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Raced and Erased: Settler Colonialism and Environmental Violence in the Poetry of Jordan Abel

On Anthropocenes and Settler Colonial Violence

Jordan Abel is a Nisga'a writer whose three books of poetry, *The Place of Scraps* (2013), *Un/inhabited* (2014), and *Injun* (2016), and work of autobiographical non-fiction, *NISHGA* (2020), address the entwined dispossessions of Indigenous land, objects, and cultural heritage that lie at the heart of both British colonialism and Canadian nationalism. The four books, all of which are dedicated to the Indigenous peoples of North America and the Americas, challenge literary and anthropological texts that glorified colonial expansion in what is now North America and helped erase Indigenous presence in the service of the settler colonial state. Abel's three books of poetry in particular plunder and reassemble textual artifacts to interrogate the physical and discursive acts of removal that characterize settler relationships with Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas.

Abel describes himself as a "survivor of the Intergenerational Trauma of Residential Schools" who grew up estranged from his Indigenous lands and family as a direct result of his father's experience of residential schools. In his writing, as in that of many other Indigenous writers in Canada, the shadow of residential schools is

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nearly always present “as an unspoken backdrop to the conditions of authorship” (Abel, *NISHGA*). The extractive purpose of these schools was to remove Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands, to assimilate them into settler culture, to destroy Indigenous resistance, and in so doing to take possession of Indigenous lands and resources. As Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states, “Colonizers wanted the land. Everything else, whether it is legal or policy or economic or social, whether it was the Indian Act or residential schools or gender violence, was part of the machinery that was designed to create a perfect crime—a crime where the victims are unable to see or name the crime as a crime” (*We Have Always* 15). In the wake of colonial invasion, Indigenous relations to the earth and the possibilities they presented were subject to this crime of concerted eradication in favor of extractive industries, industrialized food and agriculture systems, and systems of manufacturing and waste disposal that are all premised on presumptions about land and land access that are inherent to colonialism (Liboiron).

If ongoing examination of coloniality and the machinery of the settler-colonial state are a useful means of revealing and understanding its workings, Simpson warns us that “critique and revelation” are insufficient to “create the kinds of magnificent change” needed in these times of ecological crisis (*Dancing* 74). Instead, the embodied practices of Indigenous resurgence offer “a radically different political existence and ethical orientation . . . operating upon a different premise than the politics and economy of extraction” (Simpson, *Short History* 10). Literary writing such as Abel’s, which dismantles and reconstructs damaging ways of seeing and being in the world, is part of the larger creative project of radical resurgence that “creates profoundly different ways of thinking, organizing, and being” (Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence” 22).

This essay builds on previous discussions of Jordan Abel’s work by arguing that the structures and institutions of settler colonialism, including the residential schools that have profoundly affected Abel’s life and work, support an ongoing process of environmental violence and environmental racism. In challenging the structures and processes of settler colonialism and in representing the erasure of Indigenous bodies, the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the removal and destruction of cultural heritage, Abel’s texts are works of writer activism that both reveal and transmute the ongoing, violent process of settler colonialism that is too often rendered invisible by the institutions and rhetoric of settler colonial society. In examining the politics and representational strategies of Abel’s poetry, I discuss how his work brings into focus the human and environmental violences whose legacies and

current enactments continue to shape life in colonial Canada. In considering Abel's oeuvre, I explore how the books work together through Abel's consistent yet shifting use of erasure and bricolage techniques to offer new cultural imaginaries. After a discussion of the role of erasure both in settler colonialism and in *The Place of Scraps*, I move on to consider formal innovations in *Injun* and *Un/Inhabited* and how Abel's use of form challenges the racism that is foundational to both settler colonialism and to the western genre that glorifies it. Finally, I return to *The Place of Scraps* to examine Abel's dialogic relationship with the source text and the material processes of dispossession with which it is entangled. Throughout, I take up Rob Nixon's call to address "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence" by arguing that settler colonialism is always a suite of violences—both fast and slow, clearly visible and stubbornly out of sight—that include cultural erasures and material injustices intricately connected to settler colonial states and their access to land (2). Yet the violence of settler colonialism is not only discursive and not only slow. Abel's chosen source texts are all involved with physical acts of material plunder and human dispossession with lasting social, cultural, and environmental ramifications. These effects include what Nixon and others have observed as dislocations from place via the industrial transformation of landscapes and environments, even in instances where people and communities themselves have not been forcibly relocated (cf. Cunsolo and Landman). The resulting poems not only are weighted with the politics of discursive re-appropriation but also are bound up with longstanding demands for actual repatriation of cultural objects and decolonization of Indigenous lands.

On Erasures of Body and Spirit

Abel's first book, *The Place of Scraps*, which won the 2013 Dorothy Livesay Award for best book of poetry by a British Columbian author, deconstructs excerpts from Marius Barbeau's two volume anthropological oeuvre, *Totem Poles*, published by the National Museum of Canada in 1950. Barbeau (1883–1969), a renowned French-Canadian anthropologist and folklorist, is the author of over 1,000 books and articles on French Canadian culture and the Indigenous peoples of Canada. An "inveterate collector," Barbeau gathered some 400 folk tales and 7,000 songs from French Canada and 2,000 artifacts from across the country (Guilbert). His two-volume work *Totem Poles*, published in 1950, describes the cultural context of the eponymous art form and documents Barbeau's acquisitions of various totem poles

from British Columbia's coastal First Nations. *The Place of Scraps* is a long meditation on one specific removal—that of the Pole of Sagaw'een from Nishga'a territory to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto—and a reflection on Abel's own relationship with both the Pole of Sagaw'een and Barbeau's text.¹ The ROM acquired all four of its northwest coast totem poles in the 1920s, during the Potlatch Ban that forbade the ceremonies for which many works of northwest coast art were produced. As described in Barbeau's *Totem Poles*, the Pole of Sagaw'een was removed from the Nisga'a village of Gingolx, floated downriver to the coast, then cut into three pieces to be shipped by rail to Toronto. In deconstructing and reassembling this source text, Abel not only interrogates Barbeau's salvage anthropology but also brings to light a hidden subtext of cultural appropriation and elision in the original work. In doing so, he lays bare Barbeau's active construction of "endangered" peoples that formed part of a larger colonial project of removing First Nations peoples from the landscape to facilitate its transformation to spaces of industrial extraction.

Many scholars writing on settler colonialism have described how the violent erasure of Indigenous bodies is foundational to settler colonialism. Kyle Whyte states that settler colonialism is a form of injustice that includes not only "settlers' desire, conscious and tacit, to erase Indigenous peoples" but also their desire to "erase or legitimate" their own role in this violence (135). This erasure is inherent to the "ecological domination" of settler colonialism that relies on rendering Indigenous bodies invisible (Whyte) as well as obliterating other ways of relating to land and landscape, in order to fuel the operations of the extractive state. In other words, the settler colonial project of "changing the land, transforming the earth itself, including the creatures, the plants, the soil composition and the atmosphere" was and remains "intimately tied to the project of erasure that is the imperative of settler colonialism" (Davis and Todd 770).

Erasures of Indigenous ways of being and knowing continue into the realm of contemporary culture, where publishers may fail to "consider Indigenous poetry as 'poetry' or [...] see Indigenous literatures as not meeting their expectations of what poetry is supposed to be" (McLeod 4). Yet Indigenous poetry in particular offers a unique potential for interpreting and making visible the presence of violence in settler colonial states by "pushing the boundaries of English" and by addressing collective traumas, such as those inflicted by residential schools (McLeod 5–6). The poetic techniques of collage and reassembly that define Abel's work have become an increasingly common element of contemporary poetry on the whole, reflecting our collective enmeshment in increasingly textual cultures (Ramazani). However, many of

the poets who use these techniques overlook the politics of textual appropriation and erasure and, in particular, their connection to colonial property regimes. In her trenchant work on the poetry of Abel and Oglala Lakota writer Layli Long Soldier, Sarah Dowling argues that most critics have overlooked “the logics of property described and reflected in contemporary appropriation-based writing” and have not

adequately examined how these logics of property are intertwined with settler colonialism and its attendant ideologies of race, although much recent theoretical work powerfully connects property, race, and subjectivation. Instead, at a moment when the ethics of appropriation are rigorously discussed in popular forums, many poetic and literary-critical accounts of appropriation simplistically frame language and text as *res nullius*—as objects void of prior claims or interests and therefore available for and susceptible to being taken. (100)

The result, Dowling claims, is the uncritical reproduction of “what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls ‘white possessive logics’” in which modes of ownership, control, and transformation of freely-available resources become part of the workings of poetry, as well as the nation-state (105). Abel’s work is aware of these dynamics; the politics of appropriation and erasure with which the language engages reverberates through the poetic form. As Abel himself describes, the poetry “is *about* appropriation, and as such it also uses conceptual forms of appropriation in order to comment on the mechanisms of appropriation itself” (Whiteman; emphasis added). In *The Place of Scraps*, “content and form merge,” with removal becoming “both the poem’s subject matter and its law of composition” (Omhoverè).

Sonnet L’Abbé makes an argument similar to Dowling’s; contrasting the apolitical stance of various contemporary poets working with techniques of appropriation and erasure to that of Canadian poets using the technique to interrogate political problems, she states “the difference in politics between [Austin] Kleon and [M. NourbeSe] Philip, between commercial bricoleur and literary activist, lies not in whether or not they feel erasure is a kind of appropriation (they both feel it is), but in whether they assume or interrogate the artist’s unchecked entitlement to source materials” (199). Writing in detail about the erasures that occur in *The Place of Scraps*, Max Karpinski reads the work as “both a discursive repatriation of ancestral artifacts, cultures, and histories, as well as a tactical disruption of colonial epistemologies that depend on the erasure of Indigenous presence” (1). He states that in appropriating Barbeau’s source text, Abel’s poetry “constitutes a pointed

entrance into and reconfiguration of settler-colonial discourses that fabricated the myth of the perpetually vanishing Indigenous body" (Karpinski 1).

The following example illustrates Abel's sustained dialogic relationship with a passage from *Totem Poles* that is noteworthy for its erasure of both Indigenous bodies and colonial agency through its determined use of the passive voice. Abel first reproduces the passage in full:

The pole transported to Toronto. Taking it down to the ground and shifting it into the water taxed the ingenuity of a railway engineer and his crew of Indians. It leaned sharply, face forwards, and had it fallen, its carvings would have been damaged. But the work was successfully carried out and after a few days the pole with two others was towed down Portland Canal, on its way south along the coast to Prince Rupert. As it floated in the water, several men could walk on it without feeling a tremor under their feet; it was so large that a few hundred pounds made no difference. When it reached Prince Rupert, it had to be cut, as it lay in the water, into three sections, for the longest railway cars are 50 feet. Nor were all difficulties overcome after the three sections had reached Toronto. (19)

While the phrasing implies that the railway engineer and "his crew of Indians" are the ones who carried out the totem pole's removal, the only active subject in Barbeau's description of the event is the totem pole itself. It leans, it floats, and eventually it reaches its destination as if it had magicked its journey out of the damp coastal rainforest of the Nass, down the river and onto the train from Prince Rupert to Toronto. The men who accompany it in its migration are not seen to perform any action other than walking on the pole as it floated in the water. Barbeau himself is a self-effacing observer who, despite the proclamations of cultural responsibility that he voices in other passages, here is merely an impassive recorder of the scene. In this passage, as in others, no one is implicated in either the genocide of a people, their removal from the landscape, or the plunder of their cultural artifacts; all are presented casually by a seemingly disinterested observer.

Through his deconstruction of this passage, Abel calls out Barbeau's passivity and desire for recognition contained in the false modesty of his text as well as the active role of the anthropologist in constructing the image of the vanishing Indian, an ideology that paved the way for industrial expansion in the region and further disenfranchisement of its First Peoples. "Remove, transfer, shift, float" are quiet

words that betray little of the violence implicit in forced relocations and the appropriation and industrial decimation of ancestral lands.

remove
transfer

shift

face forwards,

work

down

float in
feel

no difference.

in the water

or

Toronto (21)

In an alternate erasure of the same original passage, Abel suggests Barbeau's covert sense of ownership with

his totem

the water
his Indians

carried

down Portland Canal,

their feet

it lay in the water

(23)

In a final excavation of the passage, Abel reveals the statement "remove thousands of Indians successfully without feeling a tremor" (25), drawing the reader toward the realization that the absence of feeling is made possible by the erasure of those Indigenous bodies to begin

with. In another excerpt Barbeau states: "The forest all around was gradually reclaiming its rights after the native villagers had departed many years ago for other haunts, or had died out" (31). The word choice here is telling: as if for reasons unknown, the villagers had disappeared from the landscape that was now merely haunted by their ghosts. According to Barbeau, these villagers had moved on so long ago that the "rightful" owners of the land, i.e., the forest, had returned to "reclaim" it. The passage ignores seasonal transhumance in which northwest coast peoples frequently moved between villages for months at a time, the smallpox epidemics that ravaged Indigenous communities, and the colonial processes that were forcibly evicting communities from their homes. Instead, it declares not only that there was no human presence on the land to assert ownership of it but also that ownership could not have been claimed in any case because the land rightfully belonged to the trees. In one violent stroke, Barbeau erases both the people from the landscape and the legitimacy of their claim to it.

On Environmental Racism, Its Construction and Deconstruction

Speaking to the host of CBC radio's *Q*, Simpson observed, "When I think about my life as an Indigenous woman, one of the things I circle back to is this feeling of being lost or fragmented which, I think, comes from the experience of the violence of colonialism" (Grant). Abel's third and most recent book of poetry, *Injun*, enacts this fragmentation as it addresses the systemic racism that is foundational to the structural violence of settler colonialism. In particular, the book challenges the racist orientation of western novels that glorify the violent displacement of Indigenous peoples during the settlement of North America. In a note at the back of the book, Abel explains his creative process: "*Injun* was constructed entirely from a source text comprised of 91 public domain western novels with a total length of just over ten thousand pages. Using CTRL+F, I searched the source text for the word 'injun,' a query that returned 509 results. After separating out each of the sentences that contained the word, I ended up with 26 print pages" (*Injun* 83). Abel goes on to describe the *ad hoc* process of cutting up and reassembling this compiled material into new poems. In its repeated articulations and erasures of this racist slur, the collection exposes the brazen racism that was the norm during the period of unfettered colonial expansion in which the original westerns were published and that was further normalized by these and other texts. The work challenges the notion of easygoing Canadian multiculturalism, pointing instead to

the historic racism that remains pervasive throughout North American society. This racism directly serves the purposes of the extractivist state in which racism is “not merely a consequence of these structures of colonial power or a marginal effect of those structures; it was/is a means to operationalize extraction” (Yusoff 33). According to Yusoff and others, extractivism and racism are constitutive; both *Injun* and Abel’s previous book *Un/Inhabited* explore this entanglement.

The opening seventeen pages of *Injun* comprise a series of original poems constructed from the contents of Abel’s source text. The first fifteen poems are incisive and evocative, the imagistic language conveying the frontier landscapes of westerns in which blatant racism (“grubbed up injuns/in the gleam of discovery” or “injuns in a heap”) is simply part of the scenery. The broody tone of certain poems, such as poem d) on page six, hints at dark acts that remain inexplicit:

he confessed over a pitch fire
two yards of bright luck

packed through a mangy boil
the antipathy of peaceable hills

going crazy over that injun smell
downwind from the storm

...

a reserve of gas feather camps
dusted straight into the big kill

Here the lines illuminate the inconsistencies between visions of bucolic settlements and the forceful antipathy required to bring them about. As the sequence progresses, the lines become increasingly shredded by caesuras until words themselves are broken apart, coherent language becoming meaningless constellations of letters—or perhaps becoming something entirely new.

“Operationalized extraction” is a more obvious concern of Abel’s second book, *Un/Inhabited*. In many ways a precursor to *Injun*, *Un/Inhabited* also uses ninety-one western novels as its source text and a similar CTRL+F mining of these texts for terms connected to colonial

preoccupations. The first half of the book, a section entitled “Pioneering,” presents the results of Abel’s searches in a series of poems that each bears the search term as its title followed by a compilation of sentences containing that word. Together the words map colonized terrains of extraction. The varying length of each poem indicates the relative weight of the word within the source text and by extension the genre, so that “extracted” is a short piece at two-and-a-half pages and “territory” is just over nineteen pages while “frontier” clocks in at thirty-four.

The most significant aspect of “Pioneering” lies not so much in the textual arrangement—the poems are laid down in uniform, columnar blocks of text—but rather in Abel’s removal of the titular word of each poem, inviting the reader to supply and resupply it to complete each sentence. For example, an excerpt from the opening poem “uninhabited” reads

How lonely
I felt, in that vast bush! Ex-
cept for a very few places on the Oule-
out, and the Iroquois towns, the region
was . This was no country
for people to live in, and so far as she
could see it was indeed

In erasing the word “uninhabited” from the parent texts, Abel makes visible the obliterating work performed by the word itself. In creating conspicuous white spaces in the text, he ironically makes the word and its work more visible, calling it into the foreground for interrogation. At the same time, in supplying the conspicuously absent term, readers are drawn into an uncomfortable complicity and reenactment of the discursive process of pioneering that is at work in the original text. Supplying the words—uninhabited, settler, pioneer—I become an active participant in processes of erasure, white supremacy, and appropriation. In reconfiguring the original texts as an interactive dialogue, Abel illustrates the active work carried out by language and speech. In doing so, he makes it difficult for readers to shrug off the novels as bigoted products of a less enlightened time, instead making clear the ease with which such ideologies can be reproduced.

Injun can be seen as an extension of the work begun in *Un/inhabited* that picks up the slur that *Un/inhabited* steers clear of. The main text of *Injun* is not a work of erasure; it inscribes and re-inscribes the offending

word on the page then literally turns the text upside down, breaking words into frayed assemblages that render both language and alphabet unintelligible. However, the eighteen-page Appendix at the back of the collection includes a compendium of the 509 original sentences with the slur excised, once again leaving the reader to fill in the awful blank. Linked by their methods and their experimental form, the two books work together in producing similarly jarring effects. Drawing on literary texts from an earlier time, both books emphasize colonialism's present by making readers complicit in the repetition and enactment of racism, linking this directly to the dispossession and erasure that constitute the present-day settler colonial state.

If the two books appropriate to reveal appropriation, they also extract from source texts, calling attention to the extractivism that is settler colonialism's underlying motivation. The final section of *Un/Inhabited* announces this politics with its title, "Extracted." This section comprises some forty-four pages of increasingly cramped text interspersed with white bars of varying width. Like the "zips" and color swaths of Barnett Newman's paintings, these visual poems abandon traditional representation to communicate conceptually. As the section progresses, the letters become more densely overlapped and illegible while the white bars widen until whiteness overruns the page. The barred structure of the pages, reminiscent of core sampling that probes the bedrock in advance of mineral extraction projects (Ritter), begins tentatively then appears to accelerate, much as accelerating extraction from the mid-twentieth century has carried us into the overlapping environmental crises of the era now called the Anthropocene. Like extraction itself, this new geological era is deeply colonialist, based on "a specifically racialized territorialization of the earth" (Yusoff 105). The unified humanity that the extractivist "Anthropocene" insists on is, Yusoff reminds us, a fiction: "If the imagination of planetary peril coerces an ideal of 'we,' it only does so when the entrappings of late liberalism become threatened. This 'we' negates all responsibility for how the wealth of that geology was built off the subtending strata of [I]ndigenous genocide and erasure . . . the economies of geology still largely regulate geopolitics and modes of naturalizing, formalizing, and operationalizing dispossession and ongoing settler colonialism" (106). This colonialism proceeds through the ongoing consolidation of state power and neutralization of Indigenous resistance in an attempt to satiate the state's hunger for Indigenous lands and their resources (Simpson, *We Have Always*). In "Extraction" the state's insatiability is represented by the shifting balance of text and white spaces, in which the former is squeezed from coherence into illegibility as its space on the page is consumed by whiteness.

On Cultural Elimination

While Abel has indeed chosen as his source texts “documents that have produced, justified, legalized, denied, aided, and abetted the violent silencing and dehumanization of various groups of people,” and while his poetic interactions with these texts do point toward the discursive power and materiality of language, Abel’s work extends beyond a critique of and engagement with discursive aspects of the texts (L’Abbé). As Abel himself has described more recently, his poetry is as much about his lived experience as an intergenerational survivor of residential schools as it is a commentary on forms of erasure (*NISHGA*). *The Place of Scraps* is not only a book of erasures and bricolage but also a work in which Abel places himself in dialogic relationship to Barbeau’s *Totem Poles*. Importantly, this dialogue involves not only reappropriation of Barbeau’s work but also Abel’s reflections on his own life experience. As he describes in his autobiographical book *NISHGA*, Abel chose to work with Barbeau’s *Totem Poles* because in a situation of disconnection and dispossession, far removed from his extended family and ancestral lands and communities, the anthropological text was his “first real connection to Indigeneity.” His connection to his Indigenous heritage was mediated by the writings of a mid-century anthropologist whose work, as we will see, was part of the very process of dispossession that severed Abel from his heritage. As an intergenerational survivor of residential schools, Abel “create[s] art that attempts to reflect [his] life experience, including [his] severance from Indigenous knowledge and land.” My discussion of the poetry and the relationship between the two texts takes up Dowling’s assertion that critics of appropriation-based texts “must attend to the critical issue of the prior, and to the ways in which appropriation-based works mediate and manage it . . . center[ing] that which comes before the poem and is made to serve as its exploitable resource” (120). I do this primarily by taking into consideration the social and geographical context of *Totem Poles* and Barbeau’s earlier writings and Abel’s discussion of his relationship with the text.

Land claims and the question of ownership were prominent issues during the period that Barbeau was active in northwest British Columbia, beginning with his initial trip in 1914.² Writing on the historical land claims of the Gitksan people, whose territories border those of the Nisga’a in the upper Skeena and upper Nass watersheds, Gitksan scholar Neil Sterritt reports that in 1908 the chiefs of the upper Skeena communities of Kuldo, Kiskaga’as, and Kispiox petitioned Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier to attend to their land grievances. The following year, the Steward-Vowell Commission held meetings in

Hazelton—a village on the Skeena River established alongside an Indigenous community in 1862—on July 13 and 14, 1909 to investigate these grievances (Sterritt). Newspaper accounts, the only extant documentation of these meetings, report the following:

Each tribe was represented by a spokesman, who presented each tribe's troubles and demands in turn, each spokesman practically repeating what the first one set forth. Basing their contention on the assumption that all the land belonged to them to be heredity [sic] and that whites had taken it without conquest or remuneration, they practically asked that the whole country be surrendered to them. This would involve dispensing with the present system of reserves, the establishment of their ancient tribal laws and customs for the government of the territory and the forfeiture of all rights, claims and interests of the whites etc., practically the establishment of the conditions existing before the white man came among them. While claims were made separately for the surrender of each tribal chief's "lands of his forefathers," collectively it would involve the entire country. (Quoted in Sterritt 99-100)

Several years later, on April 21, 1915, the McKenna-McBride Commission held further land claims hearings in Gitanmaax during which Edward Spouk presented Gitksan wishes:

Seven years ago we sent a petition right down to Ottawa—our petition meant that we were asking from the Government to give us our land back and also our hunting grounds and all our fishing camps, and we want to hold these for our own use—we want to hold it just the same as a white man holds his land . . . and we have been asking the Government to get rid of the Indian Act for us. (Quoted in Sterritt 100)

Similar sentiments were voiced during a subsequent July 13, 1915 meeting between Commissioner MacDowall and representatives of Kuldo. Speaking on behalf of the chief of Kuldo, William Holland stated

We sent a petition down to Ottawa for all one Skeena River nation and we need our land back again; that is the Kuldoes, Kisgigax and the Kispaiox, Glen Vowell and Hazelton, and all those tribes right down—we just

want one thing and that is to get back our land again—the land was here before we were here and we want to get it back—all the land along the Skeena river. (Quoted in Sterritt 100)

Both 1915 meetings resulted in similar outcomes: the commissioners tersely adjourned the meetings, refusing to acknowledge or address the grievances that the Gitksan had placed before them. Sterritt also details the Gitksan claims that were taken down by Barbeau and his Tsimshian colleague William Benyon during their visit in 1920 and published in Northwest Coast Files held by the Canadian Museum of History.³ In spite of these high-profile commissions and Barbeau's own involvement in studying northwest coast Indigenous land claims, a discussion of land politics and the notorious *Indian Act* that banned potlatch ceremonies from 1884 to 1951 is largely absent from Barbeau's work. Instead, his writings suggest that the Indigenous peoples of the northwest coast have little claim to their cultural heritage and their most prominent cultural symbols as the emergence of each was directly connected to the arrival of European peoples.

For Barbeau, the totem pole is itself a product of colonization. In the introduction to *Totem Poles* he states, "the arts of the north Pacific Coast as known to us are a recent growth, almost entirely within the nineteenth century, and mostly in its latter part" (xi). This viewpoint is more explicitly stated in his article "Totem Poles: A By-product of the Fur Trade" published in *The Scientific Monthly* in 1942: "The belief has long been held that the totem poles of the North Pacific Coast are ancient, that they are a typical form of prehistoric art. Yet nothing is farther removed from the truth" (507). Instead, he claims that "It is only after 1830, more precisely after 1850, that totem poles became a feature of the villages of the Haidas, the Tsimshian and the southern Tlingit, and after 1890, that they appeared at Alert Bay among the Kwakiutl and among the Nootka on the west side of Vancouver Island" (507). "To emphasize the novelty of the totem pole," the article assembles examples of totem poles with signs of colonial influence that he claims illustrate the connection between the art form and the fur trade, "more particularly with the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company" (508). Citing examples of Gitksan and Haida totem poles that incorporate European figures and imagery, he advances the argument that "the remarkable development of native technique and style in totem pole carving is largely confined to the period subsequent to 1830" as it "hinged upon European tools, the steel axe, the adze and the curved knife" (511).⁴

This hypothesis of the recent origins of totem poles appears contrary to the salvage anthropology of Barbeau and his contemporaries, which typically viewed Indigenous culture both as unchanging and unable to survive in the face of colonial incursions. However, both publications reiterate ideas published in an earlier essay in which Barbeau claimed that the art form was not only recent but also now extinct (“Modern Growth”). These writings not only erase the possibility of ongoing carving practices by relegating them strictly to the past but also negate the existence of Indigenous artistry and innovation by ascribing the art of carving to colonial influence. Posing the seemingly rhetorical question, “was this stylization aboriginal or derivative?” he proceeds with his interpretation: “It had every chance of being derivative. Yet it is difficult to say from where, for the lack of sufficient comparative data. Advanced stylization can only be the result of intense cultural development, such as never had happened on the Northwest Coast in prehistoric times” (“Modern Growth” 391–92).

I include these examples by way of illustration that Barbeau’s work on northwest coast peoples was undergirded by an enduring white supremacy that reappears throughout his work. The everyday racism of his remarks that negate the complexity of Indigenous culture is of a different breed than the swaggering masculinity of the western texts assembled in *Un/Inhabited* and *Injun*, yet is no less constitutive of the environmental violence of settler colonialism; racism and white supremacy, in all their forms, “provided the rationalization for British theft of Indigenous lands” (Dunbar-Ortiz). Barbeau’s aim appears to have been not only to physically remove totem poles from Indigenous villages, but also, through his research and writing, to dispossess Indigenous peoples even of the art form itself, granting its origins and development to European influence and innovations, despite contrary evidence from early European explorers to the region. Through such writing he extends a sense of colonial ownership and entitlement to an art form that is one of the most prominent signifiers of Indigenous presence on the landscape. Depicting histories of inhabitation and encounters with the animals and supernatural creatures of the northwest coast, totem poles represented ways of living in and on Indigenous landscapes that incoming settlers actively suppressed through legislated bans on cultural production and assembly for cultural events.

Abel’s engagement with Barbeau’s text includes several short sequences, each extending across several pages, that begin with an appropriated passage of text and conclude with an original prose poem. Between these two brief texts lie a series of erasures, first of the excerpt of Barbeau’s text, which was then at what Abel calls a “hinge point” of Abel’s own work. The “shadow presence” of residential schools is

residual throughout the book but particularly at “every moment in which an excerpt from Barbeau comes up” (*NISHGA*). These hinged pieces, Abel explains, hold in the first instance his own lived “experience and position as both an intergenerational survivor of trauma and . . . as an urban Indigenous person” in which he is forced to seek traces of his Indigenous heritage in the writings of a white anthropologist. The other side of the hinge contains Abel’s “dismantling of colonial authority and simultaneous articulation of an Indigenous voice” in original writings. The entwinement of the two texts—Barbeau’s and Abel’s—“attempts to represent both the lived experiences of intergenerational trauma and the experiences of urban Indigenous Peoples.” The complex poetic work thus captures the reverberations of settler colonialism’s displacements and appropriations across time and space. It reveals the white supremacy embedded in Canadian scholarship that was foundational to some of the nation’s most prominent institutions and recalibrates silences within these works to include voices previously erased.

On Slow Violence, Fast Violence, and the Cultural Politics of Repossession

Nixon describes “slow violence” as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). While settler colonialism is indeed one of many “slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes” whose structural effects play out over the long term, scholars at the Yellowhead Institute note that rather than being merely slow, colonization’s “cataclysmic consequences” are a product of both fast and slow tactics (Nixon 2). The effects of cultural genocide and the erosion of cultural beliefs, practices and signifiers accrue gradually and can be difficult to perceive, but “the blunt instruments” of “physical dislocation, relocation, centralization and dispossession” produced material effects quickly (Yellowhead Institute 16). Cole Harris argues that “the materiality of the colonial experience” in British Columbia included an “ability to dispossess [that] rested primarily on physical power and the supporting infrastructure of the state” working alongside motivations to dispossess “derived from the interest of capital in profit and of settlers in forging new livelihoods” (167, 165). It can be tempting to ignore the entanglement of violence and state power, which can seem antithetical, particularly to those who have been on the receiving end of the order and stability that it appears to assure (Blomley). However, as Nicholas Blomley demonstrates, “violence plays an integral role in the

legitimation, foundation, and operation of a regime of private property" that is foundational to capitalist economies (121). Importantly, property "is not a static, pre-given entity, but depends on a continual, active 'doing'" that includes the active control of bodies through contracts and law enforcement (Blomley 122). In Canada, Glen Coulthard writes, "economic, gendered, racial, and state power has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations" that continually enact dispossession and systematically regulate "the generative relationships and practices that create and maintain Indigenous nationhoods, political practices, sovereignties, and solidarities" (Coulthard 7; Coulthard and Simpson 254).

Even in instances where Indigenous communities were not forcibly relocated to reserves, dispossession and loss due to the imposition of regimes of violence and the destruction of Indigenous relationships are inherent to the experience of colonization. Nixon proposes a broader notion of environmental displacement that refers not only "to the movement of people from their places of belonging" but also to losses sustained by people who remain in place, that is "the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19). These losses of culture and connection and subsequent threats to agency that Vanessa Watts points to, are not "a secondary force to physical removal and loss, nor [are they] any less violent" though the complex impacts may be more difficult to perceive (Yellowhead Institute 16).

Abel's work critiques both the physical and discursive aspects of displacement and their lasting effects. On page 47 of *The Place of Scraps*, Abel presents an extract of Barbeau's text thick with italicized Nisga'a terms and definitions in parentheses. Subsequent erasures excavate the text, first leaving only the parenthetical terms, then a page of empty parentheses. At the hinge point, Abel offers a new field of parentheses that, on subsequent pages, he incrementally repopulates with his own voice. In doing so, he first reclaims spaces rendered parenthetical to the main thrust of the anthropological text then reveals an imagined moment in Barbeau's life in which the parentheses capture brief asides in the anthropologist's imagined train of thought. Both passages recount a brief vignette related to a pole on the upper Nass River, but whereas Barbeau's original text offers a dry description of the pole and briefly names the Nisga'a people associated with it, Abel's passage brings Dennis Wood of Gitlarhdams to life in an imagined exchange with the anthropologist who had visited his community. In doing so, he centers an important member of the community and contributor to Barbeau's

text who had been displaced to a parenthetical attribution in the original.

The displacement of voice and identity, as in the case of Dennis Wood, works hand in glove with the displacement in place that is increasingly felt by Indigenous communities across North America. These communities now contend with the disproportionate effects of climate change along with those of imposed heavy industries, whether mines, smelters, oil refineries, hydroelectric dams, clearcuts, pulp mills, or bitumen and methane industries. Appropriation and control of land by the colonial state to maintain such industrial operations was and is a high-stakes proposition in Canada, whose economy is driven in large part by extractive and land-based industries. Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction contributed some 160 billion CAD to the national GDP in May 2021, an increase of 13.8% over the previous year (Statistics Canada). Canada is the global leader in mineral extraction; besides its oftentimes dubious activities abroad, the sector accounts for annual domestic exports of \$81.4 billion CAD (Yellowhead Institute). The access to land that extractive industries rely on is underpinned by horrific physical violence. In 2021, the discovery of hundreds of secret, unmarked graves at residential schools in British Columbia and Saskatchewan has drawn fresh attention both to the extent of the damage done by residential schools and to the motives of their proponents. The words of Duncan Campbell Scott, who mandated attendance at residential schools in the 1920s and who is quoted in an epigraph of *NISHGA*, make clear that the objective of the Canadian government's residential school policy was to "continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department" (National Archives of Canada). These schools were frighteningly effective in carrying out their mission; while it remains unknown exactly how many Indigenous children perished in residential schools, Duncan Campbell Scott himself affirmed that "It is quite within the mark to say that fifty per cent [sic] of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education, which they had received therein" (Schwartz). By eliminating the "Indian problem" through the forced removal, assimilation, and death of the Indigenous population, the Canadian state sought to extinguish prior claims to the land and alternative relationships with it that were not based on private property or extractive capitalism.

Calls for restitution are not new, as Neil Sterritt's discussion of early twentieth century land claims clearly demonstrates. Nearly a century later, the treaty between the Province of British Columbia and the Nisga'a people in 2000 became the first treaty ratified in the province

since 1899 and one of the few treaties at all in a provincial jurisdiction in which land ownership is still largely disputed. On neighboring Gitksan territory, the historic *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* trial, brought forward by 51 appellants who sought to curb rampant logging on their traditional lands, finally recognized Aboriginal title as an ancestral right when the case reached the Supreme Court in 1997. However, in recent years proposed methane and crude oil pipelines have led to clashes between police and Indigenous peoples on Gitksan and neighboring Wet'suwet'en lands, pointing to the unresolved nature of "Aboriginal title" on these lands and the reluctance of governments to honor their obligations to Indigenous peoples.

Environmental violence is only one part of Nixon's analysis; he also addresses the difficulties of representing it and the role of writer activists in unveiling settler colonialism's "perfect crime." Abel's books are an example of writerly activism that helps make visible the continuing process of settler colonialism and the racism, cultural genocide, and many other forms of erasure and displacement that are its constituent parts. Writing as an intergenerational survivor of residential schools, Abel makes clear that the legacies of the violent physical *and* representational practices of the past continue to inflect on the lives of Indigenous peoples and on their lands. By exposing erasures and injustices—both historical and contemporary, physical and discursive—in the heart of the Canadian settler state, Abel's texts challenge colonialism's removals: people and objects from the land, children from families, ceremonies and traditions from communities. Yet like other Indigenous literatures, Abel's poetry is not merely a testimony of suffering; it is also part of the radical Indigenous resurgence of our times. It is a powerful reminder that Indigenous peoples in Canada are, as Daniel Heath Justice puts it, "the inheritors of heavy, painful legacies, but also of hope and possibility, of a responsibility to make the world better for those yet to come" (210). This work is an essential affirmation of Indigenous rights and a vibrant component of the ongoing activist struggle for restitution and for sovereignty over Indigenous culture, objects, and lands.

NOTES

1. The name of this museum, like many other cultural institutions in Canada, pays homage to the nation's colonial heritage through direct reference to the British monarchy and to the monarch who remains Canada's head of state.

2. Derek G. Smith notes that Barbeau conducted extended periods of field research in the Skeena and Nass areas in 1914–15, 1920–21, 1924, 1926, 1927, 1929, 1939, and 1947 (192).

3. In recent decades, William Benyon has been recognized as an anthropologist in his own right, given his significant contribution to the Barbeau collection, which has since been renamed the Barbeau–Benyon collection (Fee; Smith). Barbeau did not recognize Benyon as a colleague but rather as a guide and informant.

4. These comments are reprinted almost verbatim in *Totem Poles*.

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