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"A track is a story teller": Narratives of Colonialism, Native Art and the City and the Bush in Marvin Francis's Bush Camp

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**“A track is a story teller”: Narratives of Colonialism, Native Art and the City and the
Bush in Marvin Francis’s *Bush Camp***

In her essay “What about you?” Approaching the Study of Native Literature”

Kristina Fagan explains that the best way to approach Native literature lies in the balance between “understanding the distinctive Aboriginal quality of the literature and resisting any over-simplifying conclusions” (244). According to Fagan, this means looking at the “shared history and perspectives of Native people on their own terms” and paying attention to “their particular complexities whether they be individual, tribal, regional, political etc.” (244).

In my analysis of Marvin Francis’s *Bush Camp* I have attempted to take into account both the author’s Albertan and Cree heritage as well as his own individual interests. Because Francis moved off the Heart Lake First Nation reserve and into the city at a young age (Moses et. al 446), and because he was a supporter of both Aboriginal peoples and the Winnipeg poor (“Marvin Francis Biography”), I sought to attend to aspects of the poem that involved not only Canadian Aboriginal issues but contemporary urban and global issues as well. Francis’s work as a labourer on the Albertan oil lines (Cariou 150) also influenced me to attend more thoroughly to the topics of oil and oil mining within *Bush Camp*, perhaps more so than other issues which may be equally as significant within the poem. Finally, Fagan also stresses the need to see Aboriginal writers not as objects of knowledge but “as producers of theories, philosophies and interpretations” (246); therefore, in the last section of my analysis I attempt to explore how Francis works to change and reinvent colonial ideas and symbols.

“Waiting for the passenger” is the first poem that I have chosen to analyze because I feel that it establishes many of the themes that are built on throughout the text, such as the exploitation of both Aboriginals and the working class within Canadian society and the ties between national and global colonization. The first line “Bandana sweat mood watch some guys/hang rats for the passengers” (16) creates a humorous image of the bush camp laborers subverting authority and breaking up the harsh railway work as they wait to flash their genitalia at the train passengers who are presumably of a higher class. Yet within the humour, Francis also implies the more sinister theme of the railway labourers’ working conditions. The first word “Bandana” alludes to the workers’ attempt to shield themselves from inhaling the toxins in the creosote tar used to treat the railroad ties referenced in the following lines: “creosote black working on the gang.” The next line “John Henry got all the press” (17) references the American railway folk legend and symbol of exploited labour¹, alluding to the fact that a similar exploitation continued on the railways of Canada in the 1970s, but, unlike the story of John Henry which is immortalized in song, it goes unacknowledged into the present time.

The next lines explore the inequalities of economic relationships not just for the working class, but the working-class Aboriginal, Johnny Muskeg. When Francis tells us “he didn’t / ‘get in get rich get out’,” he quotes a phrase that Patricia Nelson Limerick claims is an embodiment of “the attitude of the extractive industry”(100). This phrase implies the tendency of natural resource industry to disregard the damage of its development on lands and peoples, and, after reaping the financial benefits, to simply move onto the next promising area. Francis then counters this phrase in the symmetry he creates within the following lines— “ he was already there/he was poor/ and/ he loved the muskeg”—which

¹ Jeanette Bicknell explains that, although the figure of John Henry has been used to represent many different ideologies, John Henry is primarily seen as “a symbol of physical strength and endurance, of exploited labor, of the dignity of a human being against the degradations of the machine age” (176).

address how Aboriginal peoples have been disadvantaged and exploited by this extractive and natural resources industry, particularly the oil industry in the case of Western Canada². Because of the Government's and development companies' disregard for Aboriginal land rights, Johnny is left to sustain himself by labouring on the very railway which, ironically, facilitates the same industry of extraction that has harmed indigenous peoples and their lands.³

Because Francis suggests his poem is set in the 1970s, Johnny's muskeg, "where the contractor dreams watch the D-9/sink funding money" (17) may refer to Muskeg Lake in northern Alberta located near Fort McMurray where the Great Canadian Oil Sands mine was established in 1967 ("The Oil Sands Story"), while also acknowledging many of the Aboriginal muskeg territories in northern Canada that have been subject to Oil Sands development since the 1970s, such as those of the Lubicon Cree, the Athabasca Chippewa, and, more recently, the Heart Lake First Nations community where Francis was born (Carrou 150)⁴. However, while the image of the D-9 Caterpillar bulldozer sinking into the muskeg specifically evokes the desecration of the Canadian environment and Aboriginal lands, Francis links the image to the simultaneous destruction occurring in other areas of the world during the period of the poem. Francis's specific reference to the D-9 may allude to American's deforestation of Vietnam, also occurring in the 1970s and during which the same D-9 Caterpillar model was used⁵.

² Dean Neu and Richard Therrien's chapter "Ecocide and Changing Accountability Relations" illuminates the bureaucratic mechanisms behind the abuse acted out on Canadian Aboriginal territories and peoples by industrial development and extraction industries. They also examine the new colonialism of "land use" employed by government and multinational corporations.

³ John Eagle examines the CPR's development of coal, oil and other mineral mines in western Canada in his chapter "Natural Resource Policies."

⁴ Melina Laboucan-Massimoand's "Awaiting Justice" examines the history of the Lubicon Cree's struggles with the mining industry and the human rights violations. The Athabasca Chippewa have documented their struggles with Shell Oil on their website, acfnchallenge.wordpress.com.

⁵ Although I have been unable to find any academic source that confirms the use of the D-9 in Vietnam, numerous web sources seem to confirm this fact, such as the Workingman website which relates the history of the Caterpillar model titled "Caterpillar D-9 Dozer History" and the document titled "A Day in the Jungle,"

The poem also makes another link between the Canadian bush and the Vietnam War in the lines “where Agent Orange right of way attacks/anything green” (17). Francis connects the Canadian government’s use of Agent Orange along railway tracks, highways and plots of crown land during the 1960s and 1970s to the American Operation Ranch Hand, in which the pesticide was sprayed to clear rural and forested land as a measure of “forced draft urbanization social policy”(82) and which sought to destroy Vietnamese farmers’ ability to feed themselves and force them to move to cities under US-GVN control (Lewallen 81).⁶ Therefore, Francis’s image of Agent Orange in the Canadian bush suggests that Canada is not so isolated from similar types of oppressive colonial acts such as those of the Americans in Vietnam. Instead, there is an direct parallel between the American government’s forced displacement of rural Vietnamese and the Canadian government’s displacement of Aboriginal peoples through colonial manifestations such as the Indian Act, forced relocation onto reserves, residential schools, broken treaties, exploitation of resources and development.⁷ Francis seems to indicate that the colonial and imperial forces at work globally during the 1970s are also found within Canada, both in the aftereffects treaties and acts, and in newer developments, like transnational corporations’ mining of natural resources, reminding us that we are not post-colonial, but that imperialism continues while the effects of colonization are still playing out in Canadian Aboriginal lives.

The subjects of oil and colonialism in “waiting for the passenger” thread throughout the other poems in *Bush Camp* creating links between the past and the present as well as between national and global issues. The title “push push in that bush” has obvious sexual connotations, particularly for an audience familiar with the refrain from the blatantly sexual

which records the history of the Engineer Land Clearing Company in Vietnam as told by one of its commanders Tom Franz.

⁶ See articles “Toxic 'Agent Orange' sprayed in B.C.” and “Agent Orange calls flood hotlines” for the Canadian government’s use of Agent Orange during the 1960s and 1970s.

⁷ Grand Council of the Crees’ Report, “The Systematic Dispossession of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada,” documents past and current forced displacement of Aboriginal peoples from their lands.

1970s song “In the Bush” by La Musique. Yet while Francis is clearly playfully engaging in popular culture, as he does frequently throughout *Bush Camp*, the word ‘push’ also suggests a forceful invasiveness, while the presence of missiles in the poem, phallic in shape, perhaps allude to a colonial rape of land and culture. In “push push in that bush” themes of American colonialism arise again, but this time in reference to 21st century imperialism, which, Cariou points out, Martin alludes to in the title *Bush Camp* which “shares its name with the “camp” of George W. Bush and his allies” (x). Although “push push in that bush” makes specific reference to the American oil driven invasion of the Middle East with the line “gotta keep up the new nazi oil stock,” its placement in a story about the Canadian bush draws a parallel between American imperialism and the Canadian government’s approval of oil mines and pipelines in western Canada, many of which threaten Indigenous lands and undermine Aboriginal rights (Laboucan-Massimo 17). By connecting the Canadian bush to an American oil-driven international agenda, Francis shows us that the greed for oil and the exploitative measures acted out on land and peoples transcend borders.

The poem, whose lines form the shape of a missile, also features the lines “money bucking movie export/tom crews will be replaced/by cruise tom a hawk” (38), a passage which plays with the interconnectedness of widespread American popular culture and imperial power, suggesting the ability of cultural imperialism to assimilate, conquer and reinforce political dominance. The phrase “cruise tom a hawk,” which alludes to the tomahawk cruise missile named after the Native tomahawk axe, also renders visible the colonial act of the appropriation of Native culture within both Canada and the US, by drawing attention to the non-Native use of Native words to create products in a commoditized culture⁸.

⁸ In North America, Native words have been used to market products that range from cars, to liquor to arthritis medicine.

In the following poem, “Jenny finds a cruise missile,” the missile Jenny discovers in the bush further reinforces the connection between Jenny’s bush camp, which labours to maintain a system that runs on diesel oil, and the colonial power structures, which often involve the use of missiles and which provide the railway engines with their diesel fuel. Through this connection between the railway and the Middle East invasion, both of which have been pursued in the name of western progress, Francis seeks to destabilize Canadian notions of peaceful progress ingrained in Canadian history and mainstream nationalism by pointing out that both railways and missiles spring out of the same colonial structures and fuel each other literally and ideologically.

As *Bush Camp* transitions to Johnny in the city, Francis moves away from the subject of oil and instead focuses on urban Aboriginal issues, particularly the position of Aboriginal artists in non-native culture. In the lyrically titled poem “animal tracks, sidewalk cracks, word attacks, goodbye union jacks,” Francis explores some of the issues surrounding Aboriginal art through Johnny’s experiences as a sidewalk chalk artist. The Flathead painter and curator Quick-to-See Smith claims, “Art was never a separate endeavor in any tribe” but “a celebration of life and a reaffirmation of identity” (qt. in Farrell and Irwin 60). Although many critics have emphasized the problems of generalizing all art made by Native peoples into one category, Quick-to-See Smith’s observation might be one way through which to examine Johnny Muskeg’s engagement in art. Francis tells us that Johnny draws on the slab outside city hall because he “wanted to make sure the tracks he sent Jenny/were faithful to his memories” (52). This suggests that Johnny’s art is something he has experienced intimately, and the lines “His hand guided by bush memories chopping wood/socks for gloves/Of the joy of gasoline birch bark flame” (54) reaffirm the ties between Johnny’s art and his memories of the muskeg bush and his uncle’s trapper cabin that form part of his identity as Johnny Muskeg.

Although Johnny's art is informed by a set of personal experiences, it is quickly labeled as an "urban Cree approach" by a hippie "flash-frozen-from-the-60's usual guy" (52) who gives him a tip jar and sidewalk space outside his store. In creating this scene between Johnny and the wannabe hippy store owner, Francis unveils the tendency for non-native culture to not only define what falls under the category of Native art, but to turn it into an attraction or commodity.⁹ Francis himself notes, "Any Aboriginal artist, whether they are visual, or a writer or any of the other arts must contend with the market's expectations, especially the European market; many want stereotypical art or nothing" (39). However, the lines "Johnny also quick/draw mcgraws pieces of/animal like the crow quill/or other important feathers" (52-53), which pun on the Quick Draw McGraw cartoons that both parody and originate from the culture of the American Old West, suggest a playfulness in Johnny's art and asserts the right of Native artists to make use of the contemporary and dominant culture within their work.

The commoditization of Native art is another issue that Francis addresses in the poem when Johnny is pressured to create his sidewalk art for the consumption of primarily non-Native consumers. Irwin and Farrell suggest that Aboriginal peoples constantly engaged in visual forms of artistic expression long before white settlement; however, as settlement intruded on Indigenous lands, a tourist trade developed for which "items were created according to what would sell, thereby often trivializing the imagery of the community" (61). In Johnny's situation, the patrons' request, "capture my true spirit" (53) and their desire to be portrayed as animals, hints at stereotypes of Native spirit animals and suggests the desire to commodify and essentialize Native art. Yet Francis deals with this subject of commoditization ambiguously because, although Johnny's art has become a commodity for

⁹ Trépanier and Creighton-Kelly who acknowledge that the topic of native art is often "a discussion that is still one that ignores any Aboriginal understanding" (48), discuss this tendency to view Aboriginal art through purely western conventions further in the chapter "through the western lens".

non-Aboriginals, as Irwin and Farrell describe above, the poet does not imply that it has become a trivialization of Aboriginal imagery but, instead, represents a way to speak back to the assumptions about Aboriginal culture and space and allows Johnny to satirize those assumption-makers. Where Irwin and Farrell appear to suggest that this tourist trade coerced Aboriginals into producing art based on non-Aboriginal expectations, thereby leaving them devoid of creative control, Francis does not subscribe to this notion of the Aboriginal stripped of creative agency. Instead, Johnny retains control in his ability to read what the crowd wants and also to subvert their desires: “If he didn’t like them he put their face on a skunk/or a dog licking his ass” (53). Here perhaps Francis is suggesting the possibility for Native peoples to make art within commodified culture while still maintaining the ability to talk back to the expectations and stereotypes pushed onto them by this culture. Furthermore, Johnny also seems to engage in highly political art that has nothing to do with making a profit:

He drew sidewinder snake tracks huge and neon
 leading right up to the local cash your check/mailbox/address
 for the homeless/for drifters/rip off store. (53)

Johnny’s snake tracks could be a reference to the Misi-kinepikw, the man-eating serpent of Ojibway and Cree legend (“Legendary Native American Figures”), which perhaps Johnny or Francis equates with institutions like money-marts that exploit those who are already poor. Or perhaps the neon snake tracks are meant to draw attention to a path that many people in low-income settings must take because of systemic inequalities within urban societies.¹⁰

Regardless, it would seem that Johnny’s sidewinder snake track is a strong political statement that aligns itself with the urban poor and draws attention to the inequalities of what

¹⁰ In “My Urban Rez” Francis mentions money-marts as one of the symptoms of low-income social structures that work to keep the poor poor and that heighten difficulties for low-income Aboriginals attempting to integrate into the city.

Francis refers to as “a hierarchical consumer driven society”(“My Urban Rez” 41). Yet although Johnny’s snake makes it into the paper, Johnny himself never gets famous from his “sidewalking art/[but]just got stepped on once in a while” (54), perhaps, because as Francis points out from his own experience, “contemporary, avant-garde does not sell as well as a painting of Aboriginal deities” (39).

Similarly, when Johnny engages in the deconstruction of “the union jax in unflattering ways...because he had to salute that flag every morning/when he was a kid in a leather strapped residential school for speaking his language”(54), this politically motivated dismantlement of imperialist iconography is not understood or acknowledged by his audience. As outsiders to Johnny’s experience of oppression under imperialist systems such as residential schools, the non-Aboriginal audience cannot recognize the symbol of the flag in Johnny’s art or its significance as a signifier of cultural destruction and emotional and physical trauma. Yet Francis also seems to suggest that it is not Johnny’s duty to explain this art to the public, for he depicts him responding to their inquiries with obscure answers like “*Cuz of that muskeg tea and the spruce gum and all that*” (54). Through this ambiguous answer, which his audience does not care to pursue further, Johnny refuses those within the dominant culture easy access into his experience or a definite meaning to his art.

In his examination of Francis’s first collection of poems, *City Treaty*, Cariou notes that, although corporate branding of Native culture, including Native art, has been exploitative and detrimental for Aboriginal peoples, Francis demonstrates the possibility of re-contextualizing the presence of corporate branding “by bringing it inside the symbolic spaces of Native culture,” thereby allowing a space for its critique while also changing its meaning (156). Francis repeats this re-contextualization in *Bush Camp*, but instead appears to shift his attention to the subversion and transformation of colonial icons such as the railroad and the demarcated boundaries of the city and the bush.

Evelyn Peters notes that during the 1960s and 1970s there was a strong view, particularly in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, that aboriginal peoples belonged on reserves, not in towns, and inner-city deterioration was often linked to urban aboriginal populations (316). After moving off the Heart Lake First Nations reserve, like many Aboriginals, Francis experienced what he calls “the in-your-face racism of the seventies... which led to extreme difficulty in finding a place to rent, employment and acceptance in the urban culture in general” (39). However, in *Bush Camp*, Francis works to destabilize and blur the boundaries that separate bush and city through the imagery surrounding Johnny and Jenny. In the poem “Bush Voices” Jenny, the non-Aboriginal, labours in the bush camp and wanders off the railway tracks into the bush to follow the animal tracks that “lead her to where those bush voices echo” (51), while the Aboriginal Johnny leaves the bush camp for the city from which he sends her “lovingly hand drawn illustrations of/assorted animal tracks” (51) and recreates his animal track bush memories on the urban canvas of the sidewalk. This beautiful symmetry between Johnny and Jenny and the urban concrete paths on which animal tracks are created and the animal track paths that run alongside the industrial steel rail paths which connect the urban and the rural hint at the reconciliation between these two spaces that Johnny and Jenny inhabit and which western thought has separated into a binary of nature, purity, wildness versus civilization, urbanization, and progression.

By destabilizing these boundaries, Francis also draws attention to the ways in which these kinds of divisions and borders, such as the creation of reserves and crown land and the city and the bush, have been used to marginalize Aboriginal people in an attempt to position them within the world according to the government’s desires. Furthermore, perhaps through bringing these two spaces together, Francis is proposing a different way of seeing the land, one that acknowledges the existence of boundaries yet suggests the land they claim to differentiate is intimately connected.

The railway is perhaps the ultimate colonial presence within *Bush Camp* that Francis exposes to criticism while also working to change its signification. While the CPR has often been used as a symbol of national unity in Canada (Eagle xii), its creation also brought Canadian troops and settlers to western Canada, a migration that displaced Aboriginal peoples from their lands (Cariou x). The CPR has also been used by historians to construct “end of the Indians” narratives like Pierre Burton’s high blown rhetorical passage in *The Last Spike*:

The railway, like a glittering spear, was thrust through the ancient hunting grounds of the Blackfoot and the Cree...From a proud and fearless nomad, rich in culture and tradition he became a pathetic, half starved creature, confined to the semi-prisons of the new reserves and totally dependent on government relief for his existence...Thus the CPR became the visible symbol of the Indians’ tragedy (232-233).

This type of historical narrative not only ignores the Aboriginal peoples’ resourcefulness and adaptability in maintaining their culture, but also creates a binary that situates the Blackfoot and the Cree as noble savages prior to the railway and vulnerable subordinate creatures after its construction. Francis’s treatment of the railway keeps its past and present colonial effects in mind, while also challenging ideas such as Burton’s by suggesting the possibility for the railway to become a positive space for community and story.

Cariou notes in his introduction to *Bush Camp* that the railway represents “The Man a.k.a. The System a.k.a colonization” (x); however, throughout the poem Francis rejects a stable meaning for the railway as solely an embodiment of colonization. Instead, he plays with the polysemous nature of words to subtly confuse the meaning of ‘tracks’ and to link the railway tracks and the animal tracks that seem to connect Johnny and Jenny and bush and city. In the poem “Bush Voices,” Francis tells us, “muskeg power creeps to the edge of the

tracks” (48), something which entices Jenny further into the bush where she finds “animal tracks/bush sign posts scream information” (48). Francis’s use of the word tracks seems purposeful, and throughout the rest of the poem he creates an image of the iron tracks and the animal tracks coexisting alongside one another as Jenny moves between the bush and the bush camp. Francis also constructs the ‘track’ as something that communicates information: “tracks are left behind loaded historical markers” (50). Tracks are symbols that can be read like the ones that comprise Johnny’s letter or like the narratives within a story such as Anishinaabe author Louis Erdrich’s novel *Tracks* that Francis mentions in the lines “*U learn to read tracks by looking at tracks in the bush/U read erdrich tracks and wonder more*” (50), but Francis also suggests that tracks possess an oral element in his description of them as signs that “scream information”(48).

The line “a track is a storyteller” (52) adds further significance to the track because, as Carla Taunton states, “in Aboriginal communities the story has long been a vehicle for resistance, employed as a strategy for cultural survival” (qtd. in Trépanier and Creighton-Kelly 20). While Francis may be referring to animal tracks in these lines, the connection he has established between the two different types of tracks suggests that perhaps the railway tracks too hold the potential to tell stories. Not grand national or historical narratives that treat Aboriginal peoples as objects of knowledge or suggest the end of Native culture, but stories about individuals and communities who have been or are affected by the railway, perhaps like the very stories that run throughout *Bush Camp* itself. The presence of the railway in the text seems to represent an attitude winding throughout *Bush Camp* that suggests the potential for transformation—the possibility for objects and ideas that may have been detrimental to Aboriginal peoples to be used in new ways to tell their stories and express new possibilities and realities.

Bush Camp is a complex poem that contains many different threads of story and meaning that weave together issues both historical and contemporary, and because of limited time and resources, as well as my being an outsider to Aboriginal culture, I was capable of addressing only a select few of *Bush Camp*'s many themes in this paper.¹¹ Furthermore, my interpretations of these themes within *Bush Camp* cannot be said to be complete or fully accurate because, as Renate Eigenbrod points out "indigenous speakers never cultivate words for purely artistic ends...their words exist in nature and serve numerous purposes that can only be partially understood when analyzed by academics in the disciplines of English" (72 Round table). Instead, this essay was a process in which I attempted to employ some approaches to criticism proposed by Aboriginal critics and authors, and which allowed me to become aware of some of my own assumptions about Nativeness and Native literatures. I hope that this essay may serve as an example of a respectful approach to analyzing Native literature and allow others to become aware of their own assumptions or learn from any of my oversights.

¹¹ For example, one of the major aspects I have not addressed is Francis's mastery at creating a visual art within the shapes his poems take on page. His careful arrangement of words and white space most likely point to even more themes and stories, yet there was not the space to examine them within this essay.

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