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Representing Wilderness: Community, Collaboration, and Artistic Practice

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in Art and Visual Culture

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Abstract

This dissertation project serves as an inquiry into Canadian representational practices and discourses surrounding colonialism, wilderness, nature and nationhood. The written thesis presented here is part of a multidisciplinary project that also comprised of an art exhibition held at Western's McIntosh Gallery, from June 3rd to June 25th, 2016. This paper, alongside the drawing, sculpture, and videos created for my exhibition, examine depictions of nature and nation in Canada through an analysis of antimodernism, primitivism, and a seeking of the spiritual connected to constructions of "white wilderness" and the spatial imaginary of Canada's colonial frontier. This paper also explores ways in which decolonial art and theory seeks to challenge those same configurations of identity and power, including the development of settler-based decolonizing strategies aimed at unsettling dominant political and cultural narratives.

Specifically in relation to my own art practice, this means challenging the enduring colonial legacies of Canada's settler past and the contemporary representational practices that continue to privilege and empower colonial constructions of space and place. This dissertation project proposes a collaborative-based research practice that operates in relation to issues of the local, domestic, and lived practices of people and their interaction with the environment. As such, this paper examines mainstream articulations of nature and nation in Canada through historicized interpretations of dominant Settler/First Nation narratives and demonstrates how an understanding of this history becomes vitally important when trying to achieve performative, transformative, and collaborative understandings of the colonial experience that continues to define life in Canada.

Keywords:

Wilderness, Nature, Nationalism, Canadian Art, Postcolonial, Decolonial, Antimodernism, Settler Colonialism, Group of Seven, Primitivism, Whiteness, National Parks, Canoe, Grey Owl, Tom Thomson, Video Art, Collaboration.

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The work in my accompanying exhibition features lead performances and collaborative directions by Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson; the work of Cinematographers Clark Ferguson and David Hartman; Sound/Recording artists, Jordan Poniatowski and Joel Alain; and Canoe Dancing by William Brims. Behind the production of the show was an incredible support cast that included technical and production assistance from Western Visual Arts staff: Andrew Silk, Julia Beltrano, and Jennifer Slauenwhite; McIntosh Gallery support from James Patten, Brian Lambert, and Lucas Azevedo Cabral. My work in Saskatchewan would not have been possible without the guidance of Gord Vaadland, support from PAVED arts in Saskatoon, and the incredible network of family and friends that reside there. I would also like to thank Paula Dias from the Visual Arts Department for her tireless and generous support and guidance throughout my time here at Western. I dedicate this project and offer an eternal debt of gratitude to my family, my parents, brothers, and most importantly to my wife Jennifer LaChapelle. And lastly, to my two children Violet and Matthew, thank you for always reminding me of what is truly important in this wonderful life we share.

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Preface

The goal of this dissertation project is to interrogate contemporary relationships to nature in Canada through a study of representational practices that link ideas of wilderness to national identity. My dissertation project includes a research and production methodology that encompasses an intensive studio art practice, written analysis, and a final gallery exhibition. My historical and theoretical research explores ways in which postcolonial and decolonial art and theory seek to challenge configurations of identity and power. This includes the development of settler-based decolonizing strategies aimed at unsettling Canada's dominant political and cultural narratives. Specifically in relation to my own art practice and research interests, this has led to an investigation into the various ways Canada's national identity has been mediated through the representation and reception of artistic images and practices. Chapters one and two of this thesis introduce my theoretical framework, and outline major research questions and literature that I have engaged with throughout the project. Chapter three of this thesis provides an overview of many of the artists, exhibitions, and authors that have greatly influenced the direction of this dissertation project. Chapter four discusses how my artwork operates propositionally in relation to the ideas discussed in this paper, and introduces the various strategies and directions I have employed for the exhibition component of the project. Within that aspect of my submitted dossier, I outline previous and current artworks and exhibitions undertaken during my Ph.D., as well as discuss the working methods and practical strategies inherent to my studio production.

The written component of my studio-based Ph.D. project focuses primarily on how notions of the "primitive," and its place within contemporary constructions of "nature" in Canada, have been largely inherited from the antimodernist movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and particularly through influential artists like Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. My paper offers an analysis of Canada's dominant political, social, and cultural narratives, and investigates how they represent a story of inclusion and exclusion that illustrates the tensions between conceptions of an iconic and a domestic nation. I also show how cultural representations of space and place in this country continue to reflect dominant cultural values that carry forward many of Canada's colonial traditions. Finally, I look at a cross section of artists and exhibition practices that have shaped the direction and theoretical concerns of my project.

Throughout this project, my goal has been to (re)examine what I think can best be described as “Canada’s master narrative” by further exploring the urban versus rural, human versus nature ethos that remains central to Canada’s enduring nature/nation couplet. My research investigates the links between Canadian identity and what seems to be an almost obligatory gesture of deference to an idea of wilderness that is deeply imbedded in not only our colonial past, but also in what a continuation of these ideas might mean towards future participation in Canada’s nation-building project. In doing so, my goal is to challenge the colonial legacies of our settler past and the contemporary representational practices that continue to privilege and empower colonial constructions of space and place. I believe that recognizing how differing viewpoints frame Canada’s wilderness experience is essential to the development of compassionate, and inclusive approaches to articulations of land, economic structures, and social life. As such, finding ways to speak back to the diversity of perspectives and ideologies present within our nature/nation narratives, through the creation of performative, and transformative art works, remains the principle aspiration, both practical and theoretical, of this dissertation project.

Introduction

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

As an artist, my practice utilizes a research methodology of knowledge creation and problem solving that combines studio-based investigations with academic research and writing. Both my academic work and artistic production inform one another through an exploration of the historical legacies and power relations embedded deep within modern concepts of wilderness and contemporary popular culture representations of Canada's nature/nation narratives. My research is based on historical, social, and ecological analysis, and adheres to the principle that the lived practices of people, and their interaction with the environment, are crucial to understanding the social and political character of any particular issue. Both my written and visual research draws upon, as a starting point, an intention to question the enduring effects and lived realities of Canada's colonial history. This includes many of the restrictive and exclusive features of Canadian nationalism, discourses around whiteness, a denial of the colonial present, the negation of class, and a continued indifference to issues of gender and sexuality.

On Nature and Wilderness

The idea of nature that I am exploring in my artwork is complex, and therefore my interdisciplinary research surveys a range of social theory and historical analysis. In the simplest of terms, the idea of nature to which I subscribe can be defined as the site where human and natural economies meet. As a place in itself, nature and the ways in which it is interpreted are profoundly ideological and most often politically charged.

Constructions of nature are therefore never innocent, and when put in the service of the modern nation state, almost always contain disavowals of the various social histories deemed inessential to predominant national discourses. For this reason, within this dissertation, I have tried to utilize a process of historical research, critical analysis, and visual expression to investigate and undermine the relational and visual expressions of nature that continue to draw upon material, ideological, and nationalist agendas carried

forward from colonial concepts mapped onto Canada's wilderness frontier and First Nation communities.

Geographers Bruce Braun and Joel Wainwright describe the idea of a socially constructed nature as an effect of power in their influential essay, "Nature, Poststructuralism, and Politics" (2001). As the authors indicate, "the concepts through which we know nature are deeply implicated in the kinds of nature that we produce: *social nature* is produced at the epistemological/ontological junctures where concepts, actions, and matter get mixed together" (41). Noted environmental historian, William Cronon (1996) describes nature and the origins of wilderness culture as a "creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history" (69). Cronon's seminal call to "rethink wilderness" is based on his analysis of the constantly evolving processes that have shaped relationships to the natural world. As Cronon writes, early associations to wilderness in the West were biblical: the place where Christ struggled with the devil and endured his temptations; the site Adam and Eve were driven to when cast out of the "Garden of Eden." But perceptions of wilderness, as an uncultivated and inhospitable region, began to change at the end of the nineteenth century to encompass romanticized views of the supernatural, replete with the emotional, spiritual, and sacred expressions of the divine. In Cronon's words, "wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good – it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall – and now it was frequently likened to Eden itself" (72).

This transformation has its roots in Western Enlightenment philosophy and doctrines of the sublime. "In the theories of Edmund Burke [1757], Immanuel Kant [1764], William Gilpin [1803], and others, sublime landscapes were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God" (Cronon 1996, 73). To a large degree, sublime aesthetics no longer produce the kind of awe and terror they once did when framed through the Christian ideas of temptation, god and the devil. However, notions of the sublime continue to have traction within contemporary understandings of the landscape, particularly when seen through the lens of conservationist politics and the interrelated concepts of beauty and the picturesque. Expressions of "sublime beauty" are

still used within the semiotics of preservation and protection to frame specific natural spaces as emotional and sacred sites, capable of instilling both respect and wonder, alongside feelings of helplessness, regret, and insignificance. Scholarship surrounding this idea of the sublime is quite extensive (see Monk 1935; Weiskel 1976, among others) and though an in-depth study of this area ultimately exceeds the parameters of my project, it is useful to note that this particular framing of nature, as a venerated, spiritual, and iconic space, has become common vernacular within wilderness discourses and continues to influence illustrations of the North American colonial frontier through both art and literature. Paradoxically, this view continues to be foundational to conceptions of nature framed within the “dominion” of Christian-based capitalist culture, and subsequently regarded as raw material in terms of economic resource commodities linked to neoliberal ideas of progress and growth. For that reason, descriptions of a “sublime wilderness” presents itself to be one of the most influential transatlantic expressions of European colonial philosophy and settlement. Germane to my research interests, is how the transference of this idea has effected Canadian national identity and the creation of the modern parks system, camp and cottage cultures, as well as current incarnations of the environmental movement.

The Roots of Wilderness in Canadian Art

As John O’Brian and Peter White (2007) note in the introduction to their book, *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, “wilderness and northernness figure prominently in Canadian writing as well as in Canadian art” (4). As the authors assert, “it has functioned as a powerful political unifier and helped consolidate the drive toward national sovereignty, as well as to contain prior aboriginal claims to the land” (4). To better understand links between European colonial influence and representations of the Canadian wilderness, my research project explores the work of artists Tom Thomson and the various members of the Group of Seven, and establishes a critique of this work based on an analysis of iconic images of “authentic” identity, nationalized rites of passage, and an interrogation into the ideology of “primitivism” displayed within the work. Vital to my own work is the recognition of how aspects of “primitivism” have been developed through the antimodernist movement of the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To that end, I acknowledge that an important spark for this research occurred within Kathryn Brush's *Mapping Medievalism at the Canadian Frontier* project (2010), including research conducted for that project by then Western University Masters student, Rebecca Gera (2010). Brush's project effectively explored European medieval influences on twentieth-century Canadian artists, squarely placing the cultural and linguistic roots of our current concept of the term "wilderness" within the medieval European imagination.

This research on the roots of primitivist/antimodernist desire situates the contemporary yearning for a return to a sublime "natural" state, within a growing postcolonial discourse that links Canada's visual history to ideas of nature and nationalism (see Baldwin 2009; Bannerji 2000; Jessup 2001b). This investigation has helped situate my own artistic practice and research interests within a discourse that continues to consider wilderness as crucial to the construction of the Canadian nation. This includes breaking down the historical roots of the great paradox within sublime wilderness representations: that nature is on one hand, a place of beauty, solitude, and spiritual regeneration, and on the other, a place of unknown terrors, physical dangers and threatening monsters (which includes landscapes, human inhabitants and animals). Recognizing the roots of this duality, and the origins of collective understandings of wilderness culture in Canada, become important when we consider arguments regarding the impact these visions had on Canadian artists at the turn of the twentieth century (see Brush 2010; Baldwin 2009; O'Brian and White 2007). As much of the scholarship on Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven shows, these artists built a strong identity around the image of an artist *in nature* with brush in hand, easel and board propped up on paint box, trying to capture something both distinctive and sublime in the landscape. Modernity's dueling ideologies of social progress and freedom of the individual, alongside Europe's subsequent developing of antimodernist beliefs, can be seen through the image most squarely associated with the Group of Seven: that of "brave outdoorsmen [sic] seeking visual trophies of the wilderness, forg[ing] a national identity with their bold new painting style" (Weiler, 1985, 5). Undeniably, this view of the Group of Seven and their role as national image-makers has had an unshakeable grip on the formation of a self-conscious national identity

in Canada. As Brian Osborne (1988) suggests, “the work of the Group of Seven came to dominate Canadian’s self images, or at least, the images of their country. An ideology of northern distinctiveness became central to the iconography of Canadian landscape” (172). Today it is well understood that any contemporary artist concerned with landscape art, whether critical of the Group of Seven or not, is necessarily wrestling with an historical canon of Modern art that links nature and nationalism together.

The Human and the Natural

While I must begin here by admitting a sense of personal uncertainty regarding a way to categorically articulate my own subjective position within decolonial art and theory (and I tend to shy away from terms such as ally and activist), my project does start from an anti-colonial or non-colonial view that seeks to undermine systems of knowledge that make distinctions between human and natural economies. Consequently, this project offers critical reflections on how the ideas and theories investigating relationships to nature operate within the communities they attempt to describe. Stuart Hall’s “politics without guarantees” and his writings on Nationalism (see Hall 1986, 1994, 1999) provide an important foundation for discussing these concerns and establishing the theoretical framework I am utilizing for this project. Hall asserts that nation states are never simply political entities; they are also symbolic formations that are created through various systems of representation. Hall stresses the need to understand or even counter universal claims of nationhood and authenticity by engaging with the lived practices of the people, places, histories, and ideologies that make up those nations. Likewise, his assertion of “no guarantees” takes into account the contingencies necessary to understand how different social relations can affect theoretical and empirical studies and assumptions. Hall’s writing on diaspora and the historicized construction of nations are an important reminder that universal references to individual experiences and beliefs, in a Canadian context, rely on a mythologized and nationalized version of the Canadian “people” that more often than not fails to represent the individual lives and experiences of those who actually make up the nation’s citizenry. Hall also reminds us to resist seeing autobiography as the sole determining relation through which to understand “location” within the various social processes that effect ways in which nature is represented.

My Artistic Practice as Research “In Nature”

A significant part of this project has been built outward from a weeklong trip that took place in August 2015 to Prince Albert National Park (and surrounding areas) in northern Saskatchewan. In context of this, it is important to establish that an essential aspect of this research project focuses on the representational and discursive practices that inform contemporary understandings of Canada’s National Parks and their translation into the social, historical, and geographical forces that have helped shape notions of wilderness, nation, and nature in this country. This research and art production trip acted as a generative tool for a major new video work and research initiatives created through collaborative moments, chance encounters, and pre-scripted ideas. Several other artists, support crew, and local guides were invited to create new performance-based works that explored themes of belonging, connection, family history, and a longing to be “one” with (their idea of) nature. This field work utilized a range of methods, including oral histories, (semi) structured performances, non-artist participation, artist collaborations, and independent studio work, in which I compiled and created the core methodological directions for my ongoing research interests into discourses around nature and nation, as well as serving to create the content for what would end up in my final multidisciplinary exhibition of video, drawings, and sculpture. To date, my research (before and after this trip) has explored historical and contemporary issues of pedagogy within Canada’s park system, as well as issues pertaining to nature tourism, spectacle, and the representational practices surrounding issues pertaining to understandings of space and place in related wilderness culture. Building on the writing of Catriona Sandilands (2000, 2005), Pauline Wakeham (2008), Anne Whitelaw (2007), Kevin DeLuca (1999) and Keri J. Cronin (2011), among others, my research explores contemporary articulations of “National Park Nature” (Cronin 2011) and the enduring colonial legacies of our settler past. This investigation into narratives and ideologies championed as both the dominant and “official” histories of Canada necessarily traces the transfer of those concepts onto national imaginaries and artistic productions of the Canadian nation.

Postcolonial and Decolonial

Both the studio production and written components of this dissertation project are rooted within a postcolonial/decolonial discourse that sets out to challenge Western epistemological and ontological positions of knowledge and power within the modern nation state. Establishing a conclusive (or even a useful working definition) of the postcolonial/decolonial position seems to ultimately depend on the vantage point and authorial voice of the particular practitioner deploying the term. Decoloniality, while a centuries old project for Indigenous peoples affected by colonialism, is a relatively new term within mainstream academic scholarship. As such, and until very recently, anti-colonial, or non-colonial research, writing, and activism in Canada by non-Indigenous practitioners has predominantly fallen under the umbrella of postcolonial studies (see Francis 1992; Mackey 1997, 1999). This situation has now begun to shift, and at present both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors, artists, and scholars, appear to use these two terms interchangeably. However, within institutional and academic circles there continues to be a great deal of debate, particularly on the settler¹ side of the equation, as to what actually constitutes decolonial practices and research methodologies

One of the leading non-Indigenous voices that has arisen within decolonial aesthetic circles, Argentinian/American scholar Walter Mignolo, argues that a defining feature of the “decolonial option is the analytic of the construction, transformation, and sustenance

¹ For the purposes of this paper and my current research, I position the term “settler” to describe a non-Indigenous Canadian citizenry and the enduring colonial political structure present within Canada’s history of European-based settlement and contemporary settler-Indigenous relationships. This includes my own position as a white scholar and artist of European-British descent. I do this with full awareness of the many on-going debates within the burgeoning field of critical settler-colonial studies. Many of those actively contest and interrogate both the term “settler,” and specifically who is implicated in these discussions when broadened to include questions regarding who embodies the settler colonial relationship within contemporary multicultural and immigrant populations (see Battel Lowman and Barker 2015; Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel 2014, among others). This literature also shines a critical light on how a Eurocentric settler-based academic academy has attempted to decolonize and Indigenize itself through adopting inclusive policies that endeavor to incorporate Indigenous scholars and research methodologies within their institutional framework. As many authors have noted, while these efforts have been useful as a way to think through settler relations to colonial history, current land claims, and calls for Indigenous sovereignty, they continue to be settler-based (or perhaps even settler-centred) and have therefore continued to problematize, rather than dismantle, the enduring legacies and apparatus of colonial power structures (see Morgensen 2011, 2012; Regan 2010; Wolfe 2006, among others).

of racism and patriarchy that created the conditions to build and control a structure of knowledge, either grounded in the word of God or the word of Reason and Truth” (Mignolo 2011, xv). The decolonial option, as Mignolo calls it, starts from this analytic understanding that such hierarchies are constructed by systems of power and knowledge that privilege and protect traditional and critical theories grounded in ideas of Western civilization and modernity. Mignolo maintains that while postcolonial and decolonial projects share similar goals, they are nonetheless, based in a different genealogy of thought and existence. Postcoloniality, he argues, emerged specifically from the experience of British colonization (of Egypt and India and of the Palestinian question) and as an option to poststructuralism and postmodernity. But decoloniality, Mignolo argues, emerged at the very moment in which the “colonial matrix of power” was being put in place, in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, and subsequently developed as “an option” to the rhetoric of modernity, and still more recently to practices of globalization.² In Canada, an important part of the decolonization process means there is the requirement to develop an understanding of the enduring legacies of colonial violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples and more importantly to recognize how these processes continue to be enacted in present day Canadian society.

At the heart of this debate in Canada is the predominant multicultural narrative that privileges an idea of a foundational European settler-colonial society that has effectively marginalized and assimilated difference within its own pioneering origin stories. Embedded within this settler narrative is a belief that contemporary Canadian society, as it exists today, is the natural and rightful inheritor of both land and power within the modern nation state. Building on the work of critical settler-colonial based authors such as Mignolo, Scott Morgensen (2011), Paulette Regan (2010), and Patrick Wolfe (2006), among others, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) address this belief system in their

² Mignolo defines globalization as system of deregulated markets where profit is equated with growth. As he argues, in the 1980’s “globalization” replaced “development” under the influential theories of Milton Friedman and subsequently institutionalized by the economic foreign and domestic policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. In Mignolo’s terms, “globalization came to be the rhetorical term used to describe imperial designs in the remaking of global coloniality” (Mignolo 2011, 258).

essay, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor”, when they write that “settler colonialism [should be seen as] different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain” (5). In Canada, this belief in settler sovereignty and supremacy has led to a troubling history of official governmental policy including the implementation of the Indian Act, the Residential School System, the Reserve and its related Pass Systems. This legacy continues unabated to the present day through governmental (in)action over systemic problems of inequity, underfunding, lack of adequate education initiatives, and serious reserve infrastructure issues pertaining to clean water and housing, to name just a few key issues.

In his 2011 book, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Walter D. Mignolo calls on Western scholars to perform a “relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality” (11). While this undoubtedly foregrounds a space in which non-Indigenous scholars and activists can participate in decolonial practices, Indigenous approaches to decolonization, such as those described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), tend to position decoloniality within an Indigenous subjectivity that counters and “deconstructs” dominant colonial narratives through the privileging and presentation of Indigenous knowledge within both grassroots activism and academic research methodologies. While Smith does not go so far as to frame decolonization as an exclusively Indigenous project, her reflections on the need for settler-based research methodologies to operate outside and alongside Indigenous research and activism, come with a strong caution for non-Indigenous scholars. Namely, to avoid the adoption of language tropes and institutional control over the positions of authority claimed by Indigenous practitioners (and that are necessarily at the very centre of decolonial activism). This means that non-Indigenous scholars need to be cognizant of the ways research methodologies are institutionalized through academic disciplines and scholarly networks, and of the ways in which knowledge and information is collected, constructed, and represented. This includes recognizing the institutional (and personal) links to colonial oppression and a history of scientific knowledge that subjugates and dehumanizes Indigenous populations, and in many cases continues to do so. As Linda

Tuhiwai Smith writes, decolonizing methodologies need to “provide space for further dialogue within a framework that privileges the indigenous presence, that uses ‘the words’ (such as colonialism, decolonialism, self-determination), and that acknowledges our continuing existence” (6). Smith also argues that in many cases, recognition, respect and protection of Indigenous intellectual and cultural knowledge is not enough, that the social realities, and lived effects of colonization continue to have very real implications for those involved.

On this significant topic, Smith warns that quite often, “sheer physical survival is far more pressing” (4). Issues of perseverance and over-coming, extreme poverty, chronic ill health, addiction, poor educational opportunities, children being forcibly removed from parental care to be “adopted” or institutionalized, and disturbing examples of systemic racism and violence continue to be everyday realities for a great number of Indigenous communities. As a result, the various decolonizing strategies enacted by Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists often have very different motivating factors. She importantly asserts:

The problem is that constant efforts by governments, states, societies, and institutions to deny the historical formations of such conditions have simultaneously denied our claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope. To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve ‘what we were and remake ourselves.’ The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. (Smith 2012, 4)

Smith invokes the metaphor of “choosing to work from the margins,” and the struggle to understand social inequality, oppression, disadvantage, and power, as important tools in the overthrowing of colonial injustice (204). In Canada, this means acknowledging that ongoing struggles within First Nation communities are the direct result of Canada’s enduring colonial history; doing so could (hopefully) force the settler subject (or, in my case, the artist/scholar) to rethink the traditional frameworks relating to how one engages with national history and cultural identity.

In the case of artistic representations of the Canadian landscape, this critical understanding must come with an awareness of the shift within Western postmodern art and cultural studies that has privileged ethnographic and anthropological systems of inquiry and discovery.³ In light of this, and in relation to my own study, it is important to draw upon the critical theory of American art historian Hal Foster. In his essay, “The Artist as Ethnographer” (1996), Foster argues that the (postmodern) focus on cultural difference and an awareness of “location” as understood in the context of cultural studies, can have the reverse effects of the artists’ desired intentions in that it can problematically privilege autobiography over critical analysis. In other words, the artist as ethnographer often manifests a kind of “philosophical narcissism,” in which, Foster implies, we often find our heroes mirrored within our own ideologies. Regarding the kinds of strategies currently operating within the frame of decolonial aesthetics, autobiography is often enacted by non-Indigenous artists and scholars as means of witnessing, and as a platform to position oneself within a framework of critical inquiry. However, as Foster importantly points out, the privileging of autobiography can often lead to a cultural politics of marginalization and opportunistic “ethnographic self fashioning.” This includes contemporary (re)articulations of place and space incorporating romanticized depictions of primitivist fantasy, notions of authenticity, and reaffirmations of whiteness within portrayals of personal relationships in and amongst the Canadian landscape. Therefore questions regarding the development of settler-based decolonizing strategies must go beyond models of analytic and autobiographical self-reflection, to also acknowledge the ever-present tensions and potential pitfalls that exist within the institutional and personal desire to build collaborative relationships and opportunities that make it possible to present alternative ways of knowing and seeing.

In response to the work of non-indigenous artists and (in particular non-Canadian) decolonial authors such as Walter D. Mignolo, Métis artist and scholar, David Garneau

³ “These developments constitute a series of shifts in the ‘siting’ of art: from the surface of the medium to the space of the museum, from institutional frames to discursive networks, to the point where many artists and critics treat conditions like desire or disease, AIDS or homelessness, as sites for art” (Foster, 1996, 184).

(2013) argues that recurring themes in Western art and aesthetics privilege differences that seem “other” to dominant European subjectivities. This, he says, creates a “tendency in decolonial aesthetics to essentialize non-dominant cultural contributions and to find value only in what they are thought to have possessed prior to contact /colonization” (17). Similar to Tuhiwai Smith and Foster, Garneau warns us that if a Canadian branch of the “decolonial” movement happens to be managed by “Eurocentric” Canadians (no matter how reformed), it is at risk of becoming “less like a new turn than as just another cycle in a continuous revolution in Western art, thought, and sentiment since the Romantics; [in which Western artists] disenchanted with the society of their fathers, seek personal and cultural renewal, and re-enchantment, from the work and lives of those supposedly uncontaminated by their patrimony, the Indigenous” (17). Responding personally, as a first generation Canadian, born to British landed immigrants, and as someone married into an Indigenous/Metis family who now has two Métis children, discussions around colonial violence, disputes concerning the dispossession of land, and issues of Indigenous sovereignty versus national dominion and authority, ring particularly close to home for me. As well, as an artist with research interests pertaining to a history of representing the Canadian landscape, and as someone who regularly collaborates with Indigenous practitioners, deeply involved with these issues, I find myself needing to engage with discussions around autobiography and the demands to not only recognize Canada’s colonial history, but also to address and attempt to work through my own potentially complicitous relationship to ongoing colonial beliefs and practices. In my case, this means learning not only from my immediate family and from Indigenous and other collaborators, but also through an active engagement with recommendations and evidence uncovered by important bodies such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and Canada’s recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). It also means recognizing the authority of traditional and contemporary Indigenous knowledge keepers and cultural practitioners here in Canada. As a non-Indigenous artist and scholar engaged in this field, it has been important to recognize that working through issues of decolonization and intergenerational colonial responsibility is often accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty, and therefore demands a methodology of continuous questioning and consultation.

With this in mind, I position this project as a potential working model and critical framework for settler-based decolonial methodologies centered on unsettling dominant Eurocentric ideologies of place and space. This involves reflecting upon my own experiences within decolonization practices and considerations on how “settler methodologies” can acknowledge and disrupt histories of colonialism through invoking historical understanding, direct intervention, collaboration, and embodied performance. Namely, I do this by framing my own research-based art practice as an “embodied site” that attempts to connect academic, artistic, local settler-based, and Indigenous cultural communities with one another. I will admit that this has not always been an easy, or straightforward task, and I don't know if I have always been successful. However, I can say that within both my final exhibition and this written thesis, I have set out to explore the fraught territory that exists between iconic, historicized national narratives and individual localized experiences. In particular, I demonstrate how national dialogues regarding everyday, domestic relationships to nature are most often framed within a questionable and often unsettling semiotics of nationalized iconography, official institutions, and settler-colonial mythologies. To illustrate this symbolic framing, in the following pages, I discuss how notions of the sublime and primitivism were adopted in Canada by Eurocentric antimodernists such as the Group of Seven, and analyze the colonial roots of many of Canada's dominant narratives regarding nature and nation. In doing so, I provide an in depth analysis of the iconic importance of the canoe, and investigate the legacies of both Grey Owl and Tom Thomson in Canadian cultural production and conservation politics. In order to situate my analysis alongside other contemporary art projects, I examine how several recent contemporary art exhibitions dealing with nature and national identity continue to perpetuate settler-colonial logics and belief systems. Further, I provide a survey of contemporary artists who have responded, and in many cases resisted, colonial and antimodernist ideologies. I also offer a brief discussion on how the deployment of rhetorical devices such as satire, parody, and whims of fantasy and fiction, operate within my work to unsettle and deconstruct questions about Canadian relationships to nature and settler history.

Before moving into the core of my discussion, it is important to state that while I recognize that numerous artists and historians have examined the production of what constitutes scientific, ethnographic, and colonial knowledge, the fact that issues of race, ethnicity, religion, and the control of land, continue to underwrite modern Canadian politics and governmental policy development shows us that colonial ideologies are still very much alive and flourishing in Canada. I need also add that throughout this project, my research directions have remained reflexive and reactive to my experiences as both a Canadian artist and politically engaged citizen. As such, given current events in this country regarding issues such as immigration, land use/environmental issues, and domestic politics related to the maintenance and enforcement of settler-based colonization practices, I remain skeptical that issues of reconciliation, redress, and social justice can be resolved solely through processes of cultural recognition and forward-thinking academic scholarship. I do however believe that in order to imagine a productive future for Canadians and the nation state, addressing issues of whiteness, and the enduring legacies of colonialism within Canadian cultural production, remains absolutely vital if we are to have a meaningful and truthful conversation regarding how discourses of nature and nation have come to be organized, represented, and understood.

Chapter 1

Arguments and Orientations

In this first chapter, I explore many of Canada's dominant political, social, and cultural narratives through an analysis of primitivism, modern medievalism, and ideas regarding whiteness. In particular, I focus on the influential role artists involved with the antimodernist movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have had in developing a national identity centered on ideas of multiculturalism and northern distinctiveness.

Antimodernism, Settler Colonialism, and the Group of Seven

In the present moment, it is often an assumption that contemporary artists concerned with landscape-based artworks are wrestling with a historical canon that links nature and nationalism together. In Canada this linkage has become synonymous with discussions of the Group of Seven. Literature on the Group (see Linsley 1996; O'Brian & White 2007; Osborne 1988; Silcox 2003; Walton 1990) underscores the influence European notions of a sublime, romantic, and natural landscape, have had on the Canadian imagination. Such a view includes a preoccupation with the transfer of colonial Europe's conceptual and material practices, ethnographic and scientific belief systems, and their various subjectivities and imaginaries to the Canadian setting. This becomes significant when we consider the connections early twentieth century artists made with the idea of Canada's wilderness as a sublime form of cleansing nature, rooted within a Western epistemology that viewed nature as apart from humans. The Group and their supporters linked Canadian identity to notions of a sublime wilderness full of heroic possibilities, racial purity, and associated with an antimodernist desire to return to a primordial or "natural state." The representation of this "natural state," it should be added, was connected to a spatial imaginary about the colonial frontier that has had a lasting impact on the way Canadian artists have come to view the landscape. In light of this, the following explores these traditional and colonial representations of the landscape and their ongoing influence in contemporary Canadian art and politics.

Lynda Jessup and other scholars of art history and cultural theory argue in the edited anthology, *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience* (2001a), that antimodernism underpins many of Canada's most familiar representations of the national landscape, past and present. Jessup writes that "the Group [of Seven] is still being advanced as representative of the nation as a whole, as something shared by the nation's citizenry and therefore national, because [their art] supposedly triggers national feelings in each member of its audience" (Jessup 2001b, 143). If this is true, it suggests that the spirit behind these antimodernist works continues to run deep within Canadian identity, and warrants careful consideration of why this is still the case. Within the same anthology, Kim Sawchuck (2001) situates antimodernist experience as rooted within the cause and effect relationships of colonialism that manifest themselves through a sense of nostalgia and a contradictory yearning for a "future imbued with the past" (Sawchuck 2001, 156). Fred Myers (2001) similarly views contemporary understandings of primitivism through antimodernism, and goes further to include a Foucauldian critique of colonialism's ideological and representational displacement of the "other," and the result whereby colonial power is understood to be dominant knowledge.

These are important considerations when setting the stage for a discussion of the idea of wilderness that I (and many others) work within. Therefore, within this discussion of antimodernism and primitivism, I rely upon a body of literature that explores the representational links between early settler and First Nations history, Christian spirituality, and the material/ideological and nationalist agendas that have been mapped onto Canada's wilderness frontier. Building on research foregrounding modern understandings of the Canadian landscape within a medieval-inspired European imaginary, I chart the transfer of Europe's various conceptual, ideological, and mythological histories and cultural processes, through Canadian settlement and the development of national identity. To this end, I have built upon Kathryn Brush's catalogue essay, "Reframing Canada's "Wilderness" Icons: Medievalism, Tom Thomson, and the Group of Seven" (2010), and Rebecca Gera's "Imag(in)ing the Medieval: Gothic Encounters in the Literary "Wilderness" of Upper Canada" (2010). These authors offer a

critical discourse that places the linguistic roots of “wilderness” within Gothic literary traditions of the medieval romance to illustrate the profound influence European literature has had on the modern imaginaries of Old and New World settlers, cartographers, explorers, and artists.

In Canada, beliefs and ideologies regarding humanity’s place in the natural world have been formed within a sphere of influence that has included widely held beliefs and representations of primitive man, human dominion over the natural world, and the divine providence inherent to imperial/colonial settlement and the expropriation of land. As such, it becomes vital, in light of the motivation to deconstruct and decolonize our relationship to the land we call Canada, to fully understand the oscillation between past and present and the various methodologies behind the colonial transfer of Europe’s material and ideological culture. Building on the definition of the Middle Ages as an “artificial imagining” of the modern age, author Elizabeth Emery situates medievalism within a postcolonial subjectivity that highlights the need to consider the different methods and ideologies used in the various deployments of medievalism in the New World. She argues that in order to understand the different forms of medievalism, we need to look at the methods individuals and institutions use to construct ideas about the Middle Ages. Doing so, Emery maintains, allows for an understanding of medievalism as a constantly evolving and self-referential process (Emery 2009a). Michelle Warren builds on this idea in her essay, “Medievalism and the Making of Nations” (2009). Warren describes how a sense of place and national history were achieved in the New World through the forces of Epic Nationalism, and its Gothic literary history; Ethnic Nationalism and its denial of cultural hybridity and “foreign elements”; and Gothic Nationalism with its deployment of European medieval architecture as a form of “colonial mimicry.” These forces allowed for a project of historical myth making which encouraged elites from the New World, who were unwilling to let go of Europe’s traditions, signifiers, and precedents, to claim ownership over their new land. This Epic, Ethnic and Gothic Nationalism that Warren, Brush and Gera reference in their medieval/modern histories, can therefore be seen as an attempt to white-wash the collective memory of Canada’s settler history. Warren speaks to this when she says

“nationalist medievalisms occupy a complicated ideological ground that includes fragmented identifications with European imperialism, colonial oppression, the prestige of ancient histories, and the cachet of self-invention” (Warren 2009, 288).

If we follow Warren’s argument to further include the Group of Seven, recognizing them as national image-makers, working in a tradition close to old Christian Europe’s primitivist desire to return to a primordial nature, then we can see that their visual productions had the effect of deleting the collective histories of Indigenous peoples who inhabited and governed the land before European colonization. Whether intended or not, this deletion and the harkening back to a pristine state of nature served to racialize Canadian identity by minimizing the significance of First Nations and also early French settlement. This view is highlighted by Leslie Dawn in his essay, “The Britishness of Canadian Art” (2007), which traces the Group’s links to the British landscape tradition of the “picturesque” and its “codified pre-eminence in the imperial expansion of culture and civilization into the natural spaces of its colonies” (Dawn 2007, 197). Mary Longman reflects on this colonial legacy in her 2009 essay on contemporary Aboriginal art, “Ancestors Rising: Aboriginal art as historical testimonials.” She says that this representational practice was part of a colonial strategy of territorial take-over, termed “cultural imperialism” by Edward Said (1974). This strategy, she says, substitutes the Aboriginal narrative with European interpretation, creating a massive web of myth making. It should be added here, that this colonial framing of Canadian art history illustrates a pitfall that I see embedded within Brush’s *Mapping Medievalism at the Canadian Frontier* project: the transferring of the term “Middle Ages” onto pre-contact Indigenous history. For, as Mary Longman writes, contemporary Aboriginal artists are now setting out to reclaim their history “through a critical analysis of the colonial narrative and assertions of the Aboriginal perspective, such as themes that addressed colonization, stereotypes, cultural appropriation, identity, and the Western Art history [tradition of] framing and exclusion...” (Longman 2009, 100). Given the desire within many First Nations communities to redress historical narratives within an Indigenous perspective, it seems crucial to question the usefulness of framing pre-contact Aboriginal history through a European inspired-art historical approach.

Lynda Jessup (2001a) defines antimodernism as a critique of modernity framed by a sense of loss felt during the rampant industrialization and urbanization of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modern artists, she argues, while not completely against modernity, responded to some of its perceived characteristics of rampant individualism, material progress, and technical, scientific rationality by seeking out the “authentic experiences” embodied in real and imagined idealizations of pre-industrial societies. This “antimodernist” response sought out “traditional” values within notions of community, and, as Jessup says, there was a “quest for innocence, authenticity, and safe, simpler, premodern spaces” (Jessup 2001a, 6). Important to this research into medieval/modern influence, is the role antimodernism had in the rise of such notions as the “Primitive,” the “Traditional,” and “Folk.” As Jessup argues, antimodernism underpins much of Canada’s past and present representations of the national landscape. She demonstrates this through her essay, “Bushwackers in the Gallery: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven” (Jessup 2001b, 130-152), which traces the antimodernist roots of the Group of Seven, and charts their rise to prominence through a collusion of influence, politics, and ideology within governmental, industrial and private citizenship. Kim Sawchuck elaborates on this in her essay, “Modernity, Nostalgia, and the Standardization of Time” (Sawchuck 2001, 155-164), by describing the antimodernist experience as rooted within a causative relationship with colonialism and imperialism. Part of this relationship included the standardization of time zones, which marked “an increasingly sophisticated micro-management of time and space, along with a separation from a localized sense of place” (157). And while she argues that antimodernism was not a search for “timelessness,” it was a search for alternatives, as such, it is hardly surprising to find artists of the nineteenth and twentieth century seeking expressions of “nostalgia” outside the timed march of progress, towards more localized, idyllic, and pre-modern “temporal spaces.” Sawchuck describes this sense of nostalgia, as a “contradictory yearning for a future imbued with the past” (156).

This linking of antimodernism to time, and the inherent contradictions posed within the desire for authentic experience and simpler times, is important here, for it recalls the assertion that it is impossible to view representations of the Canadian landscape without

looking through the lens of the past. As Fred Myers' notes in his essay, "Around and About Modernity: Some Comments on Themes of Primitivism and Modernism" (13-25), the contemporary viewing of "primitivism" is based upon both a Foucauldian critique of colonialism's ideological displacement of the "other," which "emphasizes how such representation traps or subjectifies others and has defining power (as dominant knowledge) over their identities"; and secondly, "a postmodern attack on Modernism itself, its structures, and its codes, as subordinating or managing a threatening 'difference'" (Myers 2001, 14-15). As Myers' notes, primitivism continues to exercise considerable traction in present day society. What this indicates, is that notions of primitivism and antimodernism still run deep within Canadian identity and therefore must be considered, as Elizabeth Emery argues, through the different methods and ideologies that are embedded within their deployment and continued dissemination. By doing so we will be able to understand these processes as constantly evolving and self-referential, which they indeed are. The question remains, however, why, after decades of interventionist actions and debate into Canada's master narrative, is this still the case?

Given the continued presence of European antimodernist art in Canada, and the continuation of many of the social and political influences behind nineteenth and twentieth century constructions of wilderness and nature, it becomes necessary to look at the relationship this art has with current cultural policies in Canada. Lynda Jessup's earlier invocation of "multiculturalism" alongside expressions of wilderness within Canada's "official national imagination" is picked up by Andrew Baldwin (2009), who importantly suggests that wilderness functions as a site of racial and national regeneration with the resulting effect of racializing the Canadian nation as white. As Baldwin argues, this is a process of "spatial imaginary" between the city and wilderness, a thread he picks up in his essay, "The White Geography of Lawren Stewart Harris: Whiteness and the Performative Coupling of Wilderness and Multiculturalism in Canada" (2009). In the essay, Baldwin brings together the concepts of wilderness and multiculturalism as interrelated foundational ideas within Canada's "official" national imagination. He does this through a reading of two popular works by Canadian landscape painter and member of the Group of Seven, Lawren Stewart Harris (*North Shore, Lake Superior*, 1926 and

Hurdy Gurdy, 1913). Through his analysis of these two works, Baldwin builds on a postcolonial discourse that understands nationalized representations of nature within a particular and racialized, historical geography. Baldwin reads the painting *North Shore, Lake Superior*, 1913, through Harris' now infamous comments in the 1926 edition of the *Canadian Theosophist*, in which he describes the Canadian landscape in terms of "a living whiteness" with its "cleansing rhythms" in opposition to the cultural particularity of aspects of life in modern Toronto.

As Baldwin notes, "this understanding of nature in racialized terms allows us to conceptualize nature-race articulations as tied to very specific historical moments and trajectories" (Baldwin 2009, 532). This is possible because as we have seen in the previous discussion around the Group of Seven, their paintings were taken to "represent Canadian national space in originary terms" (536). Baldwin similarly looks at *Hurdy Gurdy*, 1913, through Harris' Theosophist beliefs in the divine and spiritual, and via his related interest in aesthetic formalism, which he maintains, provides insight into why Harris chose to portray Toronto's working class *Ward* neighborhood with such "colorful and vibrant charm" (Baldwin 2009). As Baldwin maintains, this reading of *Hurdy Gurdy*, through the guise of moral aestheticism, allows for the possibility of Harris "attempting to position the 'otherness' of the *Ward* within national space, by conveying his belief of what the *Ward* should look like" (539). Therefore this celebration of Toronto's cultural diversity must still be viewed through Harris' desire to seek refuge from processes of urbanization and industrialization within the sanctity of antimodernist formulations of wilderness space. And while he describes Harris' role in the racialization of nature as being that of an instructional, yet ambivalent player, Baldwin's argument highlights a narrative that is often left out of nationalized institutions such as National Parks, and the museums, history books, and media, which represent "official" and dominant histories.

Lodged within the background of Baldwin's writing is an analysis of wilderness, multiculturalism, and Canadian nationalism offered by Catriona Sandilands. In her essay entitled, "Domestic Politics: Multiculturalism, Wilderness and the Desire for Canada" (2000), Sandilands looks at the framing of the Canadian nation as a "hegemonic

universality” through its ability to form a narrative of geographic and cultural sovereignty that “authentically embodies” the collective identity of its citizens. She argues that “[f]or this authenticity, the nation looks to the past as a representation of origins and shared culture, and to the future as a fulfillment of this originary promise, to take us past contemporary irruptions of difference” (170). Therefore, the desire for the nationalist past (and future) disavows the differences of culture, community and identity. As Sandilands says, there is a nationalizing of the imagination. Of interest here is the connections Sandilands and Baldwin make to the same nationalizing motivations and contradictions made by Jessup, Brush, Emery and Gera; that of a “yearning for a future imbued with the past,” and the parallel representations of Canada’s wilderness as both a cleansing space, alongside that of a threatening, alien wilderness. This framing, she says, “re-articulates an understanding of nation and nature within representational practices.” (Sandilands 2000, 177). In Canada, this is most often articulated through ideas of nostalgia, yearning, and a seeking of the spiritual. Contemporary articulations of nature in Canada must therefore take into account (or at least show an awareness of) a representational history of settlement that includes among other things, a legacy of class, privilege, and expropriation that has effectively racialized the country as white through a process of establishing a spatial imaginary involving civil society and ideas of wilderness. Sandilands argues that this discourse refers back to the founding moments of the Canadian nation. Moreover, she says if Canadians can manage to protect these spaces of wilderness, it will mark the distinctiveness of Canada into the future. To be “Canadian,” she argues, means that showing deference to the wilderness becomes an obligatory act and everyone must pass through this gate of the colonial past in order to be part of the future nation. According to Sandilands, this oscillation between the past and the future bypasses, or in her words, “domesticates” other types of cultural relations to nature as inessential compared to the universal and timeless reverence for the Canadian wilderness. Sandilands shows how such deference to wilderness and the iconic national landscape (the medieval inspired sublime/spiritual version) represents a key national practice in which Canada’s wilderness history becomes a particular historical discourse elevated to the status of a universal national practice.

To understand the ramifications of the colonial transfer of Europe's material and ideological culture onto the Canadian landscape, we need to situate contemporary connections to nature within a postcolonial or decolonial subjectivity. Dominant arguments around the Group of Seven consider them to be respected national image-makers who constructed ideological connections to place and space. If we add that they were working within an antimodern/medieval inspired tradition linked to Christian Europe's primitivist desire to return to a primordial nature, then we can see that the emptying out of social relations in their works, suggests a process that obscures understandings of difference. As constructions of power, their visual productions had the effect of framing nature as empty, feminine, and wild, which in turn (and perhaps ironically) has paved the way for one of the dominant manifestations of how nature is seen today: as cash-generating and tied to modern/industrial notions of progress and expansion linked to the global marketplace and investor led policies on stewardship and exploitation. If we follow the arguments made by Baldwin (2009), linking wilderness mythology and multiculturalism in Canada to ideas of nature framed within particular, ideological, and racialized historical geographies; and Jessup (2001) who traces antimodernist roots of the Group of Seven through a rise to prominence aided by a collusion of influence, politics, and ideology within government, industry, and private citizenship; then it becomes necessary to look at the extent in which these colonial views of nature, country, and the north, continue to figure predominantly in the operation of Canadian nationalism.

Jessup mentions that the continued relevance of Canada's settler/colonial past creates a curious relationship with current cultural policy in Canada, "which has moved away from the European-based ideas of the state as the political expression of a homogeneous national culture" (144). However, conventional notions of an inclusive and multicultural Canada fall out of line with mainstream understandings of how Canada's multicultural policies relate to First Nation peoples, and their rights to land, hunting, fishing, and government funding. As Eva Mackey (2013) describes in her analysis of the Federal Government's apology for the infamous Residential School System, the language (and legal history) used in government policy towards First Nations is constructed around the

cultural aspects of Indigenous identity, and not around the social and political processes that involve treaty law and the redress of past genocidal practices relating to land acquisition and control. This de-linking of First Nation culture to land-based material practices, serves she says, to further confuse the legal and political position First Nation identity holds in mainstream Canadian consciousness. As Mackey says, “within the official multicultural policy framework of Canada, in which all cultural groups other than the founding and First Nations are seen to be equal (and individual) in their difference, [this framing] constructs Aboriginal people primarily as one of the many bearers of a distinct culture within a multicultural nation, rather than as sovereign nations with [distinct] political and cultural rights” (Mackey 2013, 54).

With the emphasis placed on culture as opposed to legal standing, Indigenous peoples become just another culture or “ethnic” group making demands on the crown. Quoting sociologist Andrew Woolford, Mackey writes that, “the essentialized identity of the First Nation ‘other,’ ... presents itself to the liberal mindset of the ordinary citizen as a relationship of special treatment whereby one group, based upon [its] ethnic identity, receives privilege that contradicts the accepted discourses of equal rights and responsibilities” (54). This view, she says, “mutes the particular historical and current status of First Nations as *First Nations*, as sovereign nations that make nation-to-nation agreements and treaties as equals” (54). Recognizing First Nation sovereignty or an obligation to uphold Treaty agreements also contradicts the widely held belief that Canada’s Settler culture, with its Eurocentric/colonial history is the natural and rightful inheritors of Canadian territory; a belief that relegates First Nations culture to that of “origin” story and the shared heritage of all Canadians. One does not have to look far within Canada to see manifestations of this particular ideology. Misunderstandings of treaty rights within commentary surrounding ecological activism, hunting and fishing rights, and land claim challenges by First Nation peoples, represent a common belief in the rightful transfer of wealth and equity from First Nations to the people of Canada, and in doing so, erases a history of conquest, displacement, and genocide. Furthermore, the celebration of Boy Scout/Summer Camp culture, Grey Owl, Bill Mason, and the symbolic reverence of the Canoe, reflect a national narrative that represents a dominant

belief in an unbroken line of inheritance from First Nations peoples to the citizenry of present day Canada.

Notions of Primitivism, Whiteness, and Early Spiritual Roots

Notions of primitivism and whiteness need to factor heavily into any discussion of the antimodernist movement. However, I would argue that just as important to these discussions are the implications and significance of early formulations of a conception of “spirituality” found in wilderness representations and antimodern ideologies. Therefore, in addition to acknowledging the antimodernist framing of Canada’s wilderness as a sublime nature full of heroic possibilities, it is also important to trace faith-based medieval/modern inspired belief systems within representations of the “primitive” desire to return to a primordial or “natural” state. While not exactly a blind spot in the literature, the Group of Seven’s spirituality and their practicing of Theosophy, though often mentioned, is rarely interrogated within art historical texts. As University of Toronto-based Theologian, Michael Stoeber, writes in his essay, “Re-Imagining Theosophy through Canadian Art: Theosophical Influences on the Painting and Writing of Lawren Harris” (2012), “theosophy provided a religious framework within which these artists could understand their own spiritual experiences and aspirations” (82). Theosophists take their influences from Hinduism, Buddhism, Neoplatonic, and Western esoteric ideas (Stoeber 2012) and believe in multiple planes or levels of existence. Theosophy makes connections between the physical and spiritual worlds, with the aim of raising one’s mind, emotional desires, and physicality through a deeper and divine connection to the natural world. The movement gained a strong foothold in the arts in the early twentieth century, and besides its effect on Lawren Harris and several members of the Group of Seven, it was also known to have influenced Paul Gauguin, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian, among others. Theosophists believed artists “possessed unusual potential in intuiting spiritual truths and expression through [their] artistic mediums” (Stoeber 2012, 85). As Harris himself says, the Group of Seven’s project was to “represent the essence of the Canadian landscape, the underlying principles or forms of the natural phenomena, her aspect, moods, and spirit” (Harris 1928). In his 1933 essay “Theosophy and Art,” Harris goes on to describe beauty as “the underlying, informing,

spirit of the universe...primarily, an elevating, transforming and unifying power, perhaps the greatest there is.” (Harris 1933, 130-131). As Stoeber describes, “artists like Harris and Kandinsky actually claim through their paintings to convey spiritual realities and mystical experience that transcend the distortions and necessities of the social and material worlds” (Stoeber 2012, 97). Inasmuch as I acknowledge that it is important to respect these artists’ beliefs and the sincerity with which they acted, and would not offer a wholesale condemnation of all aspects of Theosophy, it is important to note that the movement eventually came under serious charges of fraud and suspicion, and the principle proponent behind the popularity of these ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Madame H. P. Blavatsky, was accused of plagiarizing many of the movement’s foundational texts.

Grounded in the natural and spiritual worlds, and derived primarily from Buddhist theology, Theosophy, much like other neo-pagan practices such as the European-Naturalist inspired Wicca movement, remains rooted in a Christian cosmology that bases ideas of connection to the natural world within a process of restoring human nature “to its original glory,” or in a Christian context, “a perfect oneness of union with God,” (from *Introduction to Theosophy*, book iv. pp. 407-412, &c. as quoted in *Theosophy Notes and Queries* - N°74, May 30. 1857). George Boas’ 1966 book, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages*, makes a strong argument for early formulations of “primitivist desire” to be found within biblical translations around *The Fall of Man*, including an unconscious desire to return to the *Garden of Eden*. Boas traces this belief system through European history from early Paganism to projections of the “Noble Savage” seen so often in the representations of historical colonial settlement. Alongside this, Walter Mignolo (2011) and Kim Sawchuck (2001), both argue that the colonization of time was created within the modern invention of the Middle Ages, and the colonization of space through the conquest of the New World. However, as Mignolo argues, this conflation of modern understandings of place and space with religious and spiritual beliefs has locked ideas of the North American landscape within a structure of control and management that is wrapped up in a complex system linking ideas of nature to Western theology and a secular cosmology. Given that aspects of primitivism continue

to have considerable traction in present day society, and in particular, remain prevalent in contemporary art practices, this discussion of primitivism and early European theology within my thesis provides the basis for my exploration of race, and specifically ideas related to the construction of whiteness within Canadian cultural production, both historically and in the present. This includes the institutions and artistic projects that continue to connect an idea of national identity to a concept of wilderness rooted in settler-colonial ideology and European antimodern spiritualism.

The primitivist desire for release from the “perceived alienations of urban life” (Ekers 2010), brings up a troubling discourse within modern primitivism. As Colin Rhodes (1994) notes in his study on the development of primitivism within modern art practice, artists seeking alternatives to modern culture challenged Europe’s implied dominance by questioning the superiority of one culture over another (see also Baker 2000; Ray 2001; Walters 2010). What is most telling about Rhodes’s study is his assertion that the very act of “appealing to the primitive,” even if in positive terms, reinforces conventionally held beliefs and rationalizes colonial justifications of the dominance of modern culture (in this case, European) over primitive societies, most often defined as opposite, inferior, and hostile. This discussion is picked up by Michael Ekers (2010) in his study on the cultural production of nature in Canada’s forestry/treeplanting sector, in which he discusses the problems with modern primitivists “going tribal” in wilderness spaces, but then afterwards returning to their “normal,” albeit slightly rejuvenated, selves. As Ekers describes, primitivism acts as an escape from whiteness through “choosing to adopt (and by implication, at any time choos[ing] to discard), the ways of the ‘tribal,’ the ‘natural,’ and the ‘less sophisticated’ peoples on Earth” (79). As Ekers indicates, the problem with modern primitivists is that through the transformational process of a rejuvenated sense of self, a “regeneration of whiteness is achieved through an individual ‘going tribal’ and afterwards returning to their normal life a more complete and whole person. In this respect, primitivists tend to reinforce [the idea of] white superiority even as the individuals ‘go native’” (80). Ekers’s point is an important one, and should act as a cautionary tale for all artists working around relational issues concerning wilderness, nature, and community, in this country and elsewhere.

An interesting case regarding the foregoing was an exhibition from 2010 at Toronto's Power Plant gallery, called *Adaptation, Between Species*. This show about "becoming animal," through an exploration of "encounters and exchanges between species," was surprising in the fact that it had very little Canadian representation, being made up almost entirely of European artists, and had absolutely no Indigenous participation. Instead, the show contained artists who channeled models of nature spirituality and Indigenous appropriation to gain the level of connection and authenticity regarding the natural environment that is often mythologized in Canada through the popular legacies of artists such as the Group of Seven. The curatorial statement by Helena Reckitt, "Between Species" (2010), was heavily influenced by the Wicca-inspired artists Fastwürms, as well as by the European philosophy and theories of Derrida (2002) and more importantly Deleuze and Guattari's treatises on "becoming animal" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Those authors are cited for their critique of capitalist consumer culture, and proposed as catalysts for change, communion, and extension of human identity. Why this connection is significant, and definitely a topic of interest within my research, is that even within this particular reading, there remains a heavy reliance on the notion of the "primitive," which in this case is dependent upon an original and pristine state of nature somehow absent in the contemporary world. Framed this way, Reckitt's curatorial dependency on the particular authors and artists foregrounded in the exhibition, set alongside her abject failure to include Canadian Indigenous artists already working with similar subject matter, shows that significant elements of Canada's art culture continues to traffic in (or at least remain woefully ignorant of) colonial frameworks that favour ideas of primitivist fantasy, appropriation, and transgression.

The prevalence of this kind of thinking is further substantiated by a very brief survey of much of Canada's current landscape-based artwork, where we still see the celebration of non-Indigenous artists appropriating the Shaman role. Two obvious and famous examples would be self-professed shaman artists, Michael Dudeck, recently nominated for Canada's prestigious Sobey Prize (2014), and former General Idea member, A.A. Bronson, who in the discourse around his own practice and the exhibition *School for*

Young Shamans (2008) is noted as referring to himself as a Shaman and describing German artist Joseph Beuys as the “patron saint of shamanism” in the art world (Beuys will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three). As well, if more indirectly, we see groups like the Fastwürms, Twelve Point Buck, The Royal Art Lodge, not to mention Emily Carr or even Jack Shadbolt, incorporate pedagogical elements deeply rooted in what I believe can be successfully argued as a primitivist/antimodernist understanding of our place in nature. Moreover, in Canada we continue to import and celebrate Shaman artists as influential role models. Marcus Coates from Britain is the most prominent example, having received much critical success here in Canada through a recent exhibition at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (2012), a residency in Banff, as well as being a featured artist in the previously mentioned 2010 show at the Power Plant. Unfortunately, these works join a long line of Indigenous appropriations and romanticized naturalist understandings of nature within Canadian cultural production. As Daniel Francis describes in his book, *The Imaginary Indian*, “people who appropriate an Indian persona and claim to have special insight into the Indian way of life are called Imaginary Indians and Plastic Shamans.” These shamans, he argues, adopt native identities in order to speak with greater authority and recognition and are easily accepted as they “conform to the image of the Indian held by the White world” (109). Francis points to “Grey Owl” as one of Canada’s most infamous and celebrated “Imaginary Indians.” Grey Owl’s real name was Archie Belaney. He was an English immigrant with no First Nations ancestry who adopted a Native persona to help sell his books and spread his message of ecology and stewardship of the Canadian forests in the early twentieth century.

Understanding Grey Owl’s legacy is important to my project as he operated within the same time and space as Tom Thomson, and was instrumental in shaping the public perception of both Indigenous identity and also garnering support for Canada’s burgeoning national parks system. Grey Owl managed to tap into a long-held tradition of mythologizing wilderness spaces, and his tales of advanced Beaver societies and spiritual kinship within Canada’s vast wilderness were warmly received in post-Industrial England as well as in the increasingly urbanized communities of Canada. His books, films, and

live performances employed a politics of place and space deeply indebted to European notions of the sublime, the Gothic Romance, and a “return to Eden” spiritualism centered on creating and protecting ideas of wilderness conceived as pre-contact, empty, and sacred. Grey Owl’s message of ecology continues to inspire a great many Canadians and is still, for many, considered profound because they continue to see it as coming from the “authentic” voice of an Indian (or in terms of the 1999 Richard Attenborough/Pierce Brosnan film, *Grey Owl*, “a man who became what he dreamed”). As Francis notes, even when people find out Grey Owl was not of First Nations ancestry, “the general opinion seems to be that what he stood for was far more important than who he was – and this being the case, so what if he wasn’t really an Indian? What mattered was his work as a writer and as a tireless promoter of wilderness preservation. As for the rest, it seemed a harmless enough hoax” (137). I should note here, that Grey Owl’s legacy in Canada, as will be discussed throughout chapters three and four of this thesis, is the subject of a significant portion of the visual production and exhibition components of this dissertation project.

To fully understand oscillations between the past and present in Canadian wilderness discourses, and the appropriation and blending of Christian and Indigenous spirituality, we can look to the continued significance of the canoe and its symbolic role in Canadian culture. Next to Tom Thomson (and perhaps Pierre Elliot Trudeau), arguably the most famous figure linked to canoe culture in Canada is Bill Mason. Mason has become synonymous with the canoe in the Canadian imagination, and his work, as author and filmmaker with Canada’s National Film Board, have made him a household name within outdoor recreation circles. Mason’s Christian upbringing and reverence for nature reflect many of the beliefs championed by the Group of Seven and Grey Owl, as outlined in the preceding pages. As Misao Dean writes in her insightful book, *Inheriting a Canoe Paddle: The Canoe in Discourses of English-Canadian Nationalism* (2013), “Bill Mason felt that the goal of his work and [his film] *Waterwalker* in particular, was to overcome the alienation of white Canadians from the land” (124). Building on the writings of Terry Goldie (1989), who suggests that “white Canadians respond to their alienation from the land through appropriation, impersonation, and incorporation of indigeneity,” Dean

argues that Mason's appropriation of the canoe creates a link with the landscape that has come to symbolize the nation, and that through his efforts "to assume the point of view of First Nations peoples [in his films and books], Mason [enacts] Goldie's practice of impersonation, and through his trying to become indigenous to the land itself, he practices Goldie's ideas of incorporation, swallowing up the rights of First Nations and their cultures within a new, ethnically, and environmentally responsible Canada" (Dean 2103, 125). As discussed earlier, this incorporation of First Nations culture into nationalized discourses of wilderness representation, transforms the land into a shared heritage for all Canadians. But, as Eva Mackey writes in "Becoming Indigenous: Land, Belonging, and the Appropriation of Aboriginality in Canadian Nationalist Narratives" (1997) this "enables the culture of the colonized to be appropriated by the colonizers and put to service in building national and international identity" (160). What makes Mason relevant to a discussion on the roots of spirituality in Canadian wilderness discourses is his "search for a less restrictive and more celebratory way to express his faith, [which] puts a particular spin on his nostalgia for a mythical time and place when nature and humans lived in harmony" (Dean 2013, 130). As Dean goes on to quote, the wilderness for Mason is a work of art in itself, "a creation that celebrates the Christian God who made it" (130).

Bruce Erickson builds on these ideas in his recent book, *Canoe Nation: Nature, Race, and the Making of a Canadian Icon* (2013), in which he writes on the importance of the canoe in Canadian cultural production. Erickson, similar to Myers (2003), places his (postcolonial) critique of a gendered and sexualized wilderness history within innovative arguments that use the canoe to build on Foucault's notion of bio-power. In doing so, Erickson sees the canoe and its contemporary appropriation within mainstream "leisure culture" as a direct instrument of colonial expression and an antimodernist/primitivist inspired cultural assimilation of Canada's native populations. In connection to my own work, Erickson's critique unravels the canoe's links to European settlement, and destabilizes the canoe as a cultural icon. In doing so, he questions and "queers" the myth of the canoe as a celebrated symbol of the Canadian landscape. As Erickson is keen to point out, much of the literature in Canada that reflects the Indigenous origins of the

modern nation state, point to the canoe's importance in opening up new lands to European exploration and settlement. In the kindest and gentlest versions of this history, the canoe was a gift to early French settlers who then used it as the necessary vessel in which to travel the waterways of the otherwise unmanageable Canadian terrain. Such early French "diplomacy" created a unique social dynamic that many authors and historians attribute as the earliest versions of multiculturalism in Canada (see Jennings 2002; Ralston Saul, 2009; Osler 2014). Of course depending on whose history you are reading, after this early version of diplomacy, the English settlers either adopted this French style and accepted Native culture and went on to build a prosperous nation (Jennings, 2002, *and most of Canada's public school history textbooks*), or turned it upside down through a systematic and thorough policy of cultural assimilation and attempted racial genocide (see Erickson 2010; Mackey 1997, 2013; Wakeham 2010).

As the illustrations above hopefully show, understanding the roots of primitivism, whiteness, and nature spirituality within Canada's nature/nation discourses becomes vital if we are to fully understand and participate in the politics, ideologies, and particular histories at play within Canadian wilderness representations. And while acknowledging that many artists have begun to look critically at the colonial legacies and current multicultural practices situated within Canadian culture, thus challenging many of the presuppositions of Canadian identity expressed in visual representations of Canada's historical landscape, it remains clear that tensions between the iconic and domestic nation, and a future imbued (with a particular version) of the past have become deeply imbricated within Canada's nature/nation discourse. As such, we continue to see new generations of Canadian artists working with issues related to "wilderness" and the "modern primitive" in ways that carry on distinctly traditional, and colonial representations of the landscape. Yet, given the history of interventionist artworks by artists such as N.E. Thing Co., Michael Snow, Joyce Weiland, Rebecca Belmore, Adrian Stimson, Lori Blondeau, Dana Claxton, and Jin-Me Yoon, among countless others, and their resulting effects of rendering the asocial landscapes of influential artists like the Group of Seven as particular rather than universal, we must ask why the contemporary movement to "nature" continues to involve the adoption of non-white "primitive," pre-

modern lifestyles and representations. In other words, given the current postcolonial/decolonial discourse prevalent in present-day Canadian society, why do contemporary representational practices continue to privilege and empower a symbolic use of nature that for many artists, young and old, has come to emblemize a romantic lament for an earlier, unspoiled time? The antimodernist literature that I cite within this study importantly details the links between influential modernist art production and the imprinting of colonial constructions of space, time, and spirituality on modern understandings of wilderness, nature, race, and national identity. This influence continues to reverberate quite problematically within contemporary artistic practices in Canada today.

Chapter 2

Contemporary Articulations of Nature and Nation

In this chapter I offer an analysis of cultural representations of space and place in the context of my attempt to understand concepts of entitlement, colonial settlement and the dispossession of land. I also draw upon recent debates within postcolonial and decolonial theory to explore and understand the pervasive political stakes that influence Canada's colonial traditions and speak to its possible futures.

Constructions of Place, Space, and White Wilderness

The ideological investment in nature and nation, and the various disavowals through which this investment is enacted, have become the subject of inquiry for scholars and artists from a wide range of disciplines. Within my own studies, albeit largely focused on the history of representation within art and visual culture, the subjects of nature and nation are situated within a constellation comprised of anthropology/ethnography, cultural studies, sociology, cultural/environmental geography and media studies. In this light, my research tracks the establishment of a comprehensive colonial framework that continues to define constructions of nature and wilderness in Canada. Pertinent to my studies are issues of multiculturalism; the colonial denial and subsequent (re)discovery of Indigenous influence; as well as a fragmented regional politics of place and space. Other influential areas of research framing discussions on the construction of wilderness narratives in Canada, do so through a genealogy of Queer theory, and gendered politics, via the sexualization of the landscape. Such work explores how hetero-normative and feminized representations of nature have acted to legitimize the domination of nature through the performance of masculine explorations and domestication of land, territory, and people (see Ekers 2010; Erickson 2010, 2014; Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010). That research plays an important role in my understanding of the presence of a gendered and sexualized discourse present within representations of the Canadian wilderness. Not only does this foreground the site of settler based masculinity explored in

my own work, but it also opens up a space where new forms of femininity and sexuality can be established. Within my own research and artistic production, such discussions create a back drop for my investigations of masculinity within the “wilderness experience,” and help situate my work within a context involving distinct histories of gender and race relations - in particular, where white men, unencumbered by societal restraints, are encouraged to get in touch with their “primitive” masculine identities. Regarding my interests, these studies describe ways in which colonial representations of nature effectively delete the collective histories of Indigenous peoples, whether intended or not, which has resulted in the imprinting of an enduring colonial viewpoint that racializes the Canadian landscape as white, and also influences ideas of national identity through expressions of wilderness as a site of racial and national regeneration.

In a Canadian context, this colonial framework positions wilderness as an empty space apart from (urban) society, waiting to be filled with cultural content. In this regard, the idea that wilderness is constructed through ideology is important when we consider that dominant national narratives almost always discourage complexity and heterogeneity with respect to various other social histories. Theoretical accounts on the constructions of nature-based representations of Canadian life provide a compelling means of understanding how views of the Canadian landscape are constructed and produced through a variety of social processes. For example, Anne Whitelaw’s (2007) situating of her analysis of Tom Thomson within cultural studies, emphasizes “location” and also the experiential element of an artist’s biography as important tools in understanding articulations of landscape and nature representations in Canada. This view is particularly useful when navigating modernist narratives surrounding the formation of Canadian identity, which are often constructed according to a perceived measure of “authenticity” based on first-hand experience in nature. This experience, Whitelaw says, provides an alternate and engaged interpretive framework that disrupts the hegemonic assumptions of traditional, “rational” modes of thought, and its claims to offer a balanced, factual, and objective perspective. But as Whitelaw attests, the trouble with privileging autobiography over critical analysis is that it assumes the universality of the “authorial voice.” As a result, many authors within cultural studies have tried to show an awareness of the

importance of situating oneself as “a speaking or writing subject” located within, among others, “a politics of identity, autobiographical narratives as frames of analysis, and a concern with place defined either geographically or culturally” (195). As Whitelaw argues, this focus on location is essential as it is concerned with “foregrounding the material relationship of the speaking-writing subject to the object of analysis” (195). Building on seminal work by Stuart Hall, Whitelaw quotes that author to note that the “practice of representation always implicates the positions from which we speak or write from...” (196). Autobiography, therefore, maps relationships to a place within an existing community deployed to provide specific articulations of social location. This social location, she argues, is the place where one is located in relation to an ostensible geographical and intellectual centre. In other words, when considering spatial location, issues of diaspora, class and critical geographies emerge to provide a more complex mapping of the ways in which identity is experienced. Citing Jody Berland, Whitelaw contends that a narrative of Canadian intellectual history is needed to unpack our received understanding of space. “The production and regulation of Canadian culture [and heritage] through the formulation of federal policies and the institutions to manage them were instrumental in creating a space within which culture and cultural practitioners could exist” (203). But within such a space, she warns, we must pay attention to the “location” of our voice.

In his essay, “In the Shadow of Whiteness: The Consequences of Constructions of Nature in Environmental Politics,” Kevin DeLuca (1999) explores the idea of a naturalized and nationalized nature through an analysis of the constructions of wilderness within the environmental movement. DeLuca describes the Canadian wilderness as essentially “white, strongly ideological, understood as non-human, untouched and a storehouse of resources that circumscribes and sustains humanity” (DeLuca 1999, 219). Building on the dichotomous relationship of nature within Western Judeo-Christian culture, that positions it “on one hand as a cursed, desolate, arid wasteland, and on the other, as a sanctuary, a place of refuge, and religious purity” (220), DeLuca understands wilderness not so much as sacred, but foundational to individual and national identity, essentially a cure for the effects of civilization. DeLuca’s insightful essay is important to my research as it builds

on ideas around the origins of the term “wilderness” as a concept of the medieval European imagination, mentioned earlier, that is carried forward via the literary conventions of the Gothic novel and early European settlement in North America. Furthermore, this framing of nature according to ideas of primitivist/antimodernist desire, situates our understanding of nature and the desire to protect it within a longing to return to a sublime “natural” state. DeLuca examines the writings of revered naturalists, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and John Muir (1838-1914), and attributes their shared philosophy of “wilderness being the source of sustenance for civilization” as the idea in which grounds the ontology of Western epistemology. According to DeLuca, this philosophy situates nature as a space in need of both human stewardship and protection and has subsequently “reinforced [the idea of] nature as an object of humanity’s subject” (223).

To further his point about the need to challenge ideological constructions of nature, he quotes Judith Butler, who writes that in popular terms, “to question the political construction of such a meaning of the ideograph of nature is to remove nature from the epistemologically given and make it a site of political struggle” (Butler, 1992, 14). Questions concerning who constructed this ideograph (symbolic nature), why, and upon what exclusions it is founded, all come to the fore here. This also opens up possibilities for potential redeployments. As DeLuca suggests, this points to one of the main problems with historicism, as we are conditioned to most commonly historicize that which has been universalized and naturalized. “White Wilderness,” as DeLuca calls it, highlights the history of the term: from the Bible, to the Enlightenment, the Romantics, and then to mainstream environmentalists in the twentieth century and beyond. “White Wilderness is a social construction with roots in race, culture, and class that works to mark social distinctions and affirm hierarchies” (228). DeLuca’s study importantly points out that within mainstream conservationist discourses, “there is an assumption that nature is white nature - wilderness, and that political efforts must be directed toward saving nature for all of humanity, which refers primarily to white, middle - to upper - class people who have the money and leisure time to be tourists, hikers, and bikers” (225).

It should be noted that DeLuca describes whiteness as a social/historical construction, not as an essential and immutable racial category. This is an important distinction as it reveals the complicit nature bureaucratic management takes within protected spaces like National Parks – through strategic decisions about language usage and via various tropes of representation. This distinction also reveals the various social and ethical implications that necessarily attend questions of audience within the promotion of specific nature-based representations, such as those involving notions of a sublime, romantic wilderness. These issues can then be brought forward with consideration to broader questions about representation in the arts and the circumscribed structures surrounding such things as advertising in the arts, the awarding of grants, residencies, and subsequent visual representations (including photography and painting). Representations of “White Wilderness” as DeLuca describes, are directed towards an audience already conversant in these concepts and are in a general sense, necessarily in conflict with ideas pertaining to labour, the working class, issues of residents versus tourists, benefactors, bureaucrats, local Indigenous populations, and visitors from non-Western cultures.

Building on the important role visual legacies have on constructions of “White Wilderness,” DeLuca describes the mediums of photography, painting, and drawing, regularly used in artistic and other forms of representation, as means for advancing “mythic discourse,” wherein “myth becomes a naturalized, ahistorical, depoliticized, tautological, commonsensical discourse” (233). Photo archives of Canadian settler history provide evidence of this whereby the two meanings of nature inherited from Thoreau and Muir are foregrounded: that of a sublime, romantic nature; and nature as source of sustenance for civilization. DeLuca explores this idea of myth further in order to understand how the myth of nature as wilderness is constantly interpreted and reiterated. Quoting Roland Barthes, DeLuca writes, “in passing from history to nature, myth organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity and threads appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes 1976,143). Understanding the roles that myth and location play within the construction of wilderness highlights the way we view nature through the lens of culture, which, in the case of Canada, is implicitly white

culture. As DeLuca says, “[these ideas] point to a certain class specificity, for it is not merely all of white culture but that grouping trained to view nature as an aesthetic landscape, as high art” (235). An antidote of sorts that DeLuca offers to the pervasiveness of “White Wilderness” refers us to environmental justice groups that challenge industrialism, mainstream environmentalism, class discrimination, institutional racism and regional bias. He notes that justice groups are different than environmental groups who maintain culture/nature hierarchies, in that justice groups most often unfold within inhabited land and include the people that live there. He describes this as a “deconstructive move that not only reverses but displaces the culture/nature dichotomy, thus contesting the Cartesian contention that there is an ontological divide between the human and non-human” (236). This means that humans are always embedded in place (not space), and that in order to “decolonize the industrial mind” (Winona LaDuke, 1993) and understand Canada’s wilderness spaces, we must first concern ourselves with understanding the places that people live and work within as inhabitants.

To explore the roots of racial division and discrimination in this country, we need to look at the motivations behind pervasive ideas about race and culture and how they have manifested themselves in mainstream cultural politics. As Himani Bannerji (2003) argues in her book, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*, Canadian identity has been constructed as “threatened” through an “existential emphasis” placed on survival from and within nature (particularly at the time of settlement). In this important critique of multiculturalism, Bannerji explores Canadian nationalist discourse through the lens of the “other” by describing the power relations involved in white Canada’s construction of cultural difference. Bannerji builds on the seminal writings of Homi Bhabha, who within his discussions on postmodernity and nationhood, asks us to rethink and reinscribe processes of multiculturalism (framed as white) through strategies of negotiation, insertion and intervention. Bannerji argues that from our earliest moments, white colonizers in Canada thought their identities and presence within the colonies were under threat. Therefore, both nature and “uncivilized” Indigenous populations posed not only potentially grave danger to whites, but also the possibility of extinction. As Bannerji points out, this framing of nature and our

subsequent attempts to control it through the “prescribing of difference,” is actually born out of a colonial legacy of forced cultural assimilation. In her analysis of current multicultural policies, Bannerji elaborates on the colonial organization of wilderness space at play in Canada’s sublime nature/threatened nation paradox by arguing that “the concept of diversity simultaneously allows for an emptying out of actual social relations and suggests a concreteness of cultural description, and through this process obscures any understanding of difference as a construction of power” (36). Of particular interest to my research, is her framing of Canadian settler society as the result of attempts to overcome an empty wilderness through the establishment of white European settlements. This framing opens the door for possible decolonizing strategies of redeployment, in Bhabha’s terms, through a focus on temporality, interventions into modernist constructions of place and space, and the analytic understanding of modernity’s origins and problematic histories of colonialism, racism, and conceptions of power and privilege. Invoking Homi Bhabha, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith once more, I would argue that this can be done by looking, thinking, writing – and producing our work “from the margins.”

Within this critique of Canada’s perceived multicultural diversity and the colonial roots beneath narratives of cultural difference in this country, it is important to remind ourselves that Canada has a longstanding tradition of by-passing treaty obligations by placing the legal rights of land ownership under the dominion and discretion of the Crown. This actively undermines challenges by First Nations that attempt to hold the Canadian nation accountable to treaty law, enshrined in the constitution, laws which are meant to recognize Indigenous autonomy and seek reconciliation and redress for the colonial theft of the land, through demands for sovereignty and equal partnership in decision-making regarding future resource management (see Henderson 2013). To better understand the genesis of this contentious relationship I look to Derek Gregory’s essay, “(Post)colonialism and the Production of Nature” (2003), in which he offers us a means to demystify nationalist ideals regarding multiculturalism and the potential for accommodating difference within a tolerant nation. Gregory further explores the visual history behind the displacement of the “other” within dominant discourses of Canadian identity and argues that the production of the “other” within nature most often takes the

form of an unfriendly or monstrous power that threatens the colonial culture. He describes this as an imaginative process, helped by the construction of nature as an external and eternal force lying outside the historical definitions of “culture.” And it is through this removal and subsequent control, that nature was not just dominated, but also domesticated. And so examples of difference, the monstrous, deformations, and especially Indigenous knowledge, were intentionally removed from being potential influences on European society, either by time or physical distance.

Gregory builds on Edward Said’s concept of the “imaginative geographies” as one of the enabling conditions and material effects of colonial rule. His writing shows us how a European desire to “normalize” and “naturalize” nature was achieved in part through a spiral of representational practices and performances that eradicated difference and alternative histories. He warns that “the imaginative geographies are never merely representations, [but] have practical, performative force” (107). Building on this idea of the “imaginative geographies” within Canada’s wilderness history, it is thus important to recognize the simultaneous effects these political and social practices had (and continue to have) on the assimilation and genocide of Canada’s First Nations populations, as well as on encouraging a continuation of romanticization and misguided notions of “authenticity” concerning Indigenous cultures within Canada’s spatial imaginary.

Returning to Andrew Baldwin (2009) and his work on Group of Seven member, Lawren Harris, once more, we can see how such imaginative geographies played out in dominant representations of nationalist discourses. As Baldwin notes, Harris “celebrated diversity, [but] did so by narrowly circumscribing his ethnic objects into a national symbolic order in explicitly cultural terms and in doing so, depoliticized ethnic difference by assigning it an aesthetic presence in the national form” (533). Building upon the writing of Himani Bannerji (2000), Baldwin describes multiculturalism as “an interpellating device used by the national state to cultivate self-recognition among so-called ‘visible minorities’ as ‘cultural’ others within the nation. Such a move, [according to Baldwin, while] recognizing difference within the nation, nevertheless guarantees the white, Eurocentric foundations of Canadian nationhood” (533).

In my view, hegemonic structures or programs supporting colonization, cultural genocide, and white supremacy cannot be separated from contemporary articulations and representations of nature and nation. It therefore becomes vital to unmask the history of colonialism in this country in order to fully analyze contemporary articulations of nature, nation, space, and place, particularly as they are played out in works of art. It is also important to understand how Indigenous and decolonial activism and scholarship in Canada (and beyond) can articulate positions of difference. Indeed, there is a profound imperative to recognize the difference between influence and appropriation, sovereignty and supremacy, and, when dealing with issues of land claims and the environment, to be able to understand not only our own histories and ideologies, but also to listen to and acknowledge those we have not experienced ourselves. In Canada, we simply can no longer have a conversation about nature and nation without applying the dual narratives concerning “authorial voice” and “the imaginative geographies.” Furthermore, while many of us have little or no contact with the apparent mythological or untamed wilderness that we believe surrounds us, it plays an important role in our national imagination. This connection has undeniably allowed the Canadian nation to forge a strong and significant identity through traditional “rites of passage,” that often apply to young middle class Canadians: these include working in and visiting rural spaces, showing support for the national parks system, camping and visiting cottage countries, and participating in the adoption of a growing collective concern for the environment (a concern admittedly tempered by the economic needs of our ever expanding resource economy). Unfortunately, as I have tried to show, a close analysis of the social and political frameworks within contemporary representations of Canada’s nature/nation couplet continues to indicate a strong reliance on traditional and generalized representations of Canadian identity. It therefore remains vital to continually engage and question the age-old articulations of nature, gender, race, and nation within Canada’s nature/nation discourse, in order to develop a more concise and representative understanding of the nation and what we mean when we refer to it as such.

National Parks: Theorizing Domesticated Nature

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the representational and discursive practices that inform contemporary understandings of Canada's National Parks, and considers their translation into the social, historical, and geographical forces that have shaped notions of wilderness, nation, and nature. My investigation into Canada's parks is ultimately an inquiry into the construction of place and space, specifically read through a desire to connect to the conception of mythic wilderness represented by the parks system itself. In particular, I examine national discourses that look to the past as a representation of origins and shared culture, and to the future, in an apparent attempt to move us beyond contemporary issues of difference and disparity. Such a complex viewpoint, has, I believe, effectively nationalized and normalized structures of difference within the Canadian imagination and made problematic issues regarding culture, community, and identity. In essence, the nationalizing of our imagination has domesticated cultural difference, and it is for this reason that it becomes necessary to interrogate the social and political influences behind the historical constructions and contemporary representations of wilderness and nature that continue to blindly validate the legacy to which I am referring. This includes previously mentioned ideas of multiculturalism and the effects of racializing the Canadian nation as white through a process of normalizing a spatial imaginary regarding city and country. In Canada, this is most often articulated through ideas of nostalgia, yearning, a seeking of the spiritual, and sometimes through the direct appropriation of Indigenous mythologies and cultures. Contemporary articulations of the landscape in Canada, alongside issues of identity, place, growth/transformation, and a desire for connection, must therefore take into account (or at least show an awareness of) a history of settlement that includes a legacy of class and race based privilege, direct links to antimodernism and a colonial history of assimilation and genocide. An awareness of this history allows us to understand the "location" (to borrow from Anne Whitelaw) framed within Parks Canada's landscape-based representations as being based on a particular and racialized historical geographies that continue to depict Canadian nature as an empty, unspoiled wilderness. If we do this, we can then begin to see that the framing of nation and nature within representational practices almost always includes issues of spectator/spectacle; the mediated/unmediated gaze; an oscillation between the past and

future; and the elimination of difference and alternative histories. As I will demonstrate, representations of nature in Canada have changed very little over the years since Canada was first settled by colonial Europe. By this I mean that the nation continues to be ideologically connected to the symbolic landscape of past generations through a repetition of ideas and images, arguably recycled as a means of establishing concepts of “authenticity.”

In an early essay on representations of domestic politics within Canada’s national parks, noted environmental-social theorist, Catriona [Mortimer] Sandilands (2000) describes the nature-culture juxtaposition found there as being neither random nor wild, and she describes the “physical bonds and spiritual connections” we are supposed to find within the parks as being strongly ideological. She goes on to note, “parks contain nature at the moment they claim to preserve it, and open it up to particular kinds of activity at the moment they claim to close it” (91). As Sandilands indicates, much of the representational history linking nature and nationalism together relies on images of wilderness “emptied of the stain of cultural particularity.” Describing how the social organization of parks can both prohibit and foster certain kinds of activities, she points to the often-contradictory threads of representation and practice. The two threads often create a tension within the park’s mandate, between wild nature preserved, and nature as a recreational-educational site. Sandilands elaborates on these themes by describing nature education as “disciplinary pedagogy,” which is civil, ordered, and propagated mainly through the ideology of a pioneering heritage. Wild nature, she says, is, in contrast, most often described through spectacular nature representations, and the practice of consumption. Images of Pierre Eliot Trudeau paddling a canoe, the men and women featured in Canadian beer commercials, and the biographies of members of the Group of Seven’s back and forth journey from the bush to studio, all come to mind. Contemporary articulations of such journeys, as represented in the recent *National Parks Project* (2011), in which Canadian film makers and musicians were invited to the parks to make music videos, and the curatorial premise behind the American exhibition, *Oh, Canada* (Markonish 2012), which framed a broad survey of Canadian art production around notions of the “uncanny” within a vast and romantic history of space and place, do little

to challenge the restrictive relationships between identity, landscape, and nature at work in much recent Canadian art. In regards to my own particular project and interest in these ideas, I think Sandilands' arguments in the area of pedagogy and her parsing of park representation regarding discipline and spectacle are important. She describes the Parks as heavily regulated spaces, "...constituted as spaces of state-regulated public activity, complete with disciplinary codes of conduct" (Sandilands 2000, 94). She contends that this has the effect of regulating or normalizing activity between humans and the landscape. This process, she argues, disguises what is actually a "particular" vision of comportment and a "particular" understanding of what humans should do in nature. "Parks thus contain pedagogical experience not only of a naturalized state authority, but of a nationalized state. There is only one natural heritage, there is only one nation emerging from it; and there is no contest over national ontology or epistemology in which the visitor might play a situated part" (96). Thus this idea of an originary "national nature narrative" regulates our experience within the parks, and ultimately our understanding of our relationship to Canadian wilderness. In describing parks as "sites of spectacular consumption," Sandilands argues that parks are ultimately the objects of the tourist or "users" gaze. Representational practice within the parks frame park experience to resemble the pictures we take. Our experience of nature then becomes a series of photo-based opportunities, which prove that we have truly "experienced" nature. The pictures we take home, Sandilands contends, often resemble the brochures we have been given as advertisements of the park. Our experience therefore is organized through the disciplines of tourism and spectacle.⁴

Keri J. Cronin (2011) builds on this idea of a constructed nature through representational practices. She calls it "National Parks Nature," which she says creates an understanding

⁴ It should be noted that this seemingly "pre-digital" argument does not take up the "selfie" and the applications associated within larger processes of social media. Which one could argue is a new paradigm that has interesting potential for these ideas. In that context, likely one of the best illustrations for Sandilands' argument would be the invocation of Jin-Me Yoon's project, *A Group of Sixty Seven* (1996), which subversively challenged the "Whiteness" of the Group of Seven and Emily Carr's work by placing models in front of iconic Group of Seven paintings.

of place, mediated through photographic imagery. Describing this as a system of visual organization predicated on dominant cultural values regarding nature, non-human animals, and the environment, Cronin describes “National Park Nature” as mediated through “the technologies of vision, such as photography, and differs from other modes of engaging with the landscape due to its relationship with contemporary notions of environmentalism” (4). She elaborates, that “National Park Nature” is “characterized by a complex dynamic between a desire for “pristine and unspoiled” wilderness and the development of amenities such as recreation facilities and luxury accommodations” (4). Cronin’s research points to the erasure of locality within park representation and forces us to consider the roles and responsibilities artists play within the representational history of nature and culture as coming to be perceived as distinct and separate realms. Building on the writings of Bruce Braun (2002), she quotes, “...by situating the viewing subject behind the (absent) camera, looking out into the wilds, the image firmly situates the viewer *in* modern society and asks him or her to ponder the yawning gap between culture and nature, city and country, modernity and pre modern antecedents” (5). As both Sandilands and Cronin point out, landscape imagery can be understood as a site of power relations among the various social classes, and signals the collusion of influence, politics, and ideology within governmental, industrial and private citizenship. These intimately connected relations often manifest themselves within the seemingly dichotomous encouragements to “escape to nature” and to embrace “the enthusiasm for material progress” (Cronin 2011, 6-7).

The idea of national parks as spaces of ecological purity and sources for the production of national identity relates back to the nostalgic search for an authentic, unspoiled land that has become a defining characteristic of Canadian wilderness representation. However, parks, as Cronin maintains, “are as domesticated and as human manipulated as the rest of the Canadian landscape; they only appear to be wild to a public that has been conditioned to equate National Park Nature with unmediated nature” (11). Cronin describes how imagery “has complicated, constructed, and sustained relationships between humans and their environment in a variety of contexts, geographical locales, and historical periods” (15). She also notes that representational practices have changed very little over the

years, and repeats Sylvie Beaudreau's description, in her discussion on the "Changing Faces of Canada" in *National Geographic* magazine (2002), of an "iconographic redundancy" found within approaches that continue to portray the landscape through a lens of sublime, symbolic, romanticism. This redundancy can and should be broken down and engaged with through an inclusion of local narratives, and discourses that incorporate people's real lived experiences within and alongside the parks. However, the circulation and reception of social issues that are central (rather than marginal) to different groups' experiences within "National Park Nature" forces us to consider how the narrative of the individual in nature, and within the nation, is disrupted by an awareness of social processes, and asks us to confront the location and particularity of the artistic and institutional portrayal of that experience. As Susan Sontag (1977) suggests, a photograph is always "a thin slice of time as well as space" and as such, "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it reveals" (22).

Leading Indigenous literary and cultural studies scholar, Pauline Wakeham, similarly reminds us of the importance of perspective, privilege and voice in her analysis of the Banff National Park Museum. Wakeham's work addresses the museum's use of "naturalist" understandings of park history and their continuing reliance on taxidermy to illustrate visual articulations of the park's historicized narratives and geographies of place. The museum's inclusion of the aboriginal body within its diorama displays, and its conflation of "animality" and "aboriginality" as affiliated species within nature, do little to circumnavigate the park's modern update to attempt to frame itself as a "museum of a museum." As Wakeham shows us, the example of the Banff Museum reframing its history through a pedagogy of preservation, the semiotics of taxidermy, and a footnoted reference to its naturalist past, ultimately emblemizes the museum's current display strategies as an "alibi for perpetuating the exhibition and consumption of taxidermy - and the colonialist ideology that contoured it - in the present tense" (Wakeham 2008, 61). As Wakeham further reminds us, the park tries to deploy a "postmodern meta-commentary regarding its own historical development that, in the very process of performing self-reflexivity and purporting to 'show its own hand' effectively distances the national historic site of the present from the museum's colonial past. In this process, the Banff

Park Museum dissimulates itself from its ongoing relationship to colonial knowledge/power systems” (66). This, it should be added, doesn’t always bear out successfully, as Wakeham, Cronin, and Sandilands make explicitly clear within their respective research trajectories. By emphasizing the imperialist and racist discourses that are often overlooked in the haze of romance and nostalgia, Wakeham asks us to not forget the colonial violence that has secured imperial control and to instead, to think of parks as perpetually re-articulating structures of meaning, constantly being reincarnated in different forms by different people.

Catriona Sandilands (2005) foregrounds this idea in her critical analysis of the gendered, racialized, and heterosexualized dynamics that were established within the development of the Banff National Park. Modeled after European spas and resorts, and developed during western rail expansion, the park appealed (and still does) to “privileged world adventurers [and thus] firmly establishing white upper-and-middle class life in the mountains” (144). As the park developed, “it required the extension of heterosexualized domestic relations in the wilderness [meaning white women as the bearers of white families with which to fill colonial space] in contrast to Aboriginal women and to non-British and/or working class women who were part of the resource communities in the region” (145). Such park origins carry over into the ongoing representational practices and experiences of nature and nation in all of Canada’s national parks. Sandilands describes this relationship as follows:

A tension remains in the parks between an *iconic* national nature (coded as wild, empty, cold, white, except for a romanticized view of Aboriginal peoples, and male-homosocial) and a *domestic* national nature (appearing civil, secure, warm, infrastructurally complex, and feminine/family oriented). Parks serve both nationalisms. In their mandate of preservation, education, and recreation (in that order since the 1980s), there is an enormous contradiction between a view that would keep the landscape as empty of humans as possible for the sake of “future generations” (thus preserving its timeless and sublime qualities) and one that would encourage Canadians en masse to learn about, and relax healthfully in, the nature that signifies that nation (thus making good domestic citizens). (Sandilands 2005, 145)

In light of this, National Parks thus become interesting places to stage art projects and interventions (as I choose to do), for as Sandilands notes, they serve as a particular,

historical and “embodied site for enactments of - and resistances to - these Canadian articulations of nature, gender, race, and nation” (146). And whereas her argument looks at the roles of park wardens within park history, my current project begins by looking at the continuing ecological legacy that figures such as Grey Owl uphold within park narratives, regarding the working relationships between stewardship and conservation, tourist/guiding relations, and Settler-Indigenous representations. These relationships are all equally dependent upon not only the settlement history of the park, but in cases such as at Prince Albert, on the continuing success of the featured wild Bison herd located within the Park. These factors, alongside the differences of opinions, clashes, and frequent collaborative moments, including when involved in art productions in these zones, act as the embodiment of the tensions Sandilands describes between the iconic and domestic nation. Thus issues surrounding policing and management, and the tensions present through the day to day experiences of various stakeholders (local ranchers, park wardens, tourists, scientific research teams, federal bureaucrats, and aboriginal hunting programs), become conflated with the on-going concern to preserve the parks’ “nature” and another primary concern: that of facilitating tourism and recreation. For many Canadians, the park represents a “sublime” nation/nature narrative, but therein lies the tension previously described by Sandilands. While the park is protected by the domestic nation, decisions on policy, development, and funding are often influenced through links between industry and governmental concerns with promoting iconic representation. This relationship can (negatively) “represent economic expansion (greed), settlement (tourist development) and civil order (bureaucratic rationality) [in which] the parks represent the lifeblood of the nation in the testament to a collective origin and memory” (151). The “mythic and empty park-nature” narratives spoon fed to the people of Canada can therefore be seen as an extension of colonial relations and as an active attempt to empty the landscape of traditional, local, and productive/reproductive activities.

As Keri J. Cronin attests, national parks occupy a space between the educational functions associated with museums and the entertainment functions of “fake nature” destinations, which are all equally dependent on dominant social, cultural, and economic ideologies. “Simply put, National Parks cannot offer a more authentic nature experience

than what a museum or theme park can. They do however frame encounters between the human and non-human world” (138). She stresses that we need to look at the ways in which nature is shaped into something that can be looked at. One of the ways I think the foregoing can be done, is through a thorough investigation of the ideas of “space” and “place” in discourses surrounding parks, architecture, planning, and land use management. Regarding the “space” of Canada, especially as described in exhibitions such as the recent *National Parks Project* and MASS MOCA’s *Oh, Canada* exhibition, we are regularly asked to consider the landscape as a specific “place” in which one can lose themselves in an experience equatable with identity loss, role-playing, magic and transformation. In this sense, the term “space” seems to be more abstract than the term “place,” whose usage at least refers to an event (which has taken place), a myth (said to have taken place), or a history (related to significant places). But within such understandings of place, I would venture that most of the users described here have developed a fictional relationship between gaze and the actual landscape. And while we use the word “space” to describe large geographical areas and the production of a rationalized use and frequenting of certain places (see de Certeau 1984), we should recall that there are many spaces in which the individual can feel himself or herself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle itself. Thus the spectator can easily become the spectacle, as in the case of nature tourism and park representations, which give consumers a view of themselves as described in brochures and ads. And while this notion is a useful point of reference to deploy in thinking about the uses, designations and creation of public spaces, most of us in Canada would do well to consider that we often only interact with the public “space” a park provides, and are usually only reminded of the archeological and geographic place that it in fact is, through a mediated intersection of pedagogy and discipline.

In a fascinatingly useful study on the philosophical implications of the conscious creation of space and place, anthropologist Marc Auge, argues in the book, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, that “if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or

historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Auge 1995, 63). Auge goes on to say,

Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten. But non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified – with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance – by totaling all the air, rail, and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called means of ‘transport’ (aircraft, trains, and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of him[or her]self” (64).

The parks, with their rivers, beaches and campsites have become mediated *non*-places, representative of a nature defined by visitors’ use and non-use of designated spaces and functions. The viewer entering the space of a designated park is given the tools to lose themselves to the experience, to feeling, to identity loss, and to naturalist role-playing that is unrestricted by any past or present political or social justice issues pertaining to settlement and the dispossession of land. As such, a very important aspect to consider is the counter argument to Auge and de Certeau’s ruminations on anthropological and philosophical constructions of place and space, born out of a postcolonial discourse that calls into question the internalization of the colonial constructions of those same spaces and places, as outlined earlier in this paper. National Parks (and a significant amount of Canada’s land masses, for that matter) remain contested spaces. So, as such, every place, even universities, airports, shopping malls, and territories covered by pipelines have a history, both present and future, which need to be recognized and articulated if we are to truly understand and be accountable to the spaces we inhabit.

As an artist responsible for the images I create, I am aware of the politics and tensions that are often manifested within the park system through processes of historicization and development. This tension, which I am highly interested in, needs to be understood through the privileging of narratives embedded within the symbolic uses of nature. So notions of taxidermy, as seen in many of our parks and museums of pioneer/settler history, need to be understood in the terms described by Pauline Wakeham: as engaged in “spin[ning] a nostalgic narrative of disappearance that accepts the decline of animal and

Aboriginal populations as a melancholy but natural fact of social progress (Wakeham, 2008). We also need to heighten our awareness of the impact “intellectual colonialism” has had on contemporary understandings of nature. “On the one hand, this can be viewed as questioning the dominance of knowledge production from Western centers of power, opening up a space within which marginalized voices have the opportunity to speak. Thus, the idea of ‘intellectual colonialism’ is in complicity with economic, neo-imperialism and neo-cultural politics of nation-state structures” (Cronin 2011, 198-199). Therefore, ideas of spectacle, space and place, representational history, and the mediated/unmediated gaze, all need to be understood within the continuing colonialist strategies, structures, and perceptions, that function through the ongoing development of wilderness spaces like Canada’s National Parks.

Chapter 3

Artistic Strategies and Exhibition Practices

With respect to the discussions raised in the previous chapters, the following provides an overview of many of the artists, exhibitions, and authors that have greatly influenced the direction of this dissertation project. While I provide a survey of a wide range of works by individual artists and their respective biographies, I primarily focus my reflections and critiques on the over-arching curatorial and theoretical frameworks in which landscape-based works and exhibitions operate. Issues of class, privilege, and a racialized wilderness will be discussed in relation to the ways various exhibitions position “beacons” of Canadian cultural identity. In doing so, I engage with such phenomena as the enduring influence of the biographies (and antimodern masculinities) of Grey Owl, and the various members of the Group of Seven, including their back and forth journeys from bush to studio. In this chapter I also look at a select group of artists working within Canada’s landscape traditions, and attempt to challenge their ideas, specifically as they relate to some of my newer works, through the medium of film. In addition to this discussion, and the already mentioned “becoming animal” themed, *Adaptation* exhibition at the Power Plant in 2010, I will focus in detail on another project central to my research and studio directions within this dissertation, namely the federally sponsored, 2011, *National Parks Project*.

Creative Frameworks and Artistic Practice

Offering a counter story to the *Adaptation* exhibition has been a persistent theme over the course of my Ph.D., specifically in response to its curatorial premise that set out to explore “encounters and exchanges between the species and highlight forms of identification and projection, mimicry and camouflage...and look[s] at anthropomorphic projections of animals, and at the ways in which animals interact with humans, including how they 'train' their masters” (Reckitt 2010, 14). Of interest here, and as a counterpoint to the above statement, is the exclusivity and the particularity of viewpoint finally expressed within a show purported to look at the difference between intelligence and

instinct, forms of knowledge, and the lure of non-human states, including the urge to merge with the “creaturely” and “botanical.” As mentioned, Reckitt’s curatorial position was heavily influenced by the Wiccan inspired artists Fastwürms, and through the European philosophy and critical theories of Derrida (2002) and Deleuze and Guattari’s treatises on “becoming animal” (1988). In that often cited text, Deleuze and Guattari advocate a “return to nature” through the concept of deterritorialization, which they frame as the severance of social, political, or cultural practices from native places and populations. Thus, in their terms, the process of “becoming animal” is an invitation to return to a natural state, which they stress is not a metaphor, but a search for an ontological primordality. Of interest to me here is that even though the authors intend a critique of capitalist consumer culture, and a rejection of the classification of nature through theology and identity politics that can act as a catalyst for change, communion, and extension of human identity (all of which sounds good to me), they rely heavily on a notion of the “primitive” as dependent on an original and pristine state of nature, a sense of the primordial, that when coupled with its contemporary deployments as evidenced in *Adaptation* and other exhibitions, harkens back to the originary *Garden of Eden* myths discussed in earlier chapters.

Like Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida’s work is often cited within philosophical texts dealing with human/animal/nature themes. Indeed, in his 1997 address, and in 2002 translated essay, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Derrida asks us to focus less on the individual “human” animal, and more on broad social/political/environmental concerns associated with an implied transformational quality connected to preoccupations with ideas on animality. Derrida points out to us the role the “other” must play in determining our identity/self, and famously asks: “Who am I (following)?” Derrida’s writing launches a philosophical debate around the “violence of words,” one that destabilizes the notion of a “natural language” and questions the authority of naming “animals.” In it, he calls for compassion and recognition of inter-dependency between species, and an active rebellion to what he refers to as “the war on pity.” David Wood, in a response essay entitled, “Thinking with Cats,” from the book, *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity* (Atterton and Calarco 2004), argues that,

“Derrida reminds us of an urgent need of another kind of war on the culpable blindness that hides from us the sites at which compassion is pathologically suppressed” (Wood 2004, 144). In context of this, what is most interesting to me, is the failure and “culpable blindness” the Power Plant displayed in the curation of the exhibition, in which they failed to open up a space for recognition and conversation on issues of appropriation, neo-primitivism, and the enduring legacies of colonial transgression that remain inherent within visual representations of the landscape.

Situated at the epicentre of this conversation on artistic portrayals of neo-primitivist interactions with the landscape, is German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), whose legacy seems to have made it acceptable for non-Indigenous artists to appropriate Indigenous culture, and particularly to dress up as shamans. Beuys’ own shaman work, such as the (in)famous, *I Like America, and America Likes Me*, 1974, in which he spent three days in a gallery with a live coyote for the stated purpose of commenting on “America’s colonial relationship with the American Indian,” has been written about extensively. Interpreting this iconic work seems to depend heavily on the viewer’s subjectivity, and their particular vantage point. I interpret the work as a form of taxidermy, in line with Pauline Wakeham’s previously invoked decrying of nostalgic and melancholic narratives of social progress, disappearance, and the natural decline of animal and Aboriginal populations. This legacy, and many of the orthodox views that accept without reservation the authority of Beuys’ work as healer and catalyst for change, have had a profound impact on an entire generation of artists (myself included). But some of that impact clearly needs to be problematized. In Canada, we can look specifically at non-Indigenous artists such as A.A. Bronson and Michael Dudeck; the latter would make a fascinating case study on his own, because, through his “witch doctor” persona, he actively appropriates, incorporates, and acknowledges his critics’ concerns within his performance practice.

As a retort to the continued, and unquestioned traction of Beuys’ work, anthropologist Victoria William’s essay, “The Artist as Shaman: The Work of Joseph Beuys and Marcus Coates,” in *Between Art and Anthropology, Contemporary Ethnographic Practice* (Schneider and Wright 2010), provides a valuable lesson in what art critic Jan Verwoert

describes as an orthodox art historical (and in this case Eurocentric anthropological) interpretation of Beuys' oeuvre. It is one that is "wholly under the spell of the artist's authority." In a 2008 article in *e-flux*, called "The Boss: On the Unresolved Question of Authority in Joseph Beuys' Oeuvre and Public Image," Verwoert astutely notes that much of the critical discourse around Beuys' legacy comes from the repetition of his own authorial positioning of his practice, and as a consequence, leaves unresolved many of the inner tensions and unanswered questions at the heart of his oeuvre. This view gives us some insight into Williams in-depth look at both Beuys and Coates' collective works, making important links between art and ethnography and discussing how the treatise on "becoming animal" functions in contemporary movements such as relational aesthetics. However what is quite evident in Williams' (and many others) discussion of the act of appropriation within these artists' work, is the development of a very narrow Eurocentric and colonial ethnographic view of not only the art world, but also on the historical/contemporary role(s) of the shaman within Indigenous cultures, specifically around notions of primitivism and authorial voice. Walters links Coates to Beuys through precedent and a questionable deployment of dominant language tropes, arguing that by the mid-twentieth century, "the concept of the shaman had been transformed into a metaphor for the artist" (37). Much like the Power Plant's Helena Reckitt, Williams positions shamans (artists) as "wounded healers," giving credence and authority to their appropriationist performances.

British art historian, Steve Baker (2000), in his book, *The Postmodern Animal*, provides a useful survey of the presence of the animal in contemporary British and American art, including a survey of the work of Joseph Beuys. He also provides an extremely insightful reading of Deleuze and Guattari's "Becoming Animal" text, in which he points out that the platform on which these authors base their analysis of the characteristics of the "anomalous" potential of "becoming-animal" operates primarily within the domain of "the white, male, adult, 'rational' subject, the 'average European' man who constitutes the standard" (128). And as such, he importantly points to the need to continuously question dominant narratives that still rely on "hard-primitivist" notions of animal/nature relations. In my own case, it was after seeing the work of Marcus Coates and the

Adaptation show at the Power Plant in 2010, while at the same time beginning to engage ideas of “becoming animal” and an awareness of cultural appropriation juxtaposed with my own experiences as a tree-planter seeing white Canadian kids going “native” in the bush, that my own Shaman character was born: *Ass Face, Plastic Shaman to the Stars*, accompanied by his infamous *Power Animal Parties*. While familiar with Coates’ entire body of work, my own video and performance for this character was specifically drawn from Coates’ video and performance *Journey to the Lower World* (2004), in which, wearing a deer-skin robe complete with head and antlers, Coates performs a shamanic ritual for residents of a Liverpool tower block scheduled for demolition. Although Coates, in his role as shamanic character, personifies the traits of the “plastic shaman,” I believe there are valuable lessons to be learned from his work, primarily from the fact that a “failed” shaman metaphor can actually display redeeming qualities in accurately playing out the inherent colonial legacies embedded within the perceived universality of a generalized Canadian identity. The question that still must be asked, however, is what culture do artists like Marcus Coates, Michael Dudeck, A.A. Bronson, and Joseph Beuys think they are referencing?

Claire Bishop’s 2005 book, *Installation Art*, is an important reference for my project in that she sets up direct art historical connections between Beuys’ “social sculpture” performance practice and Nicholas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics movement (in which Coates is implicated). These studies foreground how ideas of activated spectatorship and decentering are enacted through an emphasis on immersion and presence in contemporary installation and performance practices. Bishop also highlights a need to call upon ideas of “location,” discussed elsewhere here, and cautions against “autobiographical” complacency further elaborated by Hal Foster (1996) and Anne Whitelaw (2007). I also draw upon Chantal Mouffe’s 2007 essay, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces” in *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, in which Mouffe champions ideas of agonistic aesthetic strategies and the role of artistic and cultural production within processes of “capital valorization.” Mouffe asks us to abandon the notion of the modernist avant-garde, but agrees “that art can still be a place of social change.” She calls upon artists today to “subvert the dominant hegemony and contribute to the construction of new subjectivities” (5). As discussed in chapter two of

this thesis, one of the ways that I, as an artist, filter and try to subvert the actions and receptions of shamanistic artists such as Joseph Beuys, Marcus Coates, A.A. Bronson, and Michael Dudeck, alongside the romantic constructions of nature and a mythology of the Canadian wilderness as portrayed by the Group of Seven, is through invoking one of the most infamous “Imaginary Indians” (Francis 1992) in Canadian history: Grey Owl. What is important to note in this regard is that inasmuch as Grey Owl’s, Beuys’, Coates’ (and even my own) “failed” shamanic works are ultimately about trying to find a connection and similarity to “animals,” and a history of interacting with the environment, such works, in their failure to make sense of their community and the world around them (by appropriating the Indigenous image of the shaman), actually appear to strengthen the validity of their searching by opening up a dialogue that foregrounds what is actually missing.

Alongside this discussion on contemporary exhibition practices, a significant portion of my project has been influenced by land-based interventionist and activist work by Canadian artists such as: N.E. Thing Co., Michael Snow, Joyce Weiland, Rodney Graham, Rebecca Belmore, Adrian Stimson, Lori Blondeau, Brian Jungen, Duane Linklater, Kent Monkman, Vincenzo Pietropaolo, Ayumi Goto, Jin-Me Yoon, and others. With regard to the present study, these artists, through the tackling of issues concerning the everyday environment; forms of representation; environmental and ecological changes; issues of race; immigration; and Canada’s multicultural diversity, have rendered the asocial landscapes of influential artists like the Group of Seven, as highly particularized rather than universal. Furthermore, their explorations of documentation and representation through the different mediums and processes of performance, photography, video and film, have allowed for a unique and critical look at the treatment of the “other” within Canadian culture. These artists have been significant to my research and the development of my own art practice, as they have demonstrated to me how the presuppositions of Canadian identity expressed within nationalist discourses of the landscape can, and must be, rigorously challenged. Tracing this path through visual representations of the Canadian landscape, one can see how embedded meanings, differing viewpoints, critique, and activism, present within individual works can nonetheless so often be overwritten by the curatorial positions foregrounded within large

survey style exhibitions and collections. As I have demonstrated regarding the recent examples already cited, *Adaptation*, and specifically the *National Parks Project*, to which I have already referred and will discuss further here, do little to challenge restrictive relationships between hegemonic notions of identity and the framing of nature within dominant social and ecological politics.

For the most part, ideas of nature represented in those exhibitions have centered around “authentic” experiences, and have juxtaposed relationships concerning living, working, and being “from” communities with direct links to nature, to those of people “parachuted” in from more southern and urban environments. The *National Parks Project* (2011) is an excellent example, as it was created (in the words of Parks Canada), “in the tradition of the Group of Seven, Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*, and other touchstones. The *National Parks Project* [NPP] aims to explore the ways in which wilderness shapes our cultural imagination. The core of the project is the parks themselves - places that most Canadians never visit, but are nonetheless amazing and inspirational parts of the country we call home” (from NPP website, 2011). Through this material, we can see how the language and promotion around the project traffics in a history of representation that has, in no uncertain terms, been internalized through a pedagogical investment in nationalized versions of Canadian settler history. A further example of this is evident in the words of Parks Canada:

On the eve of its centennial, Canada’s finest artists embarked on a historic expedition to capture the majesty of the landscape in music and film. Thirteen film makers, thirty-nine musicians, thirteen National Parks of Canada. From May to October, 2010, the project sent different groups comprised of one filmmaker and three musicians to a park in each province and territory, to capture their experience of the landscape in a short film and soundtrack. Each quartet was selected from the best Canadian talent, in the spirit of exploring unfamiliar creative and physical ground. Groups spent five days in the parks, exploring sights and sounds and collaborating on music and images that would communicate the unique essence of the surrounding environment. (NPP 2011)

The project was commissioned by Parks Canada, and was produced in association with, and aired on public television through the channel, *Discovery World HD*. It premiered in 2011 at the SXSW festival in Austin Texas, and was screened at a number of other film

festivals that same year, including *Hot Docs* (Toronto); Reykjavik IFF; Nouveau Cinema (Montreal); Possible Worlds (Sydney); and MoMA (New York), among others. The music produced through the project features a veritable who's who from the Canadian contemporary music industry, and has had a significant life of its own, with several concerts performed and individual albums for each park project available for purchase on *iTunes*. This latter point is worth noting, as a significant portion of my project, including the staging, musical, and narrative directions for my newly created film work, *Pilgrims of the Wild*, has been built as a response and counter-story to the federally sponsored *NPP* project. Specifically, my project is a response to the official Parks Canada film, accompanying short videos, and musical soundtrack created for the Prince Albert National Park.

To explore possible directions and influential examples of artists producing counter-narratives “from within” dominant nature/nation discourses, I offer the following analysis of several recognized Canadian artists working in the medium of film, to see how they have translated and worked with many of the ideas I have discussed thus far. In particular, I look to the individual film works by Duane Linklater and Brian Jungen, Michael Snow, and Rodney Graham. Jungen and Linklater's collaborative film, *A Modest Livelihood*, 2012, is a fifty-minute, silent hunting film. It stars the two artists and follows them as they learn from both elders and (failed) experience, the techniques for tracking and hunting a moose. The exhibition of this work I recently saw at the AGO in 2013, was projected onto a massive screen in a cavernous and nearly empty room; a display strategy that dramatically heightened both the lack of sound and the slow pace of the film. In a 2012 interview in *Canadian Art*, the artists describe how their film's format draws heavily upon old National Film Board (NFB) documentary works from the fifties, sixties and seventies. In the interview, they describe how the NFB films they watched in their youth, profoundly influenced, not only their sense of self, but also importantly, made them aware of dominant ethnographic narratives in Canada. The NFB, through the documentary film genre, established location shooting as one of the key elements in the description of the landscape and helped to forge an artistic tradition in Canada, representing people escaping from the trappings of modern urban life into the wilds of the

Canadian landscape. This history of documentary work is profoundly important when considered next to the imagined fictional narratives (from Hollywood), and the imaginaries of historical studio artists (the Group of Seven), as it highlights the potential for a tension to be created between the “fictionalized genre space and local space” found within Canadian explorations of nature. This tension, I should note, becomes one of the key elements that all the work I have created for my dissertation exhibition draws upon.

In context of my interest in Jungen and Linklater’s work, Michael Snow’s project usefully calls up the powerful influence that Euro-Canadian landscape painting, and the film, television, and multi-media experimental landscape projects of the late Sixties and Seventies, have had on their respective works. To focus on Snow himself, it is important to acknowledge his use of cinematic tropes and rhetorical devices that mine the history of documenting ideas of “terrain vague” or “terra nullius,” that often dominate Canadian landscape representations. I am particularly interested in Snow’s film, *La Region Centrale* (1971), and his commitment to issues pertaining to cultural production and the framing of Canadian national identity through nationalized constructions of place and space. Snow’s work specifically references the Group of Seven and a history of documentary film making in Canada. For related reasons, I am interested in the film and installation work of Rodney Graham. Of particular note for me, is Graham’s *How I Became a Ramblin’ Man* (1999), and his investigations of perception and representation through the deconstruction of the romantic western film genre. Like Snow, Graham uses appropriation and a breakdown of conventional cinematic tropes and material strategies to question systems of perception, representation and ideologies at play within conventional landscape based films. Importantly, these are all ideas I am trying to touch upon in my dissertation show, but perhaps none more so than in the Grey Owl related film work, *Pilgrims of the Wild: A New National Parks Project* (2016).

Michael Snow’s seminal work, *La Region Centrale* (1971) was filmed through his installation of a camera, purpose-built for his project, that was capable of spinning completely on its own axis. The camera was installed in a remote part of northeastern Quebec. At the beginning, the film displays slow movements reminiscent of any number of Canadian landscape paintings, but these are quickly overtaken by a dizzying array of

movement and image, direction and speed changes, eventually encompass the disorienting effect of a view that is completely inverted. The film's accompanying soundtrack is that of the camera's operation and environmental effects and noises. Although much of the literature around Michael Snow's work seems to focus on the material and specialized camera effects of his work, by his own admission, alongside an interest in the technical potential of the camera to act as an instrument with "expressive possibilities," he was also striving to speak to a more generalized Canadian interest in landscape art, and the role it has played in the formation of ideas around national identity. Building on Snow's interest in the great landscape paintings of Europe and Canada's past, art historian Joanne Sloan writes in her essay, "Conceptual Landscape Art: Joyce Weiland and Michael Snow," in John O'Brian and Peter White's critical landscape anthology, *Beyond Wilderness* (2007), that "Snow was striving to bring the Canadian preoccupation with landscape up to date, re-situating it in relation to a technologically expanded visual culture, a shifting sense of nationhood, and a destabilized natural world" (Sloan 2007, 73). This argument importantly moves Snow's work and the experimental film avant-garde he is most often associated with, into a position of influence alongside the massive impacts felt from Euro-Canadian landscape painting and the multi-media experimental landscape projects of the late Sixties and Seventies.⁵ Sloan argues that Snow's film, *La Region Centrale*, attempted to "dismantle the landscape genre, and lay bear its conventions to reveal its inner mechanisms" (73). Her description of Snow's work highlights his failure to create, through his dehumanized and mechanical process, a deconstructed landscape image that is entirely drained of past narratives, affect, and memory. And while we can see through this reading of Snow's work, a clear acknowledgement of the continued dominance of the Group of Seven in areas of northern wilderness representation, Snow's experimental film work also importantly stresses the historical dominance of the documentary, location-based filmmaking widely promoted in Canada through the National Film Board.

⁵ Examples of the latter include seminal works by Canadian artists N.E Thing Co. and the American Robert Smithson and his ideas on the "staging of a dialectic between sites and non sites" (Sloan 2007, 74). All of which greatly influenced the cultural productions and understandings of landscape representation at the time and continue to do so in the present.

This history of the NFB's pivotal role in shaping Canada's national imaginary is picked up by Jim Leach (2010), in his essay, "The Landscapes of Canada's Features: Articulating Nation and Nature," which offers a reading of Snow's films through an analysis of his deconstruction of both the "cinematic apparatus" and a "desire to break the frame." Leach's argument revolves around Snow's interest in the processes of framing cultural production and national identity through mediated and nationalized perspectives of the landscape. Specifically, this is legible based on the establishment of on-site location shooting as a means to claim "authenticity" in documentary style portrayals of human interaction with the natural world. Much like Sloan, Leach's argument shows us how the representational framing of the "artist *in* nature," became one of the prime signifiers in documenting the nation's existence. The problem, as Leach says, is when the frames themselves come to be seen as natural and thus fixed" (271). Leach's work on both English and French Canadian representations of the landscape also serves to describe how national identity in Canada has so often become a question of framing the dichotomous relationship between urban and rural life. "Landscape interacts with narrative in these films to produce an often troubling and complicated relationship between nature and nation" (272). Highlighting the ideology of "conservation" as a major defining feature in Quebec culture up until the 1950's, Leach explores how the "picturesque" representations of a white wilderness in Canada's north, framed as a vast, empty, and "virgin" wilderness, all but wrote Indigenous peoples out of the stories of modern Quebecois and Canadian life.

Recognizing how "location" is framed within artistic portrayals of the landscape is important if we are to effectively shift Canada's nature/nation discourse in new directions. Rodney Graham, I believe, offers an effective illustration of this critical awareness in his film *How I Became a Ramblin' Man*, (1999). The film depicts a vast prairie landscape reminiscent of those seen in classic Hollywood Western films, in which we see the artist, dressed as a cowboy, riding his horse through the landscape and past the camera. Sounds and images of nature, running water, birds chirping, and the clickety-clack of the horse's hooves are all used to dramatic effect. Stopping in a creek-side

meadow, Graham descends from his horse and sits beneath a tree to play a sad, lonely, wandering tune on his guitar, before re-mounting and riding off into the sunset. Like Snow's work, this video is intended to be screened within a gallery context and is repeated on a nine minute loop.

In a curatorial essay on Graham's film, Jose Luis Clemente (2008) links Graham's work to Snow, through his investigations of the "multiple visions generated by the cinematic apparatus" (88). Clemente describes how *Ramblin' Man*, deconstructs the western film genre through the function of the "loop" and the deliberate voiding from the film of any melodrama and superfluous action. Like Snow, Clemente argues that Graham uses appropriation and a breakdown of conventional cinematic tropes and material strategies to question conventions of perception and representation. In this work, Graham uses the looping presentation technique, and a familiar image of the lonely abject cowboy within a vast and desolate landscape, to explore the conventions behind the narrative logic in western films" (89). As he and other authors have suggested, the use of the looping structure in short gallery films "denies the possibility of description and resolution, proposing [in the context of Graham's work] a journey that is repeated interminably and which leads the spectator to reflect on the predictable nature of the script" (89). Ideas behind the predictability of scripts is taken up further by Stella Hockenhull in her essay, "An Age of Stupid?: Sublime Landscapes and Global Anxiety," in which she charts a history of landscape representation in cinema that relies heavily on a sublime landscape aesthetic. Mobilizing an interesting, close reading of James Cameron's 2010 film *Avatar*, she highlights how the director uses a sublime "pictorial effect" to create a "visual spectacle" that works alongside the film's dramatic narrative; one "that enables the spectator to invest in a contemplative attitude that produces mainly 'aesthetic forms' on which landscape works [necessarily] depend" (Hockenhull 2013, 118). Building on Henri Lefebvre's writings on the social production of space, and in particular his notion of a "space freed from eventhood," Hockenhull explores how quick editing, framing conventions, camera angles, and shot duration all work to create a deliberate visual style, and an approach to choreography that highlights the sublime landscape and a feeling of foreboding reflected within the message of ecological concern Cameron instilled in his

film. Hockenhull's argument is useful in that she illuminates how alternative worlds can be created through a romantic positioning of the individual within nature, offered as an escapist stance through a "utopian counter-world [and] foil for the harsh realities of existence" (118). Her description of the cinematic apparatus present within a majority of landscape-based films is, in essence, an accurate account of the very space and the genre tropes that Rodney Graham deconstructs in his work. Read this way, through both Clemente and Hockenhull's analysis, Graham's endless loop of a singing cowboy opens up a space (freed from eventhood) that provides an opportunity for the study of landscape as spectacle, thus permitting a reflective and critical examination of the pervasive cultural influences present within so many of Canada's current and past landscape representations.

A useful backdrop to this discussion is provided by Catherine Fowler's writings from 2004 on gallery films and the essay film genre. Though the scope of this chapter does not allow for a full unpacking of Fowler's ideas, it is important to mention that her work is modeled on film maker Maya Deren's concept of "vertical time," which is the concept deploying a "vertical logic" built around a central emotion or idea, one containing the rhetorical devices of metaphor, dream sequences/spaces, and repetition. Fowler maintains that artists today, building on a history of alternative viewing experiences, and re-thinking linear time through the potential of editing, are able to produce work which effectively creates an interactive relationship with the viewer through a blending of art historical framing devices and a temporal and spatial employment of film language and cinematic codes. Building on this idea of metaphor and repetition, we can see how Graham's looping portrayal of a cowboy "singing the praises of his harmonious communion with nature...deploys a model of masculinity that operates as an appropriation and deconstruction of the image of the cowboy galloping across the unspoiled American West" (Clemente 2008, 90). The song Graham sings is about how he took up his solitary life far from the city. As Clemente says, "sound and music are particularly important elements in Graham's work, and he often uses them to lead us back in his work to the absence of convention and film narrative, or to ironically explore the drama in which all his main characters are caught up; conceived as a form of liberation,

an escape route from the labyrinth in which the characters are trapped” (91).

Paradoxically, we can see how similar ideas of sound are at play within Jungen and Linklater’s work, however in their case, it is the silence which opens up a space for contemplation about ideas of subjectivity, originality, authorship, and fetishism within the landscape film genre.

The other topical idea at play within both my own work and the works of Graham, Snow, and Jungen/Linklater, is the essay film. Specifically, that form of film making analyzed by Tim Corrigan in the chapter, “About Refractive Cinema: When Films Interrogate Films,” published in the book, *The Essay Film*, (Corrigan 2011). Corrigan describes the “refractive essay film” as “art about art” that has the aim of “return[ing] the film to the world and ideas about the world” (181). Corrigan extends and readapts French film critic Andre Bazin’s (1918-1958) term “refractive” to describe a practice of deflection and dispersal he feels is at the center of this particular kind of essay film, one that he says, “interrogates their own representational regimes” (181). Corrigan sees this kind of work as more than mere artistic commentary; instead he describes how “refractive cinema reenacts the art work as an open-ended criticism that specifically engages ideas within an essayistic arena that abstracts the very activity of thinking, through a cinematic process. This [he says] enacts and disperses the critical act of thinking cinematically itself” (183). Corrigan highlights many of the methodologies used by artists within this genre and builds on Foucault’s theories around the interpretive qualities of the essay format. Corrigan notes that Foucault positioned the essay “between the commentaries described in early responses to biblical and philosophical texts and the critical responses of scientific systems that would drive analysis in the modern era” (188). Within this history of the development of the essay form, Foucault claims “commentary yields to criticism: so that language no longer simply glosses a text but now intervened, to investigate, decipher, and interpret the possibilities and limits of that language” (183). Corrigan’s framing of the essay film in this way shows how the various methodologies of camera operation, editing, location, sound (or lack there-of), and the context of being in a gallery, work to undermine the representational stability and the narratives at play within the works in question. In Corrigan’s terms, the work turns back on itself to comment on its

own making. And while he notes that most essay films work with a large degree of “reflexivity,” he sees them as mainly “autobiographical inventories of filmic perceptions.” In contrast, he sees this type of “refractive” essay film as being about more than human subjectivity, or the spaces of public life: “(it) also points to the aesthetics, or more exactly, the anti-aesthetics of representation that always hovers about essay films as a filmic thinking of the world” (191). “Refractive suggests a kind of ‘unmaking’ of the work of art as the film, or we will see, its failure or ‘abjection’” (191). What this analysis shows, is that through the deployment of the various techniques, tropes and rhetorical devices present within the conventions of the cinematic apparatus, works such as those by Snow, Graham and Linklater/Jungen (and even my own) can be seen to actively destabilize perceived notions of the landscape, and the identity constructions found within conventional representations of it. In Corrigan’s terms, at the heart of this work is “a critical reenactment of the cinematic representation itself, as a way of reconceptualizing that [representational] process as an open-ended encounter with the world, as an act of criticism rather than commentary” (191).

My interest in the diverse but interrelated works of Michael Snow, Rodney Graham, and the collaborative efforts of Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater, is galvanized around their active and critical engagements with the conventions and tropes of landscape representations in Canada. I have come to think that, when combined, all three films under consideration index my research interests into issues of culture, community, and identity, and more importantly, emphasize how these ideas are constructed through popular and historical representations. All three films engage with viewpoints on wilderness and landscape representation framed within a political culture that is particular, ideological, and built on racialized historical geographies. As well, these artists explore ideas of nature often constructed through representational practices mediated by a system of visual organization predicated on dominant cultural values. The emphasis these artists place on ideas related to the iconic national landscape helps re-articulate understandings of nation and nature within representational practices and reminds us to question the narrative of geographic and cultural sovereignty that is so often deployed in an attempt to authentically embody the collective identity of Canadian

citizens. Tracing a path through these artistic interventions, from Snow's deconstruction of the Group of Seven's gaze, to Rodney Graham's playing the singing cowboy, to Jungen and Linklater's silent reconstruction of the hunting documentary, we are reminded of the importance and continuing need to consider the various perspectives, privileges, and voices at play within discourses often overlooked in the haze of romance and nostalgia surrounding representations of the Canadian landscape. Indeed, we are reminded that we ought not forget the colonial violence that has secured modernist ideas of place and space into the constantly re-articulating structure of meaning, imbedded within landscape representations. All of this, one could argue, is at play in the landscape film works being discussed here, but most emphatically through Jungen and Linklater's emphasis on the domestic, local and traditional knowledge operating within visual representations of Indigenous interactions with the land.

To conclude this chapter, I want to emphasize that at the forefront of my research into Canadian landscape representations is a desire to explore and challenge the enduring colonial features of Canadian nationalism. More importantly, as an artist, I am interested in how issues of nature and nation can be disrupted by progressive and critically engaged artistic productions. And so, finding ways in which my own visual productions can act as interventions into the historic connections between the sublime, romantic, natural landscape and its links to the nation remains my prime creative motivation. The effect of this, I hope, will be to ultimately challenge, question, and allow for a reconsideration of the representational framing that has come to shape our physical and spiritual connections to the Canadian landscape.

Chapter 4

Final Outcomes and Significant Collaborative Practice

In this chapter, I describe the production and research methodologies involved in mounting my final thesis exhibition and discuss the development of the individual works within the show. I also discuss my recent participation in two important and formative group exhibitions, and the creation of a new performance work developed in conjunction with this dissertation project. Finally, I present the critical framework and collaborative practice that was utilized in the creation of my major new video production, *Pilgrims of the Wild*.

Field Work and Studio-Based Research

As described earlier, my thesis exhibition included two video installations, as well as a drawing and several sculptural works. As might be surmised, this foregrounded at least two quite distinct working methods. The drawing and sculptural works were entirely created within a studio based methodology of experimentation and creation and was developed throughout the course of my Ph.D. Several of the works were previously exhibited in various group and solo shows during the time of my Ph.D. program, including the large drawing work, *Group of Seven with Wolf's Head and Study of Dead Hind* (2014), and the two carved transformation masks, *Grey Owl/Pierce Brosnan* (2015), and *Wolf/Kevin Costner* (2015). The cast resin sculpture of two fighters, *I Don't Know if I am Right, But I Do Know When You are Wrong* (2013/14), has been shown in various incarnations, but in my final exhibition, the work was expanded to include a canoe and small changes to the forms of the cast plastic figurines. The work was renamed for the exhibition, *Canoe Dance* (2016).

In contrast with the production of the drawing and sculptures, the video works, *Pilgrims of the Wild* (2016), and *Dance for the Narrows* (2015), are comprised of footage taken while on numerous “in-field shoots,” and their production included lengthy “in-house” editing periods. As the need has arisen, I have worked with professional editors, camera

and sound operators, actors, musicians, and professional guiding outfitters. The video work, *Dance for the Narrows*, was initially created when I was invited to be part of a group exhibition at the Orillia Museum of Art and History, in response to the 400th anniversary and re-enactment celebrations of Samuel de Champlain's arrival and subsequent travels in the Simcoe area of Ontario. The final outcomes of this video responded to the curatorial premise of thinking through the enacting of Nation-to-Nation relationship in Canada between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. *Pilgrims of the Wild* was conceived and created entirely as a creative aspect of my dissertation research, and was always intended to premier as part of my final Ph.D. dissertation exhibition.

My principle methodology in developing this dissertation project, particularly during the field work intended for the performance and video based elements, involved setting up a series of events, and organizing a group of people to perform with me in a specific location, in an attempt to tease out a story that is both compelling and valuable – one that bears qualities of “authenticity” for all parties involved. Following that aspect of the process, I then proceeded to build artworks around the idea of “experiential video storytelling,” through studio-based investigations focused on materials and ideas. I have found that through this experience a substantial amount of the ethos and the “direction” for this work was highly influenced by my actors, guides, camera and sound crew. In light of that, it was my intention to explore the collaborative aspect of the project to the fullest. As mentioned previously in this thesis, for the *Pilgrims of the Wild* project, I invited several other artists who work within similar methodologies and subject matter to mine, and also a filmmaker, and an audio recording engineer, to accompany me on a weeklong trip to northern Saskatchewan in mid-August, 2015. The trip, and its subsequent performance outcomes, was recorded and compiled as the core content for the final exhibition. This week-long expedition was framed within a loosely scripted idea of a pilgrimage to Grey Owl's cabin, and an invitation to my participating artists and crew to explore their personal connections to not only Grey Owl's legacy, but also to ideas relating to Canada's national parks, nature spirituality, the canoe, and other themes related to the specific geography of northern Saskatchewan's boreal forest. The trip

included a multi-day ride on horseback into the Prince Albert National Park, facilitated by Gord Vaadland of the Sturgeon River Ranch, based out of the Sturgeon River area on the West side of the P.A. Park. My own crew was comprised primarily of cinematographer Clark Ferguson, audio engineer Jordan Poniatowski, and two principal collaborating artists, Adrian Stimson and Lori Blondeau. In addition to the overnight trip into the park, we stayed on the site of a well-known music festival as guests of the cultural organization, *The Ness Creek Cultural and Recreation Society* (also located on the park's West side), and recorded both on-site at that location, as well as at the nearby campground facilities of Nesslin Lake.

Our final location was the result of a (very) long day trip to Grey Owl's cabin on Lake Ajawaan, in the heart of the Prince Albert National Park. This episode comprised of a 5-hour round-trip drive from our accommodations at Ness Creek, to the town of Waskesiu, located inside the park's southern gates. There, a rented eighteen-foot aluminum outboard boat was rented from a local outfitter, and was used to travel up river, over two significant rail-car portages and across the large expanse of Kingsmere Lake. Once on shore, our group hiked with equipment and costumes the additional two and half kilometers to Grey Owl's cabin. I have chosen to give a detailed trip account of the effort involved and distance travelled to reach this location so as to illustrate the amount of work and commitment each member of this project put towards its ultimate resolution. For the most part, our weeklong trip took place during plus-thirty degree Celsius weather, and due to a late August rain, we enjoyed the constant company of swarms of mosquitoes and black flies. The final day of shooting on Nesslin Lake, as can be seen in the completed video, was met with a torrential downpour. Needless to say, it took some convincing and protective measures with cameras and audio gear to complete the shoot, but it was definitely worth the commitment and adaptations, as I believe all participants came away from the week with some pretty remarkable raw material and experiences. By the end of the week, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, we began to refer to this project as our "Decolonial Bootcamp."

All of the parties involved in this project, from artists, to camera and sound persons, to guides, and local hosts, feature as key contributors to my work and each, at some point, took on central creative roles leading to the final production. I acted as principal director, producer, and writer of script and actions, but let the locations and working methods of the various collaborators and crew, dictate, change, and adapt many of the ideas and final outcomes of the project. While I do consider *The Pilgrims of the Wild* project a true collaboration in a creative sense, I should note, for the purposes of this dissertation, that I had final say in many of the scenes, and have conducted all the editing and realized the promotion of the work. I also produced the work in its entirety from a financial perspective, paying for each aspect of the project, from camera/audio gear, travel for my artists and crew from as far away as Montreal (to Saskatoon, and then up north), to accommodation and food on site. Each of my principal artists and crew received a \$1000.00 artist/production honorarium, on top of the previously mentioned costs that were covered. I also arranged and covered costs for the guides and outfitters, boats, generators, and vehicles. Ultimately, I would say that the operative structure of this project, undertaken as part of my Ph.D. research and final dissertation exhibition, set the conditions that have shaped its final outcomes.

It is also important to acknowledge that the major video piece was always planned to “locate” itself in proximity to my own autobiographical voice, mobilizing a settler-based narrative that speaks back to dominant viewpoints of Canadian settler history, park representation, and decolonial options and rhetoric. And while the Indigenous voices and substantial performative directions made by my two leading collaborators and actors, Adrian Stimson and Lori Blondeau, shaped the final outcomes and decision-making processes in profound ways while on location, the final work, as presented within this Ph.D. project, is intended, within the context of my research, to act as a vehicle to break down dominant representational practices within non-Indigenous Canadian landscape representations. I do however feel that there remains tremendous potential for this work to continue, and to be transformed to advance new modes of (re)presentation outside the confines of a major academic research project and supporting institutional framework. While nothing is planned at this point, I imagine this will happen primarily through new

group exhibition opportunities with Adrian and Lori (related to this work), and through possible spin-off projects. Certainly some amazing dialogues regarding potential and future collaborations have been undertaken by this group of artists and the regional and local representatives and stakeholders that came together to see this project to its completion. Future work will necessarily include my immersion in a more well-rounded collaborative practice, one that allows my own artistic voice to be pulled in new and unexpected directions, and in the process, to unsettle my own subjective position and my perceptions of and within the landscape.

The major video work, *Pilgrims of the Wild*, was created in Saskatchewan, primarily due to the importance of the geography and location of park and wildlife to the project, but also because a project of this scale is possible (for me) due to an important group of colleagues and contacts that I have established there over the years, in and out of the areas surrounding the Prince Albert National Park. Given this, I already knew many of the guides and facilitators that contributed to the success of the Prince Albert edition of the centenary *National Parks Project*, and as such was able to incorporate those actors into my final project so as to fulfill one of my desired intentions and outcomes for this project. Namely, the incorporation and naming of local participants within my work, something that was noticeably absent for me within the Prince Albert addition of the *National Parks Project*. One might assume that the aforementioned absence was meant to uphold the illusion of an empty, and sublime wilderness, within official park representation, but that element left an impression on me that convinced me of the need to frame my own project to include the guides and local participants in significant ways. I will add that Gord Vaadland from the Sturgeon River Ranch, who also took the *NPP* film crew and musicians into the park back in 2010, believed in our project to the point that aside from immediate food costs for my party, he offered his guiding services, staff, and horses, at no cost, in exchange for the production of a short video excerpt that he could use in his Ranch advertisements. The associated costs for bringing a group of ten into the park for an overnight trip on horseback would have exceeded \$4000.00, so it is with heartfelt gratitude, to both Gord and his crew at the Ranch, that I acknowledge this agreement. Without this arrangement, my project would not have been possible.

Likewise, Gord Olson, from the Ness Creek Cultural and Recreational Society, and Ness Corp. Ventures, did much of the groundwork to facilitate our party's work in the region and graciously allowed our crew to stay on the site of Festival grounds, while another ticketed event, *The Northern Lights Bluegrass and Old Tyme Music Festival*, was taking place. The intentional framing of my project in such a way that it required the incorporation of outcomes resulting from collaboration, chance encounters, and experimentation, has now become a significant, exciting and even central part of my artistic process. As such, I built this project with the knowledge that its end results and material considerations would remain constantly in flux, and to invoke Stuart Hall's earlier assertion once more, its success would come "without guarantees."

Previous Exhibitions and Related Projects

My final exhibition has been greatly influenced by my participation in two recent group exhibitions and a commissioned performance, all investigating decolonial politics and practice in Canada from a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. The previously mentioned canoe dance video, *Dance for the Narrows*, was created as part of the exhibition, *N2N: Widening the Narrows*, July 2nd to September 26th, 2015, at Orillia Museum of Art and History. The show was led by the curatorial team of Wanda Nanibush and Matt Macintosh, and explored the legacy of Champlain's arrival in the area and local water management issues surrounding the Trent Severn Waterway and the historic Mnjikenning Fishing Weirs. The second group exhibition was, *Mamo'wiiang To Make Change*, May 21 to July 4th, 2015, at The Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, led by the collaborative curatorial team of Leah Decter and Jaimie Isaac. I also created a performance piece, *Searching for Grey Owl*, that premiered at the 2015 incarnation of the Indigenous Peoples Artist Collective's *Two Story Cafe*, arts festival, September 16th to 19th, in Prince Albert, SK., along with a second performance at Western University's Artlab this past March, 2016. This work focuses on the popular legacy of Grey Owl in this country and the subsequent re-telling of that story in the 1999 Richard Attenborough film, *Grey Owl*, starring Pierce Brosnan. What follows is a brief synopsis of each of these

exhibitions in which I share the “curatorial” premise as well as provide images and descriptions of the various works that have carried over into my final exhibition.

N2N: Widening the Narrows, July 2nd to September 26th, 2015, OMAH, Orillia, ON.

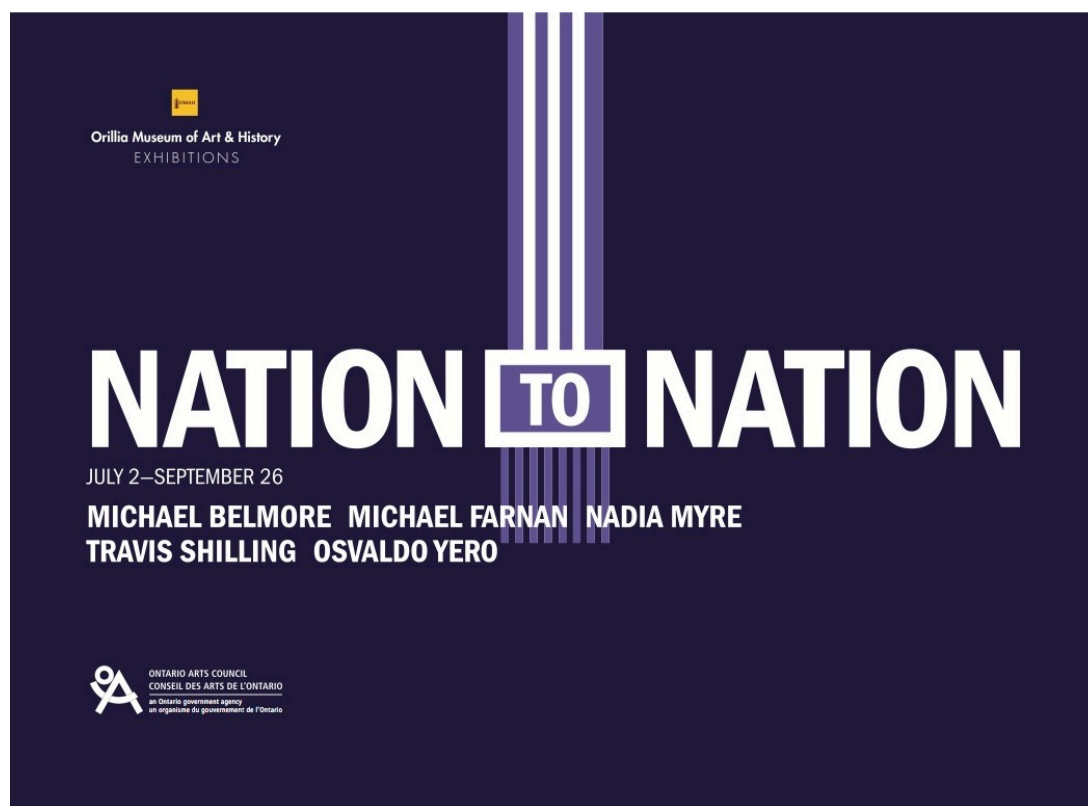


Figure 1. N2N Exhibition Invite.

My new video work, *Dance for the Narrows*, 2015, was created to be part of the *Nation-to-Nation* exhibition at the Orillia Museum of Art and History. The show was the brainchild of then acting curator, Matt Macintosh, and independent curator, Wanda Nanibush. The show’s curatorial premise was intended to provide a counter story to the regional and quatercentenary celebrations of Champlain’s arrival in the Simcoe area, and to specifically address Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests and histories revolving around the historic Mnjiking Fishing Weirs. Located in the Atherly Narrows, in the heart of Orillia, Ontario and connecting Lake Simcoe to Lake Couchiching. Five artists, including myself, were invited to research the area and make a work that responded to these interests. Michael Belmore, Nadia Myre, Travis Shilling, and Osvaldo

Yarrow all participated. I will admit to being very excited to be part of this show and have the chance to work with the curators and participating artists. I took the curatorial



Figure 2. *Dance for the Narrows*, 2015. Production Still. Bill Brims in Canoe.

premise very seriously, due in part to being the only (current) local artist featured in the show, and in an interesting twist, the only white European/Settler identified within the nation to nation context. I spent one or two days a month for almost four months going through the Orillia Museum's archives, which included an impressive collection of Huron and Chippewas First Nation artifacts, and a large collection of *Group of Seven* and other regional painter's works. I also spent a great deal of time visiting the site of the Fishing Weirs, and engaging with local and traditional knowledge keepers. It was through this research that I ultimately decided to create my "Canoe Dance" video. I employed respected environmental documentary filmmaker, David Hartman to act as Director of Photography and William Brims, my previous canoe instructor and well know figure within "Canadian Style" paddling circles. I also employed my cousin-in-law, accomplished Métis musician and educator, Joel Alain, to arrange and perform the songs, "Cry of the Wild," originally written by Dave Hadfield (1999), and the traditional

Canadian camp fire classic, “Land of the Silver Birch,” originally adapted from Pauline Johnson’s “The Song my Paddle Sings.” From the exhibition’s curatorial statement:

The Mnjikaning Fishing Weirs were the site of ceremonies that re-established the Anishinaabe treaties with the Fish Nations. The lands that form Orillia are Indigenous territories that were meant to be shared and governed by the nation-to-nation relationship of settler and First Nations. What is it to have a nation-to-nation relationship with animals and each other? What changes in our way of living and relating to each other if we acknowledge the inherent sovereignty of Indigenous peoples? How will we adapt to the profound changes wrought by a complete disregard for the life of animals, land, and water?

Nation to Nation brings together five exceptional artists whose practices explore ways of thinking through colonization. Through a range of media, sites and strategies, these artists bring local and non-local, Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives to a discussion about nation-to-nation relationships. This discussion is propelled by the artist’s research and explorations into the Mnjikaning Fish Weirs Historic Site and the arrival of Samuel de Champlain to Orillia/Rama area exactly 400 years ago.

Mamo’wiiang To Make Change, May 21 - July 4th, 2015, The AGSM, Brandon, MB.



Figure 3. *Mamo’wiiang To Make Change*, Installation Image. Work in foreground by Leah Decter and Jaimie Isaac, (official denial) trade value in progress, 2014.

The *Mammo'wiiang To Make Change* exhibition was an exciting opportunity to work with a group of artists who have inspired and acted as mentors to me over the years. The show was curated by Jaimie Isaac and Leah Decter, and arose out of a collaborative project the two had undertaken in the wake of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the legacies of Canada's Indian Residential Schools (see Decter and Isaac 2015). The show included one of their collaborative Hudson Bay Blankets from the project, *(official denial) trade value in progress* (2014). I exhibited my *Group of Seven* drawing, alongside the *Grey Owl/Pierce Brosnan* mask. Along with these works, a new piece was created, the *Wolf/Kevin Costner Transformation Mask*. Participating artists in the exhibition were Ayumi Goto, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Adrian Stimson, Scott Benesiinaabandan, Paul Zacharias, and Peter Morin. From the shows curatorial text:

Mammo'wiiang is an Anishinaabemowin word meaning gathering. Evolving from the co-curator's four-year collaboration, Mammo'wiiang to make change focuses on artworks that address social, cultural, economic, and political conditions arising from Canada's colonial project. The artists in this exhibition enact relationships across cultures, generations, histories, species, and experience, highlighting the transformative power of exchange, and inviting the viewer into this ongoing dialogue. Geographically situated in the place now known as Brandon, in Treaty 1 Territory, this exhibition brings attention to interrelated histories on this land. Disparate experiences of colonial nation building are met here with sites of activation and resistance that aspire to non-colonial attitudes in the present and future.

For over 500 years, Indigenous peoples have enacted resistance to the structures and relationships of colonization. Increasingly it is understood that these actions undertaken by Indigenous peoples must be met by a commitment for change from non-Indigenous people. Artists are among those at the leading edge of such efforts to unpack and confront colonial legacies.

Mammo'wiiang to make change considers the urgency of working towards these goals, and acknowledges the significance of culturally responsive collaboration. In selection of works, the co-curators have considered the artists' individual, as well as the collaborative, practices that tie them together through relationships, which like the co-curators, extend over time and outside the work in this exhibition. The artists envision and enact notions of transformation on multiple planes, working with trans-disciplinary proficiency to reveal and interfere with colonial structures. Standing together across disciplines and cultures with a sense of both cohesion and tension, they bring awareness to the historical schisms between Canada and Indigenous Peoples. The works in *Mammo'wiiang to make change* engender a dynamic provocation for audiences to enter into an ongoing dialogue.



Figure 4. *Mammo'wiiang To Make Change*, Installation Image. Work by Cheryl L'Hirondelle in foreground, my work is on back wall.

Searching for Grey Owl, IPAC's *Two Story Cafe*, Sept. 16th-19th, Prince Albert, SK., and Western University's Artlab Gallery, March 11, 2016.



Figure 5. *Searching for Grey Owl* performance, *Two Story Café*, Mann Gallery, Prince Albert, SK.

As previously mentioned, this performance work focuses on the popular and enduring legacy of Grey Owl in this country, in particular on mainstream, or in this case, Hollywood representations of Grey Owl, and his enduring presence in National Park advertising. The performance was originally created to premiere as part of the *Two Story Cafe*, in Prince Albert, Sk. I had been in contact for a few years about the possibility of working with the Indigenous Peoples Artist Collective on this project, and was commissioned as a feature artist for their 2015, 9th annual festival.

My performance included the scene shot at Grey Owl's cabin from the *Pilgrims of the Wild* film, and a reenactment of the closing segment from the Richard Attenborough film, *Grey Owl* (1999), in which I deliver Pierce Brosnan's final monologue, and donning a cardboard Pierce Brosnan mask I had made specifically for this work, I sing an acappella version of the contemporary wilderness lament, *Cry of the Wild*, to an audience that had also been provided with, and encouraged to wear, the Pierce Brosnan masks. As this was the premier of the work, I was able to analyze what I felt did and did not work, and made several small changes for the second performance of this work at the Artlab Gallery at Western University, London, Ontario. Namely, I shortened the video clip, had assistants pass out the masks to the audience, and provided the words of the song via projection for the audience to sing along. I also sang through a megaphone.



Figure 6. *Searching for Grey Owl* performance, Artlab, London, ON. Photo credit: Mark Kasumovic.



Figure 7. *Searching for Grey Owl* performance, Artlab, London, ON. Photo credit: Mark Kasumovic.



Figure 8. *Searching for Grey Owl* performance. Image of audience wearing Pierce Brosnan Masks. Artlab Gallery, London, ON. Photo credit: Mark Kasumovic.



Figure 9. Boy Scout in Canoe, from *Pilgrims of the Wild*, video still.

The Canoe, Collaboration, and a New National Parks Project

Within this extended project, one of the central subjects I focus on is the canoe, both as an icon and idea through history and theory, and also in connection with both land and nation. The canoe within my project has acted as a tool (or vehicle) for investigating culture as well as personal practice. As preparation for this project, I began working with instructors and guides throughout the summer and fall of 2014, to complete the ORCKA (Ontario Recreational Canoe and Kayak Association) canoe courses, with the intention of learning “Canadian Style” paddling - which for the uninitiated, is among the skills celebrated by the likes of Grey Owl, and Tom Thomson, and by Bill Mason in his famous books and NFB film series *Path of the Paddle* (1977; 1980), and *Song of the Paddle* (1978; 1988). Canadian Style paddling is also the principal technique used in the *canoe dance*, which features in my work, *Dance for the Narrows*, 2015, originally created for the *N2N* exhibition. Among other things, my use of the canoe within this project references the extensive archive of canoe themed videos as evidenced by the NFB website, including those by Bill Mason, and the plethora of *canoe dance* videos that can be found on YouTube and various social media sites. This focus on the creative invocation of canoe culture in Canada has allowed me to explore ways in which the

canoe has been framed as a metaphor for Canadian national identity. My own engagement with canoe culture and the act of traveling and recording “in the field,” so to speak, through both the *Dance for the Narrows* project, and later through the *Pilgrims of the Wild* project, represents my attempt to inhabit the territory established through “location shooting” and claims of “authenticity,” as discussed earlier with regards to the NFB and the tradition of documentary style filmmaking in Canada that places man in direct contest with nature. The insertion of the canoe as a cultural object and performative trope within this dissertation project has been very much a process-oriented undertaking: I immersed myself in canoe culture, as well as the local communities that live and work alongside and serve the parks and recreations spaces we were exploring. This has allowed me to work with important figures in the field who share similar interests, such as canoe icon, William Brims, respected naturalist and guide, Gord Vaadland, cinematographer’s David Hartman and Clark Ferguson, and highly esteemed artists Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson.

In light of my choice to involve other professionals and creative allies so directly, I now want to turn to the collaborative aspects I have employed throughout this project. It was always my intention to create opportunities where I could work with those I admire, respect, and can continue to learn from. As such, I have continuously strived within this project to find places and possibilities to include friends and family within the final work or in supporting production roles. My brother, cousins, and life long friends all feature in this final dissertation work due primarily to overlaps in both their own and my artistic practices and shared interests in issues related to the project’s core research objectives. I have also used this project to chart unknown territories, following a path aimed at working with those I hold in high regard and consider as central actors within the critical terrain I am committed to working in. I have known Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson since 2009 when I was in Saskatoon completing my MFA degree at the University of Saskatchewan. Both were alumni and sessional faculty and important figures in local, regional, and national/international art communities. Arguably, the seeds for this project were planted a number of years ago when Adrian and I first worked together as independently invited guest-artists and researchers at the *Bison on the Edge* conference,

in the community of Big River, Saskatchewan, in the summer of 2010. The conference was hosted by the *Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards* and brought together an international group of researchers and scientists focused on protecting and documenting the wild herd of bison living within the Prince Albert National Park. At the time, the herd was Canada's only free-ranging plains bison colony still living within their historic range. It was here that we also met Gord Vaadland, and many of the key players who helped facilitate the filming of the *Pilgrims of the Wild* project. A couple of years later, I was invited by PAVED arts to screen one of my video works in conjunction with Stimson's solo exhibition, *The Shaman Exterminator: On the Trail of the Woodcraft Indians with the Buffalo Boy Scouts of America*.⁶ Stimson's exhibition, among other things, explored the history and enduring popular legacy of the Woodcraft Indian movement created by Ernest Thompson Seton. Seton's legacy is what continues to drive Boy Scout culture in Canada, and Adrian's work mirrored my own interests and research into notions of the modern primitive, Grey Owl, and Camp/Boy Scout culture here in Canada. This overlap in our respective practices became the jumping off points for a new collaborative work centered on historical representations of the Prince Albert National Park.

By way of introduction to Adrian Stimson, he is a Saskatoon based artist and member of the Siksika First Nation in Alberta. He is best known for a body of work which adopts and challenges the romantic and benevolent view of Indigenous history in Canada's colonial nation-building project. As an artist, he first and foremost sets out to Indigenize and Queer the terrain of our national imaginary, with the aim of destabilizing our historic connections to place. Stimson's installation and performance works explore both his own personal, and broader Indigenous/Canadian histories within the Residential School System and are memorable in their impacts. His works *Old Sun* (2008), and *Buffalo Boy's Confessional: Indulgence* (2007), (in my opinion) affirmed Stimson's place as one of Canada's leading voices in the efforts to decolonize and rethink Canada's dominant settler narratives. His most (in)famous work centers around the outrageous and brilliant

⁶ November 2nd to December 8th, 2012, at PAVED Arts, in Saskatoon.

Two-Spirited performance character Buffalo Boy, a figure inspired by the performance legacy and colonial themes of *Buffalo Bills Wild West* shows of the late nineteenth century. Buffalo Boy, who features prominently within the film *Pilgrims of the Wild*, is intended as a camp send up of the darker sides of Canada's early settlement history (see Bell 2007). Nonetheless, despite the apparent lightness that can attend camp humour and parody, Adrian remains deadly serious about his work and role as artist, community leader and activist. As University of Saskatchewan colleague and Art Historian Lynne Bell describes, "Stimson's performances and installation works connect the cultural genocide inflicted on Indigenous children in the Residential School system and the Buffalo genocide and its devastating impact on the lifestyles of the Indigenous peoples of the Plains" (Bell 2009,89). In Stimson's own words:

I use the bison as a symbol representing the destruction of the Aboriginal way of life. But it also represents survival and cultural regeneration. The bison is central to Blackfoot being. The bison as Icon and food source, as well as the whole history of its disappearance, is very much a part of my contemporary life.
(Stimson, as quoted by Bell, 2004, 48)



Figure 10. The Shaman Exterminator, COSMOSQUAW, and Beaver, at Grey Owl's cabin, from *Pilgrims of the Wild*, video still.

Lori Blondeau is one of Canada's most courageous and accomplished performance artists and art world activists. She is the co-founder and current executive director of the transformative and mobile Indigenous artist collective, Tribe, which just celebrated its twentieth anniversary with the blockbuster exhibition, *The Fifth World* (2015), curated by Wanda Nanibush at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. Lori is a long time collaborator with Adrian Stimson, and brought to the project several performance characters, including Buffalo Boy's partner in crime, the gun slinging, Belle Sauvage, as well as the Indian Princess, and COSMOSQUAW. The latter is a character born out of critical re-stagings of the photographic and aesthetic conventions found in popular culture fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*. Like Stimson, beneath the camp humour and social satire, resides a profound strength of conviction and resistance that reasserts an Indigenous presence and sovereignty into everything she addresses. Blondeau takes on racist stereotypes and demands that we account for the physical and sexual violence enacted upon Indigenous people in Canada. When the *Pilgrims of the Wild* film opens, and we see Lori standing in a field in her red dress, and again later, standing defiantly in the same dress, next to Grey Owl's cabin. For the viewer (and the artists involved) Lori's appearance situates Canada's colonial history, identity politics, and the endurance of a racialized and gendered violence perpetuated against Canada's Indigenous population at the core of the project. As author and Indigenous Humanities Research activist, Len Findlay, writes, "Blondeau's red dress puns on [the idea of] *redress* as well, pushing sexual promiscuity and the troubling legacy of Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and the red dress movement that has come to symbolize it" (Findlay 2013, 226). As Findlay goes on to say of Blondeau in his essay, "Redress Rehearsals: Legal Warrior, COSMOSQUAW, and the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards,"

There is an enormous freight of meaning behind Lori's works. The reductive trajectory of sexism is reversed so that the sexualized female body connects back along an obscured continuum to the (hard) core values of respectable society in a former French and British colony. The tropes of the Indian princess and the Indian trollop are recomposed as a report on what counts as beauty and as a political intervention. Politics is not just a man's game, whether he be white or brown, a radical or a revolutionary. Moreover, sexual politics is neither an oxymoron nor a mere distraction from the struggle of males for domination. (Findlay 2013, 227)

Lori has an amazing ability at storytelling through subtle and deliberate action, and invokes a politics of accountability that is often unsettling. My friendship and artistic camaraderie with Lori and Adrian over the years, and our recent collaboration on this project, has taught me a great deal. Namely, to be ever-attuned to the presence of another path, a different choice, and an alternate future. Together, they have demonstrated to me an incomparable compassion, generosity, and their strengths of character. They have taught me to stand up for my convictions, fight for my beliefs, and demonstrated to me that it is perfectly okay to not know the destination before heading down an uncertain path. Most importantly, they have taught me how to listen. Working with one's mentors and real life art world heroes was initially a humbling prospect, but the two of them displayed a humility, and willingness to push themselves and me beyond our individual comfort zones, in a way that I found truly inspiring. For that, I will be forever grateful.

Projecting the Past into Visions of a Fantastical Future

Here I want to specifically address the particular aspects of my own art practice that I brought to this larger project, in order to begin the dialogue with Adrian and Lori that ultimately yielded *Pilgrims of the Wild*. The narratives involving Grey Owl and the Park's continuing representation of his vital role as steward, and deep ecologist, are significant within the complex cultural world of Native appropriation that continues to reflect, as Stimson says, a "genuine admiration of 'Indian Life' by non-native people." As has been researched elsewhere, this ostensible fetishization has evolved to influence many different movements throughout the world: the Boy Scouts, Ontario Summer Camp culture, Kal May's "German Indians," the white Indian actors of Hollywood, the Fashion, Consumer and Romantic novel industries, Rainbow gatherings, survivalists, Hippies, Hipsters and the Burning Man Festival. Within Parks Canada's recent centenary celebrations, and the release of the various park films and music recordings for the *National Parks Project* (2011), this influence and history can be seen in many of the portrayals of both landscape and its inhabitants. This reliance on particular versions of land usage and colonial framework of place and space became the working material of our film, *Pilgrims of the Wild: A New National Park Project*.



Figure 11. The Indian Princess, Buffalo Boy, and Boy Scout meeting on the banks of Ness Creek, SK. from *Pilgrims of the Wild*, video still.

With many of my own formative years spent living in Saskatchewan, regional narratives such as those representing Grey Owl, and the local guiding, tourist, and resource-based lives of people who live in and around the park, have always been present in my life. Grey Owl was therefor an admittedly difficult subject to take on. He is of questionable repute, and yet, as a historical figure remains profoundly important and iconic to the region and national park narratives. I have been working around the problem of how to explore his legacy for a number of years. Through many of my earlier video works, such as *The Legend of Bison Hughy* (2012), and *The Beaver goes Logging* (2011), I had begun to set up a dialectical methodology of working around this central subject of Grey Owl's legacy, by way of weaving something quite accessible (my character driven stories) together with something challenging – the canonical Grey Owl legend. Formerly, my work was about trying to find a way *in* to the difficult subjects of appropriation, white wilderness, and representations of spiritual connections to nature, settler history, and the

intergenerational responsibility we share towards actions of colonial genocide. As I have delved more deeply into this subject matter, I have come to realize that it is primarily the idea of an “authentic” Canada that I question, and that through this analysis of both our ostensible trophies and historical representations, my aim has always been to explore the continuing popular discourses surrounding ideas of Canada’s wilderness represented as *terra nullius*, and also the enduring colonial framework of an inherited, empty landscape, waiting to be filled.

For the reason described, I want to make it clear that the *National Parks Project* (2011), and the related artists, musicians, and film crews, that were involved in that undertaking have never been the principle subjects of critique within my new film work or this dissertation. And while I remain critical of the *NPP* project’s principal framework - of perpetuating the Canadian tradition of seeking spiritual regeneration and growth through a back and forth journey from empty, unspoiled wilderness, to civilized, urban Canada, I recognize that the individual works within the *NPP* project all speak to different regional and national perspectives, and employ unique and idiosyncratic ways of knowing and seeing. For example, there is a profound difference between the park film shot in Prince Albert, SK. which flew in filmmaker, Stephane Lafleur and group of musicians, including Mathieu Charbonneau, Andre Ethier, and Rebecca Foon, from urban centers in Ontario and Quebec, and who were likely unaware, and by all accounts, ambivalent to many of the local, and historical, implications and artifacts foregrounded through their film. In contrast, the park film for Sirmilik National Park, in Nunavut, created by renowned Inuit film maker, Zacharias Kanuk, rings with a greater awareness of its context. Unlike Lafleur’s depiction of the northern boreal prairie landscape, which recreated park imagery in much the same ways described by Keri J. Cronin (2011) regarding the representational practices of “National Parks Nature” (as discussed in chapter two of this dissertation), Kanuk depicts the arctic landscape as place where people live, work, and inhabit, physically, spiritually, and historically. Kanuk’s film work, matched by the vocals of Nunavut native, Tanya Tagaq, does this by focusing the film around an eighty-year-old hunter who has lived his whole life in the region. This offers an important distinction, one that I began thinking about immediately after seeing the series of films in

this project. Indeed, I knew the group of guides and park employees who brought Lafleur and crew into the park personally, and would argue that had the Prince Albert film included any one of the local narratives involving those who had also lived and worked within the park and surrounding areas, a much different film might have resulted; one that likely would not have spurred me into taking action making a film that redressed and reenacted many of the film's principal nature/nation constructions.

Besides the noticeable difference between films enacting a local presence, the main feature or element that intrigued me about the *National Parks Project* was the operational approach of sending a crew of filmmakers and artists into the parks to create a new work exploring location and seeming national symbols of wilderness and nature. This framework, and in particular, my intimate knowledge of the Prince Albert National Park and the local communities that not only aided in the filming of the *NPP*, but are themselves tied to the park in a variety of ways, raised a lot of critical questions. Specifically, they circulated around the particular framing of the park within familiar tropes of an empty, sublime wilderness, alongside a further question that work raised: could I send a group of performance based visual artists into the park to produce an alternative work of significance? This vision of the park, and the representational erasure of a local Settler/Indigenous presence and perspectives, next to the reverential portrayal of Grey Owl within the projects supporting video documentation, became a source of great provocation and inspiration. Many of the locations our team utilized within the *Pilgrims of the Wild* project, such as the trip to Grey Owl's cabin, and the Long Meadow located in the Park's West Side, were chosen to mirror the way they were featured in the *NPP* film, *Night Vision*. What interested me most about that earlier work was the haunting tenor and mood created through the audio and video styles. Namely, a sense of foreboding, discomfort, and general unease created through droning melodies and visual representations of the park at night pervades the work. This image is completed with a child's voice talking about being scared, and images of empty campgrounds, with the ghost of Grey Owl seemingly still haunting the park's imaginary through his old *NFB* films.

The structure of our work, and specifically the creation of a series of distinct scenes within the *Pilgrims of the Wild* film, happened quite spontaneously, based on working within each location, and engages issues of access, schedules of participating actors and crew, the weather, and the ideas of many. In the editing suite back at home, I began working on the project in the order it was shot, and quickly recognized a natural progression and development of a character driven narrative, involving the three principle players, myself, Adrian, and Lori. Realizing that my film was beginning to mirror the series of short accompanying videos that accompany the “official” Prince Albert National Park film on the *NPP* website, nationalparksproject.ca, I began to look a bit more closely at the structure and the sound utilized within those works. In particular, I examined how the accompanying sound track of soft melodic tones and the accompanying rhythmic guitar styling operate, in terms close to those argued earlier by Stella Hockenhull, to illuminate how alternative utopian worlds can be created through a romantic locating of the individual within nature. As a consequence, I began to pull elements of the audio from the original film and after working on them in post-production to alter and adapt their sounds, I placed them within my new work. Amazed at the correlation between the two, I began to re-adapt, alter and re-work many of the sound elements from the original films, and combine them with new audio recorded on location while shooting our film. The results of this process have become an important, and I think, integral feature of the *Pilgrims of the Wild* project. My aim, in doing this, was to create a referential audio backdrop that resonated with the mood of the original films, but also amplified the tensions and narratives present in the new work. Chapter titles for the different scenes in *Pilgrims of the Wild*, including the title, have been adapted from the published works of Grey Owl (1931, 1934, 1935, 1936).

I will close this chapter by asserting that I have continuously sought within my work to create a view of history, seen through the present, and projected into a fantastical future composed of re-enactments, parody, and transformation. Throughout this dissertation project, I have tried to stay attentive to the terms of my critique, and avoid getting wrapped up in the threads that pull from the various narratives we stumble upon through creative research. But many questions still remain. Can *Grey Owl* speak of anything

productive today? Can there be a transcendence of his historical legacy? Does there need to be? Can we move beyond the “mystification” of an idea, image, or cultural ideology? Does speaking back to the grand narrative mean you are living in subordination and reaction to it? What about the important possibility that an alternate grand narrative already exists, and that we just have to open our eyes to see it?

Exhibition Images

All images presented below were taken during the run of the *Representing Wilderness* exhibition at Western University’s McIntosh Gallery. Photos courtesy of Mark Kasumovic.

West (Main) Gallery:



Figure 12. *Representing Wilderness*, Installation Image. *Grey Owl/Pierce Brosnan Transformation Mask* and didactic panel, 2016.



Figure 13. *Representing Wilderness*, Installation Image, Masks. 2016.



Figure 14. *Representing Wilderness*, Installation image, 2016. Transformation Masks with *Pilgrims of the Wild* video.



Figure 15. *Representing Wilderness*, Installation Image, 2016. Image of *Pierce Brosnan/Grey Owl Transformation Mask* (2014).



Figure 16. *Representing Wilderness*, Installation Image. *Wolf/Kevin Costner Mask* (2016).



Figure 17. *Representing Wilderness*, *Wolf/Kevin Costner Transformation Mask* (detail).



Figure 18. *Group of Seven with Wolf's Head and Study of Dead Hind* (2014).

East (Small) Gallery:



Figure 19. *Canoe Dance*, 2016.



Figure 20. *Canoe Dance*, 2016.

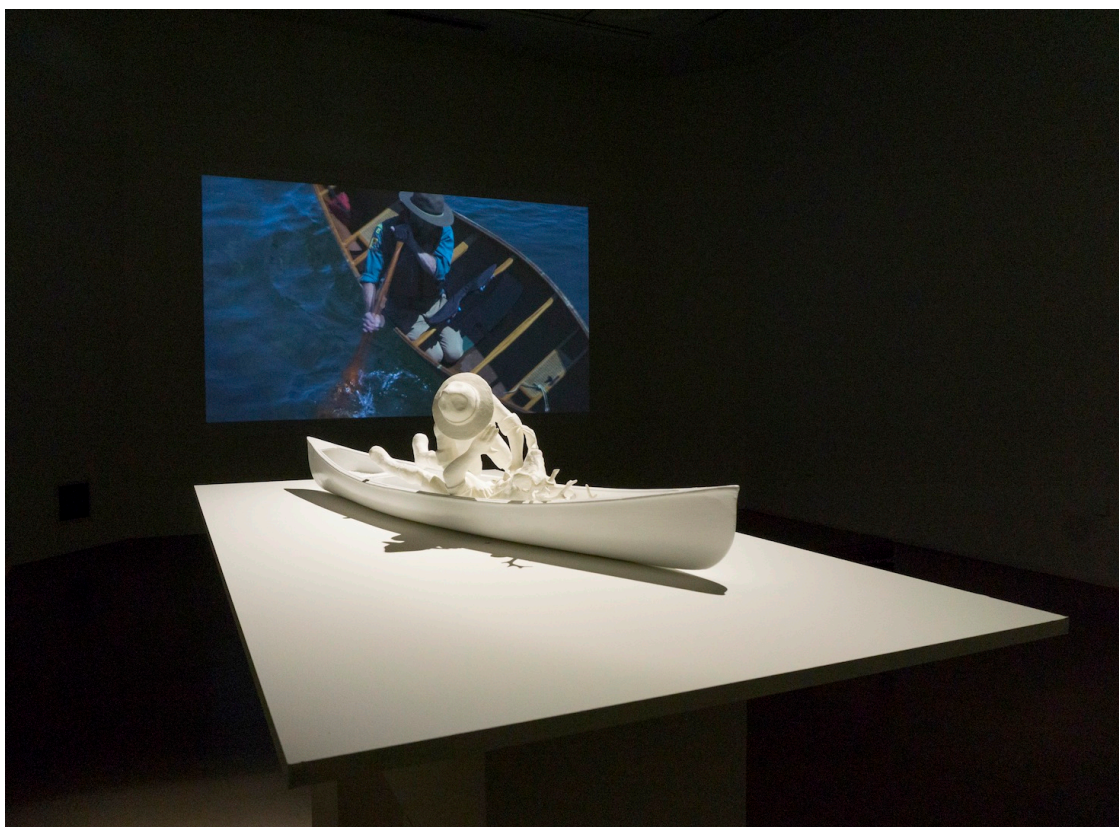


Figure 21. *Canoe Dance*, Installation Image. Sculpture with video, *Dance for the Narrows* (2015).

Conclusion

Learning to Listen and See Differently

My final dissertation project has included drawing, sculptures, performance and two major videos installations, in addition to this written thesis. Together, this work has acted as both a vehicle and site for an in-depth and experiential analysis of Canada's wilderness culture and its enduring colonial legacies. The drawing and sculptural work created for this exhibition highlight the ideas, theories, and experiences that have evolved within my research over the last four years. My drawings, including the *Group of Seven with Wolf's Head and Study of Dead Hind* (2014), have allowed for an exploration of myth, fact, and fiction, and most importantly have provided me with an opportunity to interact with Canadian iconography through my own personal history and experimental approach. The two transformation masks and small sculptural figures of two Boy Scout Leaders fighting in a canoe are intended to directly represent many of the tensions and struggles inherent within my project's subject matter and themes. The last and most significant aspect of my dissertation work has been the creation of the two major video pieces. Stylistically, the videos, *Dance for the Narrows* (2015), with a running time of 11 minutes, and *Pilgrims of the Wild* (2016), with a total running time of 40 minutes, are a mix of documentary (both fiction and non-fiction), "experimental art video," animation, and also allude to epic nature films. In both these videos, I have tried to work from a place within (and alongside) the "margins" of the grand traditions of cinematic representations of the Canadian landscape, in the hope that such artwork can offer another voice, and an alternate way of seeing the Canadian wilderness.

As an artist, I take my responsibility for the images I create very seriously. Canadian representations of the landscape have, for so long, portrayed images of a vast, and sublime wilderness full of heroic possibilities and spiritual regeneration. The Eurocentric colonial viewpoint these images most often represent, have contributed to the political will, infrastructure, and institutional pressures that have not only privileged these enduring belief systems, but have also shown themselves to be breathtakingly slow to

adapt to Canada's changing cultural, political and ecological landscape. Such changes require us to meet the demands for new intercultural dialogues between Canadian and Indigenous communities, among other imperatives. As the contributing authors of the introductory essay, "Decolonising Testimony: On the Possibilities and Limits of Witnessing" in *Humanities Research Volume XV. No. 3* write, "Canada is a nation in which the national memory of settlement [and] dispossession [of land] is still in dispute" (Kennedy, Bell and Emberley, 2009). Therefore, dialogues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, alongside artists and scholars (and the communities they represent), can no longer remain governed by strict European cultural and political aesthetic paradigms, and instead must take place on profoundly equal and sovereign terms. As author and decolonial activist, Paulette Regan notes in her book, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*, (2010), as Canadians "we need to learn to listen differently." As I have found over the course of this project, when we learn how to do this, we also begin to see differently. Suddenly the insidious colonial framework of the "imaginative geographies" as described by Derrick Gregory in chapter two of this thesis, are clearly evident in the vast majority of landscape-based representations of Canadian identity, both new and old. Canada's multicultural landscape no longer seems so inclusive, and the proactive and activist motivations of environmental groups interested in specific kinds of conservation strategies, and the links between industrial and governmental resource extraction initiatives that inevitably lead to policy and legal challenges against First Nation sovereignty, no longer seem to be in the best interest of the collective good of the nation. So what direction should an artist, steeped in traditional Eurocentric-settler-based iterations of the landscape take when attempting to create new, respectful (and hopefully) transformative works about the landscape?

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, decolonizing theory and activism have proliferated among non-Indigenous artists, academics, and social justice groups over the last few years. And while a good many people in Canada, myself included, are actively trying to work their way through real life applications of terms such as "settler methodologies," and "intergenerational responsibility," we must not lose sight of our

obligation to find new and innovative ways to move beyond the mere acknowledgment of the colonial history that frames nation to nation relationships with Indigenous peoples, and also shapes (and possibly limits) dominant Canadian narratives around human relationships to the natural world. In a very timely, and poignant response to these growing concerns within Canada's arts and cultural communities, independent curator and author, cheyenne turions, recently penned an article entitled, "Decolonization, Reconciliation, and the Extra-Rational Potential of the Arts" (from artseverywhere.ca, posted March 2016):

No doubt cultural forms are implicated in the decolonial process as a measure of the [colonial] undoing. Given the recent proliferation with which the term "decolonial" circulates in the art world, it would seem that artists and curators are fully convinced that their aesthetic gestures can have this particular kind of social consequence. To be explicit, I count myself among these cultural workers: I believe that aesthetic forms make important contributions to the broad project of decolonization, a belief that hinges on the conviction that exhibition spaces are civic spaces, and that artistic and curatorial practices are political gestures. Encounters with contemporary culture (here the term being used more-or-less for the contributions to the production of civic space, inciting the potential to change the way we live. "Decolonization" implies revolution. It instigates a shifting terrain of social relationality that, when applied to cultural production, assumes a connection between what has been and what is to come, encouraged and enacted through aesthetic forms. But I am not always sure what the term 'decolonization' actually connotes in its usage. What referents attach to 'decolonization' when it is named in regard to aesthetic practices?"

Building on the important work of David Garneau, turions argues that cultural decolonization in a Canadian context should be about "unsettling settlers" and helping them adapt into "non-colonial persons within Indigenous spaces" (turions 2016). I believe that turions is effectively opening up important ground within discourses surrounding Canadian representational practices, specifically to be applied to non-Indigenous communities. However, whatever the potential for "shifting terrain" and the creation of new "revolutionary" spaces might be within decolonial aesthetic practice, we must continue to heed the warnings of scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, David Garneau and in a broader sense, Hal Foster, among others. All of whom caution against the potential for non-Indigenous voices within decolonizing initiatives to be complicit in the re-inscription of colonial methodologies that perpetuate paternalistic and ethnographic attempts to "heal the wounds" of colonialism, without addressing any of its root causes.

Decolonial essentialism, as David Garneau describes it, frames Indigenous knowledge and practice within a structure of colonial difference and power relations that can “actually inspire practices that perpetuate the modernist and colonial traditions they seek to undermine” (Garneau 2013,16). Meaning dominant settler culture remains the authoritative power within which nation to nation relationships occur, and Indigenous cultural practices are framed as potential sites to reinvigorate or rebalance Western aesthetic practice. Walter Mignolo (2011) argues that this framework establishes a history of “exteriority” in which Indigenous culture is kept outside the dominant narrative framework and is only brought in by the benefacting institution or well-meaning cultural practitioner. Garneau adds further insight:

Curators, and others who facilitate the production and exhibition of this sort of work, must be cautious not to replicate a Truth and Reconciliation model or models of quality framed by standards of colonialism and whiteness. We must be certain that those we work with are agents and not subjects. We must especially watch that our creative partners are not participating due to economic deprivation: selling the final commodity the dominant culture is interested in accumulating, their stories. (Garneau 2016, 22)

This warning is particularly important, given this sector’s history, when working (in my case) through discourses surrounding wilderness, nation, and nature. Which to a very large degree, continues to frame Canadian settlement through the modalities of divine providence and the natural inheritance of both land and power. This framing is particularly evident when witnessed through the steadfast belief in the supremacy (and endurance) of white settler-culture over the originating First Nations. Colonialism in Canada, by virtue of the imperialist and aesthetic ideologies of nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, and currently, as described by Mignolo, through the effects of late twentieth century neo-liberal globalization, continues to frame Indigenous communities as outside acceptable levels of privilege and opportunity. This idea of lacking, when framed in terms of “cultural work,” has subsequently led to many settler-based decolonizing strategies to re-inscribe mainstream colonial power relations, specifically when directed through corresponding institutional calls to be more inclusive in the creation of spaces for alternative knowledge and practice.

Part of this essentialist discourse, I believe, can be viewed through the language and motivations that currently frame non-Indigenous participation in processes of decolonization. To that end, settler-driven methodologies promoting inclusiveness and accessibility through attempts to “indigenize” the institution, and “making space” for alternative practices, need to be further scrutinized for their complicit role in the endurance of Canada’s colonial matrix. As does terminology that has become commonplace within decolonial discourses, such as the designation “settler” to describe and define Canadian citizens, and the specific act of “reconciliation,” used to frame past wrongdoings and a brighter path towards future relationships. Here I must add that I agree in principle with the term “settler” and apply it easily within my own writing and research for it ties my work as an artist and academic to the contentious politics of place and space still very much in dispute in Canada. However, current language around decolonial theory and academic practice remains inaccessible to those that resist the negative connotations of this framing. While one might effectively argue that settler culture in Canada has very little to complain about, which is of course true, I would argue that if the goal of decolonization strategies is to make Canadians take on a more active, and responsive position within a desired move towards a non-colonial society, then it should be asserted (anecdotally at least) that for many Canadians, to suggest to them that as a second or third or even fourth generation Canadian, that they are still “settlers” who need to rethink their position on the land, is a potentially unproductive way to foster such necessary activism.

In this regard, it is interesting to my project, how the framing of the Canadian subject in such a way as to deliberately invoke early settler history is disquietingly reminiscent of Catriona Sandilands’ previously discussed look at the framing of the Canadian nation through narratives of geographic and cultural sovereignty which “authentically embodies” the collective identity of its citizens. As she has argued, “for this authenticity, we look to the past as a representation of origins and shared culture, and to the future as a fulfillment of this originary promise” (Sandilands 2000, 170). Of interest here, is how the desire to frame Canadian citizens through a European pioneering/settler past, turns the universalizing and nationalizing disavowal of difference Sandilands describes on its head

and perpetuates the act (and future actions) of separating cultures, communities and identities. This, I will add, should not necessarily be seen as a bad thing, and is understandably the ultimate goal of decolonizing Canada's settler culture: to create an awareness and understanding that could eventually lead to new Nation to Nation sovereign agreements between Canada and the First Nations. Unfortunately, the visual linking of historical representations of settler culture to the founding moments of the nation, is for a great number of people, a Canada of their forefathers, and for this reason, most often goes unquestioned. It is the official history represented in museums, schools, parks, and celebrated during national holidays. So the question remains, how do we begin to have these conversations and ask questions in a language that can inspire Canadians to begin to listen and see differently?

As an artist, activist, and scholar, David Garneau, has become one of the leading voices of decolonial theory in Canada. In an insightful essay on the subject of decolonial aesthetic practices, entitled, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing" (2016), he offers some thoughts on the framing of the Reconciliation process in Canada, and possible ways non-Indigenous peoples can work towards non-colonial practices. As Garneau writes, "Settlers who become unsettled - who are aware of their inheritance and implication in the colonial matrix, who comprehend their unearned privileges and seek ways past racism - are settlers no longer...they have become respectful guests, which in turn allows Indigenous peoples to be graceful hosts" (Garneau 2016, 11). But what does it mean to be a respectful guest and a graceful host when the political will and national imaginary remains stacked against the creation of a level playing field? One way Garneau thinks us through this problem, is his analysis of the meanings between the choice of words "reconciliation" over "conciliation," and an acknowledgment that the idea of reconciliation for a majority of Canadians, creates a "false understanding of the past [which] constricts our collective sense of the future" (13). Garneau argues that the current reconciliation process as it applies to the inquiry into Canada's Residential School System is deeply flawed, as it implies that at one time, the nation of Canada and First Nations people had an amicable and positive relationship through Treaty, one which was tarnished through the "mistake" of the residential school

system. It also implies that if original treaty relationships can be re-established, once the painful but necessary process of truth and rehabilitation has occurred, a time of general conciliation between Indigenous people and the state of Canada will somehow be restored.

Garneau insists that treaties do not include everyone, and a substantial area of the country, including the majority of British Columbia, Quebec, and eastern Canada are not covered by Treaty. He also importantly points out that the Métis are not treaty people. In these terms, “the constant repetition of the word ‘reconciliation’ creates a screen for the constant conciliation, which is a present wish that there truly was a past comprehensive settlement in order that the future can be bearable. The actual settlement was not an agreement between First Nations and Canada, it was not the treaties and was not conciliatory, but it was universal - it was the imposition of the Indian Act (1876)” (Garneau 2016, 14). To further complicate notions of reconciliation, Garneau points out that the “sanctioned performance” of reconciliation is equally distorted:

Testimony produced for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is constrained by non-Indigenous narratives of healing and closure; by Western religious ideology (the Catholic rite of reconciliation and Christian concepts of forgiveness); by an emphasis on individuals over communities; by the public display of victims but not perpetrators; and by the degrading and corrupting influence of cash-for-testimony. (4)

This system allows for individual accounts of transgression and atonement. However this confessional framework also allows the Canadian state to absolve itself of any guilt and not risk the integrity of current dominant power structures. In further provocation, and in contrast to cheyanne turions’ earlier testimonial for the power of art to make important contributions to the decolonial process, Garneau warns us that we should “not be in such a rush to let our words imagine a reconciled, healed future” and cautions us to remember that “art is not healing in itself, but can be in relation. Art is a stimulant and a balm when taken internally, but dangerous if mistaken for experience.” As he says, “there is a profound difference between reading signs and being engaged by a symbol [and the] sharing in a discourse about the histories, responsibility, and transformation among artworks and with other human beings [can be] a corrective to the colonial desire for

settlement” (24). And so it is with these thoughts in place, that I heed Garneau’s call to “reconsider the Reconciliation project.” Doing so, I believe, forces both artists and academics to acknowledgement that there is still a great deal of work to be done in the development of decolonial cultural practices, particularly within the contentious field of advancing critical settler methodologies and the development of intergenerational responsibility towards the enduring legacies of Canada’s colonial history.

Recognizing that one of the key signifiers of Canada’s multicultural framework is the acceptance of difference within the nation state, the question has to be asked, different from what? Whiteness has become the foundational authority, and the production of difference within Canadian society establishes the power relations that perpetuate and naturalize white conceptions of race. In regards to this particular dissertation project, and my continued interest in iconic figures such as Grey Owl, we can see how the continued traction and celebration of iconic, colonial histories within Canadian life and in particular, park culture, demonstrates that for a great many Canadians, ideologies of “white wilderness” continue to persist within nationalized narratives of Canada’s settler colonial culture. As Bruce Erickson writes in his impressively titled essay, “A Phantasy in White in a World That is Dead: Grey Owl and the Whiteness of Surrogacy,” Archie Belaney’s “masquerade was integral to the construction and popularity of a new regime of white space that inevitably envisioned the Canadian wilderness without a First Nations presence” (Erickson 2011, 29). Within this critique, however, it is important to recognize that in the early twentieth century, the wilderness space that Grey Owl created was to some extent also a “revolutionary,” anti-colonial space, a viewpoint which continues to lend some credence to contemporary arguments put forth regarding Grey Owl’s lasting relevance within (some circles of) Canadian culture. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that Grey Owl’s wilderness was ideologically steeped in the colonial concepts of antimodernism, primitivism, and ideas of white supremacy, all part of a colonial framework that continues to haunt Canada’s dominant nature/nation narratives. As Erickson points out, this ideological framing of the nation allows for the creation of spaces “that reflects the values of certain actors, mirroring their identity thought the values attached to it” (34). We can take this to mean that discourses centered on dominant

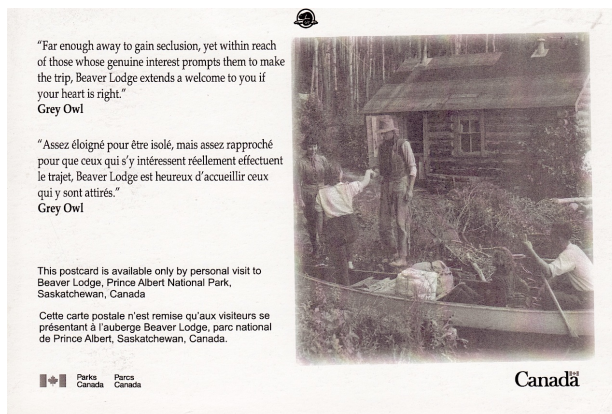
aesthetic and colonial practices featuring the Canadian wilderness, are not true illustrations of a “natural” part of the nation, but are instead examples of the ways in which Canada’s wilderness culture has been naturalized and legitimized by historicized accounts of the nation’s founding pioneering settler past. The “myth of the vanishing Indian” and the “opening of the West” through the fur trade remain central to many of our national mythologies and settler legacies that continue to be celebrated annually. In this history, figures like Grey Owl, with his canoe and pet beavers, speak proudly back to the founding moments of Canada’s national identity. However, as I hope I have shown over the course of this project, characters such as Grey Owl and the recreational sites that spaces like his cabin in the Prince Albert National Park have come to represent, can also exist as “embodied sites” for strategies of subversive decolonizing art practices.

From my particular vantage point, a path towards conciliation between Settler and Indigenous nations within Canada, which includes understandings of past relationships to the land and each other, remains vital. It means understanding that the history behind dominant representations and discourses framing Canada’s nation building project, and specifically, in relation to depictions of the landscape, must be understood through the colonial matrix of power that has come to dominate and dictate national imaginaries. As I hope I have shown in this dissertation project, in order to properly unpack Canada’s representational history and create a working decolonial methodology for non-Indigenous cultural practitioners, we must continuously strive to find new ways to confront contemporary colonial conditions and enact an imperative for new paradigms of Indigenous-Settler dialogues. In Canada, there remains a need for artists and scholars to unsettle spaces of colonial white privilege with the aim of finding meaning and value in our local and collective communities. Throughout this project, I have worked towards the goal of creating compassionate, and inclusive approaches to articulations of land, economy, and social life. I have tried to demonstrate this through examples of collaborative research practices, investigating how my own work as an artist operates in relation to issues of the local, domestic, and lived practices of people and their interaction with the environment and each other. Through collaborative practices, I believe we can

not only undermine systems of knowledge that make distinctions between human and natural economies, but also reveal many of the contradictions inherent within mainstream culture's desire to be connected to both the land and history of Canada. Namely, we need to be invested in overcoming the problematic creation and continuation of a narrative that inscribes Canadian Settler culture as the natural inheritor of a vast and empty landscape. The challenge in Canada, as I see it, is for both Settler and Indigenous perspectives to acquire equal status and operate in dialogue with each other, and become equally informed by perspectives coming from outside these two dominant Canadian narratives. Understanding these differing viewpoints is essential if we are to achieve a truly performative, and transformative understanding of the colonial experience that continues to define our shared relationships within Canada's dominant nature/nation discourses and experience.



Figure 22. Postcard from Grey Owl's cabin. Available through on-site visit to Beaver Lodge, Prince Albert National Park, Saskatchewan. Card courtesy of Parks Canada.



"Far enough away to gain seclusion, yet within reach of those whose genuine interest prompts them to make the trip, Beaver Lodge extends a welcome to you if your heart is right."

-Grey Owl

Figure 23. Back of Grey Owl Postcard

"Thank you and good night. I'd love to say there is coffee and donuts...but we forgot them."

-said the *Huckster* to the crowd gathered around *AssFace*, *Plastic Shaman* to the *Stars*, during the final performance of his infamous *Power Animal Party*.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Michael Farnan

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Post-secondary Education:

2012-2016: Western University. Ph.D. Studio, Visual Arts and Culture

2009-2011: University of Saskatchewan. Master of Fine Arts.

2000-2006: Concordia University. Bachelor of Fine Arts.

Awards

2016 **SSHRC** Storytellers Competition: **Top 25 National Award**

2013-2016 **SSHRC CGS Doctoral Award**

2016 **Lynne Lionel-Scott Scholarship for Canadian Studies**

2012 University of Western Ontario **Chair's Entrance Scholarship**

2010/11 University of Saskatchewan **CGS Masters Thesis Scholarship.**

2009 **SSHRC Masters Graduate Scholarship.**

2005 FASA Special Projects Grant

2005 Mills Purchase Prize. Concordia University

2003 Heinz Jordan Prize for excellence in painting. Concordia University

Teaching and Recent Scholarly Activities

Currently teaching in Department of **Art and Visual Culture at Western University:**

2016: **Sessional Instructor: Drawing Explorations: VAS 2104 A and Introduction to Drawing: VAS 2204A**

2015/16: **Honours Studio Seminar. VAS 2282 A.** Teaching Assistant for Kim Moodie.

2014/15: **Advanced Sculpture and Installation. VAS 3320.** Teaching Assistant for Kelly Jazvac

2013: **Advanced Drawing: VAS 3300 A.** Teaching Assistant for David Merritt

2012/13: **Drawing Explorations: VAS2104 A/B.** Instructor

2010: **Extended Media II / III / IV – Art 236.3 /338.3 /438.3.** Instructor. Created course syllabus for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year combined course focussing on video, installation, and performance at the University of Saskatchewan.

Seminar Participant: Forthcoming. “**Decolonial Cultural Practices: Advancing Critical Settler Methodologies.**” UAAC Conference 2016, Oct. 27-30, Montreal, PQ.

Seminar and Panel Presentation: “**Indigenization, Settler Methodologies, and Intergenerational Responsibility.**” CATR Conference/Congress 2016, May 28-31, Calgary, AB.

Current Member of **Exhibition Committees for Quest Art**, Midland, ON., and **Orillia Museum of Art and History**, Orillia, ON. Jury member for various show selections at McLaren Art Centre, Barrie, ON.

Authored exhibition essay for **Clark Ferguson’s** screening, *Tales from the Deep* at PAVED Arts, Saskatoon, Sk. July 6th-July 19th, 2012 (essay located in online archive: www.pavedarts.ca).

Authored exhibition essay for **Michel Boutin’s** exhibition, *Great King Rabbit* at AKA Gallery, Saskatoon, Sk. June 24th-July 29th, 2011. ISBN#978-0-9867619-6-6.

Co-author of academic journal paper in *Space and Culture*. (Ekers, M, and Farnan, M., (2010). **Planting the Nation: Tree Planting Art and the Persistence of Nationalism.** *Space and Culture*, 13(1). 95-120).

Lecture presentation: *Space, Place, and the Art Object*, plus conference panelist and project artist for *Big Things Sculpture Symposium*. North Battleford, SK. August 18-22, 2011.

Guest artist and researcher at the *Bison on the Edge* conference. Conference topic: *Sturgeon River Plains Bison – Successes and Challenges*. Big River, Sask. June 8-10, 2010.

Visual Artist Exhibition History

2016 *Representing Wilderness: Community, Collaboration, and Artistic Practice.* Ph.D. Dissertation Exhibition. McIntosh Gallery, Western University, London, ON. June 3-25.

2015 *Searching for Grey Owl.* IPAC’s *Two Story Cafe*, The Indigenous Peoples Art Collective, @ The Mann Art Gallery, Prince Albert, SK. Sept 26, 2015. Performance work and talk.

2015 *N2N: Widening the Narrows.* Orillia Museum of Art and History, July 6 - Sept. 26, 2015. Curated by Matt McIntosh and Wanda Nanibush. Group show with Michael Belmore, Nadia Myre, Travis Shilling, and Osvaldo Yero.

- 2015 *Mamoowiang To Make Change.*** AGSM: The Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon, MB. May 21 - June 30, 2015. Curated by Jaimie Isaac and Leah Decter. Group show.
- 2014 *The New Canadian Naturalist.*** Solo exhibition. Quest Art, Midland Cultural Centre, June 13th - August 31st, 2014. Midland, ON.
- 2014 *On the Subject of Becoming Animal.*** Solo exhibition. gallerywest. January 1-28, 2014. Toronto, ON.
- 2012 *Toon Town.*** Screening of *The Beaver goes Logging.* PavedArts. Saskatoon, SK. November 2-17, 2012.
- 2012 *The Legend of Bison Hughy and The Beaver goes Logging.*** Exhibition of new video works w/Andrzej Maciejewski. gallerywest. Toronto, Ontario. March, 2012.
- 2011 *The New Canadian Naturalist.*** MFA Thesis Exhibition. Gordon Snelgrove Gallery. Saskatoon, SK. October 10th to 21st.
- 2011 *The Fifth Annual Two Story Café. IPAC.*** The Indigenous Peoples Artist Collective. Prince Albert Arts Centre, Prince Albert, SK. Video screening of *The Legend of Bison Hughy.* Oct. 1st, 2011.
- 2011 *May Works 2011. Redressing Labour, Undressing Capitalism.*** Group Show. Curator: Edison Del Canto. Gordon Snelgrove Gallery. Saskatoon. May, 2011.
- 2011 *The Legend of Bison Hughy*** Public screening of short video work for *Canadian Nature Escapes* and *Saskatchewan Tourism.* Saskatoon March 16th; Regina March 17th, 2011.
- 2011 *Control-0. Electronic Arts Exhibition.*** Group Show. Curator: Linda Duvall. Gordon Snelgrove Gallery. Saskatoon, Sk. November, 2011.
- 2010 *AKA Artwalk.*** Group Show. AKA Gallery, Saskatoon, SK. Dec. 01 – Dec. 30, 2010.
- 2010 *Menagerie.*** MFA Group Show. Gordon Snelgrove Gallery. Saskatoon, SK. January.
- 2008 *Exploring A Natural Habitat.*** Solo Show. The Studio Gallery. Queens University, Kingston, Ontario. Sept. 03 to Oct. 03, 2008.
- 2008 *Art for Healing:*** Mills Purchase Prize Donation. *Sausage Pants*, 2005. Painting donated by Concordia University to the Art for Healing Foundation. As of Oct 20th, 2008, work is now hanging in the cardiology wing of the Royal Victoria Hospital, Montreal.
- 2007 *Painting work donated and sold for auction*** to benefit Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors without Borders), organized and held by the Parisian Laundry Gallery, Montreal.
- 2006 *Mills Purchase Prize Award Winners, 5 year retrospective exhibition.*** FOFA Gallery, Montreal.

2005 *Peinture Fraiche, 2005. Art Mur. Montreal.*

Harvest: the Contemporary Canadian Landscape. w/ Trevor Keirnander. VAV Gallery, Montreal.

Round Up. Annual Undergraduate Exhibition. Concordia University, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal PQ.

2004 *Fantasy Dream Home Lottery.* AKA Gallery. Saskatoon, SK.

2003 *Green/Vert.* Annual Undergraduate Exhibition. Concordia University. Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery. Montreal PQ.

Trail Songs. The collected works of Michael Farnan and Stephanie Chabot. VAV Gallery, Montreal, PQ.