing challenge of SGBV” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). In this way, SGBV is disconnected from other issues. Further, the relationship between gender-based violence and gender equality more broadly is only implied: sexual violence is situated as a discrete issue, separate from, for instance, fighting infectious diseases. In this way, the policy evades any discussion of the root causes of SGBV. In describing the gendered challenges faced by women, the FIAP describes high rates of gender-based violence under the broader heading of “more family responsibilities and fewer opportunities” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). Here, GBV is listed along with “greater burdens of unpaid care work” and “fewer assets and resources” as well as women being “forced into early marriage,” as one of many gender-related issues (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). Similarly, in the category of gender and health, the policy says that it will focus on programs “that address the ongoing challenge of SGBV,” again describing this as a vague problem that naturally exists and does not need to be elaborated on. There is an implicit link here between these different forms of gendered inequalities but the commonality is not elaborated on, nor are the causes of these issues actually acknowledged or discussed. In isolating symptoms of violence from their causes, this framing of gender-based violence sidesteps any discussion of colonial power structures and Canada’s reliance on them.

3.2. *Naturalizing and Normalizing Violence*

The policy often describes sexual violence as if it is natural and inevitable, or at least as if its causes cannot be addressed directly. For instance, it often uses passive language to frame SGBV, for instance uncritically listing as gender-based issues: that “women and girls face greater burdens of unpaid work, have fewer assets and resources, are exposed to higher rates of sexual and gender-based violence, and are more likely to be forced into early marriage” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). There is no mention of who is enacting this violence, what it looks like, or what causes it; instead, violence is a challenge that women face, and that they are then made responsible for addressing. By not naming the causes of violence, this discourse serves to reinforce the idea that violence is inevitable and cannot be eliminated. It also reinforces the idea that violence is endemic to the Global South, rather than produced by coloniality.

The policy also often positions SGBV as accidental. On the topic of the rights of adolescent girls, the policy states that “many have an inadequate understanding of their sexual and reproductive health and rights, and many face sexual and gender-based violence” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). This implies that the girls’ inadequate knowledge is the cause of the sexual violence they experience. Not only is this problematic for erasing the role of perpetrators, but this also ignores the structural causes of SGBV and the structural factors that produce girls’ vulnerability to violence. Conceptualizing violence as a problem of awareness for women and girls in this way makes those at risk of violence responsible for preventing it, ignoring how instances of violence are enabled by societal power imbalances. Women may be aware that what they are experiencing constitutes domestic violence but have no recourse for leaving a relationship due to poverty and legal constraints. As Nandita Dogra notes, this decontextualized focus on awareness ignores the strategic decisions women have to make in instances of violence (342). This approach goes against feminist perspectives on violence that see SGBV not as being an unfortunate outcome of men’s biologically violent nature but about power and control (for instance, Brownmiller), an understanding that suggests that women’s awareness means little to perpetrators of violence who may be well aware that they are violating the principles of consent but also know that they are unlikely to face consequences.

A related form of depoliticization evident in the policy is the medicalization of SGBV. This becomes clear in the interventions, when they are more specifically stated, that are suggested for addressing SGBV. In the humanitarian sphere, the policy says that Canada will “dedicate a portion of its humanitarian assistance funding to providing counselling and psychosocial support to those in need,” also mentioning the need for “stronger measures to keep people safe and help survivors rebuild their lives” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). While this does mention vaguely the notion of keeping people safe, its main focus is on the aftermath of violence. Here, instead of a structural issue, violence is primarily an individual issue that can be dealt with through medical care without disrupting or even questioning the structures that make violence possible. Programs “that address the ongoing challenge of sexual and gender-based violence” are listed as one of the focus areas under health in the policy, as part of “programs and projects that put gender at the heart of their efforts to improve health care” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). This further reinscribes SGBV as (primarily or largely) a health issue. The language of “ongoing challenge” also harkens to the language of epidemics and of health issues as natural and scientific, rather than produced by social phenomena; Lauren Berlant describes how the framing of issues like obesity as “epidemic” or a “crisis” obscures their origins in deeply entrenched, historically emergent social causes (754-80).

3.3. Violence As A Cultural Issue

The policy also often attributes SGBV to vaguely-defined cultural causes, echoing colonial ideas of *third world* cultures as *backward* and lacking in human rights. As Walter Dignolo notes, ideas of human rights, within which Canada's discourse of gender equality is framed, are entangled with the move from liberalism to neoliberalism and with imperialist expansion (*The Darker Side* 176). Indeed, many scholars have described how Western ideas of human rights have been used to detract attention from the harms of neoliberal economic reforms and have even been used to legitimize them (e.g. Jessica Whyte). Nelson Maldonado-Torres notes that the concept of human rights is also tied to Eurocentric conceptions of who is (and is not) human, while Dignolo argues that these concepts-of the human and human rights-were developed in tandem with each other and thus cannot be disentangled from the coloniality of power ("Who Speaks?"). Conceptualizations of gender are also crucial to establishing colonial power relations, positioning colonized women as "not-human-as-not-yet-women" (Lugones 744). Thus, gender equality cannot be understood as neutral or universal; for instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes how Western feminist discourses also perpetuate the colonial dynamics that oppress colonized women by depicting the "third world woman" as a "monolithic subject" (333). As Arturo Escobar describes, the field of international development specifically relies on colonial, Eurocentric discourses that in turn replicate colonial power imbalances.

Indeed, the FIAP's descriptions of SGBV depict it as primarily a cultural issue, perpetuating the image of women in the Global South as oppressed. What the FIAP says directly about SGBV is that its programming "will include support for comprehensive approaches that help end these forms of violence so that fewer women and girls are subjected to domestic violence; intimate-partner violence; trafficking and exploitation; child, early and forced marriage; and female genital mutilation/cutting" (Global Affairs Canada, "Feminist International"). By grouping together phenomena like female genital mutilation/cutting with domestic and intimate partner violence, the policy reinforces the idea of sexual violence as primarily a cultural problem, linked to social norms that make violence possible. Such an analysis ignores the interrelationships, and co-constitutive nature, of cultural phenomena and economic relations. This also reinforces racist and colonial ideas about the culture of developing countries as *backwards*. Uma Kothari notes how terminology related to "tribalism, ethnicity, tradition, and culture" are often used in development discourses to imply race without stating it outright (qtd. in Abraham 19). Dogra also describes how international development discourses rely on depictions of women in the Global South as "traditional and religious" (338), for instance depicting women only in

gender-segregated spaces to imply that this is a cultural norm to invoke paternalistic impulses in Western audiences (338-39). In this way, the emphasis on cultural causes of violence reinforces Canadian coloniality.

3.4. Violence As A Distraction From Capitalist Production

The policy also describes SGBV as an economic problem, instrumentalizing gender equality as a way of enabling full participation in capitalist economic production. In this way, equality is depicted not as a worthwhile goal on its own, but rather beneficial for its ability to improve capitalist productivity. Laura Parisi argues that the policy embodies both “feminist neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism,” with the former promoting gender equality as sound economic policy while the latter sees neoliberal economic policies as the best way of achieving gender equality (170-74). For instance, the policy states that “empowering women, overseas and here at home, makes families and countries more prosperous,” and that “Women already generate nearly 40 percent of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP) and the potential for further growth led by women is relatively untapped” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). Aside from problematically instrumentalizing gender equality for economic reasons, this conceptualization reveals the neoliberalism of the Canadian government’s approach to gender equality, something that Mignolo describes as the “transnational ideology of the market” (*The Darker Side* 161). The policy has no discussion of how the labour market is structured by capitalist economic relations in ways that depend on, and reproduce, gender inequality, and how these relations may be impacted by Canadian intervention. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Grinspun and Mills demonstrate that Canadian international development activities, particularly under the Harper government (2006-2015), used “capacity-building” activities to influence the legal codes of countries where Canadian mining companies work in order to encourage them to lift environmental and other regulations, making these companies’ operations easier (140). Indeed, Jacqui True describes how policies of trade liberalization and marketization, such as those that Canada advances, are associated with increases in violence against women (50). In many contexts this is made worse by weakened social safety nets and the creation of free trade zones that create an influx of young, poorly-paid young migrant women who are then made vulnerable to violence with little legal recourse or protection (49). Past research on the FIAP specifically has noted that Canada’s policy makes economic concerns even more central than Sweden’s feminist foreign policy does (Zhukova 845). Parisi similarly argues that the FIAP’s central conceptualization of gender equality is as a barrier to economic growth (165).

The policy's depiction of women's labour market participation can also be further problematized from a broader feminist political economy standpoint. Dogra notes that, in a scan of international development NGO public-facing materials and the images they use, the few depictions of Global South women outside of traditional gender roles are in the realm of work (339). These depictions fit into the "neoliberal logic of 'good economic sense,'" which position women as an instrument of development only (339). This logic reinforces patriarchal ideas about women's agency, imagining that they only work out of sheer necessity or because they have been abandoned by male breadwinners (339). Christiana Abraham describes how the neoliberal trope of women's labouring bodies taps into racist ideas of, for instance, Black women as more resilient than delicate white women, or rural women as tougher than civilized women from the developed world (13). A focus on empowerment can also obscure how constructions of gender are tied up in economic relations, so that, for instance, men who feel their status in society is threatened by women's economic advances may become more violent towards their female partners (True 48). These effects may be exacerbated by global power inequalities. True gives an example from Kuwait, where men saw gender equality as an unwanted symbol of liberalization and took out their anger about this against women (49). However, such forms of misogyny cannot only be understood as a matter of negative gender norms but also of the competition introduced by, for instance, trade liberalization and the creation of free trade zones filled with industries that primarily hired women. In many of these cases, the influx of female workers lowered wages for all and made jobs available for men more scarce, creating a sense of resentment that must be understood in the context of scarce economic resources (True 49). Thus, the FIAP conceptualizes gender-based violence as a natural and technical problem, a conceptualization that must be understood in connection with Canadian coloniality.

4. Colonial Feminism and Canadian Benevolence in the Fiap

Examining the ways that the policy describes Canada and its role in international development reveals how this image of Canada is constructed and how it enables Canada to depoliticize violence more broadly. Its descriptions of gender equality as a "Canadian value" (Global Affairs Canada, "Feminist International") reify Canada's reputation as a *peacekeeping nation*, an image that serves to reinscribe colonial hierarchies of power. This image is due in large part to Canada's role in establishing the first UN peacekeeping forces (Rudderham), something that has been core to Canada's international image and identity since the post-war era (Cros). Nicole Wegner demonstrates, through

examples of relations between Canadian peacekeepers and civilians in Afghanistan and in conflicts with Indigenous nations within so-called Canada, the racist and colonial ideas that allow the conceptualization of the Canadian military as a “peacekeeping force,” even outside of peacekeeping operations, to operate, casting protestors as disruptors of peace. Tyler Shipley argues that peacekeepers have often seen themselves as a civilizing force, for instance referring to Somalia as “Indian Country” when stationed there and imagining “that they were there to civilize a place of ‘pure evil’” (354). In this way, the label of “peacekeeping” gives cover to Canadian colonial and militaristic violence.

Examining the FIAP itself shows a colonial view of Canada as inherently more egalitarian than other countries. The policy says that it is based on “Canada’s expertise and comparative advantage,” and that Canada can “help the people of the world’s developing countries,” that it is “worth reminding ourselves why we step up” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). It also notes that “we are positioning Canada at the forefront of this global effort.” The Message from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, then Chrystia Freeland, begins by saying that “I will speak up for the poorest and most vulnerable, especially women and girls, and they can count on the commitment and expertise of our team” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). The policy and its announcements instead rely on stereotypes of “developing countries” as “backwards” and lacking in equality, with colonized women unable to speak for themselves (Spivak). This is how Canada is able to, for instance, fund projects addressing sexual and gender-based violence in the West Bank and Gaza on the one hand (Global Affairs Canada, “Project profile-Addressing”), while supplying arms to Israel (Dyer). The FIAP’s failure to mention colonial power relations thus serves to reinforce them.

Also colonial is the policy’s emphasis on how gender equality worldwide will benefit Canadians. For instance, it says that “empowering women, overseas and here at home, makes families and countries more prosperous,” and that “Canada’s international assistance will benefit not only partner communities but also Canadians” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). This view is also instrumentalizing, and in this case it also erases the benefits that Canadian companies get from fostering gender inequality in the Global South. This strategy in the policy serves to feed into the multicultural narrative of Canada as a tapestry of people from all around the world, tying in closely with the rhetoric of diversity being Canada’s strength (Trudeau). In this case, the rhetoric of multiculturalism is used to justify Canadian coloniality, while reinforcing the idea that the social and economic conditions in the Global South are not important enough on their own to be worth addressing, and are more or only important if they will impact (white) Canadians. This further entrenches narratives of Canadian multicultural benevolence.

The policy also reinforces problematic images of women and girls in “developing countries,” feeding into racist and colonial mythologies and in turn justifying Canadian coloniality. The policy refers to “the poorest and most vulnerable, especially women and girls” and says that women are “the most vulnerable to poverty, violence and climate change” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). This mention of vulnerability removes (real) conditions from their structural roots in forms of inequality that Canada perpetuates. However, the policy not only mentions women’s vulnerability, but connects it to their need for empowerment by Canada. For instance, the policy says that “In many countries, a mix of discriminatory laws and policies, coupled with... harmful cultural practices, limits the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). Here, an implicit difference is created between Canadian women, who benefit from the gender expertise and equality of Canada, and women of the Global South, who are imagined to be helpless victims. Indeed, Zillah Eisenstein writes that in nationalist discourses, first world women represent modernity, while colonized women represent tradition (43). Through this conceptualization of women in the Global South, the FIAP reproduces colonial discourses that perpetuate the view of Canada as an egalitarian nation in comparison.

The policy also mobilizes ideas of solidarity and community to flatten global power dynamics, further erasing the violence of which Canada can be understood to be part. The policy says that “We commit to all of this because international solidarity is a shared Canadian value,” and that “Canada is part of a global community” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). Describing the role of international volunteering and civil society partnerships in Canada’s international development programming, the policy explicitly ties this to Canada’s supposed multiculturalism: “Eager to make a difference, Canadians, including youth and people from our diverse cultural communities, are at the forefront of our international development and humanitarian efforts” (Global Affairs Canada, “Feminist International”). Describing Canada’s actions through this lens of multiculturalism erases the unequal terms on which Canada cooperates with other countries, sidestepping any mention of colonial power relations. This is especially noteworthy in the humanitarian sphere, which, Miriam Ticktin argues, is rife with depoliticized, crisis-based approaches that do not address the structural roots of any form of violence (261). Alex Veit describes how the “humanitarian machine” depoliticizes SGBV due to its reliance on governance feminism and its transformation of violence from a political to a technical problem. Indeed, Emma Swan describes how Canada’s FIAP depends on the “anti-politics machine,” a mechanism through which development policies and practice work to depoliticize issues such as Israeli settler colonialism and its gendered impacts (117-23). In spite of Canada’s stated commitment to

feminist principles and combatting SGBV, Canada voted against a draft resolution titled “Situation of and Assistance to Palestinian Women” tabled in 2018 at the 62 Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (126), a resolution which noted that Palestinian women continue to face gender-based violence worsened by the Israeli occupation. Jessica Cadesky similarly describes how the FIAP works to give Canada “political cover” for engaging in foreign policy practices that disempower women, such as supporting Saudi Arabian attacks on Yemen (310). Thus, the FIAP relies on images of Canada as benevolent to hide the violence that Canada maintains worldwide—and its gendered dimensions.

5. Conclusion

In 2017, Ashifa Kassam wrote in *The Guardian* that a group of Maya Q’eqchi’women in Guatemala were suing a Canadian mining company over sexual violence carried out by mine security in an attempt to gain access to their land for mining activities. Also in 2017, two women came from Papua New Guinea to attempt to join the Shareholders meeting of Barrick Gold, to discuss their and their community’s complaints of rampant sexual assault and other abuses at the hands of security guards employed by Barrick Gold (Beaumont). Canada never responded substantively to either case, even after numerous public complaints (e.g., EarthRights International et al.).

Meanwhile, it is illustrative to look at examples of where the Canadian government has supported efforts to combat sexual violence in conjunction with mining operations, through several international development projects funded by Global Affairs Canada, which are implemented through and held to the guidelines set out by the FIAP. For instance, the Canadian Fund for the Extractive Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean has chief among its goals “improved governance and competitiveness of the extractives sector” and “strengthened economic integration of extractive activities,” making clear how Canada is unwilling to imagine accountability for resource extraction taking away from its profitability (Global Affairs Canada, “Project Profile-Canadian”). Similarly, the project Gender Equality in Artisanal Mining aims to “empower women to articulate and defend their concerns” through “providing technical assistance to women of ASM [Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining] communities to develop relevant skills... to more actively defend their interests and participate in mining cooperatives” (Global Affairs Canada, “Project Profile-Gender”). Here, the technical and cultural framing of the FIAP is on display, resulting in a project that invests \$2 million in fostering gender equality through skill development for women, and yet completely sidesteps the structural reasons why

women in the DRC are facing violence when engaging in the brutal work of artisanal mining in the first place.

The FIAP works to depoliticize and decontextualize SGBV, positioning such violence as a technical issue with technical, universally applicable solutions, which Canada is ostensibly better able to imagine and implement than local community members. This practice serves to sanitize, hide, and justify the role of Canadian coloniality in perpetuating multiple forms of violence in the Global South, of which sexual violence related to mining operations is one part. In this characterization, there is no connection between SGBV and other forms of violence connected to capitalist exploitation, like environmental violence (Women's Earth Alliance and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network). These government discourses remove any understanding of violence from power relations, naturalizing these relations through the apparent benevolence of Canada, which then justifies its coloniality and extractivism. The FIAP and programs implemented through it also perpetuate colonial power dynamics in reifying the role of Canada as the saviour of countries with supposedly backwards gender norms. One of the main ways this occurs is through conceptualizations of SGBV as a cultural problem, an idea which relies on colonial stereotypes about cultures of the Global South. This, combined with the policy's conceptualization of Canada as a leader on gender equality, solidifies the role of Canada within the coloniality of international development.

In this way, the FIAP can be understood as an exercise of Canadian branding, with even NGO actors conceptualizing its importance in part in terms of Canada's international image. The FIAP itself presents an image of Canada as a benevolent actor, a broker of peace on the world stage, that dovetails with Canada's self-image as a multicultural nation with a peacekeeping history. This image erases the history of Canadian involvement in imperialist ventures worldwide. As such, the FIAP can be understood not merely as *bad feminist policy*, ineffective in its vagueness, but as something more sinister: a tool for feminist instrumentalization, working to give cover to Canadian coloniality. Thus, Canada can continue to reap the benefits of its mining industry without answering for the violence that it depends on.

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Transculturality and Uneven Belonging in Multicultural Canada: Mark Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* and Lisa Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*

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ABSTRACT

Set chiefly in the Canadian prairies' Indigenous-settler contact zones, Mark Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* and Lisa Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* illuminate how histories of colonial violence and trauma shape contemporary Canadian society and show the inadequacies of transcultural theory in capturing Canadian cultural formations. In the Canadian lifeworld depicted in these texts, cultures are imagined as distinct and separate, with asymmetrical power dynamics serving as the ideological bulwark of Canadian multiculturalism. While *Forgiveness* depicts the capacity of Canadian multiculturalism to pave the way for non-white migrants' transculturation, *Probably Ruby* uses Ruby's deracination from her Métis roots to portray how settler colonial histories affect Indigenous cultural lifeworlds, dictating Indigenous peoples' relationship with the Canadian state. The structural erasure of Indigenous identities through historical acts of cultural genocide continues to hinder bidirectional settler-Indigenous cultural exchange and instead fosters the assimilation of Indigenous persons, such as the deracinated Ruby, into the dominant culture.

Keywords

Transculturality; Difference; Multiculturalism; Settler Colonialism; Deracination; Colonial Unknowing; Cultural Conflict

1. Introduction

I was a master's student in Nigeria when I first came across the term *transculturality*. Commonly associated with German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, the idea dates as far back as the 1940s when the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz formulated its associated term, "transculturation," in describing "the dynamic context of colonial and postcolonial Cuba" (Stein 255), a country that witnessed "extreme mixture of countless cultures in an extraordinarily short time" (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 15). When, in 2018, I first read Welsch's 1999 paper "Transculturality-The Changing Form of Cultures Today,"¹ I was entranced by it and felt convinced it captured the cultural experiences and lifeworld of the very mobile characters in Caribbean and African diasporic literatures. Aside from those dwelling right at home in countries of Africa or the Caribbean, a lot of these characters, mostly well-educated Black people-natives of formerly colonized countries or great-grandchildren of erstwhile slaves—are regularly traversing the globe, although living and working in large metropolitan cities such as London, Edinburgh, Brussels, Paris, Toronto, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, to name a few. They typify what the Nigerian-Ghanaian novelist Taiye Selasi theorized as *Afropolitan*: "African young people working and living in cities around the globe, [who] belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many." Describing that generation's idea of home, Selasi notes:

[T]his one lives in London but was raised in Toronto and born in Accra; that one works in Lagos but grew up in Houston, Texas. 'Home' for this lot is many things: where their parents are from; where they go for vacation; where they went to school; where they see old friends; where they live (or live this year).

Saturated with narratives such as Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*, Candice Carty-Williams' *Queenie*, Teju Cole's *Open City*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, and Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, I quickly connected the concept of transculturality to the lived experiences of the characters I had read about,

1. At the core of Welsch's arguments about the world's present-day cultural constitution is the optimism that cultures are increasingly overcoming the ethnic limits of Johann Gottfried Herder's eighteenth-century notion of single cultures. Welsch posited that the Herderian cultural model, marked by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation, and intercultural delimitation, has become outdated, normatively dangerous and unsustainable, and that transculturality offers the most tenable cultural description of our contemporary world.

applying this view too to my speculations about places I had not yet physically visited, reading being my primary way of traversing the globe.

Coming to live and study in Canada, though, and encountering Indigenous literature and history for the first time, I found it curiously exciting to read the narratives of, by, and about the Indigenous peoples scattered around the prairies, the northern territories and other parts of Canada whose lived experiences revealed my ignorance about Canada's colonial history and the challenges of conceiving Canadian cultural formations through a transcultural paradigm. The history of cultural apartheid, suppression, forced assimilation, relocation, and the residential school system, which is part of the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada, starkly casts doubt on transculturality's cosmopolitan ideal. This paper calls for greater attention to specific local contexts in the making of seemingly generalizing statements about the cultural situation of the world, and shows how Canadian literary texts problematize both the universalist discourse of transculturality and the official Canadian nationalist myth of multiculturalism.

In exploring two Canadian literary texts, namely Mark Sakamoto's *Forgiveness: A Gift from My Grandparents* and Lisa Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*, the former a memoir and the latter a novel, I find that imbalanced power relations shape immigrants' and Indigenous peoples' experiences and relationship with the dominant (Western) culture in Canada. The Japanese example in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* shows that, even when they experience initial hostilities, non-white individuals of immigrant descent often find a transcultural space in Canada more readily. But for folks of Indigenous descent, as Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* portrays, the history of colonial violence and the trauma of the residential school system tend to negate transculturality, limiting their experience of cultural contact to one of assimilation into the dominant culture rather than the "mutual give and take" that is essential to the transculturation process (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 15).

This does not mean that the Canadian state's and people's relationships with Indigenous groups have remained the same, unchanged, since the 1971 announcement of Canada's multiculturalism policy by then liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau. Although the Canadian Indian Act has been amended multiple times (rather than annulled), its continued existence has been argued to reinforce colonial structures of power over Indigenous cultural systems, sustaining legal frameworks that significantly constrain the flourishing of Indigenous cultural identity (Andersen 78). But even from my outsider perspective—as a Nigerian of Igbo ethnic extraction whose parents and grandparents were once citizens of Biafra, a country that no longer exists—I do not find this surprising at all. The first two of the four goals of the Canadian state's multiculturalism policy are "to assist all Canadian cultural groups that have demonstrated a desire and

effort to continue to develop a capacity to grow and contribute to Canada” and to “assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society” (Trudeau 8545). Fuelled by a resistance to the history of settler colonial oppression and cultural genocide, Indigenous nationalisms challenge the expectation of “a desire and effort to... contribute to Canada,” and articulate demands for self-determination, sovereignty, and full political power as co-equals of the Canadian state, in contrast to their imposed status as colonized nations existing within the Canadian state and unable to determine their own political and economic futures. Hence, although the historical (postcolonial vs. settler colonial) contexts differ, the Canadian government’s relationship with its Indigenous peoples echoes the Nigerian government’s relationship with the Indigenous peoples of Biafra; and, despite the specific differences (absolute proscription vs recognition-as-containment),² the responses of the two states to minority nationalism have been similarly driven by the imperative to preserve state sovereignty and territorial control. In the Canadian context, the apprehension, I dare say, is that granting full political sovereignty to Indigenous peoples would undo the state’s control over much of the huge expanse of lands and resources it presently controls.

The Canadian state’s response to Indigenous demands for sovereignty mirrors what Charles Taylor calls a “politics of recognition.” This involves attempts to “reconcile Indigenous claims to nationhood with Crown sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identities in some form of renewed relationship with the Canadian state” (Coulthard 438). Glen Coulthard avers that multicultural-rooted politics of recognition, involving “the delegation of land, capital and political power from the state to Indigenous communities through land claims,” reproduce similar results for Indigenous peoples as the colonial power structures they are seeking to undo (438-39). There is also the gendered dimension of this politics, a phenomenon Rebecca Jane Hall, Leah F. Vosko, and Veldon Coburn have explored in their critique of “recognition-as-containment” (1523). Using the 2021 legal case *Shubenacadie Indian Band v. Canada* as a reference point, they argue that “the settler colonial state uses the regulation of the so-called Indian identity as a dispossessive strategy, a racialized and gendered means of controlling access to resources and attempting to contain Indigenous human, nonhuman, and land-based relations” (1520). Their argument highlights how, even in present-day Canada, the persisting currency of the Indian Act enables the Canadian state to undermine Indigenous cultural sustainability by disregarding kinship relationships, individualizing Indigenous

2. My use of this term draws from Rebecca Jane Hall, Leah F. Vosko, and Veldon Coburn whom I refer to in the subsequent paragraph.

identity (1538), and reinforcing "gendered processes of settler state containment of Indigenous relations and identity, especially those vital to social reproduction" (1521).

All of this is important to trace how, in the Canadian state, systematized forms of Indigenous cultural repression, together with political and cultural resistance by Indigenous peoples, are still very much in vogue and defy transculturality's presumption of bilateral cultural exchange and commodification. And while nation and culture, as Welsch has repeatedly pointed out, are indeed not to be seen as the same, the nation's (or nation-state's) political situation does affect the culture of its people, impacting whether and in what capacity the people retain their ways of life, seeing, and knowing, and how they relate with the cultures around them.

2. Reconsidering the Descriptive Obsolescence of Bounded Cultures

My reading of Sakamoto's memoir *Forgiveness* and Bird-Wilson's novel *Probably Ruby* does not suggest that Welsch's observations about the conflict-retaining nature of multiculturalism and interculturality are out of place. However, the texts enable me to show the incongruousness of Welsch's assertion that these cultural models are of the past, no longer practiced, and "descriptively unserviceable" ("Transculturality" 61). If the adjective "transcultural," as Welsch has repeatedly avowed, is the most tenable cultural description of all parts of our world today, including Canada, I can't help but wonder: To what extent has transculturality, in practice, resolved the multicultural skirmishes and such inter-ethnic micro-conflicts that persist despite the interpenetration of cultures and even inner diversities that characterize today's societies, Canadian society for instance? Although Welsch's writing wasn't formulated within the Canadian context, the universalist posture of his theorization makes pertinent the question I raised above—a question that becomes relevant in the Japanese-Canadian migrational context of *Forgiveness* and the context of Métis culturicide depicted in *Probably Ruby*. Both texts are set against the backdrop of cultural contact in Canada from the pre-Second World War era to the present, thus providing a historical context for Canada's contemporary cultural dynamics.

Exploring cultural contact and conflict in both texts, I interrogate transculturality against Canada's 55-year history of multiculturalism. Even though the idea of the transplace, "an all-inclusive space of subjective consciousness and cultural possibilities which does not deny the formative importance of native cultures—and, to some extent, their accompanying worldviews—but... allows openness to the reception, integration, and negotiation of other cultures" (Dagnino 74), sounds ideal, *Forgiveness* and *Probably Ruby* reveal the difficulty

of realizing this in Canada's relationship with non-white migrant and Indigenous communities, showing how histories of colonialism and racial subjugation undermine the optimism of Welsch's earlier writings on transculturality and the aspirational claims of official multiculturality.

The two texts present Canadian histories from two distinct minoritarian identity perspectives and literary styles. While Sakamoto's memoir uses a non-fictional form to present a Japanese-Canadian history involving initial migration, naturalization, repression during WWII, and efforts at reintegration, Bird-Wilson's novel employs realist fiction to depict Canadian history through an Indigenous perspective, foregrounding Métis struggles to retain cultural identity amid the Canadian government's assimilationist policies and cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples. While the state of Canadian multiculturalism might not have been the primary issue gnawing at Sakamoto's and Bird-Wilson's minds when they wrote their individual texts, their works do say a lot about the cultural evolution of present-day Canada, highlighting the ways notions of transcultural mixing, respect for inner diversity, and the ultimate question of Canadian identity are inflected by histories of colonialism, racial segregation and trauma. But of course, such histories and the overall issue of marginality—including the ways marginalization fuels a quest for Indigenous nationhood—are something transculturalist theorists seem too fast to write off as inconsequential; Welsch states, "It is usually the (real or supposed) losers of globalization who try to retreat to national identities" (*We Have Always Been Transcultural* 4). The question, though, would be, what made people of certain ethnic and racial heritage "losers of globalization" and why are certain territories of the world so suspicious of global integration that they choose to find succour in national identities? To blame these "losers of globalization" for retreating towards national identities is to perpetuate what Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein have theorized as colonial unknowing, the entrenching of a parallel history that renders illegible the historical and present-day acts of colonial-like subjugation of one culture (and nation) by the other.

Writing within the context of settler-colonization, Vimalassery, Hu Pegues and Goldstein argue that whereas colonization continues today in both subtle and overt forms, its beneficiaries have been oriented not to comprehend its existence. They maintain that the process of actively forgetting or choosing not to know masks the link between colonial history and ongoing settler-colonization and racialization in North America. In other words, by choosing not to know or remember, those in social and racial positions that benefit from the colonial past make it seem that colonization never happened, is not still happening, or that the epistemological, ontological, social, and economic positions of various races and segments of the world's population are as they should be, balanced and fair. Drawing on the concept of colonial unknowing,

I emphasize that even in places that purportedly have become transcultural, sphere-like thinking and social structuring remain prevalent, with ethnic minority cultures existing at the margins as the dominant culture reinforces itself and suppresses its others under the guise of embracing them. This situation encapsulates the imbalanced cultural relationships found in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* and Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*.

3. *Forgiveness*: the Persistence of Cultural Conflicts in the Transplace

In *Forgiveness*, Mark Sakamoto traces the deep transcontinental roots of his family, dating back to his Japanese-Canadian paternal grandparents, who were born and raised in Canada but were treated as enemy spies by the Canadian government during WWII. Echoing a similar history of adoption and discrimination, *Probably Ruby* depicts a Métis woman, Ruby, who was adopted as a baby and raised by a white family that severed her from her Indigenous roots and culture; as an adult, Ruby rebels against her adopted white community's anti-Indigenous rhetoric and ideology, and searches to reconnect with her biological family and Métis culture. Both books grapple with the difficulty of framing a distinct Canadian identity. While Canada prides itself on its multicultural society, Canada's stated commitment to protecting the rights and freedoms of its citizens and residents, as set out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, repeatedly clashes with its founding white settler colonial ideals, a fact Sakamoto articulates through his grandparents' stories.

Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* captures the forced relocation of the Japanese Canadian population in the wake of WWII, during which they wonder, "How could this be happening to them? They had done nothing wrong. They were all Canadians" (96). The statement "they were all Canadians" becomes a question, interrogating the absence of the inclusive feeling of "comfort and security" (Lim xii), in Bachelard's words, the "joy of dwelling" (91), for the Canadians of Japanese extraction and, by extension, all other Canadians whose ethnicity defies the normative racial configuration of Canadianness. Describing the book, Anupa Mistry explains: "Despite its benevolent title, *Forgiveness* incites a discomfort that lingers well past the narrative resolution that comes in the memoir's last few pages. It's difficult to read through the fascinating personal histories... without confronting the national rhetoric of this country as a peaceful, liberal, multicultural enclave of the world" (R14). The memoir thematizes Asian presence in Canada, calling on readers to examine Canada's history of migrant acceptance from the perspectives of the Japanese, who lived through one of the most challenging periods of that history. Although the 1907 mass arrival of Japanese in Canada, as Sakamoto relates, begins

with an invitation by “Canadian officials in Japan [who] were taking names of men who wanted to obtain Dominion visas” (40), the later maltreatment of Japanese migrants in British Columbia (and later in the Prairies) indicates that this offer of free visas to the Japanese was simply an economic push for increased labour and production within the Dominion. Despite benefiting Canada economically, this move was widely protested by white Canadians who felt threatened by the perceived invasion by Asians. “The Vancouver that Yosuke Oseki fled to in 1907 was a pioneer town—muddy, rainy, hardscrabble,” says the narrator. “The Japanese all congregated along Powell Street. The name of that part of town was as *unwelcome as the country*: ‘Japtown’” (Sakamoto 40; my emphasis). The name Japtown speaks of the apartness between the immigrants and their hosts. As the text shows, the 20th-century history of non-white immigrants to Canada is marked by intercultural conflicts and multicultural contentions.

Canadian multiculturalism operates along three lines: “descriptively (as a sociological fact), prescriptively (as ideology) [and] politically (as policy),” with linguistic diversity its core component (Brosseau and Dewing 5). But what does this linguistic diversity mean for speakers of minority languages in light of Canadian bilingualism? Sakamoto’s *Forgiveness* underscores how linguistic differences heighten intercultural conflict and feelings of marginalization, accentuating the experience of living in a world while being external to it. The narrator explains, “While almost all of the immigrants were literate, it was in the Japanese language. Most did not speak English, but the safety and security of Japantown allowed them to function with ease” (Sakamoto 40). This language difference, which reflects ethnic consolidation, also implies the social homogenization of Japanese (and, by extension, Asian) life in Canada, limiting the ability of the white and Japanese worlds to merge.³ While Japanese-Canadian migrants’ resort to their national language rather than English is an unavoidable consequence of arriving in a world that speaks a different language, what is significant is the unwelcoming responses of their Western hosts to the foreignness existing in their midst.

Despite the economic contributions of Asians to the Canadian economy in the early years of Asian migration to Canada, the Western news media’s posture towards this economic migrancy indicates the hostile atmosphere and micro-aggressive attitude of the dominant culture towards the new minority

3. This language question, a recurring issue in Canadian history, echoes the English-Cree problem we will see later in *Probably Ruby*, which depicts the residential school system’s attempts to consolidate whiteness by unteaching Indigenous children the use of their ancestral Cree language.

culture, perceived to be a threat to whiteness. The Canadian news media refer to the presence of the eight thousand Japanese in British Columbia and their Chinese counterparts as "the Asian invasion" and "yellow peril" (Sakamoto 41), thus strategically instigating public outrage against these newcomers. The narrator calls the resultant inter-racial crisis between the Asian residents and their Canadian hosts "a downward spiral," setting a pattern of life to come for the Japanese migrants' offspring born in Canada. Describing this world in which Yosuke's children and other Canadian-born Japanese live, the narrator says:

Mitsue lived in two worlds. There was the Japanese world, her community in Celtic. Her family, her friends, the food she loved, and the Japanese Centre were all there. That was the world of the familiar, filled with love. *But tomorrow was not there.* Mitsue knew from a very early age that *her future was in the English world*, the world of education, modern lifestyle, modern fads, it had movies and fashion and spoke English. She wanted to be a part of that world. Her parents wanted her to be a part of that world too. *She tried to fit in.* She was taught to play by the rules, follow the instructions, and not cause any trouble. If she did well, she thought, she would be accepted. (Sakamoto 45; my emphasis)

Far from capturing a desire for transculturality, the above excerpt captures the struggles of a representative communal minority figure to shed her identity to gain acceptance of and into a world whose rules and system of being are defined by a different and supposedly superior group: a dominant racial group opposed to the presence of any potentially divergent existent within its borders. In the section that follows, I highlight how *Probably Ruby* depicts white settler opposition to other forms of cultural lifeforms as the bane of the Indigenous cultures, resulting in generations of Indigenous cultural alienation effected through the Canadian state's instrumentalization of Western education and the residential school system as a colonial tool.

4. Three Generations of Cultural Repression in Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*

Like Sakamoto's *Forgiveness*, which explores three generations of Japanese Canadian experiences, Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* centers the struggles of Indigenous identity in Canada along the intersecting lines of three generations. The novel revolves around Ruby, a young Canadian woman of Métis descent, who is adopted and raised by a white couple and given a life that is disconnected from her Métis ancestry. As a grown woman battling an identity crisis and a sense of rootlessness, Ruby must embark on tracing her life history through the narratives about her relatives. Structurally,

Bird-Wilson constructs Ruby's narrative into a fragmented, non-chronological structure, with the story being told from a third-person point of view but following a different character in each chapter. Most of these characters interact directly with Ruby, yet there is never a chapter devoted explicitly to her perspective. (Schwartz 121)

The novel's fragmented structure, much like Ruby's incoherent sense of self, echoes the fractured nature of Canadian cultural identity. While multicultural Canada is made up of diverse Indigenous groups, descendants of British and French settlers, and peoples of diverse migrant descent, Canadian history on the Indigenous part of the equation has predominantly been a history of trauma and forced acculturation. Thus, by interlacing narratives of Ruby's experiences with those of Rose, Leon, and Grace, Bird-Wilson calls attention to generations of ethnic and cultural repression of Indigenous peoples in Canada, with Ruby's directionlessness and eventual search for her roots suggesting that these histories, though officially of the past, are arguably ongoing in present-day Canada. Not only does Ruby face various shades of discrimination as an Indigenous Prairie girl adopted by a white Canadian family, but she also, like the Japanese in *Forgiveness*, experiences what it means to live in the world and yet not feel a sense of home within that world. This inability to experience a feeling of homeliness is a lingering feature of the Indigenous lifeworld captured in the text and springs from the history of ethnic repression and cultural deracination faced by Indigenous peoples, even in the midst of Canada's adoption of respect for diversity as a political ideology.

Returning to the language question, Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby* links linguistic erasure to the identity crisis that characterizes Indigenous experiences in contemporary Canada and the novel's textual lifeworld. In the text, the residential school system mandates Cree-speaking Métis characters like Rose to shed their Cree language and learn English as a prerequisite to thriving in the same land their ancestors had lived in before them. The narrator follows Ruby's thoughts on the suppression of Cree, the dominance of English, and the overt way the Anglocentric episteme and ontology infiltrate the Métis life of her grandmother, Rose. The narrator observes: "Ruby longed to know something impossible, how they'd arrived here, just here, exactly. *Ten years* at residential school qualified kohkum Rose to speak English, *become a waitress, a housekeeper in a motel, and a farmhand's wife*" (Bird-Wilson 102). This instance reveals the existential dangers of the assimilation process fostered by the residential schools. Like her friend Ernestine and other Indigenous children, Rose is forced to spend years learning English in the residential school system and dissociating from Métis affiliations.

Thus, *Probably Ruby* portrays the assimilation process as having the same economic objective as Canada's Dominion visas to the Japanese in 1907.

Echoes of this abound in African colonial literature and history, wherein colonial education was geared towards producing a workforce for the colonial system rather than towards the humanistic goal of training individuals to overcome colonial and economic oppression. It is not surprising, then, that Rose, despite her yearning to run away from the residential school system, absorbs the residential school's doctrines and teaches her children the precepts of white superiority rather than an Indigenous or even hybridized and perhaps balanced view of the world. The narrator comments:

After years of being told not to speak her language, Rose had refused to teach her kids Cree, convinced they would be better off without the accent, better able to function in the white world. Her husband, Johnny, more traditional, had wanted to teach their children Cree, but Rose insisted on raising the kids her own way, wouldn't be told. She nurtured them with what she'd been given at residential school. (102)

It might appear that Rose's feelings exemplify a desire for transcultural self-hood. However, transculturality arises from cultural exchange rather than from deracination, which the excerpt above shows. The transculturation process "is not simply... a process of 'acculturation'... but rather a reciprocal give-and-take in which all population groups are in transition and from which they emerge changed" (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 16). It involves the retention of one's ethnic or cultural identity, followed by an openness to cultural "exchange and coming to terms with each other" (Welsch, "On the Acquisition" 12).

Later in life, Ruby finds out from Rose, her paternal grandmother, that she is Cree, "But also, French-Métis. Half-blood. So not *all* Cree" (Bird-Wilson 237). Although the Métis are descended from the intercultural union between First Nations' women and European (especially French and Scottish) fur traders, they constitute a unique Indigenous group whose cultural practices and belief systems—founded within the Canadian colonial matrix of power—are Indigenous to Canada, rather than Europe (Andersen 39). Andersen emphasizes that whereas the notion of hybridity in postcolonial discourse is often extolled as enabling "'in-between' spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood" (Bhabha 1), in the Indigenous Canadian context of the Métis people, rather than enable what Bhabha describes as a transgressive "third space of enunciation" (37), hybridity has been adapted as a classificatory term that invisibilizes the colonial power structures under which the Métis came to be (Andersen 39). Andersen asserts, "Métis are classified as hybrid—with all the denigrating connotations of the term—in ways that deny that which we seek most, an acknowledgment of our political legitimacy and authenticity as an Indigenous *people*" (38). Ruby's discovery of her Métis ancestry does not make up for her

lifelong disconnection from her Indigenous identity, nor does it undo her cultural deracination.

Similarly, instances of the apartheid between national cultures in Canada can be seen in how *Forgiveness* describes the relationship between Japanese children and their white counterparts. The narrator observes:

The Japanese kids would stick together on the weekends, rarely playing with the white children. Mitsue and Miyoko would play with the *hakujin* kids at school, but once they were on our own [sic], they would usually stick together. There were no signs to make it official, *no physical barriers; it was just the way it was*. (Sakamoto 46; my emphasis).

Notice that even though the Japanese and the “hakujin” (white) kids attend the same school and even meet each other on the weekends at Celtic’s community park, they do not mix. Their playing together in the supervised atmosphere of the school, but not on the free grounds of the community park, indicates a performance of mixing, a performance whose lack of depth is exposed by the freedom the community park offers. The narrator notes that existing between these two is an overwhelmingly felt and yet physically unseen barrier.

We can establish the currency of Canada’s non-transcultural attitude by putting the timeline of events in *Forgiveness* (some of which are as close as 2008) in context with those of *Probably Ruby*. For instance, when Grace becomes pregnant-with probably Ruby-in 1975, her mother and brother, Doug, hide her in Bethany Home (a social service housing project for perceived endangered women) to avoid the social embarrassment of people knowing that she, a white girl, is pregnant with a child of an Indigenous man. The social worker assigned to her case voices this feeling of shock and disgust when she learns the Indigenous status of the baby’s father:

‘What’s that?’ the social worker said, pretending at first not to hear Grace. ‘The father’s Native? An *Indian*?’ She rubbed her eyes as if tired. ‘Oh, dear.’ She moved like she would write something, but then decided against it-in the end making no notes in her file. Not yet. Instead she said, ‘But you’re so fair? So blonde?’ (Bird-Wilson 116-17)

In other words, why and how could Grace, a white girl with blonde [in other words, superior] hair colour and racial origin, have condescended to date an Indigenous person, let alone have sexual intercourse with such a *lowly creature*? This denigration of Indigenous status, as the text indicates, is an ongoing process in Canada.

The repression of Indigenous identity and culture by the dominant white world forms a barrier against the transcultural blending of the two cultures, much like the omnipresent and yet invisible barrier between the whites and the Japanese in *Forgiveness*. Describing this barrier and the apartness it creates as the way things are, in other words, the order of things, the narrator in *Forgiveness* points out that even as WWII nears and Canada sets about determining the fate of the Japanese and securing the country, it is still from the standpoint of separation rather than unification that the government approached it, attempting even to sow division amidst the Japanese. As government repression creeps into the lives of the Japanese, the Japanese Canadians are ordered by the government to obtain registration cards whose colours serve to divide the Japanese:

The registration card included a photo, an identification number, and a fingerprint. Mitsue hated getting her fingerprints taken. She felt like a criminal. But she smiled for the camera so as not to be rude. Mitsue's card was white because she had been born in Canada; her parents' cards were pink because they had been issued Canadian citizenship. Those who were not Canadian citizens got yellow cards. (Sakamoto 54)

By distinguishing the Japanese born in Canada from those who had come from Japan and obtained Canadian citizenship, the government frames Canadian citizenship along a scale measuring gradations of normativity. In the section that follows, I turn to how both texts depict the production of normative and non-normative forms of citizenry within the Canadian state, with each form dictating the extent of one's acceptance by and integration into the dominant Canadian social body.

5. Normative and Non-Normative Canadian Bodies in *Probably Ruby* and *Forgiveness*

Probably Ruby highlights one aspect of the non-normative form of Canadianness when the narrator talks about adopted Indigenous children. The narrator describes Ruby as having an almost clairsentient ability to "spot an Indigenous adoptee a mile away. Pick them out of the crowd like it was a serious parlour game. Sixth sense. And it wasn't just a visibility thing, a Native kid with their non-Native parents. Take the so-called parent out of the picture and she could still spot them" (Bird-Wilson 75). Consequently, one of the discursive strategies of *Probably Ruby* is to hold up the Canadian government's assimilationist adoption policy as a transcultural project, only to then turn around and

critique and tear it down, using, as with a hammer, a stockpile of evidence of its failure to unify society existentially. The text suggests that the Canadian assimilationist policy involving the adoption of Indigenous children by white parents, which has come to be known in scholarly literature and history as the Sixties Scoop, created in the adoptees an existential vacuum, a hole, deep and vacant, yearning to be filled. The narrator strikingly captures the Indigenous adoptees' sense of emptiness by comparing it to a "window, a blank spot like a slipped stitch in a knitted scarf—once it was missed there was no going back to fix it... Ruby recognized that spot a mile away" (75).

But why wouldn't this emptiness persist in the first place, when the very idea of being adopted carries a lot of stigma, with other children, "no pretending allowed," asking Ruby in public: "Are you adopted?" (Bird-Wilson 75). Obviously, the kids are not asking to know her family status but to categorize her, in other words, to (much like Ralph's stubborn younger brother, Ford) turn "the tables" (Sakamoto 25) and enjoy the glory of having at least someone they could place below them in status. Bird-Wilson's narrator reveals: "Siblings in other families would play the adopted card to torment one another saying, You're really adopted, because being adopted was supposed to make a kid cry" (75). In simple terms, the Indigenous kids adopted by white parents are cast as the other, whose existence lies outside of the normative social body. In *Probably Ruby*, the protagonist Ruby, who experiences firsthand this questioning of the adopted Indigenous kid's legitimacy, seeks to prevent a continuation of the cycle for her children, teaching her son Junior, right from when he hits ten, to be wary of the government and its institutions, especially the police (Bird-Wilson 246).

This question of normative versus non-normative bodies, the foreign versus the familiar, features extensively in the Japanese experience in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness*, especially during WWII. Narrating the feelings of the Japanese about their forceful relocation from British Columbia, the narrator captures Pat's question, "How could this be happening to them? They had done nothing wrong. They were all Canadian." This outsider feeling arises from the white world's questioning of the other's legitimacy in Canada and testifies to the inability of the society to transculturalize.

Furthermore, although most of the Japanese have, at least on paper, become Canadian citizens, the government, particularly members of the Conservative political class in British Columbia at the time, sees them as outsiders and makes it its business to ensure they feel this outsiderliness. Thus, when Susanne, Mitsue's sister, who is also Canadian by birth, is asked by her classmates why she will not join them on the Ice Capades excursion, she replies that she has a curfew, and they ask, "Why?" Her answer: "because I am Japanese" (Sakamoto 98). This reveals the superordinate place of racial identification

among Japanese Canadians, a feeling that exists also among white Canadians in Sakamoto's memoir.

Additionally, the white kids pretend not to know the fate befalling their Japanese neighbours, choosing to abide by the majority culture's conspiracy of silence that sustains colonial unknowing. For an incident of such magnitude widely covered in the papers and the radio, the seeming apathy of Susanne's white classmates smacks of a well-coordinated epistemology of ignorance. Charles Mills points out that "white ignorance [and, thus, innocence] has been able to flourish all these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for 'racial' reasons have needed not to know" (247). Thus, Susanne's white classmates need not be bothered by the ejection of their classmates and Japanese neighbours from home because they benefit from such unknowing. Even the teachers feign ignorance of the situation, perpetuating colonial agnosia.

It is significant that *Forgiveness* does not document these experiences of racial and cultural apartheid from the perspectives of the Japanese-Canadians alone, but includes, in considerable measure, portrayals of it from a white perspective. Through the narrative lens of Ralph's childhood in Entry Island, the memoir portrays the white population's perpetuation of the insider-outsider dichotomy existing between them and Asians in the country. As Ralph and Ford walk the streets of Charlottetown and chance upon the laundry shop of a Chinese, Ford refers to the shop owner as a chink, insultingly telling him, "hey, Chinaman,... you and your wife are *chinks*!" (Sakamoto 24-25). The narrator so aptly describes the root of Ford's daringness by describing the exoticness of the Chinese "lettering on the window" (24). As the narrator explains, "Different meant from away. Different was feared and desired. Different had a name: 'Chink'" (24). This repulsive reaction to the dynamics of ontological difference in Sakamoto's *Forgiveness* brings this life-writing in discursive consonance with its fictional counterpart, *Probably Ruby*, as both texts implicitly suggest that the imagination of culture as single, bounded, and homogeneous continues to organize social perception and racial interaction in present-day Canada.

The narrator's assertion in *Forgiveness* that "different meant from away" and was therefore feared resonates with Ruby's warning to her son Junior about the police in *Probably Ruby*. She tells him:

'They're supposed to help you, but if you're Native [implying different], then they think about you in terms of stereotypes.'
'What's that?' Junior had asked.

'If they don't know you, they think things about you that aren't true. They might think you're dangerous or not a good person... Before they get to know you. So they don't help you because of what they think they know about you, without knowing anything.' (Bird-Wilson 246-47)

In this case, the foreign, referring to "whatever contradicts our nature, whatever disturbs us and shocks us out of our own sense of security" (Bollnow 88), is the Indigenous person, whose identity is already perceived by the police as alien, dangerous and worthy of being vilified. The police, representing the government, are thus portrayed as unfeeling to the fate of all others whose lives fall outside the established sense of normality.

In *Forgiveness*, the sense of shock engendered by the presence of the foreign pervades Ralph and his younger brother Ford, as they contemplate the Chinese man and his wife in Charlottetown. The narrator explains:

Neither boy had ever seen Chinese people before. *They looked different* than the people they were accustomed to. It was their eyes that captured Ralph's attention and prompted his imagination. *He tried to figure out how these folks had got here.* What did they like? Could they skate on the pond in the winter? *They may as well have been aliens.* Ralph was in awe. (Sakamoto 24)

The Chinese, just like the Japanese, are seen as aliens, and it is this alien status—this condition of being strange, foreign, odd, and different—that drew Ralph and Ford's attention. This is in much the same way Mark Sakamoto's own racial and facial difference and Grandpa Ralph's mixed-breed face become the markers of distinction and objects of contemplation when, in July 2021, the author and his maternal grandfather, the aged Ralph, enter a bar in the Magdalene Islands:

Today, they looked us over and I could tell everyone had the same question in their minds: Who are his people? I was a write-off on that front—I was clearly a 'come from away.' But they got forensic with Grandpa. Eyes were squinting, searching for a telltale family feature: Big ears? A particular nose?... Grandpa was scanning their faces too, *on the hunt for familiarity*. From a table near the back of the room just beside the men's washroom came a holler. 'MacLean!' It rang out with the excitement of a call of 'Bingo!' Grandpa had been identified. (21; my emphasis)

Not only does *Forgiveness* depict "familiarity" as the basis of human connection and friendship, but it also shows the absence of it as a source of estrangement, hostility and indifference between persons and cultures.

Consequently, central to the book's enduring theme is the notion that it is often natural for what is familiar to be deemed wholesome and what is unfamiliar to be suspected as unwholesome and even treated with hostility. Hence, forgiveness begins with the recognition and acceptance of the unfamiliar and the overlooking of the initial hostility—something Mitsue and Ralph would come to understand and practice upon their meeting for the 1968 dinner that marks the engagement of Stan Sakamoto to Diane MacLean. It is in light of this act of forgiveness between the Sakamoto family (the representative figures of Japanese nationality and culture) and the Macleans (representing white Canadian culture) that the book espouses a transition from the notion of single cultures to one of cultural mixing, starting with the marriage of their children Stan Sakamoto and Diane Maclean, a marriage that symbolizes the blending of two cultures on a horizontal level, without the assimilationist pressure of any colonial power over a minority culture. An even larger, non-textual symbol of this transcultural exchange lies in the Canadian government's official apology to the Japanese in September 1988 for their mistreatment during WWII, and the ethical insistence by the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) that the Government of Canada "take such steps as are necessary to ensure that Canadians are never again subjected to such injustices [and] that the fundamental human rights and freedoms set forth in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms be considered sacrosanct, non-negotiable and beyond the reach of any arbitrary legislation such as the War Measures Act."

6. Conclusion

In the Canadian context, 55 years of official multiculturalism have been instrumental in making Canada a nominally immigrant-friendly liberal democracy amid a recent overt rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric. Sakamoto's memoir *Forgiveness*, whose storyline spans over a hundred years of a Japanese immigrant (now settler) family's experience in Canada, exemplifies that Canada's retention of immigrants' cultural diversity over the long term produces what appears on the surface to conform to the ideal of transcultural blending, marked by the retention of multiple cultural origins—the Canada-born individual's immigrant grandparents' ethnic cultural filiation and the numerous cultural affiliations the individual picks up as a result of living close to and amongst people of other racial, ethnic, and cultural origins. But Sakamoto's work also illustrates that this transcultural blending occurs within asymmetrical power structures, in which—as in the case of the Japanese—the individual from the marginal culture is acculturated into the dominant culture. Although he has Japanese parentage, Stan is, as it were, a white man in an Asian body, having been bred within

the primacy of the dominant white culture, into which he inevitably becomes acculturated. Mark, the narrator, explains that his “parents met at a dance at the McCoy High School” (155), McCoy being Stan’s Catholic school. Stan has a Western education, upbringing, and social life, with nothing tying him to his Asian ancestry except for his face and family relations. His acculturation into the dominant culture is the first foundation for his marriage to Diane. Impacted by the assimilationist pressure of twentieth-century Canada, Stan’s upbringing is mostly Western, with Stan growing up as a non-Japanese speaker whose means of Japanese cultural transmission is through family memory, food, and narrative. This asymmetrical power structure, whereby ethnic cultures become sublimated to dominant Canadian white culture, echoes Welsch’s assertion that “Transculturalization processes are often anything but innocent. Cultural enrichment and inspiration represent their beautiful visage, but variously they have power and oppression as their real undercurrent” (*We Have Always Been Transcultural* 5).

But while in *Forgiveness* the Sakamoto family’s transcultural implementation lessens “the harshness of power” (Welsch, *We Have Always Been Transcultural* 5) and enables their children and later generations (such as Mark and his own children) to find a secure place in Canadian society and polity, in Bird-Wilson’s *Probably Ruby*, the harshness of power remains unmitigated, with the trauma of the Indian Act, the residential school system, and the Sixties Scoop continuing to be felt in the life of the protagonist Ruby who equally teaches her children to trust neither the state (and its instruments, such as the police) nor its promise of fairness and altruistic help. Although Ruby has a biological Métis ancestry, this identity, including its history, is one she has been forcefully torn away from. For most of the book, Ruby remains ignorant of her Métis ancestry and struggles with an identity crisis, an alien with no connection to her origins. *Probably Ruby* shows that for Indigenous peoples, dwelling still predominantly occurs at the margins, with Indigenous cultures suppressed by the dominant white culture. In the novel, cultural loss arises not from exchange between cultures but from the forceful repression and absolute assimilation of one culture by its supposedly superior/dominant counterpart.

While the usefulness of transculturality lies in its capacity to offer a vision of an ideal world towards which society could strive, this ideal transcultural world, in which the zero-point attitudes of the episteme and ontology of various cultures or nations are decentered (thus offering every individual the capacity to find dwelling beyond borders), does not describe Bird-Wilson’s narrated portrait of Canada. To argue that *Ruby*’s Métis ancestry and her adoption and upbringing by white parents make her transcultural would be to ignore the absolute cultural deracination she undergoes. In the settler colonial context of Bird-Wilson’s novel, transculturality is hampered by the history of colonial

trauma and its impact on individuals of Indigenous descent. *Probably Ruby* depicts the ways settler colonial history and trauma continue to impact Indigenous lifeworlds in the twenty-first century, rendering Indigenous cultures and identity invisible and disposable, fuelling Indigenous anti-colonial nationalism. While Indigenous peoples of Canada indeed typify what Welsch describes as "losers of globalization," their quest for political sovereignty, which springs from an aspiration to overcome histories of epistemic violence, cultural oppression, and economic and social marginalization, says a lot about the cultural state of contemporary Canada in its relationship with its Indigenous peoples, and reveals the persistence of sphere-like cultural frameworks.

The texts together suggest that the aspirational discourse of transculturalism fails to acknowledge the persistent realities of cultural segregation and repression experienced by Indigenous peoples and, though in different forms and to a lesser degree, racialized immigrants in many parts of Canada.

I return to transcultural theory through my transnational reading of literatures from Nigeria to Canada, understanding that without attending to the ongoing, and sometimes apperceptive, legacies of colonialism and settler colonialism, transculturality further obscures the very asymmetries of power that continue to structure cultural life and belonging.

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Undomesticating Political Ecologies in Miriam Pirbhai's *Outside People*¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads Miriam Pirbhai's 2017 short story collection, *Outside People*, as a narrative guide to the political ecology of Canadian bordering practices. *Bordering* describes the ways in which human and non-human beings get marked for inclusion or disposal, protection or exploitation. The essay focuses on the mode of bordering that Ghassan Hage calls "generalized domestication": a practice of homemaking that is "paradoxically... also a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation" (91). *Outside People* highlights the ways in which the selective domestication of the world outside Canadian borders works to support the settler-colonial good life. The collection depicts the lives of migrants navigating the environments of racial capitalism to forge connections across cultures, languages and species. The stories also highlight the spillover, through tourism, mining and international adoption, of extractive domestication practices beyond the borders of Canada. In addition to exposing the mechanisms of domination that underlie myths of Canadianness, *Outside People* tells stories that evade extractive and liberal-national capture and make alliances in support of alternative, undomesticated forms of inhabitation.

Keywords

Bordering; Domestication; Migration; Race; Environment; Ecology

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1. Introduction

Mariam Pirbhai's 2017 short story collection, *Outside People and Other Stories*, encompasses a diverse range of settings: a house in an upscale Vancouver neighbourhood, the streets of Montréal, a poultry processing plant in rural Ontario, a Mexican resort. The characters who inhabit those places all can be said in some senses to occupy the category of *outside*. Pirbhai describes those characters in an interview as:

some of the most 'invisible' segments of our so-called 'visible minority' population. Those whose stories rarely get told: people of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds navigating the Canadian or trans-national workforce as temporary migrant workers, bankers, chambermaids, civil servants, teachers, and the like. ("Mariam Pirbhai Interview").

From her own "multi-ethnic and multinational" vantage point,² Pirbhai portrays migrants from diverse regions, noting in response to her interviewer's praise that she strives to: "captur[e] some level of authenticity in things outside my realm of experience." While one might read that statement as attestation of Pirbhai's successful illumination of invisibilized migrants' experience in the light of legible Canadian personhood, I want to suggest that the accomplishment of the stories is something different and more difficult: to highlight the space surrounding, and regulated movement across, the unstable border of *inside* and *outside*. I read this movement between inside and outside through the concept of what Ghassan Hage calls *generalized domestication*. Defined as "a mode of inhabiting the world through dominating it for the purpose of making it yield value: material or symbolic forms of sustenance, comfort, aesthetic pleasure, and so on" (87), domestication is a mode of homemaking that is "paradoxically... also a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation" practiced on those who are deemed sub-or not-human (91).

A critical aspect of Hage's use of this term is the connection it highlights between racism and environmental destruction. In his 2017 book, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, he argues persuasively that: "practices of racial and ecological domination have the same roots" (ix). Hage characterizes as racist "any bundle of practices which aim at problematizing, excluding, marginalizing, discriminating against, rendering insecure, exploiting, criminalizing, and terrorizing and harbouring exterminatory fantasies against an identity group of people

2. Pirbhai was born in Pakistan and lived in England, the United Arab Emirates and the Philippines before her family immigrated to Canada in the late 1980s.

imagined as sharing a common and inheritable determining feature" (12). As a means of demarcating outside and inside, racism lends ideological support to practices of border control. Gargi Bhattacharya uses the term "bordering" to describe the multiplication and integration of machineries of border control into everyday life (126). Geopolitical borders subtend the symbolic categories of identity and belonging, demarcating who and what is part of *us*, in what way and to what end. Bhattacharya emphasizes the role of environmental crisis in shaping the current iteration of racial capitalism. Following Hage, we can extend this observation to consider how practices of bordering work in the service of overlapping forms of human and non-human instrumentalization (31).³

In its primary (though not exclusive) focus on migrants, *Outside People* is an exposé of the related processes of bordering and generalized domestication that underlie myths of liberal Canadian homemaking. Pirbhai's stories reveal the multifarious operations of domestication, which works to maintain the home/nation not only by the selective incorporation of outside/outsideers, but also through the extra-territorial forms of extraction that consolidate Canada's participation in networks of global capitalism. *Outside People* also invites us to stretch the concept of domestication beyond its usual frame of reference by highlighting its operation in the process of rendering foreignness both legible and palatable through dominant narratives. While they expose the mechanisms of domination that underpin those narratives, the stories in Pirbhai's collection evade capture and make alliances in support of alternative, undomesticated forms of inhabitation.

2. Domestication in Support of Liberal Nation-Building

Canadian dreams of belonging float through many of the stories in *Outside People*. Janet, in the story "Corazon's Children," is a Japanese Canadian who has achieved success as a psychiatrist—"a *Canadian* professional with a *Canadian* degree" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 43), married to a white engineer. Umara, the middle-aged Pakistani-Canadian protagonist of "Bread and Roti," has a less exalted career, but is no less proud of her integration into Canadian society. She is thrilled to receive

3. Bhattacharya argues that ecological crisis, including the dynamics of scarcity, "in-form[s] an escalating rush to divide humanity into the worthy and the disposable" (31). Racial capitalism also reflects and advances "extractive regimes and their epistemological counterparts," as Christine Okoth has shown (380). Ecological crisis imaginaries do not shut down extractive regimes but shape their expansion in the service of a conscientiously sustainable mode of racial capitalism.

her first paycheque as a worker in the Genetti Family Food Corporation. "[I]ssued in the name of Umara Haroon Siddiqui," the cheque "was so official... so Canadian," making her "feel like her own person" (82).

Janet and Umara's pride and gratitude in their accomplishments, solidified with the imprimatur of *Canadian* success (a degree, a paycheque), reflect liberal/Liberal ideas of the nation, which elaborate on the familiar theme of Canada as a "mosaic," in contrast to the US "melting pot" (Liberal). As this familiar story of Canada goes:

Many families came here to build better lives and be part of building Canada... Together, we have been partners in building communities based on shared values of fairness, solidarity, responsibility, resilience, and sustainability. This shared mission has made Canada strong and is an economic advantage. (Liberal)

A key component of this celebration of multiculturalism is the gentle reminder to immigrants of the conditions of their welcome: they're here to build, to fortify that economic advantage.

The imperative of economic usefulness inflects all the values listed in the liberal vision, including sustainability, whose capacious scope embraces the Canadian mythology: "Nature is who we are" ("Nature").⁴ The Liberal Party of Canada's platform props up this mythology with a remarkable commitment to heeding "the wisdom of Indigenous tradition" in its treatment of nature—a commitment that quickly unravels in the elaboration of a transactional plan to: "Protect nature where it protects us, including by implementing nature-based climate solutions which deliver measurable carbon sequestration and biodiversity benefits, while supporting community resilience" ("Mark Carney"). Admittance to the fold of protection is conditional on a return on investment. Where nature fails to deliver or impedes economic development, we presume that it will be managed differently, neglected or even destroyed. Humans coded as outsiders are also subject to vacillating categorization as resource and "ungovernable waste" (Hage 46).⁵

4. In a 2025 EKOS poll, 89 % of Canadians identified nature as key to their national identity. Nature topped the list of quintessentially Canadian things, beating out the flag, medicare and hockey ("Nature Tops List").

5. Hage describes "the polarity between the racism of exploitation and the racism of extermination" that structures colonialism (31). Though not a focus of *Outside People* or this essay, it is critical to recognize (as Pirbhai does in her 2023 book, *Garden Inventories*) the centrality of genocide against Indigenous people to the domestication of Turtle Island.

The instrumentalist logic that informs this national project of homemaking becomes clear in "Bread and Roti" when Umara as a racialized immigrant is diagnosed with cancer and has to stop working. Umara's first concern on learning the news "was the prospect of losing her job and becoming the government's charity case" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 82). The neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility is reinforced by her doctor's barrage of lifestyle questions. When her son, Kashif, explains that she doesn't smoke or drink, that "'We're Muslim. It's Haram'" (85), the doctor asks her about salty or preserved foods, and then about her work. She proudly explains that she works at a bakery, which Kashif qualifies: "'It's not exactly a bakery... She calls it that. It's a factory that manufactures Italian cookies... the ones that break your teeth'" (86). The doctor eventually "mumbled something about the possible link between cancer and environmental hazards at the workplace" (86), providing a glimpse of a structural reality at odds with the story of upward mobility through hard work. The reality also doesn't quite sync up with the Canadian Cancer Society poster in the doctor's waiting room, featuring "smiling people wearing matching T-shirts and holding up banners with the slogans, 'proud supporter' and 'celebrating survivors'"—an image with which Umara can't identify (95). Though she is moved by the "soft colours" of the poster and the "yellow daffodils with white centers" that adorn the poster, "the faces [hold] little appeal" (95).

As the story progresses, Umara loses her tenuous grip on her sense of herself as a productive Canadian citizen and other frames of meaning come into view. Never fluent with English idiom, Umara is confused when the doctor tells her "it would be quite a while before she was 'out of the woods'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 82). Looking at herself in the mirror, she sees "a mountain after monsoon season: treeless, muddy, and beaten down by a landslide. At least that's what she saw when a section of her tongue and cheek—oral cavity, as they called it—was cut out to prevent the cancer from spreading" (82). Umara's literal reading of the phrase works, like her failure to identify with the faces of survivors in the Canadian Cancer Society poster (95), to expose the outside of dominant spaces of Canadian identity and community. Her attention turns habitually to the edges of the picture she's meant to be looking at. As the story opens, she awakens to notice, first the pain on the side of her face, then a sparrow that on the ledge of the apartment balcony (80). Later in the doctor's office, she looks up at the sound of a loud tap to see a bird crash into the window behind his desk. She comments, "'Bichari'" [poor fellow], while Kashif, who had also seen the bird, ignores it, continuing to talk to her doctor about her treatment plan. Left out of the conversation, she continues to focus on the window: "Wo parinda kahan gay hai?" she said to no one in particular, wondering where the bird had gone" (87). The bird's collision with the window recalls Umara's own situation in which "the world kept sneaking up on her like a car's headlights in

a dense fog" (81). In this moment, Umara is rendered, like the bird, invisible and vulnerable to the infrastructure of the economy of which she was once a productive part, to which she has sacrificed her own vitality.

3. Mutual Benefit: The Levity of Dreams and Inevitability of Sacrifice

Umara is not entirely without resources. As Kashif reminds her, deductions from her paycheque will support "[t]he hospital bills, the time off work... you've been paying into those benefits all these years" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 82). This, he reminds her, is the payoff for doing things "the right way" (82). Umara's situation illustrates an essential component of domestication, which is the assumption of "mutual benefit" (Hage 89). Hage stresses that this concept:

is not some kind of mystification of the truth that aims to 'overshadow'... the relation of power in which domestication is grounded... Seeing 'mutual benefit,' with a kind of 'Marxist' eye, as so much mist hiding a real 'reality,' ends up itself actually hiding what is a crucial reality of domestication: it is a relation of domination that aims to be lived as a relation of nondomination. Its appearance is not what hides its essence but is part of its essence. (90-91)

For many of the protagonists in *Outside People*, citizenship holds out a promise of belonging that is false without being entirely empty, offering protection without full enfranchisement.

This is the case for the unnamed protagonist of the opening story, "Air Raids," a Pakistani-Canadian woman who is struggling with grief over the death of her father, and questions about her own identity, as a Canadian and loosely observant Muslim. Her father had been a grateful new Canadian, joyfully at their citizenship ceremony, where he proclaimed to his daughter: "This is your country now" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 2). The privileges of belonging are less obvious to her: she questioned the anglophilic overtones of the citizenship ceremony and hates the cold weather of Montréal (2). More significantly, she has had to postpone her dreams of studying painting and art history to pay off her parents' mortgage. As their only child, she "bear[s] the levity of dreams and the inevitability of sacrifice in equal measure" (80). The story traces the trajectory of a process of questioning that ends in a qualified affirmation of autonomy and freedom.

That emotional journey parallels her walk through Montréal to a date with a man she met on the Métro. Along the way, she navigates a protest against Bill 21, Québec's Charter of Values legislation, a law that sought to curtail religious freedom, with the effect—perhaps the primary intended effect—of barring hijabi

women from government employment. Like the bird in "Bread and Roti," which distracts Umara in the doctor's office, the protest occupies the woman's attention even during the date, with its placards, bearing phrases like "'LA DIVERSITÉ EST UNE RICHESSE'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 10) dominating the view from the window of the restaurant they are eating in. As she walks home from the date, where differences between the relative degrees of religiosity turned out not to be the barrier she feared (her date is a devout Muslim; she is more casual), she finds inspiration in the crowd: "'My Right,'" "'My Life'" and "'My Choice'" (14). The ending seems to embrace the last phrase, confirming, against the racist aspirations of Bill 2,1 the protagonist's ability to move hopefully forward, into the relationship and her future as a free Canadian citizen.

The affirmation is haunted, though, by notes of disquiet; the "mutual benefit" of domestication flickers (Hage 89), occasionally revealing the force that is its crux—like the presence of the RCMP, "ready to shield the crowd against itself" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 7). "Am I a threat to myself?," the protagonist wonders (12). Citizenship confers benefits, but those are qualified by metrics of racial belonging: having the wrong skin colour puts you back on the outside, turning you into the object of danger from which the home must be guarded.

4. Choice, Property, Personhood

"Air Raids" ends with the protagonist joining in with the protestors at the final part of the chant: "'My Choice'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 14). In a liberal capitalist society, *choice* figures prominently as the mark of an inequitably allocated freedom premised on self-ownership. As Bhattacharya explains, racial capitalism operates through a mix of coercion and desire, ensnaring even the most im-miserated in dreams of self-actualization. Beyond the lures of crude consumerism, Bhattacharya notes that:

it is far harder to resist the framing of one's self as a precious object of property... In a world of constant depletion, every resistance revolves around the belief that I at least own my self and my own life. When every other mode of productivity is barred or escaped, we are mocked by the inescapable injunction to take productive stewardship of our own selves. (165)

The urgency of the injunction is intensified for those with the least chance of achieving its aim.

"Corazon's Children" explores that dilemma as it plays out in the racialized politics of reproductive *choice*. Janet, the Japanese-Canadian psychiatrist, is a success by most measures, two generations and one "Canadian degree"

(Pirbhai, *Outside* 43) removed from her grandmother, who was imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp during the Second World War (44). The one metric of achievement that has eluded her is motherhood, so she is undergoing expensive fertility treatment. Janet's situation is contrasted with that of her Filipina maid, Corazon, whose income supports the two young children she has left at home (37). The symmetry of the women's suffering with difficulties surrounding motherhood is undone by unequal dynamics of choice. Janet persists with fertility treatments against her doctor's warning of little chance of success, reasoning: "what choice was there but to continue?" (41). Corazon works under the terms of the Live-In Caregiver Program that will eventually allow her to apply for permanent residency and sponsor her children to come and join her.⁶ As time goes on, the prospects of reunification grow dimmer, but she reckons she "had made her choice. There was no going back" (38). Both women have indeed made difficult choices around motherhood. But in one case, the way forward is bolstered by relative economic ease—the cost of the fertility treatments is negligible for Janet in comparison to her desire to have biological children, while in the other, it is constrained by poverty.⁷

The women's different situations are also illuminated by the contours—and limits—of Janet's determination to be a good employer, assuaging her guilt at having hired Corazon through a relatively cheap "domestic workers' placement agenc[y]" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 45). When Corazon calls her "Mrs. Hartman," she corrects her, saying "in fact, my name is Murakami-Hartman—Dr. Murakami-Hartman—but you can call me Janet" (32). The gesture at familiarity is lost on Corazon who, having never called a boss by their first name and struggling with the pronunciation of "Murakami," continues to call her employer "Mrs. Hartman" (32). In another display of generosity, Janet leaves a box of pastries in the fridge for Corazon every week—a perk that Corazon has come to expect and enjoy. One week, she rummages in vain through the fridge for the pastries—the "gift of something sweet" (39), which Janet has forgotten to buy because she is distracted by her fertility struggles. The pastries are a nice touch, but they are not part of the terms of Corazon's employment, over which she has no control; their provision is totally at Janet's discretion and there are no consequences for her omission. The difference between Janet's and Corazon's situations is not

6. The Live-In Caregiver program closed to new applicants in November, 2024.

7. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild put it, "Women choose to migrate for domestic work. But they choose it because economic pressures all but coerce them to. That yawning gap between rich and poor countries is itself a form of coercion, pushing Third World mothers to seek work in the First for lack of options closer to home" (27).

that Janet has choice and Corazon doesn't; they are differently positioned within the racial capitalist logic of domestication, of which the Caregiver Program is emblematic. As a third-generation Japanese Canadian, Janet still strives to "take productive stewardship of [her] own self" (Bhattacharya 165); her exploitative relationship with Corazon works in service of that striving.

A hallmark of domestication is its invisibilization of economics; nowhere is this truer than in the intimate space of the home, where relations of domination are masked by proud or defensive claims that the nanny or housekeeper is *like part of the family* (often one microstep below the dog or cat who, according to most owners, *is part of the family*). The home is not only considered to be separate from the world; it represents a space where the ruling class cleanses itself of the dirtiness of the business of running an empire. As Ann McClintock has observed, the cult of domesticity was a central plank of the nineteenth-century British colonial project. Through its rituals, which were "increasingly global and more often than not violent, animals, women and colonized peoples were wrested from their putatively 'natural' yet, ironically, 'unreasonable' state of 'savagery' and inducted through the domestic progress narrative into a hierarchical relation to white men" (McClintock 35). Those rituals persist into the twenty-first century, their delineation of inside and outside space and relations of domination enfolding a new global geopolitics, expressed in gendered formations like the inexpensive "domestic workers' placement agencies" that bring women like Corazon to clients like Janet (Pirbhai, *Outside* 45).

Charged with keeping the domestic space clean, these workers are also tasked with erasing evidence of their own presence, making cleanliness appear natural. In "Corazon's Children," this imperative appears in the differential significance of Pine Sol. The cleaner whose "artificial scent" "assault[s] Janet when she comes in the door" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 40) represents for Corazon pleasing "proof of a job well done" (39). Symbolically, the cleanness of the home conceals the inequality of the women's relationship under the illusion of intimacy and generosity—at least for Janet; Corazon is just glad for tangible proof that cleaning is hard work. The literal and symbolic meanings of cleanliness converge in the myth of a kind of cordon sanitaire separating the home (read: settler, white) space from the dirt and disorder of the outside (Hage 100; McClintock 33). "Outside" encompasses the spaces of production that invisibly support the operation of those *home* spaces, their racialized labourers even more precarious than those who enjoy the meagre benefits of the Live-In Caregiver program.

The poultry processing plant in the story, "Chicken Catchers," represents such an outside space, to which dirt and brutality are outsourced and invisibilized. Migrant workers at the plant have one job: to "Catch the chickens and hold onto them by their necks just long enough... to inject them with antibiotics

or some cocktail of drugs, with dosages strong enough to turn even the most unyielding creatures into a sad, lifeless lump of flesh" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 25). The imperative for speed increases the risk of accidents, such that Reggie, the protagonist, is "quite certain" on a few occasions that "the needle had missed a chicken and pierced through his gloves" (25). The story relates Reggie's experience of a day spent back in the shed caring for another worker who is ill—likely due in part to their living conditions: the shed workers sleep in is damp and mouldy and clean, hot water often unavailable.⁸ The brutality of the operation starkly undermines the image of sustainable consumerism conveyed by the Dumfrey "family" farm's "free-run" chickens (25), bred top heavy to maximize the white meat that Canadian consumers bizarrely prefer. ("Here," the men lugubriously joke, "dark meat sells cheap" [26]). Puncture wounds are not the only danger workers face. "Chicken Catchers" ends with the arrival of a supervisor, who wordlessly begins emptying all the lockers of their contents. When Reggie protests, saying "That's not your property, lady!" (29), she corrects him "This is my property. All of this is my property!" (29) Only after all the lockers are completely empty does she inform Reggie of the accident that killed all but one of his co-workers.⁹ Beneath the reassuring aura of the "family" farm (Pirbhai, "Outside" 25), "Chicken Catchers" highlights the capitalist machinery that enmeshes, sometimes fatally, racialized humans along with animals.

That machinery includes the bordering technologies that relegate *unskilled* immigrants to the temporary track through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Distinctions between Canadian immigration tracks are "both managed and obfuscated by the language and ideology of skill," as Bridget Anderson notes—a metric based on arbitrary qualifications such as "specialization" (4). By this criteria, "those who can turn their hand to everything—construction workers who dig and plaster today and lay foundations and build walls tomorrow, domestic workers who clean and cook at the same time as caring for an older person—are 'unskilled' and... consigned to precarious work and status" (4-5). Anderson cites Natasha Iskander's observation that: "By denying the unskilled the more abstract, more agentic, and more subjective registers of personhood, these representations reduce the unskilled down to their bodies" (5). The line between humanity and animality becomes murky here.

Within the framework of the SAWP, the unskilled labour pool occupies a specific geographical area. Launched in 1966, the program was initially based

8. Several studies identify significant health risks associated with the housing conditions of Canadian migrant agricultural workers (Caxaj et al.; Salami et al.).

9. The story is dedicated to the ten migrant workers who died in a car accident on a rural Ontario road Ontario in February, 2012, and the three survivors (15).

on an agreement between Canada and Jamaica and later expanded to include Mexico and other Caribbean nations. Through a simplistic lens of labour markets, the SAWP represents a neat confluence of interests: Canada has an agricultural labour shortage; many countries in the Caribbean have a labour surplus; need meets need, to the benefit of both. This perspective overlooks the dynamic of domination internal to SAWP and the global networks of racial capitalism in which it operates, both exploiting and entrenching uneven development. Bhattacharya explains: "The associative chain between populations, territories and resources works to transform some spaces into geographical incarnations of racialised populations" (73). Racism sticks to places, such that "particular populations [come] to be regarded as embodiments of depleted territories. Even when displaced from regions 'classified as underdeveloped,' bodies are read as already depleted, economically and 'mentally' (by which we might understand 'culturally')" (73).

5. Extra-Territorial Bordering

The circular logic that marks bodies from "depleted territories" (Bhattacharya 73) out for certain kinds of *unskilled* but essential work in the global North does not acknowledge the role of the global North in underdevelopment. In "Chicken Catchers," for example, Reggie left Jamaica when his father's dairy farm was devastated by powdered milk imports (Pirbhai, *Outside* 23). Like many of Pirbhai's characters, those in "Chicken Catchers" are triply displaced: first, by what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" of "the loss of land and resources beneath them... leav[ing] communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19). Migration represents a second process of displacement, which often culminates in a third displacement to the fringes of major population centres, far from people, commerce and mythologized Canadian green space.¹⁰

From the moment they're driven from Pearson airport to their work sites (Pirbhai, *Outside* 20), Reggie and the other men know virtually nothing about

10. Harsha Walia uses the term "border imperialism" to describe a constellation of processes that begins with "displacements as a result of the coercive extractions of capitalism and colonialism, and the simultaneous fortification of the border—often by those very same Western powers that are complicit in these displacements" (28). Other key and intricately connected elements of border imperialism are: the criminalization of migration, the enforcement of a racialized hierarchy of citizenship, and state-sponsored exploitation of migrant labor (8).

their surroundings: they're picked up early and returned after dark (20); the shed they live in has a "single set of windows placed at an elevation that no one could see out of, except from a distance" (23); and there's nowhere to go on the three-hundred acre farm during breaks. The surroundings are dominated by poultry barns and another massive shed containing pesticides. When the recruiting agent in "Chicken Catchers" jokes about workers becoming "arts patrons" (21), due to the farm's proximity to the site of an annual Shakespearean theatre festival, it is a dig at their distance from "the arts," both their perceived lack of culture and the nature of their work, which prevents any engagement with the town beyond infrequent trips to a strip plaza to purchase work clothes and wire money back home (21). Their situation reflects the reality that, under the SAWP, "the requirement that migrants live on-farm, their long working hours, and lack of access to transportation, combine to create racially segregated communities in which Black and Latino migrants are restricted to very few, and often hidden spaces" (Cohen 140-41).

In highlighting those hidden spaces, the stories in *Outside People* highlight dynamics of bordering through which human and non-human beings get marked for inclusion or disposal, protection or exploitation. At issue is not the relative openness and closedness of borders, but how their regulated porosity supports the settler colonial and racial capitalist project of Canadian nation-building. Bordering practices permeate the everyday lives of racialized migrants within Canada. They also define in a converse way the relative freedom of wealthy Canadian tourists to enjoy the places that have become unlivable for migrants like Reggie. The story "Sunshine Guarantees" highlights these inequities from the perspective of Lucita, a maid at a Mexico resort. Like the poultry farm and industrial suburb, this location has been denuded of its local characteristics and, engineered in harmony with other properties in the Siete Mares Resort and Spa (Pirbhai, *Outside* 63)—in effect domesticated—to provide tourists with an experience that strikes the perfect balance of familiarity and difference from their everyday lives. The machinery of capitalism that is in full view in the poultry processing plant is invisible at the resort, at least to the guests. Workers, on the other hand, have to reconcile efficiency measures such as the "only one complimentary toiletry item per customer per day," policy, enforced by regular inventory checks to guard against employee theft (63-64), with the command to "always put the guests' needs first" (64), including demands for an extra bottle of shampoo. "You know how much the *gringos* love free stuff," Lucita's friend Angélica reminds her (64). This principle finds its most extreme expression in the resort's "sunshine guarantee," whereby a day without sunshine guarantees guests "something free, like a day at the spa or a snorkeling lesson" (64).

The distance between abundance and poverty, freedom and constraint, is measured along an intersectional spectrum that operates in complex relation

to bordering. Lucita observes a distinction between lighter-skinned, English-speaking “visible staff”—the poolside animators, the fitness club trainers, the lifeguards, the bartenders—who fraternize with the guests, and “the invisible army of chambermaids, security guards, busboys, gardeners, dishwashers, and sweepers, who were not meant to be seen” (Pirbhai, *Outside* 72-73). Race is not the only biometric determinant of privilege. As a single mother, caring for her own aging mother, Lucita is stuck in place, unable to contemplate moving to Canada, as her brother and family have done. Like Corazon was with a previous employer, she is subject to “inappropriate advances” from guests, and, like Umara, who is addressed pejoratively by her boss as “Aunty” (91), she is reminded frequently of her age. “If you think you’re irreplaceable,” her manager reminds her, “I’ve got a filing cabinet filled with applications from younger workers to prove otherwise” (63). For Reggie in the poultry processing plant, it is his sexuality that keeps him in his place. Absorbing the message that, as a gay man, he is “bad for business” (24), he feels compelled to take a job that he has been warned is “a new kind of slavery” (24).¹¹ The slavery that happens in Canadian agribusiness is noteworthy as a specific instance of brutality. It is also enmeshed, and operates to secure Canada’s place, in global networks of racial capitalism.

6. A Pattern That Is Hard To Ignore

Outside People works to refocus the picture of Canada, to highlight the faces of those who make up the “invisible army” (Pirbhai 73) that is enmeshed by its bordering operations. In “Corazon’s Children,” this refocusing works via the juxtaposition of Janet’s and Corazon’s photos. Janet’s immigrant success journey is marked by the series of professionally matted, black-and-white silver-framed photos that adorn her wall, marking milestones such as her wedding, her honeymoon, and her graduation (32). The series culminates in a tenth wedding anniversary photo, taken, Janet tells Corazon, “just a few weeks before the Agency sent you to us” (33). In Janet’s narrative, Corazon figures as a provision sent to her to fulfill a need. “Corazon’s Children” flips that narrative, subordinating the significance of Janet’s picture wall to the power of the one crumpled up photo Corazon carries with her. It’s a “terrible picture” by Corazon’s own estimation, in which the sun is “too bright,” her children squinting

11. Interviews with workers in Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program concur with a 2023 UN report that describes such workers as “vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery” (Cohen 138; United Nations).

and unsmiling, with their grandmother smoking a cigarette in the background (35). For Janet, the wrinkled photo that mysteriously turns up on the kitchen counter is at first an emblem of neglect: "She would never let her photographs look so beaten up and worn out" (45); then a portrait of deprivation, as she sees the children standing in front of "a dilapidated one-room house on stilts," the girl wearing a "worn-looking" *Dora the Explorer* t-shirt and the boy barefoot, in front of a background that was "a mess of the deepest greens in a mountainous terrain" (46). She sees all this before realizing that these are Corazon's children.

It is tempting to say that in this moment, Corazon's children become the subjects of the story, their humanity, along with their mother's, granted central place, but it doesn't quite work that way. In opposition to conservative white nationalist rhetoric, liberal immigrant stories make racialised immigrant lives legible by offering proof of their aspiration to the condition of agency, belonging and access to the good life embodied by the citizen. *Outside People* challenges that convention explicitly, through the example of Janet's struggle as a psychiatrist to help her clients tell better stories, to navigate stuckness and move forward confidently into the future. "Close your eyes, she'd tell [them]. Turn away from the past. Then imagine a future uncluttered by present desires. Imagine something entirely new for yourself there" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 42). She has converted the ten-step program she has used to guide her own path forward into a book manuscript that is ready for submission, but for her inability to come up with a title. While she chastises herself for missing the publisher's deadline over a "minor detail," the missing title suggests that something in the story that echoed "the anatomy of potential" she once felt in her athlete's body now fails to cohere (42). The stories in *Outside People* are difficult, not just emotionally, but also formally, in their refusal to conform to straight trajectories of longing, hope, or progress.

The context for that refusal emerges most forcefully in the final, titular story, which is the only one with a first-person narrator. Constance lives in an orphanage in an unnamed Caribbean country. Her life is shaped by Canada in ways that at first seem random, as in the unannounced arrival of a couple she calls the "Outside People," carrying a big bag that has "a sticker on it with two red stripe and one white stripe and some kind of pointy red flower in the white stripe" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 135). The couple, who are there to adopt a baby, are disappointed to learn that many of the "orphans" actually have family, who may turn up to collect them someday. The situation is complicated, the House Mother explains, "'when plenty family live outside'" (142)–"outside" meaning "'up there where you come from'" (142). Constance, whose mother has emigrated to Canada, falls into this category. Not just the destination for out-migrants in the story, Canada is also implicated in their displacement, via resource extraction projects like the gold mine where Abdul, the orphanage manager used to

work. House Mother relates the story of his escape from the mine, following his exposure of workplace abuses and toxic dumping—running, as another staff member puts it, “from one Outside organization to another” (the orphanage is also a foreign, implicitly Canadian, operation). “What can I say,” House Mother replies “Nothing makes much sense in a place where the water never run clear” (139).

What might read as a throwaway line about life in a place that’s been subject to one disaster after another takes on a wider significance in the context of the collection as a whole, which implicates Canada in the murkiness of the water and all its associated problems: a global extraction industry that displaces Indigenous communities, exploits workers, sanctions sexual violence and contaminates the environment; the destruction of local ways of life, resulting in poverty, out-migration and consequent community fragmentation; the exploitation of migrants—all in the name of nation-building. The stories further suggest that the problem of incoherence—“nothing makes much sense” (Pirbhai, *Outside* 139)—isn’t confined to the global South to which it is often imputed. Bordering practices are technologies of political economy that are also supposed to make sense, to make legible an already existing natural order. Building on Mark Fisher’s conception of capitalist realism, whereby capitalism forecloses what can be known or imagined, “seamlessly occupy[ing] the horizons of the thinkable” (12), racial capitalism establishes terms of intelligibility around categories of nation, nature, and race that naturalize the process of domination via domestication. *Outside People* unravels the sense of racial capitalist realism that defines both liberal policy and popular stories of a nation in which migrants come gratefully to know their place within prescribed currents of mobility. The stories highlight the brutality of an extractive economy and a white supremacist ideology to which racialized migrants are sacrificed along with non-humans.

That isn’t the whole story, though. Within the diffuse and complex materiality of bordering, *Outside People* highlights places of tension and porosity as potential openings for transformation. “Air Raids” offers cues to both reading and undermining the political ecology of domestication, via the protagonist’s pedestrian experience of the city of Montréal. Crossing the “invisible border” that separates the anglophone western side from the francophone eastern side, she reflects on its symbolism, representing “the clash not of civilizations but of two founding nations still shackled to the trajectory of conquest, when empires fought on the high seas for sugar cane and slaves” (Pirbhai, *Outside* 2). The walk through the city also illuminates its more recent history of gentrification. The protagonist’s Plateau Mont Royal neighbourhood:

had belonged, not so long ago, to the new immigrants and to the workers, as much as any set of streets, parks, schools, shops, and houses could belong to anyone. One community squeezed out the other... No one ever referred to it as a cause-effect relationship but, like the green-and-white flowers block-printed on her summer dress, the pattern was hard to ignore. (3)

The pattern, once you see it, is hard to ignore. *Outside People* is a guide for looking beyond the markers of individuation—clothes, food, lifestyle choices—to pay attention to patterns not usually talked about: historical, ecological, geographical patterns that result from practices of bordering, both official and unofficial. Attending to patterns recasts the terms of the realist narrative to focus on the occluded contexts of the particularities of everyday national life. As a way of noticing otherwise, it also creates openings for imagining ways of configuring life outside the logic of racial capitalism.

Umara's noticing the bird in "Bread and Roti" represents one such opening. More than metaphorical, the moment of identification is an occasion for reciprocal sustenance in the face of her unsuccessful assimilation into the dominant culture, even as a "'celebrating cancer survivor'" (Pirbhai, *Outside* 95). When told at the end of the story that her body "has failed to respond favourably to her last round of treatments," Umara "wasn't sure if she understood correctly. "'Failed' seemed to suggest that it was her fault the treatment had not worked. Had she done something wrong?" (98-99). Her thoughts return to a moment earlier in the story when she used all her strength to open the door and toss some bread onto the balcony (95). "She thought of the sparrow, comforted that at least she'd had a few crumbs to throw its way before leaving" (99). Not exactly a happy ending, this is more of an instance of what Ocean Vuong describes, in reference to the modes of care he has witnessed between precarious workers in the US, as "kindness without hope." While *Outside People* doesn't present a way out of the terrible conditions that mark temporary farm workers and others for fast and slow death, it does make space for modes of loving relationality that counter those mythologized in sites like the "family" bakery/food corporation (86, 81) and farm/poultry processing plant (17).

In "Chicken Catchers," Reggie stays with his ill coworker, Amaru in the knowledge that he'll have his wages docked for staying behind (Pirbhai, *Outside* 17). Moreover, to show care for Amaru he has to tread carefully around the matter of his sexuality—he doesn't know what Amaru's attitudes are. He also faces the challenge of language: he speaks Jamaican English and Amaru speaks Spanish. The stories contain multiple instances of translation in service of non-Anglo characters communicating with one another, not of indulging Anglo readers. A glossary, translating words in Hindu, Urdu, Tagalog, French, Spanish, Haitian Creole and Jamaican Creole, appears at the end, outside the world of the

stories. It thereby reminds the Anglo reader of their qualified belonging to this world, as such performing a vital counter-bordering role. This effect is accentuated in the final story in which, in spite of their relative wealth and power, it is the white Canadians who are in this instance the "outside people" designated by the collection's title (Piribai, *Outside*).

Part of the accomplishment of *Outside People* is to remedy what Anita Girvan and Rina Garcia Chua call the "e-race-sures" that permeate Canadian spaces, including academic spaces. Thinking human and non-human agencies and mobilities together, the collection contributes to what Chua calls a migrant ecocriticism that "will give not only voices to [migrant] species and subjects, but a physicality too—one that stresses that they do exist; that they are never just there, they are *here*" (218-19). *Outside People* complicates the *hereness* of here by highlighting the operations of bordering and domestication that selectively incorporate elements of the *outside*—racialized migrants and non-human nature—into the space of the Canadian home. While the collection centres the perspective of migrant characters that are missing from mainstream media and policy representations, it emphatically doesn't offer them up as empathy fodder for white liberals. If part of the process of domestication involves making the strange familiar, *Outside People* refuses to lend itself to this goal, dissolving the myths of Canadian homemaking into a political ecology of domination, from which emerge imaginings of solidarity and resistance.

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Canada, International Students, and Fragility: An Analysis of *Òjà (The Talking Flute)* As Counter-Narrative Project

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ABSTRACT

Canada expanded its cultural hegemony and increased its workforce through the invitation of international students, academics, and all kinds of skilled immigrants between 2014 and 2022. This invitation was part of a long history of romance with immigrants interspersed and sometimes overlapping with periods of intense hostility. Since 2023, international students have become a focal point of critique in political conversations and policies in Canada. This paper examines a counter-narrative that challenges the discourse of international students as invasive species. It focuses on *Òjà (The Talking Flute)* by Roland Samuel, highlighting international students' complex ways of being and relating with Canada while critically raising awareness of the different ways that Canada and international students demonstrate fragility.

Keywords

Canada; International Students; Invasive Species; Immigration; Counterpoint; Counter-Narrative; Fragility

1. Introduction

Òjà (*The Talking Flute*) is a collection of fragmented metal pieces held together through a high-quality welding process to produce a smooth finish. In the finished object, we see a human figure, and then we observe the place where it is moving. This figure is playing the òjà while walking on a broken car door with an inscription “Greek House Restaurants Lake Country-BC” and a half-erased telephone number. Most of the work of creating this piece involved the making of the òjà player (hereafter referred to as The Player) in action. The rest of the work, which is the broken door, is almost untouched from the way the artist found it in a Kelowna junkyard, save for an erasure of some parts of the telephone number on it for safety purposes (Samuel, *The Oja Player*). It is preserved in its form with the dirt it has accumulated. The multimedia artist who made Òjà, Roland Samuel (an international student at that time), and I met on the first day of the Association for Literature, Environment and Culture in Canada (ALECC) Conference at Wilfrid Laurier University in July, 2024. Samuel presented a paper on Òjà, which he argued embodied his perception of himself as an international student in Canada and a sustainability practice (*The Oja Player*). But Samuel’s art is much more remarkable for presenting a site where we can theorize belonging, counternarrative, and fragility. The Player is an important cultural figure in the Igbo knowledge system. However, in this art installation, they are a fragile entity, whose appearance on a broken car door as an international student reveals the unsettledness in both international students and Canada and haunts Canada’s perception of itself and international students.

This art installation was completed in 2024, a pivotal time when international students were increasingly becoming subjects of Canadian national public discourse. The dominant narrative was damaging and everywhere: the news (social media and traditional media platforms), and even Parliament. A particularly unsubtle example of this narrative is in a *YouTube* video published by Juno News on May 21, 2024, in which True North’s Harrison Faulkner insinuated that immigrants, specifically temporary workers and international students, are the major problem Canadians face because they take all the jobs, cause housing problems and affect wage stability and growth.¹ Faulkner kept asking, “does this [or that] benefit the Canadian people” (“Temporary Workers” 00:10:13-00:10:23), as if everyone was living in a world where the interdependence of humans works once Canada and Canadians are satisfied. While Faulkner does not represent the entire Canadian population, his platform presents an avenue

1. This video airs an interview Faulkner hosted with Dan Kelly (CEO of Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses).

into one part of the thick strand of the Canadian discourse on immigration. In another instance, an editorial on June 21, 2024 in *The Globe and Mail* linked the housing and job crisis to the inflow of international students. The writers argued that the housing crisis is due to the inability of the government and schools to agree on and take responsibility for the housing of international students, citing cases of Cape Breton University students that drive four hours to school and the horrible living situations of students in Brampton and Windsor (Editorial Board). The blame in this discourse is shared across the government, which keeps opening doors; the schools; and the international students (in an unspoken way).

Other opinions move between arguments for exclusion and fungibility of international students, as potential high earners and hard workers among them are preferred (Keller; Clark). In November 2025, Kate Porter confronted us with the reality that colleges were thriving and running due to the high cost of tuition that international students pay (Porter). This publication came after IRCC lowered the international students cap. However, this seemingly sympathetic narrative does not do justice to international students as knowing subjects, who carry knowledge and experiences and can see beyond the narratives about them and the narratives Canada has of itself. I argue that *Ôjâ* closes that gap and re-narrativizes international students as fragile knowing subjects rather than exploitable entities, and this contrary view confronts Canada's own instabilities, which lies in how it has perceived and narrated itself.

2. Economics of International Students: Challenging the Myths

As noted earlier, one of the perceptions about immigrants, particularly international students, is that they take jobs, especially from Canadians, while the *real Canadians* are left with no jobs. Studies show that the accusation of job-taking is untrue, as employers prefer and give better compensations to employees with Canadian experience, while international students, who do not have this experience, are instead exploited economically in the workspace (Choi et al. 14; Akbar 146). Youjin Choi and colleagues do not reveal only the lack of jobs for international students; they also show that after the investments by these students in the Canadian economy, they do not earn the same as home students after their graduation. Choi and colleagues note, "The disadvantage for international students in pre-graduation work experience hampers their ability to compete for a high-paying, high-quality job after graduation" (20). While Choi and colleagues present the fact that international students do not often get high paying jobs, Marshia Akbar argues that it is because most jobs that are available to international students "are in the low-skill/low-wage sector,

the work experience they acquire often does not provide them with any benefit in terms of finding employment in their field of study after graduation" (146). Tristan Johnson presents a different view from Choi and colleagues and Akbar, as he observes that one of the reasons for the employment difficulty is that there are no consistent ways of recognizing credentials. However, this reason does not account for those who cannot get the right kind of jobs (i.e., high paid or specialized), even with Canadian educational qualifications. Other explanations include unconscious biases people have with names among other things (Johnson). International students are not only rarely paid the same as domestic Canadians, but also in many cases, do not secure jobs at all.

Another critique of the narratives about the international students' program focuses on the broader negative economic impact blamed on international students. Conservative opposition leader, Pierre Poilievre, pontificated in a video uploaded by Question Period Watchers on *TikTok* that, as the Prime Minister, he would ensure that the door will be open to "international students if they have a way to pay their bills and a house to live in." Poilievre's pledge that his government would only admit students who would pay their rents and tuition, narrated international students in a way that suggests most of them were not doing those things. Poilievre's opinion is not new. For instance, Eunjung Lee and others posit that public discourse in Canada views international students as fungible resources, as beneficiaries of Canadian generosity, or as bad, harmful, and lawless, basing this argument on their analysis of forty-four articles and 649 comments, where there is little or no representation of "international students' own voices" (839). They suggest that international students are seen as people who Canada expends its money on and as those who destabilize the Canadian academic system with cash, thereby pushing Canadians out (853, 855). These opinions frame international students as bringing economic difficulties. However, the perception that Canada suffers economically because of the influx of international students diminishes other sides of this story. For instance, some scholars opine that the coming of international students is orchestrated on several levels to give Canada an economic advantage (Elnagar 83; She and Wotherspoon 2; McCartney 38). In his summary of this approach, Dale McCartney suggests that the history of international students in Canada

shows the deep roots and complex motivations of contemporary international student policy, and how it is enmeshed in nation-building efforts in Canada... this history shows the ongoing power of a *Canada-first* focus within the policy that belies, or betrays, claims to educational internationalism. (34; emphasis added)

Òjà presents something that is lacking in this discourse: a nuanced and culturally informed visualization of international students and Canada, by showing

the fragility of both entities. It provides an opportunity to think through an art-based representation with room for multiple interpretations and engagements. The metaphor of *ójà*—an Igbo musical instrument—and the exercise of its player conveys the experiences and knowledges that the international student or one international student has of themselves and Canada.

3. Contrapuntal Reading

The narratives from Juno News and similar platforms are part of the settler colonial narratives seeking to recreate international students as those who are undeserving, problematic and invasive in the Canadian space (against every metric possible). The mode of this narrativization reminds me of *Morus Alba* (White Mulberry), which Mariam Pirbhai reveals was brought into Canada by the white settlers only to be considered invasive after it did not serve the interest of the Canadian silk production industry (32). There is a shared otherness that comes to both species, *Morus Alba* and international students, as a result of their move to create a different destiny outside of the Canadian economy. Just as *Morus Alba* is a plant species that has escaped the purpose of its transportation into Canada, international students are one among many kinds of immigrants drawn and extracted to Canada largely by its self-marketing and implication in exploitative global economy. Both species, different in their kinds, inspire stories of blame which masks fear of dispossession. When there is this kind of fear, Chinua Achebe posits, while talking about the attitude to narrativizing colonial experiences and the colonized other, “Words become weapons... rather than tools... [and fear] and suspicion take over from openness and straight conversation” (*Home and Exile* 78). This fear is behind the narratives of blame that we witness in the cases above, particularly the case of international students. However, the openness that Achebe requests is necessary, as it will bring the “balance” (73) lacking in the conversation around international students. Achebe expects this balance to bring a better understanding to colonial experiences.

Appreciating *Ójà* in the context of these normalized narratives will require a contrapuntal reading. Edward Said envisions that this kind of reading will help us to see connections between stories and experiences that would have been viewed separately or escaped visibility in conventional readings (32). Said’s theory proposes the reading of narratives alongside others which may be assumed to represent different views, to put them in conversation with each other. As he explains, contrapuntal reading makes “concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views” (33). Contrapuntal reading

provides space where different experiences, especially those of the dominant and the marginalized, can be viewed together. For instance, rather than depending only on the Canadian news sources and opinions, *Òjà* presents an elsewhere. Hence, I will proceed to read Samuel's *Òjà* as a counterpoint to the settler colonial narratives presented about international students. Samuel's installation does not only oppose the narratives of benefits and investments, fungibility, and harm. Instead, it creates an embodied resistance against those narratives and can be placed at the same table and viewed alongside other settler colonial imaginaries of Canada and international students to bring forth the balance Achebe expected to see. It does this by pulling from multiple histories and experiences while collapsing the assumed exclusiveness between them. It is already a contrapuntal poesis, a creative mode invested in bringing different views into conversation.

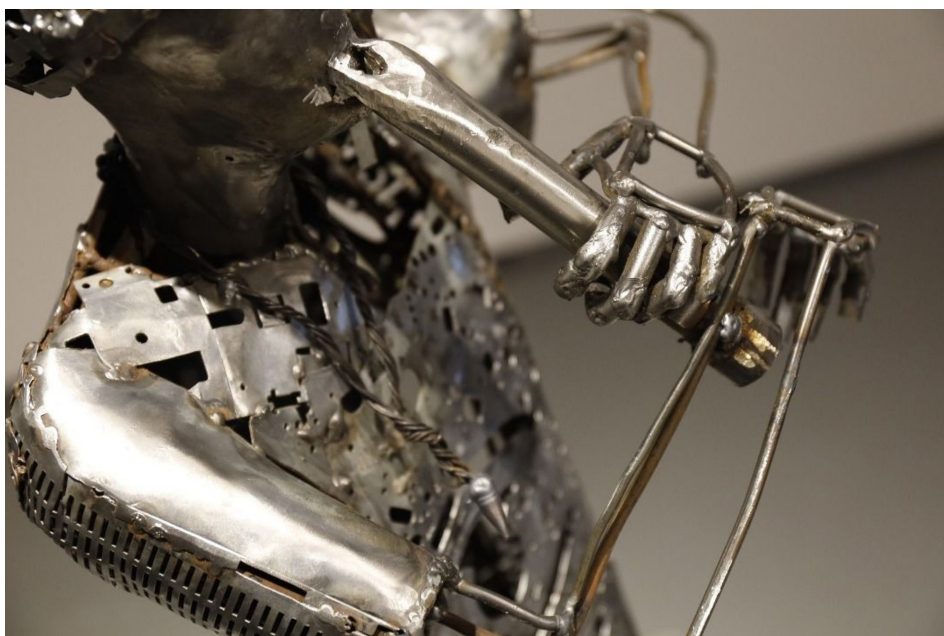


Fig. 1. Roland Samuel, *Qjà* (*The Talking Flute*), *Òjà* (*Close-up of the Qjà and its Player's Pursued Lips and Hands*), 2024.²

2. All images of *Òjà* are reproduced from a video provided by the artist with his permission.

The car door on which The Player performs is the first signal of fragility of this piece and the art's poetic endeavour. Samuel says that car door is his understanding of Canada (*The Oja Player*). But what is a car door? A car door is an entrance to what Hannah Arendt calls the "centre of movement" (373). She uses this description to illustrate the workings of authoritarian movement where a dictator's inner circle is like the inside of a car separating those within (elites) from others outside. But I argue that the car is not just the center of movement but that which makes promises of movement and acceleration. In the time Arendt wrote, as in now, it promises the possibility of seeing enough of certain realities and locations within a particular vicinity. The car's ability to fulfil, all things being equal, promises of movement and speed is the reason people still cherish road trips and all other kinds of automobile-assisted movements for fun in addition to its utilitarian function. Now, if the car is the centre of movement and makes promises of movement, its door becomes a meeting point for or an access point to movement or journey. Samuel's understanding of the car door as Canada, then, starts to take shape.

Canada is historically a place of migrants and settlers (movement). It marketed itself as part of the center in the fast moving (modern) world. But it revealed in the current immigration crises that it has become a place shutting people out. The art offers one possible answer in the representation of Canada as a broken car door. If the car door is separate, it is because the centre is a fiction; Canada is no longer a key player in the global economy, if it ever was. The crisis in this absence of the centre introduces a certain kind of vulnerability that brings about the panic reactions observable in public discourse. What kind of movement can a severed car door enable? This question demands thinking because when we see a severed car door with little information, we know that an aberration has occurred and must seek its implication and meaning. In this case, the broken car door can only make sense when engaged in relation to other components of this art installation, and whatever meaning we make becomes stronger when we marry it to the Igbo conceptual system. Òjà then becomes both an artwork that embodies a storytelling of an immigrant student's view of Canada and concretized sustainable praxis; it tells a story of a coming, even as it repositions waste from colonial capitalist endeavors into an art piece that can exist for its own sake. Its state of being, as a three-dimensional art piece, allows for an intimacy that could endear one to it and what it represents. There is something fragile about the entire piece—something that calls for curiosity and care. It would be good to understand the implications of this art in the culture that informed it in order to consider what its fragility meant for me as an international student and for Canada as a country. Hence, I turn to theorize Òjà within the Igbo culture.



Fig. 2. Sophia Igbani, *Traditional Igbo Òjà Flute Carved from Wood*, 2024.

What is òjà and why is it important to the art installation? In the Igbo worldview, òjà is a sacred and powerful object handled carefully by experts. It serves as a passage for melodies that are edifying and inspiring, but also dangerous (Onyekwelu 42). It means that whenever we hear òjà we know that communication is taking place and we carefully listen to decode based on the circumstance. This power sets òjà apart from other kinds of instruments. Òjà can address a person or a people, and call up the spirits. We believe that in this role, it can reprimand a person or people. But it does not do only that. It can soothe a person and cure illnesses, releasing both therapeutic and spiritual healing power (Onyekwelu 43). It can also praise people. In its healing and therapeutic role, òjà reaches into the minds of those who are hurting. Its player is also “a poet whose skills manifest in his poetic aptitude” (43). According to Onyekwelu, “In a social situation, the oja player uses melodic statements to emphasize notable feelings or emotions or [grander] thoughts in well-painted phrases with the aim of generating feelings by communicating with personalities” (43). Looking at Òjà, we do not need to ask what òjà is used for here.

The human figure moving on the white metal car door is The Player. An òjà player in the social fabric of Igbo people is a figure that connects stories, spirits and humans, and healing and madness. An òjà player is a craftsman whose status does not diminish whether they come invited or not. Here, I connect The Player and the international student. I draw this connection because, outside of what Samuel says,

the artist is also The Player. Samuel is an artist like an *òjà* player, and his installation is a show (representation) of an international student doing their work as The Player. The art and its making share the same complex symbolic essence. But The Player also reminds me who I am as an Igbo immigrant-student in Canada. If The Player is an embodiment of international students, the international students in Canada, in this instance, become beings that move based on demand by Canada, either explicit or implicit. For instance, my movement to Canada is somehow informed by the marketing of Canada as one of the choicest higher education spaces. I, too, have first been attracted to the narratives of cheaper and quality higher education with the experiences attached to it, with only hopes for my future. But that is not the only case. An intricate combination of reasons shape the pull Canada has on international students, including global interdependencies; imperial extractive forces operating in their country of origin;³ Canada's branding as a global equitable state; and the intensive beckoning through high-level marketing of Canada and Canadian schools as a choice place. All these reasons named above motivate this coming and landing for myself and others.

4. *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*



Fig. 3. Roland Samuel, *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*, *Òjà (A full image of Ojà)*, 2024.

3. Canadian oil companies like Meren Energy are still operating in my country (Nigeria).

I have noted earlier that *Òjà* makes us think about fragility, which can also be understood as a mode of instability. How do we make sense of the instability in this art installation? When we see The Player playing in an unsteady but rooted stature, observe the dirty space—the broken car door that is Canada—fragility becomes an important concept that we can use to understand the art installation. Fragility is a condition of instability, tenderness, and complexities in bodies, structures, and nation states. Paul Ricoeur observes that fragility is a visible mode in both human beings and nonhuman entities (such as states), something that requires an action, a “help” (16). When the fragile entity is human, Ricoeur asserts that they appear “to us as entrusted to our care, placed in our custody.” He further notes that the fragile being “relies on us, expects our assistance and care, and trusts that we shall fulfil our obligations” (16). One can understand fragility here to signify care to an equal or at least care to a being within one’s group, a recognition of need within another.⁴ The need for care exists whether there is acceptance and yielding to care or not. In that way, fragility exists whether acknowledged or not. However, *Òjà* represents more than weakness or need; it presents strength, too. This strength does not imply dominance and mastery; it signals resilience and survival. The Player remains rooted on the car door, almost immovable. The car door, broken as it is, balances whenever it is placed on the ground and cannot deteriorate further when preserved well. Hence, Ricoeur’s general explanation is not enough as it misses the recognition of strength and weakness that can co-exist in any entity or structure at any given time.

To make up for that intentional or unintentional masking of weakness or strength in the fragile, I view fragility as the unsettling simultaneous presence of strength and weakness in a body or structure. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* presents an interesting theorization of this. The text is a metonymic progression of fragility. For instance, while Okonkwo is recognized as a powerful warrior, the best wrestler and the man who defied poverty, he does not confront his fear of weakness. Such performance is similar to Ikemefuna’s,⁵ a strong boy who wants to return to his mother. And the same issue of weakness intermixed with strength haunts Umuofia village and the novel itself. This discovery of weakness changes our perspective of each entity mentioned here. They became entities that needed care even without asking, entities that persevered through personal and communal tragedies and stood together, respectively, until they did not.

4. Hoffmaster, Barry. “What does Vulnerability Mean?” *The Hastings Center Report*.

5. Ikemefuna was one of two humans (a woman and boy), the boy, that Mbaino offered as a replacement when one of their community members murdered the pregnant wife of Ogbuefi Udo.

The Player in *Òjà* is unsettling because there is a casualness in their posture that a complete stranger cannot achieve, evident in their rootedness and perseverance as they play on this dirty car door. The player does not only remain but also performs. This action takes root in the culture which informs the art itself, where an *òjà* player who has come to perform must do that notwithstanding the situation. It is also interesting to note that the art itself introduces a complementary idea from the worldview of the artist, Igbo culture, instead of appropriating one from an Indigenous culture or acculturating to *Canadian values or culture*. This action resists the idea of integration but still suggests a certain capacity to contribute to and shape national conversations in Canada.⁶ *Òjà*, then, asks bold questions about naturalization. How does one become natural to a place? Who decides who becomes natural to a place? I argue that *Òjà* recasts the international student, The Player, as a needed and rooted entity to show their connection to that piece of metal that is Canada. This strength that the international student possesses in the figure that we see is an epistemic power, something that is not available in the national discourse. It is not the kind of strength that directly implies dominance, as mentioned earlier, or the use of force, but a strength that comes from purposeful resilience, a flexible yet consistent disposition to survival, meaning-making and knowledge. Fragility, here, redefines itself outside of its normalized understanding because it does not stop at being a breakable quality but also becomes a flexible mode of being.

The strength of The Player or the international student is not the only thing that we see; *Òjà* highlights the weakness of international students in the presence of Canada they encounter. The Player is rooted but has a slanted nature. This slanted stature combined with the location of the landing signals a vulnerability and helplessness that is evident in The Player's lack of control with regard to the place where they have landed. One question to ask in this regard is why it has to be that location. Of all the places to land, they land on a piece of scrap. Who would willingly land on a broken car door? This oddity makes us consider international students as people who, primarily due to having little to no chance of deciding where they land, are bound to land on pieces and debris. There is a signaling to what Homi K. Bhabha considers the "unhomely," a location of displacement and uncanniness (9). *Òjà* balances the responsibility of playing the *òjà* and landing in this place of uncertainty. The artist performs his rootedness by depending on the materiality of the art and his readiness to let the art go into the world where it will be managed either to be understood

6. A lot of Canadians, according to an *Environics Institute* survey, argue that "that too many immigrants are not adopting Canadian values" (Neuman). Lack of integration of newcomers is a worry for this group.

or contested. And the international student, as The Player, receives this art and is urged to *play* within this space of vulnerability through their own rootedness in material/cultural conditions and openness to movement as the Other in Canada. They move here and participate in the Canadian space knowing the restrictions that exist for them, and that they exist at the mercy of the Canadian immigration policies. There are other forms of unhomeliness: difficulty with housing, susceptibility to exploitation in the housing market, and vilification for the rising cost of housing in Canada. In the 2025/2026 academic session, this unhomeliness could mean the constant reminder that the student does not belong, even when they pay a tuition that is around 5.0 times higher than domestic undergraduate students and 3.0 times higher than domestic graduate students with no idea of what happens after their graduation ("Tuition").⁷ This combination of weakness with the resoluteness that we see earlier cannot be imagined outside of the conception of the fragile which I present in this paper.



Fig. 4. Roland Samuel, *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*, *Òjà (Close-up Image of the Broken Car Door Showing "Greek House Restaurants - Lake Country BC")*, 2024.

7. Only doctorate students in some Canadian universities pay the same tuition as domestic students. I am one of those students.

The second fragility *Òjà* exposes is Canada's. It is in the dirt on the car door, and the visible and redacted writings, which I will explain below. State fragility has been the subject of different scholarly engagements with different opinions, where fragility signals an instability, helplessness, or failure/weakness in a state (Ricoeur 20; Elagin 107; Martin-Shields and Koester 3). Here, I will return again to Ricoeur's insights. Ricoeur links fragility to state's association with and use of power (20). This power is seen in the violent oppression which brings the state into existence: the gathering of lands, seizing of inheritances, and oppression of minorities; and the institutionalization and enforcing of this "initial violence" (20). The initial violence and the structure of the state ensures that domination replaces the will to live together within the state. The implication is that the state becomes a space destabilized by force that does not allow for collaborative participation of everyone within it on a horizontal level. In *Òjà*, the artist does extraordinary work in exposing this fragility in the metal platform which represents Canada. Canada is considered the poster country for prosperity, good governance, accommodations, accessibility, safety, cleanliness, and peaceful coexistence. Enakshi Dua, Narda Razack, and Jody Nyasha Warner opine that Canada considers itself to be at the periphery of the Western hegemony, welcoming to immigrants, "innocent of racism," keeper of peace, and a nation that looks out for the marginalised (1). However, this piece of art balances the already good narrative with the dependencies that Canada has refused to accept. We can think again of the dirt and the brokenness of the car door, and the redacted writing on it. These are the marks that allude to Canada's dependence on immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and the extraction of Indigenous land. *Òjà* encourages an inward reflection on Canada's origin and existence.

Canada seeks to forget the violence of its beginning and the harm done to Indigenous peoples or to believe in having pacified or already reconciled with Indigenous peoples. The conversation about invasiveness seldomly engages the experiences of Indigenous peoples as we can see in the xenophobic True North video. Invaders are other people, racialized or non-white immigrants and international students, and the invaded are *Canadians*, people like Faulkner. Indigenous peoples are absent. We see this move to forget in the obvious absence that confronts us. The figure moves on the space that is Canada to tell of that absence, just as the *òjà* player of the Igbo culture does. It considers Canada primarily through the histories of the land that the Canadian narrative has sought to conceal. If this broken car door is an end of movement, it highlights a fragile little space (quite an irony), from where not much lateral movement happens. Considering Canada in this context means that while it presents itself as an access or entrance to a fast-moving world, through education, it does not fulfill that promise because the centre of movement (and lateral movement) is no more. The broken car door cannot be part of movement on its own and



Fig. 5. Roland Samuel, *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*, *Òjà (Close-up side shot of The Player in Action)*, 2024.

does not give space for enough movement to happen on it. The entrance then becomes a platform of its own, a place of impasse and no lateral movement. This impasse inspires a reflection on the past and present. That reflection is The Player's performance. The Player's reflections on anti-immigration narratives disallows easy conclusions about who deserves to be inside and outside of Canada.

For instance, the landing and movement on that metal piece with an inscription referencing a former Greek restaurant in BC does two things.⁸ First, it reminds us that Canada's fragility lies in its history as a nation of migrants whose settlement contributed to the erasure of Indigenous peoples symbolized by the absence that confronts us. The art uses what is available to show what is present and what is left out. The absence is in the non-presence of any Indigenous marker save for the name of the city.⁹ And if the broken door is Canada and The Player and inscription signal international students' and other immigrant presence on it, we have to ask what (or who) Canada outside those people is. The subtle ignorable reality, the absence, highlights the alienation of Indigenous peoples in this Canadian narrative. What would BC, especially Kelowna, be without a palimpsestic settler state? Sakiru Adebayo reminds us that it would be a living home of the Syilx people (283).¹⁰ It would be a place where they were not struggling to assert their jurisdiction ("About"). Moreover, as an immigrant myself with a lot of curiosity and anxiety, I understand that Kelowna would not only be a living home of Syilx people but also place where everyone who enters would be invited into the kind of stewardship that Syilx people of the Okanagan uphold. This mode of viewing reveals what Canada hardly acknowledges when discussing international students. The Player shows the weakness beneath Canada's strength by beaming light on the historical absence of the will to live together (see earlier quotation from Ricoeur) and alongside the other, the Indigenous people.

The second thing that car door and its inscription remind us about Canada's instability is that the narrative of immigrants and international students focuses on the students of colour, who are not integrating well in the Canadian imagination. (Remember they are not getting jobs, are burdens to the Canadian economy, etc.) What is largely not emphasized is how the skin colour of the white

8. Samuel mentioned that he called the phone number which he would later partly efface to know if it was assigned but could not reach anyone.

9. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Kelowna is an Okanagan word meaning "grizzly bear" and was chosen by settlers in 1892 (Marsh).

10. Sakiru Adebayo, reflecting as a Nigerian academic, reminds himself of his implication in the ongoing settler colonial project that is Canada.

person moving around anywhere in the West becomes integration software that separates them from those to be domesticated. However, Samuel's piece operates on the level of synecdoche here by substituting the part (the Greek restaurant) for the whole (Western influence in Canada). Understanding food as an identity marker and shaper (Koc and Welsh 46), allows us to ask ourselves who becomes an outsider in these conversations, and why we cannot see Europeans in the conversation about immigration in Canada despite the priority given to them throughout Canada's immigration history. For example, a look at this history will show that when Canada was becoming populated by settlers, Black refugees fleeing enslavement in the US were not given land grants or allowed to settle among white society in Nova Scotia (Dyk). Furthermore, most cases in the past century in the immigration timelines favoured European settlers (see "A Hundred," *Canadian Council for Refugees* website). Even some of the cases that favoured non-Europeans still showed the preference for European immigrants. For instance, Assisted Passage Loan Scheme became universal after nineteen years, and it was no longer interest-free at the point when it became world-wide in 1970.¹¹ Samuel's piece reminds us that the population of Canada historically favoured white immigrants. While it does not speak against the struggle of white immigrants who come with different experiences, it allows us to think about their absences in the anti-immigrant or international students' narratives and refuses them the degree of anonymity they usually enjoy. The Player re-invents themselves on that car door rather than being what Sherene H. Razack calls "a dark background in a canvass of white subjects" (161). They impose their Black presence upon the European background and show themselves in the places where they are historically removed or diminished. *Òjà* does two things: allows The Player stand on a broken car door/country and shows by omission how easy it is for white settlers/immigrants to blend in the migration/settling process.

These absences in Canada's narrative of itself are not the only revelation to be noted in *Òjà*. The art installation shows us that Canada persists, even as severed and dirty as it is. The car door, in its dirtiness, could last for a long time without tampering. And it is its ability to exist, even as imperfect as it is, that makes the landing of The Player and other entities possible. Canada's immigration records show the kind of people that have landed on it. Some of them are running from ruins of their countries and wars, others are running to Canada

11. The Assisted Passage Loan Scheme helped immigrants settle without charging them interests. From February 1, 1951, to 1970 European immigrants got this loan, which helped them establish themselves. It meant that they were given a headstart and privilege that others did not get.

because they have a purpose they need to achieve. International students are also running not just because they are needed here, but because they are being pushed. Canada, as a modern state, provides that space. In a world where international travels are difficult, most travel advisory platforms, such as Global Citizen Solutions, place Canada at the top of the easiest immigration countries (Campos). Its ability to hold the international student(s) and provide not only a landing space, may not be very easy to acknowledge in certain areas when countering the anti-immigration narratives. However, if, as *Ôjà* shows us, The Player plays because they must play, and have successfully begun their performance, then they perform because Canada makes it possible. Canada makes it possible by being a space where performance and survival (of some people) can happen. This strength is often misappropriated into creating a subtly dominating narrative of a *better-than-others* Canada. Canada's strength is also evident in the historical learning and unlearning of Canada as a nation. It has come out (although grudgingly) on different occasions to acknowledge what it did, such as in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and commemoration of people like Viola Desmond,¹² even if it has not done everything right. While these might be dismissed as isolated, even tokenistic gestures, the ability to engage in this reflection in the face of a failure is both messy, unstable, and self-baring. Whether Canada does these due to an imminent need to extract and survive or to protect/recreate its images, the *Ôjà* shows a limitedness and messiness through the remnant materials that feature in it and the historical, physical and the social contradictions of the nation that that we, as viewers, must behold.

Fragility extends through the individual elements of the piece to create a profound image of what I call hyper-fragility. Each body or entity within this piece carries its own fragility. International students or immigrants arrive in Canada fully aware of their own fragile existence within the Canadian context. These two fragile entities, international students and Canada, result in a hyper-fragile entity. This intensiveness of fragility shows excess. The excess of fragile imagination in the art draws us to it and normally inspires self-preservation or colonial nation-preservation. However, when we come to terms with how the meeting of these entities with all their historical baggage and fragility creates a hyper-fragile object, then we must recognize that simultaneous multiple

12. Viola Desmond fought racial segregation in Canada, from her Nova Scotian Residence. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* notes that her decision to go to Cinema when Canada was still practicing racial segregation earned her an arrest and conviction for tax charges. She lived and died without pardon and eventually became a *Canadian Hero* several decades after her death (Bingham).

existence of strength and weakness. Thinking of myself, as an international student, and *The Player*, I realise that my experiences of perseverance from home and conscious acknowledgement of Canadian history and my place within it are areas of strength. My ability as an emerging thinker and servant in many communities I have belonged adds to that strength. However, I am vulnerable insofar as there are certain resources that I cannot afford. These resources can limit my ability to not just be committed but live. Canada, on its part, has been a major player in catering to advanced research, and a prosperous nation. However, Canada has some level of weakness due to its relationship with Indigenous and racialized peoples and its inability to fully come to terms with the relationship needed to build an inclusive, less exploitative nation. *Òjà* provides us with the avenue to have a more humane and inclusive view by showing us a different range of things that we would not have considered: fragility is not a problem that should be avoided. In the midst of the narratives of cohesion, it is a reminder that sometimes acknowledging the acceptance of fragility does not mean the demand to be “left alone,” as Nassim Nicholas Taleb has suggested (12);¹³ rather *Òjà* is an active negotiation between strengths and weaknesses, a deliberate decision not to replace reflectiveness and care with toughness. It reminds us that recognizing the messiness of our collective reality is more valuable than toughening up through exclusion. An exclusionary relationship inspired by toughness does not allow an all-encompassing care that is beneficial to every party involved.

Based on all these interpretations here and many more available to viewers of this piece, I consider the art as haunting Canadian national imaginaries. Samuel, in creating this, alludes to the general knowledge with which each international student comes. Still, with his specific knowledge, which I can relate to, he fashions what haunts every viewer. This art becomes that which is ready to bring both the social violence of the past and present into view, showing us a ghost of Canada, something we think is forgotten or already pacified. *The Player*’s lack of desire to resolve Canada’s paradoxes reminds us of Avery Gordon’s insight on ghosts and hauntings: “The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course” (8). In this piece, *The Player* carrying *òjà* is a double-layered phantom that embodies the international student and signals a readiness to continue

13. Taleb presents antifragility as a good thing since the fragile, in his basic logic, would not benefit from challenging and volatile situations and would desire to be left alone (12). Antifragility for him, benefits from randomness just as evolution does (69). This seems like an invitation to uphold collective and communal cruelty.

haunting because they have in their possession a tool that speaks and reveals. It is in this haunting that the artwork fully becomes what it wants to be and assumes spectacular significance for everyone to whom it would appear. Its beauty is not just in its ability to situate the international student's voice but in the complex manner with which it codes the message.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how international students contend with narratives about them in the Canadian public and national discourse by positioning art as counternarrative tool of importance. I argue that Samuel's *Ójà* is a counterpoint to the language of invasiveness embedded in the discourse of international students. *Ójà* serves as an articulation of self and the communal. It situates international students as if they were rooted and needed, thereby complicating their being in Canada. The rootedness and motion of The Player (international student) in this art complicates Canada's narrative of international students as temporary, creating a tension between what is narrated about them and what is. Thus, the art shows epistemic awareness of both international students' fragility and Canada's fragility, respectively. The international student is no longer a complete outsider but a knowing subject threading through Canada with full awareness of who they are, where they come from, and the situation they have landed in. Canada is not only a strong space but a sequestered one. The aim here is to study *Ójà* not as an exhaustible material, but as a haunting material with a capacity to inspire mutual care. The jolting effect of the art should make both international students and Canada seek care. International students must commit to the work of surviving while pushing Canada far beyond the limits and boundaries its set for itself, and Canada must reconsider the borders it is creating to discover the power of mutual co-existence.

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The Art of Sustainable Shelter-Making: Bakhtiari and Métis Craft Adaptation in Response to Environmental Change¹

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ABSTRACT

How can craftwork offer ethical approaches to homemaking amid environmental change? In this paper, craftwork is both the technical knowledge and the aesthetic expression of homemaking that brings together human and more-than-human relations into an ethico-political tension. This paper was shaped by a web of relations and responsibilities stemming from my Iranian-Bakhtiari ancestry and my diasporic positionality in so-called Canada. I follow the craft practices of Bakhtiari nomads of southwest Iran to redefine homemaking, not in terms of land ownership, resource accumulation, or the exclusion of others, but in terms of sheltering. Following Bakhtiari teachings, sheltering is the ongoing labour of sustaining ethical and incongruent relations with human and more-than-human communities through collective care and socio-ecological mutual orientation. By thinking with Bakhtiari and Métis textiles and contemporary art, such as Métis artist Christi Belcourt's *Water Song* (2010-2011) and Bakhtiari artist Amin Roshan's *My Father's Contract* (2013), as shelter-making practices, I explore how these diverse crafts enact sustainable sheltering through mindful reorientations to place. Both

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Bakhtiari and Métis crafts enact forms of remembering and resistance that reveal the far-reaching and interrelated extractive violences of British imperialism across Indigenous lands. This paper argues that a transnational and cross-cultural comparative analysis of Indigenous crafts can help mediate the ethical and political tensions of diasporic disorientation to new environments—what I name as the *ab-be-ab* or *water-to-water* experience—refiguring this disorientation into a long-term, water-based pedagogy for learning with Indigenous peoples, watersheds, and creative works, to resist being comfortable with/in settler colonial societies.

Keywords

Sheltering; Diasporic Homemaking; Métis Craft; Bakhtiari Craft; Water Lessons; Environmental Adaptation; Kinship; Sustainable Futures

1. Water-To-Water Lessons

In October 2021, after a cross-country move from Edmonton to Hamilton to start my PhD at McMaster University, that familiar feeling persisted. Like many Iranians, Maman calls this feeling of discomfort the experience of *ab-be-ab* (آب به آب) and tells me to rest until my body adjusts to this new environment. The expression literally translates to ‘water-to-water,’ and Iranians use it to explain the body’s physiological disorientation when moving from one climate to another, when recalibrating to a new place and learning new waters. This discomfort (headache, loss of appetite, nausea, etc.) is temporary and usually resolves when the body adapts to environmental change. *How do I adapt? What does adaptation resolve?*

Maman has long been my source of guidance. She never stopped carrying *ab-be-ab* in her bones quietly. She is neither at home nor has she stopped thinking about home. But she loves to crochet. And you see her most concentrated and at ease when she’s crocheting beside Lake Simcoe, in her foldable chair, wrapped in a thick wool scarf she wears as hijab, even in the summer. She is often cold. While others enter the water, she sits looping yarn into patterned forms. She looks out of place. But she looks at the lake and says, “چه آب زیبایی” — Beautiful Water. In relation to the lake, she is not required to assimilate. She continues to crochet.

As an Iranian-Bakhtiari woman, my homemaking is shaped by my separation from Iran while being mediated through a settler colonial order that enforces heteropatriarchal, extractive, and racist notions of living in violent contention with Indigenous legal orders. *Ab-be-ab* names the bodily and ethical distress of dwelling within that contradiction, what I call the out-of-place condition. In this paper, I conceptualize an *ab-be-ab* experience not as a momentary dis/ease, but rather as a mindful orientation for re/learning while moving from ‘water-to-water.’ From the North Saskatchewan River to Hamilton Harbour,

water materializes the roots/routes of settler extraction and industrial circulation that position us within the ongoing legacies of imperialism. It is consequently never a neutral relocation when we move from one body of water to another; we as dispersed peoples enter distinct ecologies shaped by Indigenous legal processes and treaties, and the ongoing consequences of violent settler economies. We enter currents already structured by these material and legal realities. And so, as a bodily signal of disorientation, ab-be-ab should not be resolved through assimilation into the settler order. Rather, it should remain open through mindful and ongoing reorientations to new waters and ecologies.

Mindful reorientations can render ab-be-ab a pedagogical discipline of relational discernment, attentive to its Iranian specificity but responsive to the political and ecological conditions of diasporic presence. Through this ethical openness, I can learn how to adapt ethically as I navigate my bodily disorientation within this environmental disruption/contradiction. I think about the ways craft becomes another medium of relational attunement, enacting water lessons of individual integrity in relation to a collectivity. More specifically, I consider how craft rooted in water lessons and Indigenous contexts can reshape ab-be-ab into a pedagogy of deliberate relational discernment.

2. Sheltering and Shelter-Making

I have (re)turned to Bakhtiari sheltering traditions from southwest Iran to (re)learn how to sustain relations that open an ethical mode of adaptation. Sheltering in the Bakhtiari nomadic context is the structural process of care and adaptation grounded in relational attunement with human and more-than-human beings (water, trees, plants, goats, spiders, ancestors, water ceremonies, etc.). Shelter-making practices are the material, aesthetic, and pedagogical works and creations (such as craftwork) that ensure the culture of sheltering remains ethically open: adaptive and transformative through relational, place-based embodied attunement.

Shelter-making for Bakhtiari people is mostly carried out by women (shearing goat hair, weaving, butter making, cheese making, foraging, fetching water, etc.). Weaving, in particular, is a group activity. Shirin-Jan, a Bakhtiari woman, tells me that women usually weave as a group, and that “the style and the patterns” convey their “یگانگی”—to mean both individuality and unity—as well as their “relationships and desires.”² Weaving expresses Bakhtiari women’s indi-

2. From my 2025 interview with members of a Bakhtiari tribe in Iran. Translated from Farsi to English.

vidual and collective identity, becoming a site where difference is interlaced and negotiated through relational desire in shared making. Shirin-Jan adds,

It is important that we [the encampments] are located near a stream. Water is important for good health. When there is access to water, we can work with peace of mind... And when it rains, we do not weave, so we are not bothered... we ask about each other's health, we talk about the water and the air [weather], and future plans.

She continues: "Handweaving is hard work. And it is very difficult to do this during migration when thinking about moving. But if it is necessary, of course we will do it." Shirin-Jan shows us how women approach craft with their embodied place-based knowledge. This knowledge is shaped by how they relate to and wonder about each other's health, the various scales of hydrological movements from rain to land to goat/human body to textile, and how they envision their futures. Being in relation to water offers a sense of sanctuary and the knowledge and speculative curiosity needed to adapt and reroute Bakhtiari sheltering to remain ethically open, even during environmental and political changes/disruptions. At its core, Bakhtiari sheltering is centred on women's interdependent desires and practices for a viable and transformative Bakhtiari life/future.

Bakhtiari weaving brings storytelling and craftwork into a co-constitutive pedagogical process for learning sustainable sheltering. Shirin-Jan shows that Bakhtiari women's collective making is also a space for storytelling, where individual narratives are woven into a shared material form. This co-making is sustained through attentiveness to water as a teacher, guiding collective practice in responsiveness to environmental and social change. Through shelter-making practices such as weaving, storytelling becomes a way of moving into relation with multiple stories and water-based lessons in ethical attunement that sustain collective sheltering. In this paper, I move between distinct Indigenous craft practices, attending to storytelling as it emerges through relations of reciprocal learning.

Métis artist-researcher Zoe Todd theorizes storytelling as a "reciprocal, relational" research method and ethic, guiding Métis/Indigenous scholarship in anthropology and cross-homeland work ("Métis Storytelling" 170). Building on this research ethic, I approach craftwork as reciprocal and relational spaces (much like water bodies) where stories coexist through their individual material and aesthetic forms, teaching specific sheltering practices while attending to the "broader political and historical realities and structural power imbalances" of British imperialism and empire across transnational contexts (170). I weave Bakhtiari and Métis craft stories to learn how they can reorient ab-be-ab, a bodily signal of disorientation, into a diasporic pedagogy for sheltering.

In Farsi, I think with the kinship vocabulary around *khooy* and *kheesh* (خوی/خویش) when thinking about how to sustain ethical relationality. *Khooy* signifies disposition/temperament/character, and *kheesh* signifies the self. This understanding of kinship is grounded in affinity and shared values. It means aligning the integrity of the self with human and more-than-human beings who share a disposition toward respecting interdependent, relational ways of being. Yet moving with (affecting and being affected by) kin is also a struggle, because affinity carries an ethical responsibility; it asks us to remain accountable to those relationships. Relationships adapt, strengthen, or diminish based on how responsibility is enacted. This ethical imperative of kinship, to remain accountable to the self and the relative (the other being in relation with us), determines the possibilities for sheltering to sustain collective wellbeing. To evoke sheltering as moving (adapting) with kin, both the preservation of tradition and creative adaptation to new conditions must coexist through a pedagogy of living responsibly within the political and ecological conditions of a place to re/learn and discern ethical relations. This is where an ab-be-ab pedagogy shaped by Indigenous crafts and stories can help sustain the ethical imperative of moving with kin through practices of relational and co-creative attunement when sheltering in Canada.

Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte describes “collective continuance” as a value developed from three concepts in Anishinaabe intellectual traditions: interdependent relationships, systems of responsibility, and migration, “a value that is similar to social resilience in its relationship to self-determination” (128). I draw on this framing to think about sheltering through craftwork as the collective continuance of movement, relationality, and responsibility. In this sense, craftwork, intertwined with stories and embodied kinship networks, offers material and pedagogical lessons for maintaining social resilience, through which relational structures are sustained, and collective forms of making and learning emerge amidst change and movement.

I also want to emphasize, following Whyte, that migration should not be understood as a means “to normalize one particular type of mobility, which would be morally problematic” (131). He explains:

Migration suggests that relationships of interdependence and systems of responsibility are not grounded on stable or static relationships with the environment. Rather, these relationships arise from contexts of constant change and transformation. A key idea is that relationships that are constantly shifting do not sacrifice the possibility of continuity. (131)

In line with Whyte’s thinking, moving with kin entails not only physical movement but also movement of knowledge and skills that teach us how to be and become through reciprocity and responsibility.

Craftwork embodies a movement of knowledge and skills, expressed through both functional items and artistic expression, and can teach us how to re/learn and discern ethical relations. I do not treat artwork and handicraft as mutually exclusive categories, nor do I collapse them into sameness. I focus on how each demonstrates distinct skills, techniques, and material knowledge, and how these orientations converge in textile-making. Bakhtiari weaving, for example, is at once technical and aesthetic. It is this convergence that enables sheltering to remain ethical while adapting to changing climates—what I call the art of sustainable shelter-making.

As a society that “lived and thrived at the intersection of mobility and fixed-ness” (Macdougall et al. 9), the Métis cultural landscape offers an orientation for thinking about sheltering as an ongoing practice of moving with kin. In dialogue with Bakhtiari nomads, known as *migration dwellers* (کوچ نشین), I compare the specificities of Bakhtiari and Métis shelter-making to ask how sustainable sheltering is enacted in practice: how everyday life is woven together with political, ethical, and poetic relations through craft, story, and kinship guided by water lessons. To answer this question, I turn to the Bakhtiari Salt Bag and the Métis Sash to examine how craftwork offers lessons for moving with kin through deliberate, consistent practices of relational attunement, shaping an ab-be-ab pedagogy.

3. Salt Bag and Métis Sash

Weaving is a central shelter-making tradition among Bakhtiari nomads, helping them create tents and other daily essentials while mapping their ecological and cultural landscapes. Textiles are not only designed to meet everyday needs, but the patterns/motifs are material manifestations of the “artistic taste and thought of the creative artist” (Yaghoubzadeh and Khazaie 44; my trans.) that shape/affect and are shaped/affected by their cultural and physical landscapes.

The creative artists are Bakhtiari women who are architects of their shelters. A “feminist architecture,” as described by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa,³ is the “making [of] a new culture” (19) through an embodied and relational consciousness forged through contradiction, “and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking

3. Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942-2004) was a queer Chicana poet and feminist theorist. Her work profoundly influenced Chicana/Chicanx and Latinx feminist thought, as well as women-of-colour feminism.

down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (51). Within a Bakhtiari context, weaving exemplifies Bakhtiari women's individual selves—memories, desires, pain, and refusals—that map the past/current traditions while remaining in creative/relational motion, interlacing them into a collective, non-binary Bakhtiari cultural futures. Bakhtiari tradition has been and remains women-led, and Bakhtiari women are respected as warriors, knowledge holders, and "the basis of nomadic life" (Abdullahi);⁴ however, they are also affected by patriarchy and binary gendered roles, in part due to imperial and nation-state influences on tribal life. It is through Bakhtiari women's "continual creative motion" that a feminist architecture arises, open to the complexity of sheltering so that Bakhtiari people can move with kin ethically, with the integrity of the self. I ask myself, how can this feminist architecture shape my ab-be-ab pedagogy—how to navigate my bodily disorientation—to live consciously re-formed, to make carefully, fluidly, and sustainably between multiplicity and contradiction?

Grappling with this question, I turn to the Bakhtiari Salt Bag. Traditionally, the Salt Bag (see fig. 1) is used to store salt harvested from natural brines in the Zagros Mountains. These Bags are woven to store salt for a long period of time, minimizing the need for Bakhtiari women to travel frequently to salt sources, especially when the tribes are settled in temporary encampments without direct access to these sites. To learn about its practicality and sustainability, I conducted a microscopic analysis of a Salt Bag (gifted by a Bakhtiari family). With the help of my friend and textile archaeologist Maria Elena Bertoli, a PhD student at the University of Glasgow, I learned that the warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) threads were spun in a clockwise (Z) direction and plied in a counter-clockwise (S) direction. This keeps the Salt Bag from unravelling and improves durability. We then counted the warp and weft threads to determine their densities. I acknowledge that not all Salt Bags will have similar thread counts, as they are each unique in how they are woven. However, the thread count helped me learn about the structural logic of the Bags. For example, we counted that the warp density is slightly looser compared to the weft (specifically, a difference of 3 threads per cm). Because of this, the fabric is flexible and can be folded as needed. The denser weft provides the structural integrity of the Salt Bag; the warp and weft work together to make the Bag both expandable and strong enough to contain fine-grained salt.

I also learned why goat hair is an important weaving material. Bakhtiari women use goat hair to weave their Salt Bags and most other handicrafts due to its sustainability and biodegradability. It is sustainable because it is abundant,

4. From my 2025 interview with Mehdi Abdullahi, a member of a Bakhtiari tribe in Iran. Translated from Farsi to English.

but also because it prevents items from getting wet. The coarse and porous material of the goat hair helps retain moisture, and since salt is hygroscopic (it absorbs water from the air), the microgaps in goat hair prevent water from reaching the salt, keeping it dry. These deliberate weaving techniques show us how Bakhtiari women use craft to engage in sustainable shelter-making. Their weaving embodies their consciousness of both their collective and personal needs. This ecological and needs-based consciousness enables them to mediate ecological changes, migration conditions, and their habitual labour into a “continual creative motion” (Anzaldúa 51) that recenters women’s selfhood as an ethical disposition within Bakhtiari culture and collective continuance.



Fig. 1. Zahra Tootonsab. *Salt Bag*. 2024.

When imperial and heteropatriarchal state systems disrupt the sustainability of shelter-making practices, these practices can be appropriated into systems of ecological and political harm, as occurred when the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1911 purchased close to 7,000 acres of the Bakhtiari winter pastures and fields in Masjed Soleyman, Khuzestan (Khazeni 125). Bakhtiari nomads traditionally migrate to Khuzestan near the end of summer, so that their herds can graze throughout the winter on the region's green pastures. However, the arrival of the oil company transformed Masjed Soleyman into an extractive zone unsuitable/unsustainable for pastoralism. This transformation happened through social and geological uprootings. For example, the subsurface movements of salt and the tectonic stresses that produced "large 'whaleback'-shaped folds, known as anticlines," had trapped oil and gas for millions of years (Shafiee 4), creating the geological conditions that later enabled large-scale oil extraction. Salt, integral to Bakhtiari sheltering, had become implicated in the company's material architecture.

Bakhtiari women, however, use their weaving to encode alternative forms of spatial and ecological knowledge that disrupt imperial systems of mapping and territorial control. Ethnographic and historical accounts tell us that patterns on the Salt Bag (zigzagging lines, horizontal/vertical lines, and geometric borders) symbolize "arduous migration routes" (Sarikhani and Karimian 81; my trans.) and "river meanderings" (88; my trans.), which demonstrate both the physical difficulties and the spatial intelligence required for nomadic seasonal mobility that escapes the logic of imperial mapping and reference points. Many of the terrestrial and hydro routes remain unknown to outsiders who cannot read and locate them from the woven items, or even embark on these paths. The narrow roads across the Bakhtiari mountains and near the Karun River, for example, were once described by English archaeologist Austen Henry Layard as "scarcely practicable to the mountain goat" (qtd. in Khazeni 79). Bakhtiari nomads, however, know these paths *like the palms of their hands* (a phrase Iranians use to mean they know them very well), which hold/offer ecological, political, and creative significance. These paths preserve their independence from imperial and state infrastructures of control/invasion. When Bakhtiari women weave these patterns, they express their daily interaction with the land. These habitual practices turn into patterns that make and rework a relational collective consciousness into being.

While history tells us much about Bakhtiari Khans (their bravery but also greed), we know more about Bakhtiari women through their craft. As such, my learning through Bakhtiari woven crafts begins as a meeting with Bakhtiari women who have encoded their "struggle with nature" (Afrough 67; my trans.) into the very fabric of their woven items and thus become mentors of future ecological stewards, shapers of kinship and love. I carry these lessons into my own ab-be-ab condition: how to move with their desires and irritations as I

attempt to shelter ethically on Indigenous lands and with water, holding tradition and reinvention in deliberate tension.

Following water lessons imbued with plural consciousness and possibilities, as understood by my Maman and her Maman, and so on, wherever we go, we are within a watershed. If all land belongs to a watershed, then I, too, become part of this water collection area that cycles water from the skies, the mountains, the city, and my body back into a water body like the North Saskatchewan River. Near a bank of the North Saskatchewan River, an Indigenous water walker extends me a bowl for smudging, and before I begin, they nod and say *As-Salamu Alaykum*. I am at first surprised to hear this prayer for peace, safety, and wellbeing in my religious language, but then I acknowledge that we are in a mutual orientation with the water and each other, an orientation of peace and healthy minds and bodies, and so I smudge myself and return the covenant through the sacred smoke. What I learned on Indigenous territories now known as Treaty 6 is how I can reorient myself to abide by the “Indigenous laws of relationality” (Martin 233) through creative intervention (221) that also draws on my own ancestral traditions of moving with kin. It is here that *ab-be-ab* signals how I live within an out-of-place condition that can “attend to the nuanced relationships between Indigenous communities and people of color” (221). By reorienting myself to the North Saskatchewan River, I learned how the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC) used the River for resource development and colonial trade routes. More specifically, I learned about Métis communities as “distinct peoples with unique historical relations with European settler and Indigenous ancestors” (Toorenburch and Reid 74) who continuously unsettled colonial borders through their mobility, kinship systems, and material practices.

During the Great Lakes fur trade, the families who would become the Red River Métis began migrating to the Red River Valley (in what is now Manitoba) between 1780 and 1810, engaging in seasonal mobility that sustained their economic and cultural life through trade and kinship ties with northeastern Plains tribes (Peterson 31). Water routes connected Red River to fur trade networks south and north of the forty-ninth parallel,⁵ helping Métis traders move and circulate goods and knowledges (Barclay 71). However, Métis economic networks and mobility were increasingly constrained by HBC’s consolidation of its fur trade monopoly in the region, particularly with the arrival of technologies such

5. The forty-ninth parallel refers to the line of latitude at 49° north that forms much of the present-day border between Canada and the United States. It became more actively surveyed and enforced in the 1870s, cutting through Métis homelands on the northern Plains and reshaping mobility, trade, and territorial governance.

as the steamboat in 1859 and through its exclusionary hiring practices (MacKinnon 203-04). After HBC sold Indigenous lands to the "Canadian government" in 1869-70 without Indigenous peoples' consent, which led to Treaty negotiations, Métis communities in the Red River Valley experienced intensifying processes of "displacement, dispossession, and migration" (Kermoal 115-16). Métis women played key roles in sustaining cultural identity and social life by "passing on their values in relation to the land" through their medical expertise, plant and foraging knowledge, hide tanning, beadwork, and other shelter-making practices (122). For example, "by choosing in some instances to bead plants and flowers that have curing powers," women were effectively "mapping the territory on leather or fabric as a way of affirming their Métis identity and their role in society" (129). In this way, Métis women actively reshaped and renewed cultural continuity, adapting "to an ever-changing environment, just as stories are constantly retold, and new interpretations layered onto older ones" (129).

The *ceinture fléchée*, or "arrow sash," exemplifies Métis women's innovation and adaptation within ongoing colonial encounters (see fig. 2). First Nations and Métis women used European materials such as wool and traditional finger-weaving techniques to create distinct styles, incorporating and adapting French textile patterns (Simard and Rousseau 12, 17; my trans.; Canadian Geographic). Métis women developed their own weaving patterns and styles according to their kinship group, and as Métis archaeologist Kisha Supernant explains, each thread colour and pattern in the Métis Sash represents "essential components to Métis ways of being" such as geography, mobility, kinship, economies, and daily life; the "five threads" woven together produce "a full, relational understanding of a Métis way of being" ("From Hybridity to Relationality" 362).

The Métis Sash became an economic symbol and political tool during the fur trade, and it also had multiple practical uses: supporting the back, securing coats, lashing a canoe to secure cargo, and functioning as a rope or sewing kit (Canadian Geographic). The Sash later symbolized Métis cultural and political identity, especially in connection with Louis Riel and the Métis resistance movements of the 19th century (Simard and Rousseau 15; my trans.). Today, the Sash is a national Métis symbol with a specific pattern worn by Métis community members during "gatherings and cultural events... to denote their connections to the past and present" (Supernant, "From Hybridity to Relationality" 363). Supernant describes the Sash as a metaphor, explaining that "[t]he power of the Sash as a metaphor" lies in the fact that "each thread cannot be understood on its own. It is only in their weaving that a cohesive and meaningful understanding of the whole can emerge" ("Reweaving Relations" 512). As such, weaving becomes a medium through which Métis women weave their personal experiences with the histories, stories, and lessons of their community. The Sash represents "the emergence of this new way of being in relation with lands,

waters, and human and other-than-human kin that makes the Métis a distinct people" ("From Hybridity to Relationality" 369). The Sash is thus not a metaphor of "mere semantic transaction," but rather a "binding character" (Martin 229) of ongoing Métis commitment and attention to "the places of the ancestors, the belongings left behind, and the lands and waters that hold these places and belongings today" (Supernant, "From Hybridity to Relationality" 368).

Bakhtiari women also adapted their craft in response to non-Indigenous influences, though through distinct historical contexts and contacts. For instance, I have seen some Salt Bags decorated with coins from the Pahlavi dynasty, and others with beads. These adaptations during the 1900s allowed Bakhtiari nomads to assert and practice their own sense of status and cultural identity in ways that contested imperial and state definitions. The Salt Bag and the Métis Sash reveal that a sustainable shelter-making practice, such as weaving, is shaped by divergent relationships with land and community. This diverse relationality necessitates a continual making and remaking of habits that ensure sheltering remains open to the belief in a transformative self in relation to collective cultural renewal.



Fig. 2. Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada (IPAC). *Traditional Métis Sash from the 19th century*. 2018, Canadian Geographic.

When living between a new home and a previous one, between longing and belonging, this disorientation to the contradictions of space can be co-opted by multicultural assimilation that leaves extractive/colonial structures intact. So, how can we ensure disorientation remains generative: not as a hybrid *in-between*, but as a field of distinct political and cultural identities and nations that continually re-form ways of moving with kin in resistance to colonial, imperial, and heteropatriarchal power? I now move from traditional fibre practices to contemporary artworks that mobilize weaving conceptually and materially, methodologically threading disparate aesthetic forms together to think transnational sheltering as relational practice and collective making. I read Métis artist Christi Belcourt's *Water Song* and Bakhtiari artist Amin Roshan's *My Father's Contract* as craft stories: works that activate weaving through patterning, intertwining, and breakage to produce ethical reorientations toward community and ecology.

4. *Water Song*

Christi Belcourt explains that Indigenous art traditions around the world reflect direct connections to lands, often expressed through the artwork itself ("About"). These art traditions include craft techniques, textile designs, and other forms of visual art. For Métis people specifically, the land is embedded in their beliefs and incorporated into their artwork, which informs how they are meant to live in relationship with land ("About"). Belcourt reminds us that Métis people have historically been known as "The Flower Beadwork People" ("About"). As she learned more about plants and Métis beadwork, Belcourt developed a painting technique that translates beadwork into painted form. She does this by "dipping the end of a paintbrush or knitting needle into paint and pressing it onto the canvas" to create floral patterns in dots ("Artist Statement"). For Belcourt, beadwork design is not simply recreated ("About"). Artwork becomes a process of translation in which craft knowledge is conveyed through the visual art, transferring floral knowledge about caring for the land and water, and the respect that must be shown toward the earth and all beings ("About"). Belcourt's painting engages with the political and ethical foundations of Métis craftwork, the "five threads" of geography, mobility, kinship, economies, and daily life that are woven within the Métis Sash (Supernant, "From Hybridity to Relationality" 362).

This adaptation of Métis beadwork techniques into a visual art form offers another way to transmit traditional Métis knowledge systems, particularly in contemporary times. Elder and healer Rose Richardson explains, "Years ago many of our ancestors were not able to write. As a result, stories and knowledge

were beaded or embroidered into clothing and on items of everyday use. As they drew the design they told the story of the plant..." (8). This cyclical relationship of learning from plants and transferring plant knowledge through storytelling and craftwork exemplifies Métis ways of making and remaking the Métis Homeland. Belcourt's artworks illustrate this cyclical relationship through her embodied and creative learning (from the plants and her paintings) and as a collective movement outside the body, in relation to a multiplicity of bodies and changing environments (how the paintings affect us as viewers within our specific environmental conditions). It is a sheltering with kin beyond the boundaries of space, time, and predetermined relationships, as long as we are accountable to Métis ways of making and remaking sustainably with land and beings.

Belcourt also portrays her beaded paintings as electricity. She states that the dots suggest the circle of life, but also "represent the sheer expanse and mystery of life from molecules to universes" (*Medicines* xii). Belcourt explains that the stand-alone dots "represent the universe" and the "circles" of "copper-coloured" dots represent "the spirit world" ("Métis Artist" 08:09-31). She emphasizes that "each plant has a spirit and there's also spirits that are always around us and always helping us" (08:35-45). The dotted/beaded patterns embody the kinetic force of the universe and the spirit world. Belcourt's weaving of the material and spiritual worlds energizes the vitality of Métis cultural consciousness, of respecting what is both known and the "mystery of life" that is unknown (*Medicines* xii).

In the 2010-2011 painting titled *Water Song* (see fig. 3), Belcourt reenergizes Métis culture through the fluidity and generative power of water as a kinetic force within Métis collective consciousness. The creative process involves dotting beautiful, vibrant colours upon a black background. The black background symbolizes the "black velvet used historically by Métis beadworkers" (*Medicines* xii), grounding the painting in material and cultural memory. The black background is akin to the "five threads" of geography, mobility, kinship, economies, and daily life that are woven into a Métis Sash. Each of these threads carries the political and ethical tensions of Métis life. The dotted floral motifs on the background represent Indigenous plants found throughout the Métis Homeland (xii). Métis curator and writer Tarah Hogue describes Belcourt's painting as not a medium "to elevate the natural world to the status of art, but rather to signal the connection to the natural world as itself transformative." The aesthetics of beadwork offer "histories, stories and lessons" from the land on how "to learn to be a good relation" (Supernant, "Reweaving Relations" 512-13). The painted beadwork, like weft (horizontal) threads, reconfigures the ethical and political tensions of Métis life and reenergizes a fluid and collective way of living in tune with the rhythms of a nourishing relationality (like a water song).



Fig. 3. Christi Belcourt, *Water Song*, 2010-2011, courtesy of the artist.

In *Water Song*, the left and right sides mirror each other, evoking the “symmetry, balance, and harmony” found in Métis beadwork (Belcourt, “Artist Statement”). The symmetry also activates the kinetic force of water that shapes Métis geography, mobility, kinship, economies, and daily life (the “five threads”), providing the rhythms for collective balance and harmony. When we look closely, we see hundreds of vibrant dots that make up the symmetry of the painting as a whole. Water brings us into a collective and open relation with the painting. At the same time, Belcourt’s beadwork attunes us to the labour of being in relation, the individual dots that are a bit disorganized, a bit different from the others. The painted dots depict the labour of beadwork, which requires a continuous rhythm of contact and release, and by discerning the dots, we also discern how to readjust through this labour and how to relate to each plant, animal, and cosmic energy. We experience then a tactile pacing that reattunes us to both the symmetry of water and the minute tendencies that sustain Métis relational ethics. In this sense, craftwork becomes pedagogy. When I look closely at the dotted rhythms, I learn stories of ethical attentiveness, relationality, and respect, shaping Métis traditions and continuity.

At the centre of the painting, we see red maple leaves. A maple leaf is a familiar Canadian national emblem that catches our attention as viewers who may be unfamiliar with other beings in the painting. However, instead of collapsing kinetic energy into this one symbol, when kinship becomes simply a metaphor for “mere semantic transaction” (Martin 229), we are invited to know land through how the maple “draw[s] out relationships” (229) into conditions for moving with kin. The viewer is drawn into a contact zone where looking itself becomes a political and ecological act. To understand the maple—or any being in the painting—the viewer must move slowly, look closely at the patterns,

and ask: What is being offered here? How are these beings woven together? As Belcourt explains in *Medicines to Help Us*, the maple is more than an emblem; it is a medicinal being whose properties can soothe nerves, strengthen the liver, and whose sap, rich with nutrients/vitamins (34), flows in early spring as the tree awakens. This knowledge comes from Métis land-based practices, which understand how water cycles through the environment, within trees and bodies. “Before the introduction of salt,” Belcourt states, “many foods were traditionally flavored with maple syrup,” embedding maple syrup within seasonal practices of “collection and preparation” (33). Thus, the maple in *Water Song* connects us to the temporal significance of watery ecologies of the Métis Homeland, where the kinetic force of water continually reenergizes “the yearly cycle” of “collection and preparation” (33), supporting a sustainable Métis cultural landscape.

Belcourt’s adaptation of Métis beadwork into painting sustains and reenergizes Métis ways of knowing. The strawberry, for example, represents the Métis people’s economic adaptations. As the fur trade declined in the nineteenth-century due to factors such as over-trapping of buffalo and the expansion of settler colonial settlement, Métis knowledge of plants and roots, particularly their gathering and trading, became “one example of the continuity of the Metis history and culture” (MacKinnon 198). Strawberries appear beaded near the bottom of *Water Song*, scattered on the left and mirrored on the right. As “the most widely known fruit in Canada” (Belcourt, *Medicines* 53), the strawberry’s recognizable form draws viewers into a shared ecological understanding of strawberries as sustenance. Yet Belcourt’s craft does not gesture only toward familiarity; it is a pedagogy of ethical relationality. As a non-Métis viewer, I use my ab-be-ab as my own weaving aesthetic, a disorientation that I weave in and out of Belcourt’s beadwork. My discomfort ensures that I do not treat the strawberries and the maple leaf as national emblems to settle into a Canadian identity. Instead, I weave a pedagogy that challenges me to move ethically with the beings I encounter. This process requires me to form kinship by respecting the incommensurability of knowing as an Iranian, while also being accountable for my movement and creation within the Métis cultural landscape. The ab-be-ab condition becomes both a disruptive and generative force in learning how to engage with identity as a process of ongoing relational transformation.

5. My Father’s Contract

Amin Roshan’s *My Father’s Contract* (see fig. 4) depicts a deeply personal yet historically entangled site of memory: the national oil company employment contract belonging to his father, dated 28 December 1968 (Janet Rady

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Fine Art). The contract becomes the conceptual ground and material support of the screen print, literally layered with crude oil and Bakhtiari photographs. As Roshan recounts, he was born in Masjed Soleyman, the site of the first oil well in the Middle East, a city both transformed and toxified by the "discovery" of oil in 1908 (Janet Rady Fine Art). Roshan's family, his grandfather, father, and brother, worked for the company, and they were eventually displaced due to toxic gas releases, a contraction of life possibilities under petro-colonial capitalism.



Fig. 4. Amin Roshan, painter, *My Father's Contract*, 2013, courtesy of the artist.

Roshan's artistic technique begins with collecting crude oil from a valley in Masjed Soleyman, where oil continues to seep from the ground more than a century after the first drills (Janet Rady Fine Art). He then prints this oil onto paper using silkscreen printing, creating a visceral, material connection to the tangled history of the Anglo-Persian pipeline and the Bakhtiari people. The crude oil, used both as medium and contaminant, stains the surface of the paper and visually replicates the environmental degradation, bodily toxicity, and the disruptions to the Bakhtiari nomadic lifeways that accompanied

the industrialization of their land. Yet Roshan's work does not center Bakhtiari defeat. His silkscreen technique transfers the logic of Bakhtiari weaving into an art form: each printed layer acts like a weft thread, knotting together personal memories (i.e., "childhood games with tar, walking over oil pipelines in the way of school"), familial photographs, and crude oil into a textured cultural landscape (Janet Rady Fine Art). We move, then, from goat hair as the material agent of sustainable Bakhtiari sheltering to oil as an adapted material for contemporary shelter-making.

While Belcourt's painting reminds us of the kinetic force of water, Roshan's screen print—the viscous oil marks—evokes the absence of healthy water; we are reminded of ecological destruction. The work invites us to consider the byproducts of petroleum extraction, such as water mixing with crude oil and circulating through surrounding watersheds. Roshan collects this crude oil and reclaims its deep-time properties by printing it onto his father's contract. Both of these materials, the crude oil and the paper contract, become part of a process of attending to past histories to remain accountable to a generative and transformative Bakhtiari culture.

The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) transformed Bakhtiari lands from a place hosting Bakhtiari Black Tents and flocks to a mined oil land of "derricks and pipelines" (Khazeni 112). Bakhtiari tribes, including Roshan's ancestors, were forcibly contracted into the APOC system through waged labour (112), coerced agreements (123), displacement (125) and contamination (129). For Britain, however, the exploration of oil was justified as "an imperial project that would discipline the tribes and induce them to end their pastoral nomadic way of life" (114).⁶ In addition to dispossessing and unsettling Bakhtiari nomads, the 1905 Bakhtiari Agreement between the ruling Khans and the D'Arcy Oil Syndicate also "fractured tribal solidarity" (Khazeni 122-23). Roshan's artistic techniques offer another point of entry into understanding how kinship obligations might wane. By printing images of family onto his father's contract using crude oil, Roshan helps us reflect on how honouring and critically engaging with our kinship ties also requires confronting the material realities of colonial-capitalist systems that continue to shape how we relate to others and labour. This artistic practice follows the weaving tradition of Bakhtiari women. Through the weaving of individual and collective stories onto a conflicting medium, Roshan invokes the ethical disposition of Bakhtiari women, recreating a perpetually fluid collectivity. It is through this ethical disposition of kinship that the artwork resists linear, resolved histories, creating instead an unsettled field of

6. Donald A. Smith's involvement in both HBC as a prominent HBC officer and later as chairman of APOC illustrates the far-reaching tentacles of empire across continents.

remembrance that openly accepts the nuances and tensions of kinship and love for community.

In *My Father's Contract*, Roshan offers a counter-story/memory to resist and refuse absorption into extractive logics. For example, we see the Persian employment contract centred, with its English translation on the left. Yet on the right, there are Farsi words left untranslated into English. From what I can discern, the Farsi text outlines specific work conditions, for example, that maintenance, electricity, and facilities provided by the company would be deducted from workers' wages (my trans.). It also stipulates that if a worker is absent for 21 days without justification, they would be fired on the 22nd day (my trans.). I learned that despite these working conditions and enforcements, Bakhtiari men "still sought to tend to their seasonal obligations" (Khazeni 127). Bakhtiari men showed resistance in various forms, such as workers continuing to drink river water and "forgoing the new facilities for obtaining drinking water" (127). Another example is expelled tribes "interfering with the company's work during winter seasons" (153). Why, then, display these terms only in Farsi? Roshan shows us that craft/art and language are a joined shelter-making practice; the aesthetics of language can create a liminal space where the ethics of sheltering remain open. This liminal space can only be fully entered and embodied by those already rooted, linguistically and culturally, in the distinct movements of kin.

6. More Lessons

I continue to shelter out of place, both as someone displaced from my ancestral lands and as someone sheltering within Indigenous lands. I follow the water lessons of Belcourt's art. I follow the water lessons of Roshan's art. Water in one teaches me the ethics of flow, reciprocity, and mutual shaping; in another, water teaches me the ethics of critically engaging with ancestral history and relations. Both teach me how to transform disorientation into a pedagogy for reorientation. To shelter out of place is to insist on staying with the affective labour of ethical reorientations to histories, lands, and relations rendered precarious by imperial/colonial infrastructures.

I believe that our disorientation in the diaspora should be held open as an ethical adaptation. How do we, as Iranians, adapt again and again so that we remain perpetually committed to collective liberation? What does freedom look like when displaced and living on stolen lands? These are some of the questions shaping our bodily discomfort and disorientation. I reorient myself to place by learning from Indigenous craft practices and how they inspire affective-feminist forms of sheltering. My understanding of sheltering is not a singular "aha" ontological moment (Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take" 8);

it is a continuous, habitual form of learning: a praxis shaped by Bakhtiari teachings on sheltering that informs my ab-be-ab pedagogy for living out of place (physically outside of homeland and a praxis outside the logics of the settler territorial regime).

One example of this practice occurred during the Palestinian solidarity encampment at McMaster University in May 2024, where I participated in a tatreez (Palestinian embroidery) workshop. During this workshop, I learned stitching techniques along with the histories and stories embedded in Palestinian craft. I recognized resonances between Bakhtiari weaving and Palestinian tatreez; they are both practiced by women who interweave stories of kin, culture, and resistance onto fabric. As Amita Khurana, a Palestinian-Indian tatreez artist, explains, the practice of tatreez indicates Palestinian women's "refusal to occupation and erasure," preserving Palestinian memory, identity, and history (17).⁷ Women weavers pass down "embroidery skills and tips from generation to generation" and "transmit stories of their lives in Palestine pre- and post-1948" (17). Participating in this workshop and encampment reinforced for me that craft can teach ethical practices of sheltering grounded in feminist principles. Both weaving and tatreez forge connections between homeland and home-making in diaspora, where women's biographies teach us how to adapt in the present. Craft becomes part of an embodied pedagogy for building decolonial solidarity on Indigenous lands, from one watershed to another.

Water takes me back and forth... through cycles... ab-be-ab... sometimes in grief and sometimes in rage. And then I remember Ohrón:wakon, the Place in the Ravine/Ditch, so-called Hamilton. Below the mountain, I think, and am moved by the running water that cut a ravine into this landscape. I think and am moved to find water again and again, meandering in this deep cut.

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7. Refer to Amita Khurana's article to learn more about Palestinian tatreez and to see pictures of Palestinian dresses and embroidery patterns/motifs.

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