

“Split With the Kind Knife”

Salvage Ethnography and Poetics of Appropriation in Jordan Abel’s *The Place of Scraps*

Engaging centuries of settler-invader attempts to dispossess and destroy Indigenous communities, Nisga’a poet Jordan Abel makes appropriation and erasure his central thematic and formal preoccupations in *The Place of Scraps* (2013). The text itself consists of a series of erasure poems and collages that take much of their source material from Québécois anthropologist and salvage ethnographer Marius Barbeau’s canonical *Totem Poles* (1950). Barbeau, both in *Totem Poles* and throughout his career, studied a number of Pacific Northwest “tribes,” including the Nisga’a. Abel’s appropriation of *Totem Poles* constitutes a pointed entrance into and reconfiguration of settler-colonial discourses that fabricated the myth of the perpetually vanishing Indigenous body, a myth that was instrumental to the construction of a robust nationalism in the interwar period. By demanding that readers look again and again at multiple representations of language from *Totem Poles*, Abel’s poems enact the endurance and embody the presence of the Indigenous subject under erasure. Following Roy Miki’s call for “an aesthetics that both acknowledges the colonialism embedded in Canadian cultural nationalism and draws attention to a ‘present-tense’ relationship to the lands that were appropriated” (163-64), I read Abel’s poetry 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. As this double reading suggests, Abel’s return to textual and physical sites of colonial erasure and appropriation is not simple gamesmanship; it is a powerful poetic act that reverberates in the contemporary moment, a moment understood by scholars such as Taiaiake Alfred, Leanne Simpson, and Glen Coulthard as one of Indigenous resurgence.

Before venturing into the theory and criticism that ground my thinking about Abel's text, I feel impelled to address my own positionality. As a non-Indigenous scholar, I am aware of the necessity to tread lightly in approaching and analyzing texts by Indigenous writers. This tension is compounded by the fact that the text I am reading has received very limited scholarly attention. In one sense, the lack of criticism addressing Abel's poetry is fortunate; it forces me to foreground the context surrounding both the text's production and the events and histories that the poems explore. Jo-Ann Episkenew suggests that a lack of historical and cultural context is the primary reason why non-Indigenous scholars often engage in rampant misreadings of Indigenous texts. Furthermore, as she argues, these misreadings constitute socially and ethically questionable acts that have material, real-world effects:

If one examines the *text* of works of Aboriginal literature without examining the *context* from which it is written, Aboriginal people become abstractions, metaphors that signify whatever the critic is able to prove they signify. However, to write in this way shows a lack of social responsibility because it has an effect on the living people who are the subjects of Aboriginal literature. (65)

Writing about Indigenous texts and authors requires, in my own understanding, awareness and self-reflexivity with regard to the non-Indigenous critic's self-location. To engage in criticism of Indigenous texts, I must reorient my notion of critical authority and put myself in a position of listening and learning. But I also believe that, within this reorientation, it is still possible for me to write valuable, passionate, and invested criticism. I bring to Abel's text my own personal history, as a settler born elsewhere but raised in Canada from a young age, and as a scholar of both contemporary Canadian experimental poetry and the politics of poetic form. I offer my interpretations as one entrance into *The Place of Scraps*, welcoming both conversation and correction.

In light of my scholarly investment in the political potential of poetic forms, I am further aware that an emphasis on the aesthetics of Abel's erasure poetry must also be interrogated as a possible act of critical colonization. I follow Sam McKegney, another non-Indigenous scholar, in foregrounding the negative implications of performing purely aesthetic or formal analysis of Indigenous texts. In his "Open Letter" discussing "strategies for ethical engagement" for the "non-Native critic of Native literatures" (63), McKegney quotes Helen Hoy's concern that the "application of irrelevant aesthetic standards" might be a "means of domesticating difference, assimilating Native narratives into the mainstream" (57).

McKegney urges non-Indigenous scholars to “privilege[] the work of Native scholars, writers, and community members—not as a political gesture, but as a sincere attempt to produce the most effective criticism” (63-64). To counter the possibility of producing a myopic reading, I link Abel’s poetry to the Nisga’a Nation’s recent efforts to repatriate ancestral artifacts that had been taken and scattered among museum collections across Canada. As McKegney warns, “narrow historicization won’t reverse the system’s corrosive social and political effects unless harnessed to a clear vision for the future and mobilized in the service of Indigenous empowerment” (*Magic* 6). The association of Abel’s contemporary poetry with the collective struggle towards forms of Indigenous self-recognition constitutes, I argue, one way to extend Abel’s poetics beyond the space of the page and out into the physical, contested spaces of communal self-actualization.

Taking up Alfred’s and Simpson’s work on Indigenous resurgence, political theorist Glen Coulthard emphasizes the need to “think critically about the terms employed by resistance or empowerment movements. In his transposition of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* onto the contemporary relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian nation-state, Coulthard suggests that governmental policies that emphasize the state’s “recognition” of Indigenous communities are implicated in strategies of continued colonization: “in Fanon recognition is not posited as a source of freedom and dignity for the colonized, *but rather as the field of power through which colonial relations are produced and maintained*” (17, emphasis original). Quoting Fanon, Coulthard argues that recognition does not constitute a revolutionary demand as it has been co-opted by juridical and political forces and transformed into a new means of colonial containment: “far from being emancipatory and self-confirming, recognition is instead cast as a ‘suffocating reification,’ a ‘hemorrhage’ that causes the colonized to collapse into *self-objectification*” (139). His emphasis on “the cultural practices of critical individual and collective *self-recognition*” (131) echoes the distinction made by Daniel Heath Justice between “colonialist recognition” and “kinship” (“Rhetorics” 245). Referring specifically to the United States, Justice argues that governmental policies of Indigenous recognition construct Indigeneity as a measurable quantity tied to blood or genetics, constantly under threat of being withdrawn. Kinship, however, is “more conditional, more intimate . . . [and] embedded in both a *local* and *localized* matrix of relationship. . . . Recognition in this context is thus a context- and community-specific response” (245). Both Justice and Coulthard, then, desire an alternative valuation of “recognition”; they seek to shift the

term's discursive associations towards modes of communal articulation that foreground self-definition and reciprocal rights and obligations.

For Justice, particularly, kinship as an alternative mode of recognition deviates from national policies that identify Indigeneity genetically as "a fixed state of being" ("Rhetorics" 245). Justice's argument that colonialist recognition is grounded in "fixed state" notions of Indigeneity exposes how governmental policies continue to be premised on obsolete concepts of corporeal difference. In their expectation of quantifiable otherness, governmental invocations of recognition gesture towards what Sherene H. Razack terms "the importance of the visible in colonial encounters—who and what is seen and not seen" (*Looking* 11). Working within an intersectional feminist critical framework, Razack borrows Mary Louise Pratt's construct of the "seeing man" to demonstrate the interlocking systems of imperialism, capitalism, racism, and masculinism. The "seeing man" coalesces these intertwined ideologies in his power and ability to represent, filtered through "imperial eyes [that] passively look out and possess" racialized and minoritized bodies (qtd. in *Looking* 15). Lee Maracle responds to precisely this simultaneous erasure and possession effected by colonial representations of Indigenous bodies when she describes the urgent need to write the self into literature as a defiant force. Writing enacts a persistent visibility, addressing, as Maracle says, "my need for you to see me—really see me . . . my need to carve images of myself on the panes of your books, never to be forgotten" (207). In this context, extending from Maracle's statement and echoing Fanon's concern with the ways in which the colonized comes to internalize the violent, degrading, and racist rhetoric of the colonizer, Indigenous literature might be read as offering a resistant counter-narrative to the lasting influence of colonial representations. Abel's erasure poems, consequently, can be read as one attempt to confront the colonially imposed and fabricated notion of the ontological invisibility of the Indigenous body, through a calculated, subversive deployment of imperial language and the tactics of early ethnographic discourse.

As Razack has shown, the vanishing or making invisible of Indigenous bodies is not to be dismissed as a figurative description of colonial policies. Quoting anthropologist Dara Culhane, she notes that

in the case of British colonialism, already inhabited nations "were simply legally *deemed to be uninhabited* if the people were not Christian, not agricultural, not commercial, not 'sufficiently evolved' or simply in the way." In land claim cases launched by Aboriginal nations in Canada, . . . when Aboriginal people "say today that they have had to go to court to prove they exist, they are speaking not just poetically, but also *literally*." ("When" 3, emphasis original)

Culhane's example is the juridical extension of *terra nullius* or "empty land," a fundamental distortion of settler-colonialism. Coulthard refers to *terra nullius* as the "racist legal fiction that declared Indigenous peoples too 'primitive' to bear rights to land and sovereignty . . . thus rendering their territories legally 'empty' and therefore open for colonial settlement and development" (175). While Abel announces an explicit engagement with *terra nullius* in the title of his second book of poetry, *Un/Inhabited* (2014), I see this "racist fiction" as an equally viable entryway into *The Place of Scraps* for a number of intertwining reasons. First, *terra nullius* operates through a startling conflation of erasure and possession, a conflation that is also recognizable as the ideological underpinnings of salvage ethnography, and that is readily apparent in the form and method of Abel's poetry. Second, to think the juridical invocations of *terra nullius* alongside the appropriations of salvage ethnography helps to articulate the degree to which Barbeau and other early Canadian anthropologists are themselves implicated in a colonial project always directed towards the acquisition of territory. *Terra nullius* and salvage ethnography are thus intimately linked in a concerted program of dispossession: whereas, in invoking the former, the state refuses to recognize Indigenous presence, the salvager is actively involved in erasing it.

In highlighting the twinned literal and poetic utterance of Indigenous activists, Culhane's comments quoted above also gesture towards the "often vexed relationship" of many Indigenous peoples to the imperial and imposed English language (Justice, "Introduction" 4). In the simultaneous taking up and taking apart of Barbeau's anthropological and ethnographical colonialist discourse, I read Abel's poetics of appropriation as confronting precisely this vexation, the concurrent urgency and difficulty of the poetic act. Much of the Indigenous literary scholarship that discusses the decision of Indigenous writers to work in English, importantly, does not present this choice as conflicted. Rather, many scholars and writers foreground the vital necessity of writing. Early in *Our Fire Survives the Storm*, Justice quotes the Muscogee Creek and Cherokee poet Joy Harjo: "When our lands were colonized the language of the colonizer was forced on us. . . . It was when we began to create with this new language that we named it ours, made it usefully tough and beautiful" (12). Harjo's description of a defiant and "tough" poetic utterance presents Indigenous literature written in English as always already politicized. Justice develops this notion, similarly reading a liberatory potential in the production of Indigenous literature in English: "when we question the stories that erase us and replace them with stories of both our past and current

presence, we speak ourselves into an existence that reaches to the future” (*Our* 46, emphasis original). We can arrive, then, at an encapsulation of Abel’s poetic project: *The Place of Scraps* inserts ancestral pasts and Indigenous presents/presence into the colonial utterance predicated on their denial. Following Harjo, this might indeed constitute a literature for resurgence, a literature both “usefully tough and beautiful” (qtd. in Justice 12).

In the context of Abel’s appropriation and transformation of text from Barbeau’s *Totem Poles*, those “stories that erase us” are the stories constructed by the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography, particularly the methodology of salvage ethnography. Andrew Nurse, who writes about Barbeau’s involvement in the attempted dissolution of a Huron reserve in Lorette, Quebec,¹ initially defines the salvage ethnographical method rather benignly as “the making of a record of a culture on the verge of disappearing” (“But Now” 435). Rapidly, however, it becomes apparent that the salvage ethos is heavily implicated in those colonial and imperial discourses that manufacture the erasure of Indigeneity. As Nurse styles it, salvage ethnography “posited that authentic aboriginal cultures had once existed in a sort of timeless and holistic prehistoric state that had been corrupted by progressive interaction with white culture and society” (“But Now” 444). Contact, for Barbeau and others, rendered Indigenous cultures illegitimate or inauthentic. “Culture” becomes static and inflexible, incapable of adaptation, evolution, or the integration and transformation of settler influences. Similar to governmental policies reliant on genetics,² salvage ethnography constructs Indigeneity as a fixed state; in order to justify “salvaging,” practitioners of salvage ethnography are invested in the fabrication of a coherent Indigenous culture as always removed in time and space, always simultaneously prior or previous, yet still visible, and hence, always on the brink of disappearing.

Pauline Wakeham’s study of the late 1920s silent film documentaries that Barbeau made of the Nisga’a along the Nass River interrogates one example of the contradictions of salvage ethnographical methodology. Wakeham reads Barbeau’s films through the lens of Renato Rosaldo’s “imperialist nostalgia” to reveal the troubling logic that allows the salvage ethnographer to present himself as a heroic figure while contributing to the settler culture’s perception of Indigeneity in decline: “mourning the disappearance of aboriginal authenticity, Barbeau and his colleagues attempt to distance themselves from the colonial violence that has altered native lifeways and, in turn, present themselves as sympathetic saviors of the remnants of

indigenous tradition” (Wakeham 131). This logic reroutes us once more into the twinned settler impulse of erasure and possession. The Indigenous body is “reproduced onto celluloid and wax cylinders for future safekeeping while the real referents are erased” (152). If we consider yet another articulation of the salvage methodology by Nurse, however, then the salvager’s mimetic or objective motivations, suggested by Wakeham’s “reproduced” and by the medium of documentary film itself, get thrown into question. Nurse reveals that Barbeau’s transcriptions of Indigenous narratives followed “an interpretive method” that itself amounted to a process of erasure (“Marius” 62). Parsing Barbeau’s manipulation of the narrative of the Salmon-Eater, Nurse notes that Barbeau actively altered the story’s language to suit his preconceptions. Furthermore, Barbeau understood his act of interpretation—that is, the purging of the narrative’s “derivative elements”—as “restoring its original and authentic form” (“Marius” 62). Not only is erasure intimately linked to possession, in the sense of a claim to knowledge or comprehension of Indigenous history and tradition, but the salvage ethnographer sees his disregard as beneficial, even restorative.³ When the narratives contained in *Totem Poles* are themselves seen as always already partially erased, Abel’s erasures might be understood as an act of requiting: the poetics of appropriation constitute an appropriate return.

While Abel’s formal poetic praxis points to an engagement with the discursive erasures of cultural salvagers, his text also traces the movements of material, ancestral objects. As Douglas Cole shows in his history of anthropological exploration and collection along the northwest coast of Canada, Barbeau’s salvage ethnography occurs towards the end of the peak period of the “scramble” for artifacts (286). After more than fifty years of settler-colonial accumulation of goods, the salvage methodology had become “to an extent self-fulfilling. Much had disappeared . . . because it had already been swept up by other museums” (287-88). Beyond exposing the irony inherent in the ethnographer’s act of salvage as self-necessitating, Cole also gestures towards the movement of many Indigenous artifacts into institutional spaces. Barbeau’s collections, many of which were procured thanks to the “new urgency of poverty” of the late 1920s (Cole 269),⁴ are often transferred to museums where they serve as nostalgic reminders of national prehistory; they are harnessed into a system invested in the construction and cultivation of a national imaginary. Acknowledging that these items have been implemented as objects of a large-scale cultural and social project of nation-building invites considerations of the reverberations

of salvage ethnographical methodology in the contemporary moment. Wakeham makes clear the political stakes of refusing to “bracket[]” salvage ethnography “within the discrete parameters of the past” (155). The salvage impulse can be understood within a long lineage of imperial, nationalist projects predicated on the destruction, dispossession, and representational erasure of Indigenous peoples, a lineage that might continue to be read in the ever-expanding policies of extractionism that continue to adversely impact Indigenous bodies and communities.

Salvage ethnography can thus be defined in relation to other colonial and juridical structures or regimes that continue to operate by denying the rights, or simply the presence, of Indigenous communities. As Wakeham shows, Barbeau understood this erasure as fundamentally constitutive of the Canadian nation-state: “the vanishing Indian . . . was a figure of colonial *poesis* for Barbeau—a tragic figure around whom an aestheticized narrative of extinction was writ large as a ‘picturesque chapter’ of New World beginnings” (131). Wakeham’s comment mirrors the strands of imperial discourse that I have been tracing throughout this essay: the extermination of Indigenous presence is *poesis*, the making of the (New) World. Abel’s rewriting of *Totem Poles* thus emerges as a writing against the grain of the twin thrust of salvage ethnography. *The Place of Scraps* is creation via erasure, the regenerative reclamation of those cultural narratives and artifacts removed from their ancestral homes and altered by salvage ethnographers. In the context of Barbeau’s *Totem Poles*, the central prize is “the Sakau’wan [*sic*] pole,”⁵ described by Barbeau himself as the “tallest and finest on the Northwest coast” (qtd. in Nowry 235). This pole, which still “towers from basement to roof . . . in the main stairwell of the ROM [Royal Ontario Museum]” (Nowry 235), is the subject of the first entry appropriated and transformed in *The Place of Scraps* (see Figure 1). In his biography of Barbeau, Laurence Nowry describes how, after its purchase,⁶ the Sagaween pole was “floated down to Prince Rupert, cut into three sections for rail transportation and resurrected in Toronto” (235). In light of the pole’s significance to Barbeau’s (and thus Abel’s) text, the context of its removal and transport to Toronto might offer another angle through which to understand the poems’ formal properties. “Erasure” of text can also be termed “cutting”;

Figure 1 (facing page)

From *The Place of Scraps* by Jordan Abel, published by Talonbooks, reprinted with permission of the publisher. This series of erasures (clockwise from top left: pages 5, 7, 15, 13) takes as its source text Barbeau’s “A feud over this pole.” In their original format, these erasures are opposite a blank page, surrounded by a sea of white.

"A *feud over this pole*. Old chief Mountain or Sakauwan, some time before his death in 1928, gave an account of the rivalry between the Eagle-Raven clan and the Killer-Whales or Gispewudwades of Nass River, over the size of their new totems.¹ In summary here it is:

The Killer-Whale chief, Sispagut, who headed the faction of the earlier occupants on the river, announced his determination to put up the tallest pole ever seen in the country. Its name was to be Fin-of-the-Killer-Whale. However, instead of selecting for its carver Hladerh, whose right it was to do the work, he chose Oyai of the canyon. Hladerh naturally felt slighted and confided his grudge to Sakauwan, chief of the Eagles, and his friend. From then on the Eagles and the Wolves of their own day were to be closely allied, as the ancestors of both had moved in from Alaska and at one time had been allies.

¹ For a fuller account see *Alaska Recounts* by Marius Barbeau, "The Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho and the Macmillan Company of Canada, 1947, pp. 127-136"

Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, vol. 1 (1950), 29.

or Sakauwan

and

Sispagut
the river
the country

the canyon

allied

by Marius Barbeau

his his

their s' i h is
h i s h i
his h i

H i s H i s
h h i s i s
his his h h i s

h i s

In summary

, his

¹ For a fuller account see *Alaska Recounts* by Marius Barbeau.

read against Barbeau's salvage ethnographical representations, it might more properly be understood as a "cutting away" or excision.

The excision or targeted ruin of Barbeau's *Totem Poles* can also be linked to the phrase, originating in the Cree hero myth of the Son of Ayash, that gives McKegney the title of his monograph *Magic Weapons*: "The world has become too evil. With these magic weapons, make a new world" (Tomson Highway qtd. in McKegney 8). While it might be tempting to align cutting and excision with a poetics of violent revolution, I read Abel's erasures as fundamentally generative, exemplary of what Taiaiake Alfred describes as *wasáse*: "Wasáse is spiritual revolution and contention. It is not a path of violence. And yet, this commitment to non-violence is not pacifism either. . . . I believe there is a need for morally grounded defiance and non-violent agitation combined with the development of a collective capacity for self-defence" (27). Alfred's intertwining of "agitation" and "self-defence" finds an analogue in the blockade, an on-the-ground, tactical expression of Indigenous sovereignty that has recently received considerable critical attention. Coulthard returns to the blockade at multiple points throughout *Red Skin, White Masks*, initially presenting it as a calculated disruption of "the power of state and capital" to operate in and through "Indigenous territories" (117). The blockade might also offer a productive model through which to understand the work of Abel's text. In writing over *Totem Poles*, Abel effects a discursive denial of the continuing operations of those intertwined ideologies that underwrite the salvage ethnographical methodology. And yet, as Coulthard shows, it is important to recognize that the blockade is never simply negation; in its refusal of the exploitative intimacies of state, capital, and land, the blockade as tactic can be read as an "affirmative enactment of another modality of being, a different way of relating to and with the world" (169). To read Abel's text as echoing Indigenous political tactics takes seriously the notion, earmarked by Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall, that "spaces of dissent can be generative and creative" (6). To reclaim community in and through a text "belonging" to the colonizer is both a targeted disruption of the logic of settler-colonial capitalist structures, including intellectual property rights, and an opening onto a different mode of relating to ancestral histories, spaces, and objects.

The tension between individual settler rights and Indigenous collectivity is foregrounded in Abel's opening series of poems. The series, which grows out of Barbeau's description of the origins of tribal feuds along the Nass River, hinges on the question of ownership. Following Glenn Willmott, appropriation, the

term I am using to describe Abel's poetics, carries an "inescapable association with 'property,' which comes from the same root . . . (Latin *proprius*, meaning 'one's own')" (131 n6). Indeed, Barbeau's naming of this section of the text "A feud over this pole" anticipates the question of possession or property, as well as the struggle for reclamation and repatriation (*The Place* 5). In his multiple treatments of the passage, however, Abel shifts focus slightly by dramatizing the representational appropriation of Indigenous images and cultures by ethnographic discourse. The first erasure, in its "alli[ance]" of "the river," "the country," and "the canyon," immediately contextualizes Barbeau's ethnography within settler-colonial nation-building. The rewriting of "Sakau'wan [*sic*]" and "Sispagut" as "allied" effects an imagined erasure of Indigenous histories and genealogies; the names are emptied of their specificity, dehumanized into signifiers of an exotic, prehistoric, Canadian otherness.⁷ While the poem's opening on "or" suggests the possibility of an alternative history, which might invite resistant readings of the "allied" landscape, its formal balance ultimately relies on the concluding line "by Marius Barbeau," which advances the ethnographer's simultaneous claims to authority and authorship. Semantic meaning is not at stake here; Abel is not unearthing a challenge to Barbeau's original text from between the lines. Rather, Abel's first poetic erasure re-enacts the violent erasures of Barbeau's own methodology and so reveals the obstruction of vision that informs the internal logic of *Totem Poles*; written over *Totem Poles*, the erasure uncovers how Barbeau's text operates as a writing over in the double sense of obfuscation and the exercise of power.

Abel's first series of erasures concludes with a pair of poems that lays bare the underlying forces of dispossession and accumulation, forces embodied by the salvage ethnographical impulse. In perhaps the most visually striking erasures of this first series, he strips language letter by letter, shaping the excerpt into the sibilant repetition of "his." Barbeau's "hisses"—a connotation that becomes available in voicing the poem—are broken by a single confected "their s," a suggestion of an alternative communal ownership, as well as a formal embodiment of expansive potential, signified by the white space that has been placed within the limits of the word. As with the earlier poem, in which the possible resistance or alternative genealogy embodied by the opening "or" is undermined by Barbeau's assertion of ownership, the expansiveness of "theirs" is reined in by an appended footnote: "For a fuller account see *Alaska Beckons* by Marius Barbeau" (13). The alternative model of collective possession, set against the settler model of inviolable individual rights, is reduced to an oddity

or quirk. The footnote becomes another way of claiming ownership via authority, a gesture towards an elsewhere text that allows both compre- and appre-hension. Beyond asserting authorial control over representations of Indigenous culture and society through the footnote that directs the reader to another of *his* texts, the descent into “hissing” opens the poem to multiple significations. Buried among the settler-invader’s hisses as expressions of disapproval, or perhaps even intense anger or hate, the assertion of “theirs” is silenced. Once more, resistance is curtailed. The reader turns the page and is greeted by the final erasure in the series: “In summary, his” (15).

The silencing of Indigenous assertions of presence, enacted in the relationship between the “hisses” and the solitary “theirs,” might be read productively against Abel’s reliance on the speech of the colonizer. Reading Barbeau’s silencing of Indigenous subjects in his silent films, Wakeham considers the histories of European racism with regard to racialized others. She quotes Félix-Louis Regnault, “one of the earliest pseudoscientists to study” film footage of colonial encounters: “[A]ll savage peoples make recourse to gesture to express themselves; their language is so poor it does not suffice to make them understood” (qtd. in Wakeham 145). Regnault’s preposterous assertions can be understood as one of the foundational influences on what Wakeham describes as “the stereotype of the muted savage who engages in crude gesticulation” (145). Indeed, the silence or the inscrutability of the Indigenous body is also a central feature of that other infamous stereotype, the noble savage. To read Abel’s excisions as gestural, however, would be to read the poems as engaged in an imaginative challenge to precisely these reductive notions that dictate or circumscribe the limits of conduct for Indigenous bodies. Furthermore, to consider the erasure poems as gestural resonates with the extensive histories of the silencing of Indigenous voices within settler-colonial society. One series of erasures, rooted in Barbeau’s description of “*The myth of the Dragon-Fly*” (67), explores precisely these overlapping topics, opposing settler appropriation of Indigenous storytelling with the concerted disciplinary regimes designed to eradicate the possibility of the trans-generational acquisition of ancestral languages (see Figure 2).

Abel’s first treatment of Barbeau’s retelling of the Dragon-Fly narrative silences the ethnographer, scouring the page of language and leaving behind

Figure 2 (facing page)

From *The Place of Scraps* by Jordan Abel, published by Talonbooks, reprinted with permission of the publisher. This series of erasures (clockwise from left: pages 67, 69, 73) takes as its source text Barbeau’s “*The myth of the Dragon-Fly*.”

"The myth of the Dragon-Fly. A young unmarried woman of this clan, whose name was Yaw'l, broke her seclusion taboos to play with her brothers. Although it was summertime, a heavy fall of snow covered the ground at night. When the brothers and sister looked outside they found themselves in a strange country; their house was nearly covered with snow. Huge-Belly, a monstrous being, appeared from time to time, calling the young taboo-breakers outside, one by one, in order to cut them open with his long, sharp, glass-like nose, and hang their bodies on the rafters of his lodge to smoke and dry like split salmon. One of them managed to kill him. The slayer took to flight with his sister and remaining brothers, but to little avail. A female being of the same kind, Ksenkaigyet, who could draw out her nose into a sharp knife, pursued them. As they hid in a tree at the edge of a lake, she detected their shadows in the frosty waters and dived several times to capture them, until she was quite frozen. Then they killed her. But before she died, she declared, "The people will always suffer from my nose." From her remains were born the mosquitoes and other pests."

Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, vol. 1 (1950), 24.

one by one
 their bodies
 split
 with
 the kind
 knife

only grammatical marks: the excerpt's commas, periods, and a single colon and semi-colon (69). Willmott argues that

modern imperialist assimilation, by effectively silencing the languages of Native groups and imposing English education in residential schools, appropriated the power of a good perhaps as 'supreme' as that of the land; in this light, one can also see why the aboriginal storyteller has generally been as concerned with language as with content. (92)

Willmott's final statement returns us to the "vexed relationship," as described above, of Indigenous peoples to creation with/in the English language. Nonetheless, I contend that Abel's erasure, in its expurgation of all language, is concerned equally with content. This erasure denies Barbeau the history he has "salvaged" in order to retell. It refuses the possibility of the ethnographer as self-styled "sympathetic savior[]" (Wakeham 131), withdrawing the narrative from his grasp. In its place, the poem returns to the colonizer the very grammatical system that was used to discipline the Indigenous body into colonized subject. In a later erasure of the same excerpt, a phrase appears from within the midst of these content-less grammatical glyphs: "one by one their bodies split with the kind knife" (73). In my reading of the text, this sentence carries two utterly opposed significations. It returns us once more to the "scramble," the accumulation of poles by supposedly sympathetic or "kind" salvagers—poles that are then cut or "split" for transportation. But it also gestures to the political desire that emanates from the core of *The Place of Scraps*: "One by one," Abel cuts apart the bodies of text appropriated from Barbeau's *Totem Poles*. This act is not fundamentally violent but, following Alfred, might approximate "self-defence." Most importantly, however, it is "kind," a textual, gestural enactment of a regenerative act, rooted in the reassertion or endurance of ancestral genealogies.

I close with an attempt to shift the discussion away from Abel's reliance on Barbeau and towards his identification with the Nisga'a community, past and present, in the hopes of addressing Sophie McCall's disparagement of the "limited and limiting prescription" of certain postcolonial criticism that "assumes that the main aim of Native American writers is to 'challenge Eurocentric discourse'" (28). To reduce an analysis of *The Place of Scraps* to the dissolution of imperial discourses would be a disservice to the multiple, intertwined forms of art that run throughout Abel's text (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 (facing page)

From *The Place of Scraps* by Jordan Abel, published by Talonbooks, reprinted with permission of the publisher. Pictured (left to right: pages 169 and 177) are two collages that overlay erasures, excerpts, and images, and that demonstrate the richness and variety of Abel's formal experimentation.

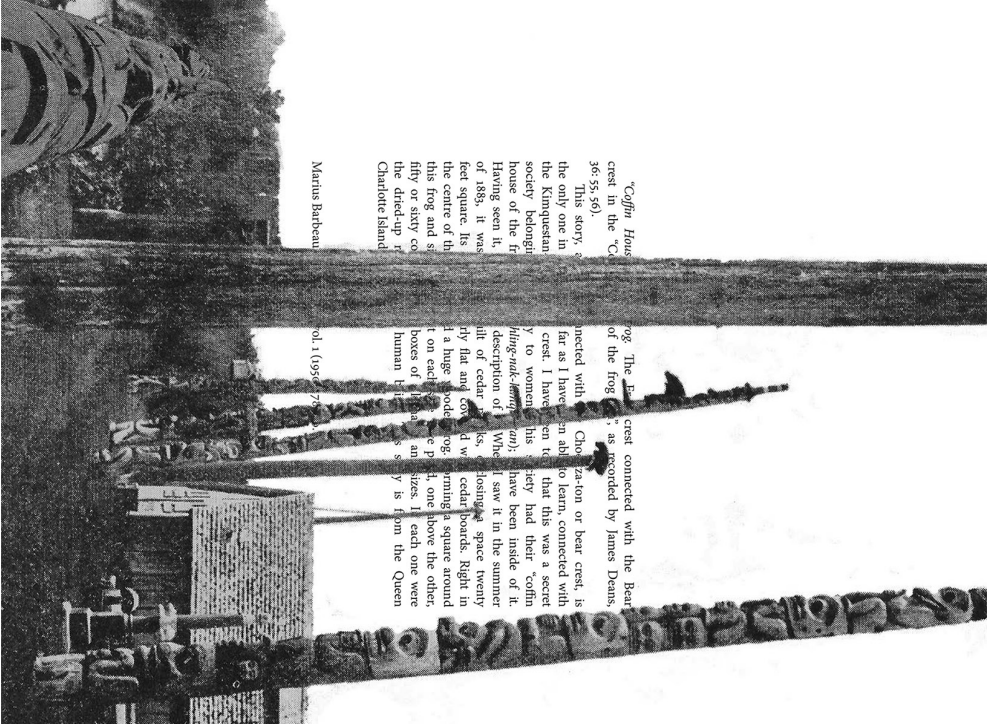


Despite efforts to determine meaning, their true nature continues to elude us. The Indian (a single element, a complex model) shares no consistency with the fossil state.

He said, "a mo-
ground"

I must know

was in



"Coffin House crest in the 'C.O. 36-55-56).

This story, the only one in the Kinuguan society belonging house of the fr Having seen it, of 1885, it was fact square. Its the centre of th this frog and s fifty or sixty co the dead-up r Charlotte Island

Marius Barbeau

The Bear crest connected with the Bear of the frog"; as recorded by James Deans,

connected with a Cho-za-on or bear crest, is far as I have an ability to learn, connected with crest. I have seen to that this was a secret y to women. This society had their "coffin *hling-puk-ang (ant)*; have been inside of it. description of I. When I saw it in the summer all of cedar. It was a closing a space twenty dy flat and covered with cedar boards. Right in a huge wooden frog, forming a square around t on each side. I saw it, one above the other; houses of the same sizes. I each one were human. I have seen it. My is I am the Queen

ol. 1 (1895) 76.

It would also be a disservice to the contemporary work of the Nisga'a, who in 2011 opened Hli Goothl Wilp-Adokshl Nisga'a, or the Nisga'a Museum, which houses artifacts repatriated from institutions such as the Royal BC Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. In an essay detailing her own involvement in the repatriation process of the Marius Barbeau Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum, Nisga'a activist and scholar Allison Nyce writes movingly of the vital importance of the articles' return: "We must reintegrate the artifacts into our society as they will reintroduce language that has not been heard in over a century" (263). Nyce's construction offers one final link between the work of repatriation and the emergent scholarship on Indigenous resurgence. The movement of return in the repatriative act is neither a retreat nor an indulgence of nostalgia. Rather, as suggested by Coulthard, "[r]esurgence . . . draws critically on the past with an eye to radically transform the colonial power relations in the present" (157). In his shift from the discourses of recognition and reconciliation to a "resurgent politics of recognition" (18), Coulthard advocates a "turn[ing] away' from the assimilative reformism of the liberal recognition approach" (154). For one example of what I consider this "turning away" from state-sanctioned approaches to Indigenous recognition, we might look to the final collage in Abel's text (see Figure 4). This final section of *The Place of Scraps*, composed entirely of collages, moves between ostensibly archival documents and contemporary photographs of tourist spaces; in the backgrounds, against emptied skies, individual letters and punctuation marks float aimlessly. The final collage, however, foregrounds the administrative speech of the Vancouver Park Board: "Please STAY OUT of the Totem Pole Area" (255). Through its tactical engagement with Barbeau's *Totem Poles*, Abel's *The Place of Scraps* refuses precisely this injunction: it refuses official declarations about the appropriate use of texts and spaces, and it refuses the reification of ancestral objects as static images of historical interest. And yet, in linking Abel's erasures to the repatriation efforts of the Nisga'a, *The Place of Scraps* might be read not simply as the targeted ruination of the colonizer's language, but rather as a creative exploration of the potential for new utterance. *The Place of Scraps* expunges Barbeau's stolen histories and salvaging narratives, releasing his words from their imperial obligations. From the interstices of re-appropriated text, fresh language flows anew, harnessed not towards violent or destructive ends, but always towards the production of new forms of regenerative kinship and alliance.



Figure 4

From *The Place of Scraps* by Jordan Abel, published by Talonbooks, reprinted with permission of the publisher. The text's final collage (page 255) foregrounds governmental, disciplinary rhetoric.

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NOTES

- 1 Nurse traces the multiple settler-colonial fictions that coalesce in Barbeau's recommendation to dissolve the Huron reserve at Lorette. A subscriber to the belief in the necessity of visible otherness, Barbeau believed that "an Amerindian person should not look like a white person. Amerindians should have a brown complexion, dark eyes, and dark hair" ("But Now" 452). Disappointed with the appearance of the Huron peoples, as well as with what he claimed was a "widespread" practice of "defraud[ing] white creditors" in which an Indigenous person could pass as white to obtain loans and then default without fear of property seizure, he recommended that the government use recently obtained legislative power to enfranchise the community as Canadians (458). Most troubling, however, is the fact that Barbeau did not see the situation at Lorette as unique: "The plan [he] laid out for the disestablishment of Lorette could have, he felt, a more general applicability in the near future because of the demise of aboriginal cultures across Canada. In his opinion the best course of action for the federal government was not to treat Lorette as an isolated case but instead to pass 'a general law covering all such cases as will eventually crop up'" (462). Thus, in the early 1920s, Barbeau advocated a concerted, nationwide program for the disestablishment and forced enfranchisement of Indigenous communities, a program that strikingly literalizes the dual notions of erasure and possession.
- 2 In order to make this comparison, I read Nurse's description of salvage ethnographical methodology against Justice's description of the American policies of blood quanta: "one can never gain more Indigenousness—one can *only* lose it. . . . Indians can vanish only in this rhetorical and epistemological construction, as they become increasingly distanced from the terms of identification, which are themselves static and frozen" ("Rhetorics" 245-46).
- 3 I would like to acknowledge and thank one of the anonymous readers of my initial submission for pointing me to this valuable article. Barbeau's manipulations, as detailed by Nurse, include the shift from "*foam*" to "*sea*," and from "*toad*" to "*frog*" ("Marius" 62). These shifts are necessary because Barbeau came to the story with the understanding that it "illustrated the Asiatic origins of First Nations" (62). As Nurse points out, "[t]he logic behind these arguments was, however, circular. Stripping the narrative of its imagery—that is, changing it—to give access to its primary meaning in turn provided the rationale that sustained the original change and sanctioned further 'corrections'" (62).
- 4 Cole's comment, although presented in passing, styles Barbeau's salvaging as especially exploitative, rooted in the intensification of economic difficulties among Indigenous communities. Even more damning is the rather evasive admission that "just when [Barbeau] began to take a cut for himself is difficult to determine with exactness" (270).
- 5 Nisga'a scholar Allison Nyce represents "Sakau'wan" as "Sagaween" (264). I follow her spelling in my own writing.
- 6 Nowry describes Barbeau's first attempt to purchase the Sagaween pole from Chief Mountain in 1927. His response was: "Give me the tombstone of Governor Douglas; I will give you the totem of my grand-uncles" (235). Chief Mountain died during that same

winter, and his “nephews and sole heirs” sold the pole the following year (Barbeau qtd. in Nowry 235). Although this is presented without comment by Nowry, it is possible to read the Sagaween pole acquisition against the background of the “new urgency of poverty,” cited above.

- 7 Tellingly, as Nurse notes, Barbeau chose to study “Northwestern Indian Tribes of North America” at Oxford because he “wanted a more exotic topic” than the one suggested by his supervisor (“But Now” 436).

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