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The Decolonization of Print, Digital, and Oral Spaces in Jordan Abel's *Injun*

When Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel performs his long poem *Injun* (2016), he remixes digital recordings of his own voice reading the work, disrupting and layering the tracks until there is an audible breaking down of language. *Injun* is a product of Abel CTRL-F searching for each instance of the word "injun" across ninety-one Western novels from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries hosted on *Project Gutenberg*. After compiling each use of the term into a printed, twenty-six-page document, Abel cut each page into one of the twenty-six sections of *Injun* (Abel 83). Mirroring the poem's typographical chaos, Abel's live performance involves a digital glitching of his own recorded spoken-word. I first experienced this live performance at the 2017 World Congress for Scottish Literatures in Vancouver, and my initial reaction was abrupt discomfort, frustration, and even resistance to the piece. As Abel's discordant layering of fragmented poetry intensified, the sound of digital malfunction echoed throughout the banquet hall, leaving me tense and apprehensive. In *Unsettling the Settler Within,* Paulette Regan theorizes a similar unsettling, drawing out an overt play on words—a double meaning for the verb "to settle." She "employs a conceptual framework for a decolonizing pedagogical strategy that is designed to teach Canadians about their history so as to initially unsettle and then transform how they view the past as it relates to contemporary Indigenous-settler relations" (13). As a non-Indigenous scholar writing "of [her] own unsettling" (18), Regan sees her work as a "call to action for non-Indigenous Canadians" (17) to unsettle themselves and take a necessary

responsibility for working towards decolonization. Regan's insistence that settlers turn inward to this unsettling has since informed my own experience of Abel's oral performance; it has allowed me to distinguish between my brash rejection of *Injun* as "unsettling," uncomfortable, and off-putting, and the more significant fact that I was, in that moment, failing to recognize that it was not the poem itself that was problematic, but rather, my response to it. I had felt resistance to my own feelings of guilt and discomfort in favour of an imagined and idealized version of Indigenous-settler relations in which reconciliation is both achieved and finite.

In an analysis of Canada's participation in what has been figured as a "global industry . . . promoting the issuing of official apologies advocating 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation,'" Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard criticizes Canada's tendency to "manufacture . . . a transition" "from an authoritarian past to a democratic present . . . by allocating the abuses of settler colonization to the dustbins of history, and/or purposely disentangl[ing] processes of reconciliation from questions of settler-coloniality" (106, 108). Taking issue with the way Canada has promoted a reconciliation that "takes on a temporal character as the individual and collective process of overcoming the subsequent *legacy* of past abuse, not the abusive colonial structure itself" (108-09), Coulthard argues that what is regularly misperceived as "Indigenous peoples' *ressentiment*," framed as an "inability or unwillingness to get over the past," is "actually an entirely appropriate manifestation of [their] *resentment*: a politicized expression of Indigenous anger and outrage directed at a structural and symbolic violence that still structures [their] lives, [their] relations with others, and [their] relationships with land" (109, emphasis original). Coulthard's work locates Indigenous resentment as a necessary and valuable reaction. If Indigenous resentment remains an ongoing response to the structural violence of colonialism, then a process of unsettling too should remain productively incessant. If so, my own unsettling after Abel's performance requires me not to look beyond my discomfort but directly at it, to be actively present within it, and, in time, to locate pathways for understanding, responding to, and learning from it. It is through a deeper engagement with Abel's *Injun* in its print, digital, and oral contexts that I intend to undertake such a process in this paper.

In order to more fully understand the importance of such an "unsettling," I turn first and necessarily to its root: to settle. Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Unangax scholar Eve Tuck discuss a "turn" in contemporary scholarship "toward analyzing settler colonialism" as "a persistent societal structure,

not just an historical event or origin story for a nation-state" (3-4). It is this emphasis on persistence that I think quite adequately informs a process of unsettling in that the kind of transformation of settler-Indigenous relations Regan sees as the productive outcome of "unsettling" must also be understood as ongoing. Reflecting on what it means "to settle" also means considering the compelling significance of place, and more specifically, *space*. In an explication of Patrick Wolfe, Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson defines "*settler* colonialism" by its "territorial project—the accumulation of land . . . [which] differentiates it from other forms of colonialism" (19). For Simpson, "The desire for land produces 'the problem' of the Indigenous life that is already living on that land" (19). The inherent importance of land in settler colonialism is first and foremost, but it can also be more broadly bridged to abstract places and spaces. If, in hearing Abel perform *Injun*, I felt "out of place," then what place or space was that? Was the poem itself moving across space(s) to catalyze such a feeling of unsettling, and, most importantly, was there not a dark irony in *my* feeling displaced as a settler Canadian?[1] While Rowe and Tuck offer helpful terminology, they actually gesture toward the "unsettled" nature of the terms themselves (3), and I suggest that such an insistence on the terms being "unsettled" actually exposes how, within the "persistent societal structure" of settler colonialism, language too is subject to crises of territory and occupation; like settler colonialism and its consequential "unsettling," language is neither static nor finite.

I have come to recognize *Injun* as a work of resistance and decolonization that confronts three distinct but interconnected spaces that are subject to settler colonialism's structure of ongoing erasure, elimination, and violence—print space, digital space, and oral space. Each space, I suggest, can be fruitfully contextualized by a metaphorical *terra nullius*, since colonized, that I argue Abel both resists and confronts in his poetry. I argue that *Injun* is a project of literary decolonization that uses digital technology to resist and dismantle the colonial language that, within print literary space, digital cyberspace, and oral space, has been used to violently define and disempower Indigenous peoples. While I explore how the digital can catalyze an intervention in print literature's colonial roots, I further address the crucial tension between print and digital as both predominantly white spaces. Ultimately, Abel's *Injun* instantiates an Indigenous presence via digital excavation, experimental typography, and a digitally remixed oral performance, all of which showcase an uncomfortable but necessary *breaking down* of the English language in both meatspace and cyberspace.

Print Space as *Terra Nullius*

To read Abel's *Injun* as a work of decolonization within print, digital, and oral spaces, it is helpful to first consider how these spaces can each be contextualized by a metaphorical *terra nullius*. Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel discusses *terra nullius* in the context of the Doctrine of Discovery and the Doctrine of Occupation. As Vowel explains, the Doctrine of Discovery was based on two papal bulls of the 1400s: the *Dum Diversas* (1452), which "gave Christians the right to take 'pagans' . . . as perpetual slaves," and the *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), which, Vowel very sarcastically relates, "clearly explained that since there were many people (heathens) around the world who weren't really using the land they were on, Europeans had every right to take that land" (236). The Doctrine of Occupation is dependent on the concept of *terra nullius*, "which is a Latin term that basically means 'land that belongs to no one'" (236). Essentially, *terra nullius* "was used as legal and moral justification for colonial dispossession of sovereign Indigenous Nations, including First Nations in what is now Canada" (Assembly of First Nations 2). Although a concept historically associated in North America with the territorial colonialism it helped facilitate, *terra nullius* continues to haunt contemporary relations between Indigenous communities and settlers beyond its original attribution to land. For instance, Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd calls *terra nullius* a "convenient colonial construct that maintained lands were empty of *meaning*, of *language*, of presence, and of history before the arrival of the European," arguing that "[f]or a worlding to take place to such a degree that the native comes to cathect her/himself as other, the native must be rendered as an unknowable blankness that can then be used to reflect back the colonizer's desires and fantasies" (64-65, emphasis mine). Byrd draws an important interrelatedness between the violent and dehumanizing impacts of *terra nullius*, and the desired and fantastical narratives of *language* used to fill the "unknowable blankness" of which she speaks. Thus, if language too can be "unsettled," and if, as Byrd suggests, there is a direct relationship between *terra nullius* and meaning and language, then Abel's literary reconfiguration of settler narratives challenges the "unknowable blankness" (Byrd 64) or figurative *terra nullius* that, as a componential substructure of settler colonialism, perpetuates Indigenous otherness.

Injun is first a reclamation of traditional print literary space that can be understood in the context of *terra nullius*. Max Karpinski reads Abel as confronting *terra nullius* in *The Place of Scraps* (2013) through print space

in his poetic form and methodology, a method which, I argue, Abel returns to in *Injun*. For Karpinski, *terra nullius* is a "viable entryway into *The Place of Scraps*" because *terra nullius* "operates through a . . . conflation of erasure and possession" that "is readily apparent in the form and method of Abel's poetry" (69). I propose that we think of North American print literary space in the context of *terra nullius* in that like the belief in land ownership, filling print space in the mainstream publishing industry was a practice historically dominated by European writers authoring settler narratives about Indigenous peoples. That is, just as North America was considered vacant by settlers, print literary space was not believed to be "occupied," so to speak, by Indigenous voices until the late twentieth century. If we think of print literary space in this way, then the ninety-one Western novels that Abel interrogates and reconfigures in *Injun* become instances of colonial occupation of this space. Another way of thinking of print literary space in the context of *terra nullius* is through the English literary canon, historically populated by white, male authors and poets. As discussed by Anishinaabe scholar Kimberly Blaeser, Western literary "'canonization,' can become a way of changing or remaking Native American stories" (53) so "[Indigenous peoples must] be aware of the stories [colonizers are] making about [them]" (Louis Owens qtd. in Blaeser 53). Similarly, Anishinaabe scholar Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm explores how "[i]n Canada . . . and the United States, successive colonizing governments have used language and the power of words . . . to subjugate and control the Indigenous peoples of the land" (11). She writes, "Language has been used not only to control what we do but how we are defined" (11). The Western print literary tradition undoubtedly has ties to the British Empire's agenda as the enforcing of the English language on Indigenous peoples was a dominant feature of their genocide. Furthermore, if we think of print literary space in the context of *terra nullius*, then we can see how early North American novels about the "wild west" and the "new frontier" colonized print space, staking claim to Indigenous identities, experiences, and voices, while violently displacing and superseding Indigenous storytelling in the process. These works undoubtedly exemplify Byrd's described reflection of settler perspectives onto a perceived nothingness attributed to Indigenous peoples (64).

Abel's *Injun* too confronts this notion of *terra nullius* within print space first in methodology. The poem signals to *terra nullius* with its epigraph from Mark Twain, which reads, "It is better to take what does not belong to you than to let it lie around neglected." Abel has remarked that his "writing

is in resistance to the problematic representations of Indigenous peoples in the Western genre," stating that "*Injun* . . . uses conceptual forms of appropriation in order to comment on the mechanisms of appropriation" (qtd. in Whiteman). When asked how he "think[s] of *Injun* in light of the appropriation of voice issue," Abel has expressed ambivalence about the continued conversation about appropriation in Canadian literature, ultimately suggesting that appropriation such as this is "a statement that demonstrates the absurd and greedy logic of colonialism" (qtd. in Whiteman). While Abel "uses conceptual forms of appropriation," he does so very self-consciously as a means of exposing the colonial structures that have and still do characterize print literary space. Abel's "conceptual" appropriation is literary resistance to the novels' occupying print literary space and it is reclamation of the racially charged language therein. While Abel's methodology obviously reveals his critique and reconfiguration of the appropriated Indigenous identity in the Western novels, it more crucially exposes his material interrogation of the Westerns' settler narratives through physical intervention. Although he digitally selected lines that use the word "injun" from the "91 public domain western novels," Abel "ended up with 26 *print* pages" which he "then cut up . . . into . . . section[s] of a long poem" very literally, to the point that there were often "scraps of paper everywhere" during his writing process (Abel 83, 85; emphasis mine). In disassembling texts accessed on *Project Gutenberg*—an open-source archive named after Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press—Abel methodologically responds to a colonial parallel between the written text and notions of space and settler colonialism. The very genesis of *Injun* is rooted in a tactile deconstruction of the novels that have perpetuated dominant settler imaginations of Indigenous identities and narratives in print literary culture, wherein Abel intervenes in an act of materialist and spatially conscious resistance.

Beyond Abel's material methodology, spatiality remains central to the poem's subject matter through Abel's exposure of the novels' hyper-focus on land. Starting with the line "he played injun in gods country," the poem begins with space, where Abel's use of the word "country" self-consciously emphasizes the colonial terminology used to label North America in terms that incite structures of ownership and sovereignty (3). Such a means of categorizing land remains aggressively at odds with the belief held by many Indigenous peoples that North America is more rightfully titled Turtle Island. Further, the word "gods" more explicitly relates the land to Euro-

Christianity, in that "God's country," as country "regarded as especially favoured by God" ("god, n. and int."), is also used to refer to sparsely inhabited spaces away from urban centres, i.e., "empty" land. The speaker also contextualizes a sort of "game" of "Cowboys and Indians," and this notion that settler violence is a "game" is one that Abel returns to throughout the poem, often associating it with land. For instance, in the opening segment, the speaker mentions "play[ing] injun" as well as "play[ing] english," and these phrases are made spatial by the phrases "*in* gods *country*" and "*across* the *trail*" (3, emphasis mine). Later, the lines "lets play injun / and clean ourselves / off the land" further this metaphorical "game" by positioning it in relation to space, land, and disappearance (14). Beyond this, the language of ownership and occupation figures prominently in the poem, and Abel exposes in his "[Notes]" the various occurrences in the Western novels of words like "frontier" (32), "territory" (42), and "possession" (58).

More crucially, these references to land ownership are often explicitly tied to language and they occur within the poetry itself, further reinforcing the relationship between print literary space and *terra nullius*. For example, the speaker introduces a male figure (presumably a settler) with the line "he spoke through numb lips and / breathed frontier" (3). The numbness of the lips insinuates an immunity to the "frontier" that infiltrates language and this, paired with the "strained words," quite intensely parallels language and land as both subject to the violent colonization at hand (3). In the following section, he is described as "hear[ing] snatches of comment / going up from the river bank," followed by instances of dialogue describing Indigenous peoples in ambivalent terms (4). This association between possessed land and language supports a reading of print space as a perceived *terra nullius* since the language drawn from settler narratives occupies the "frontier" of the page itself. When the speaker describes "bordering an artful territory / a partial injun tongue / steady in an old mans fingers" (11), the image of a severed Indigenous tongue held by the settler hand, associated with "an artful territory," proposes that this territory (both literary and actual) is one in which the white settler controls, oppresses, and even obliterates Indigenous language and narrative—a position that Abel actively resists.

Beyond this tension between land and language in subject matter, Abel further interrogates *terra nullius* in print literary space with experimental typography. From the outset, Abel rejects standard English punctuation and grammar, opening up his poetic lines to multiple interpretations. For

instance, the aforementioned phrase "gods country," if read as possessive, suggests that the land belongs to the Christian God. Alternatively, if read as plural, the phrase implies that, after contact, North America becomes a space occupied by settlers who believed themselves god-like, or having a divine right to land. Despite this lack of punctuation, *Injun* begins with some semblance of uniformity as the lines are organized in even couplets, and the poem is divided into twenty-six sections, each chronologically labelled from A-Z. At the outset of the poem, Abel's typographical strategies are reminiscent of the uniformity of traditional English poetry. However, he subverts this uniformity come section "g," which marks the initial breakdown of language. It is in this section that the couplets are no longer recognizable, and the lines are disrupted by incremental spaces. The fact that Abel arranges words and phrases from the Western novels with more traditional and uniform typography before actively dismantling them is demonstrative of how he self-consciously interrogates the white settler narratives that have and continue to occupy print literary space. This section comes immediately after the speaker describes "grubbed up injuns / in the glean of discovery," and I propose that Abel's typographical experiment be read as a disruption both of the glean of progress, but also of the ninety-one colonial novels as apparently clean by obscuring and disrupting the language in a retaliatory engagement with literary space (8). What is more, this section of broken language is the first of many, and, paired with the A-Z structure, it gestures toward an overt disruption of the English alphabet—the core of the English language which, in residential schools, violently silenced traditional Indigenous languages.

While the opening of space on the page disturbs the uniformity of the language, this typographical breakdown of language is most advanced between sections "r" and "s," where "words are broken into phonetic components and individual letters are dispersed widely across the page" (Neilson 287). Here, the letters on the page are flipped upside down and arranged in arbitrary couples, incomprehensible to the traditional, Western left to right reading experience. Shane Neilson proposes that this "exploded typography" "suggest[s] that to change relations between Indigenous people and settlers, poetry needs to be sundered first"; "[o]nly then," he writes, "can lyric be sutured back together with a changed polarity of power" (287). It certainly is an "exploded typography," but I am more inclined to read it as an act of destabilizing colonized spaces, both literary and actual. Rather than indicating that a sundering of *poetry* is required in order to

instantiate such a change, I see a shift within the exploded typography that transcends a sundering of poetry to signal not only a deconstruction of the colonial narratives within the Westerns, but also of the colonial violence that remains deeply embedded in North America's social structures. Neilson does argue that the exploded typography could represent the "dispersal and deliberate destabilization of Indigenous communities" (287), and it is true that sections "r" and "s" emulate a feeling of destruction without meaning, but as the sections dismantle the words taken from the Westerns, they more productively suggest Abel's destabilization of colonized print literary space. In other words, the Western novels already destabilize Indigenous communities in their rehearsals of settler-colonial violence. The typographical explosion is Abel's response and resistance to the structures that destabilize Indigenous life and identity both within and outside of print literary space.

While Abel's "exploded typography" is more a mode of decolonizing print literary space than a means of suturing Indigenous-settler relations, there is merit in reading into this shift the importance of change in settler-Indigenous relations that results in "a changed polarity of power" (287), as Neilson does. It is after this point in the text, after all, that the speaker begins using first-person pronouns and the poetry becomes quite literally turned upside down. Leading up to the typographical explosion, the third-person "he" is used to express much of the poem's political leaning, but between sections "s" and "z," during which the reader must physically read *Injun* upside down, the first person "i" is used to conclude the piece. In the earliest instance of this first-person shift, the speaker uses "my" to declare that

> buzzards
> are fine birds
> that are fooled
> by my redskin
> scent (23)

The "buzzard" as a bird of prey continues the theme of violence established by the colonial "Cowboys and Indians" narratives of the West that Abel deconstructs. Later, the speaker maintains the first-person perspective to make declarations of return:

> back to the bloody gorge
> to that mad
> paleface settler . . .
> back
> to the

folks
i call
brother and
sweetheart (24)

Again, there is a focus on space with this notion of a return to land ("the bloody gorge") as paired with a return to familial relations through language—it is *the speaker* who returns to those he "call[s] / brother and / sweetheart" (24). This first-person perspective offers a newfound power in the speaker's voice where he has a degree of agency over both his narrative and the words on the page. The first-person pronouns indicate a reclamation of the language lost in the Western novels' colonization of print literary space wherein this Indigenous voice rises out of the fragments that comprise the poem. Such reclamation is especially apparent when the speaker uses second-person pronouns in moments of confrontation: "black hair frontier / I hear your / dead heroes" (26). Here, the speaker confronts the land by personifying it. Of course, we are reminded of the references to violent "scalp[ing]" throughout the poem, with which Abel introduces a correlation between the Indigenous body and the violently colonized land (22). Moreover, while the second-person pronoun "your" certainly speaks to the frontier land, it also turns to the potentially white, settler reader in a provocative shift of address, and the speaker's confrontation, here, is twofold. On the one hand, "dead heroes" sardonically refers to those perpetually glorified by settlers throughout history for "shaping" the Americas about which Abel writes. But on the other hand, "dead heroes" refers to the settler Western novelists, similarly extolled by white settlers throughout history for shaping North American literature which Abel works to deconstruct. There is a clear parallel between the "authors" of North America's colonial violence, and those of the ninety-one Westerns. The latter interpretation is implied by the speaker's insistence that he "hear[s]" these dead heroes, which we can understand to mean there has been a transmission, perhaps through the literary works which Abel interrogates, of these "dead heroes[']" voices.

While the poem is somewhat pieced back together in the final sections, "revert[ing] to an easier legibility," the poem never returns to the traditional uniformity established in its early sections (Neilson 287). The words from the Western novels have occupied print literary space such that these settler authors, in a metaphorical *terra nullius*, have laid claim to the page with white, Western narratives about Turtle Island and its Indigenous peoples. But Abel's piecing back together in the final sections of the poem is not an indication that

poetry is somehow sutured, as Neilson imagines. Abel's decision not to return to the uniform couplets reminds readers that colonial tensions between Indigenous peoples and settlers remain unresolved. Abel restructures the language that dispossessed Indigenous peoples in print literary space, but he does so in a way that results in an uneasy fracturing. This poetic irresolution is part of what produces the perpetual "unsettling" that *Injun* evoked in me, mirroring, through poetry, the "persistent societal structure" of settler colonialism that we must linger within today. While Abel has the last word, so to speak, that word is haunted by its traumatic undoing throughout *Injun,* throughout colonial history and its persistence in the present.

Digital Space as *Terra Nullius*

Abel's poetics of deconstruction is also inherently digital insomuch as his decolonization of these novels exposes cyberspace as another space that can be contextualized by *terra nullius*. In "Terra Nullius, Terra Incognito" (2005), Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan scholar Jason E. Lewis explores the tendency to consider "cyberspace [as] another frontier undergoing colonization." Settler scholar David Gaertner further addresses this concept, noting that since the inception of Digital Humanities discourse, predominantly white "authors, scholars, and engineers have mobilized metaphors of colonization and terra nullius to conceptualize cyberspace" (Gaertner). Digital discourse is undoubtedly infused conceptually and linguistically with the discourse of inhabiting and occupying space: we build and own web*sites* with *domain* names, we refer to the Internet as a cyber*space*, the digital *world*, and an information super*highway*. Yet, while it has been common for settler scholars to think of cyberspace as *terra nullius*, it is imperative to consider the repercussions of such a metaphor. In "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," Lewis and Mohawk artist Skawennati Tricia Fragnito write, "if Aboriginal peoples learned one thing from contact, it is the danger of seeing any place as *terra nullius*, even cyberspace." As Lewis cautiously asks, if we think of cyberspace in terms of *terra nullius*, "and if we're concerned with how that colonization plays out, might we not do well to reflect on the historical course of colonization on this continent?" (Lewis). Drawing a parallel between actual and digital modes of settler colonization, Lewis and Skawennati expose the concept of digital *terra nullius* as one mobilized more by settler scholars and users, differentiating the Indigenous rejection of viewing "any place as *terra nullius*" (Lewis and Skawennati) and what Gaertner calls "the colonial drive to know . . . repackaged as open source"

that inflects "the realm of technology" (Gaertner). Abel engages with cyberspace similarly in *Injun,* and as he deconstructs the white settler narratives that have colonized print literary space via the ninety-one Western novels, he further resists this "colonial drive to know" through "open source." That is, if we consider cyberspace in this context of *terra nullius*, then in making these novels available in the "public domain," *Project Gutenberg* reinstates, through both literary and digital spaces, colonial narratives of inhabitance, ownership, violence, and territory. Their presence online is akin to settler scholar Joanna Hearne's description of "the digital . . . as a place of symbolic violence . . . a space where artifacts of settler imagination are simply rehearsed and (re)distributed" (17). However, many Indigenous scholars and artists work to combat this rehearsal of the settler imagination online by using digital technologies "as vehicles of resilience and cultural continuance" (Igloliorte et al. 9) as Abel does in *Injun*. In discussing *CyberPowWow04*, "a virtual gallery with digital . . . artworks . . . by . . . Aboriginal artists and writers" (Lewis and Skawennati), Lewis reflects on how cyberspace offers "the freedom" for Indigenous peoples "to define the territory as [they] see fit, a freedom that stands in stark contrast to the obstacles" faced by their ancestors (Lewis). While Abel uses print literary space to deconstruct settler narratives "as [he] see[s] fit," he also does so by use of cyberspace in a way that affords him more freedom and agency. According to Lewis, *CyberPowWow* promotes freedom of artistic expression in order to "ensure that there are no reservations in cyberspace." Inuk scholar Heather Igloliorte, Métis/German/Syrian scholar Julie Nagam, and settler scholar Carla Taunton continue this land-based metaphor online, quoting Métis/Cree scholar Cheryl L'Hirondelle's remark that Indigenous peoples' "connection to the land is what makes [them] Indigenous, and yet as [they] move forward into virtual domains [they] too are sneaking up and setting up camp—making this virtual and technologically mediated domain [their] own" (qtd. in Igloliorte et al. 7). Igloliorte, Nagam, and Taunton call "visual culture" "a colonizing tool that . . . represent[s] Indigenous peoples . . . as part of the past, static and primitive," but the same can be said of digital culture (9). For instance, *Project Gutenberg*'s open source reproduction of the ninety-one Western novels is a "colonizing tool" which redistributes white settler narratives that portray Indigenous peoples "as static and primitive," yet Abel deconstructs these narratives by working in the virtual domain and critically re-contextualizing the language of these narratives in resistance to the violent structure of settler-colonialism. Igloliorte et al. insist that Indigenous peoples can use new technologies

"for their own purposes of self-representation" (9), and if we think of Abel as responding to the "colonial drive to know" (Gaertner) in digital space and resisting the problematic association between cyberspace and *terra nullius*, then we can see how he reclaims and re-situates terms such as "injun" in order to prompt processes of "unsettling." Yet, the digital offers a more dynamic and boundless space than colonial North America and the more restrictive, print literary tradition in this respect. Abel uses technology as a means of self-representation and reclamation, using the digital's distinct tools for literary interrogation, artistic expression, and even self-conscious or "conceptual forms of [digital] appropriation" in order to "comment on the mechanisms of appropriation," as Abel says (qtd. in Whiteman); the digital can, according to Hearne, be Indigenized through "imaginative forms of claiming, a symbolic appropriation that accompanies tactical repurposing" (8), and it can be "reimagin[ed] . . . as a site of possibility" (9).

Jackson 2Bears' "remix theory" offers a more detailed account of these described acts of Indigenous reclamation and "symbolic appropriation," offering a productive framework with which to observe Abel's digital decolonization. 2Bears thinks of the remix

> as a new media *performance conjuration* . . . that becomes about the conjuration and exorcism of spectral narratives . . . that haunt our mediascape; a recombinant act that involves the slicing, cutting, and deconstruction of virulent colonial mythologies. (27, emphasis original)

Here, 2Bears parallels language and land by proposing a digital "mediascape" that requires an "exorcism of spectral *narratives*" (emphasis mine) and offers a digital space in which such narratives can be interrogated. His description of his work as a "conversation with spirits and spectres" that "takes place through electronic mediums and new media technology . . . wherein . . . ghosts of history are forced to (re)appear so that they might face up to their haunting of the living" (26) productively characterizes the affect of "unsettling" that I struggled with following Abel's performance of *Injun.* 2Bears' work exposes what Tuck and Rowe call the "narratives of conquest" which, although "mostly invisible within the settler consciousness," "remin[d] settlers that they belong, that their place in the social order has been hard-won through the taming of savages" and "confir[m] their status as the rightful owners of pastoral landscapes" (6). 2Bears achieves this in his digital remixing of the children's song "Ten Little Indians," which he describes as a reclamation through a "reappropriation of this music and the cultural stereotypes it evoked" (21). Expressing fear that his work might "perpetuat[e] these stereotypes" (21),

he expresses that he set out to "create artworks in which [he] could publicly re-perform these injustices, and [simultaneously] deconstruct . . . these . . . simulations of [his] peoples that had been sustained within . . . various media archives" (23) as an act of resistance.

Like 2Bears, Abel uses digital tools and technologies to commit what Hearne calls "a symbolic appropriation" as a means of self-consciously locating and deconstructing the acts of appropriation that are foundational to settler colonialism (8). Beyond remixing, one of the more particular ways in which Abel uses digital technology to deconstruct print and digital spaces is through data mining. In Digital Humanities discourse, data mining refers to the digital "extraction of information from a body of texts . . . in order to ask research questions," offering another metaphor for territorial excavation (Drucker). Data mining often includes the use of particular digital programs to "extract data from text according to certain parameters and deliver the data in useful file formats" (Gardiner and Musto 73). Of course, we must consider how data mining embodies colonial practices of land excavation in that to "mine" something is to engage directly with land and territory. The emphasis on extraction of raw data for the sake of "useful" delivery is reminiscent of colonial tendencies to mine raw resources from stolen land to actualize utilitarian productions and capitalist aims. Although Abel uses data mining practices to inaugurate his deconstruction of the Westerns, I contend that he does so in a self-consciously critical way that contributes to the conceptual forms of appropriation in *Injun* (Whiteman). Rather than participating in the "colonial drive to know" (Gaertner), Abel's mining uses cyberspace to redefine Indigenous identity. Hosted online, these Western novels occupy digital space in the public domain, and Abel's extraction of the word "injun" exposes this occupation while also mobilizing his symbolic appropriation of the word itself. Although he reuses the word throughout the poem, he does so after committing what 2Bears calls "a recombinant act" of "slicing, cutting, and deconstruction of virulent colonial mythologies" (27).

Abel's process included both the cutting of print pages and the digital cutting and pasting across documents following his CTRL-F search for the term "injun." More importantly, his data mining awards him a certain agency over the word where he reserves the right to use it, or not. In the "[Appendix]" of *Injun,* he includes the combination of every sentence across the ninety-one Westerns, with each instance of the word "injun" *omitted*. This excision symbolizes his confiscation of the word from both print and digital spaces, gesturing toward his own reuse of it in the long poem

which precedes. It is a visual manifestation of his data mining, where the word is not stolen but rather reclaimed, confiscated, corrected, troubled, and decolonized. If we return to the perception of print space as colonized *terra nullius*, then the word's absence also suggests that his repurposing of it accomplishes a rupturing of literary space on the page itself. This data mining exemplifies, as Hearne might say, a "reterritorializ[ing of] the digital as Indigenous space, engaging the ethics and politics of occupation across physical and virtual lands" (9).

While methodologically Abel's digital remixing shows through in his data mining, so too is it apparent in the poem's typography. In this context, the explosive typography demonstrates how digital technology allows Abel to destabilize traditional, Western reading methods. Abel suggests that *Injun* "is a non-linear book," explaining that "there are multiple reading pathways through the book" and that he can "imagine a reading process . . . in which the reader is asked to flip forward, flip back, and even invert the book while reading backwards" (qtd. in Whiteman). In Digital Humanities discourse, such nonlinearity exemplifies the hypertextual jumping common in digital reading methods. For instance, Alan Kirby describes "Internet reading" as reading that "accelerates and slows as interest flickers and dies, shifts sideways to follow links, loses its thread, picks up another . . . interrupted, redefined, displaced, recommenced, abandoned, fragmentary" (68). Such nonlinear reading is chaotic in comparison to the linear reading process familiar to the European tradition, but it is this chaotic, increasingly dispersed typography in Abel's work that is indicative of hypertextual, digital narrative strategy.

The multiple reading pathways throughout reflect the digital methodology Abel used to write the work. For example, in using CTRL-F to locate each instance of the word "injun" in the corpus of Westerns, Abel made a sort of hyperlink out of the word, utilizing it to link him to an array of different sentences and phrases across the novels. The mechanism of "injun" in this data-mining project is what makes possible the nonlinearity that Abel imagines. He further visually exemplifies this process in the "[Notes]" section of *Injun*, where he has listed and bolded various instances of words like "whitest," "frontier," "reserve," "silence," "discovery," "bordering," "territory," "land," "scalped," "redskins," and "country" (31-32, 36-38, 41-42, 45, 51-53). The bolding of these words highlights them like the sometimes blue-coloured hyperlinks that interconnect networked digital texts. In addition to emphasizing themes of erasure throughout the poem, even his

removal of "injun" in the "[Appendix]" highlights the ways in which the word has become a hyperlink to network and connect the language Abel used to craft the poem. Beyond opening up new meaning and proposing a more digital reading structure, this nonlinearity further renders the Western novels' original meanings flaccid in a way that fortifies Abel's decolonial reconstructions of the source text.

Oral Space

Abel uses digital technology to "remix" these colonial texts in digital space, but he also remixes digital *audio recordings* of himself reading the poem for a live audience, which illustrates how his reclamation of digital space transcends from the textual to the oral. His oral performances actualize these digital reading pathways by layering various lines from *Injun* in a way that disrupts the order and clarity of the reading, producing simultaneity as well as nonlinearity. The fact that Abel remixes the poem differently in each performance further indicates the ways in which digital technology allows him to vitalize these arbitrary digital pathways. When Abel manipulates the sound files until they begin to skip, lag, and cut-out, he offers his audience an aural experience of what it means for this language to be broken down. Abel indicates that, in his performances, he attempts "to re-present" the "multiple layers of meaning and text" and "to communicate how these layers came together during the process of writing and reading the book" (qtd. in Peters). The layers of meaning are certainly present in Abel's performance, but interestingly, his performance leaves textuality to the wayside and instead situates his work in an oral space wherein he delegates its sound and function. When Abel turns the lights off for a performance, he further eliminates this textuality so that the audience must focus only on the poem's orality, removed from the print and digital *textual* spaces of which it is born.

Abel's turn to the oral allows for him to actualize the work of resistance to settler-colonial power that he accomplishes conceptually in print literary and digital spaces, but more significantly, this orality constitutes an approach to resistance that uses Indigenous ways of storytelling and knowing. According to Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice,

> every time we privilege the literary, we run the risk of doing violence to the specific relational contexts of the oral. Reading can be a very isolated and isolating experience; sharing stories orally is done in the context of living, dynamic peoplehood—one reason why it's so significant to Indigenous communities, where so much knowledge is transmitted between living people, not mediated by objects like books. (25)

In crafting *Injun* through print literary space, Abel certainly engages the literary, but I argue that he does not "privilege" it and subsequently enact violence upon the decolonial subject matter. While *Injun* is a print literary text, its very genesis relies on Abel's resistance to the literary as that which has perpetuated settler narratives about and perspectives on Indigenous peoples and their histories. By performing *Injun* through digital recordings of his own voice, Abel actually relocates *Injun* from the Western textuality of these settler narratives to a more Indigenous method of storytelling. Of course, as digitally recorded, his performance is still "mediated by objects," to use Justice's words. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson similarly suggests that despite the fact that a performance of "a spoken word story" can "lif[t] the burden of colonialism by visioning new realities," "[w]hen mediated through print or recording devices," the relationship between storyteller and audience becomes "reduced," and the process loses "some of its transformative power" (qtd. in Justice 25-26). Despite its digital mediation, Abel's performance of *Injun* undoubtedly lays the groundwork of "lifting the burden of colonialism by visioning new realities." His performance maintains the transformative power of the relationship between storyteller and audience first because the recordings are poetic fragments *in Abel's voice*, as if to illustrate his agency over the colonial language that he dismantles with resistance. Second, from a digital technological perspective, his live sound mixing of his own voice illustrates a similar authority over the language in that he digitally (with his digits) determines the pathways and patterns of the colonial language *Injun* is derived of in real time.

Conclusion

Yet, if we think of his digitization of this orality as reducing the "transformative power" of *Injun*, to use Simpson's phrase, what, then, is *Injun*'s ultimate impact? Even if we agree that the digitization reduces its transformative power, this reduction might actually be indicative of the unresolved tensions at the close of the poem, and those that remain at the heart of settler-Indigenous relations today. Perhaps, through this reduction of transformative power, the necessary "unsettling" of certain audience members emerges and lingers. With this, the effectiveness of *Injun* lies in the fact that, during these performances, the writing process and one's reading of the text—what 2Bears would call the racist "spectres" "of the 'Indian'"—still haunt. Abel relates that his intention in his performances of

Injun "is not necessarily to produce discomfort," although "discomfort is a natural side effect," but rather that his "main intention is actually to attempt to re-present the spirit of the text" (qtd. in Peters). With this in mind, the digitization of orality allows for Abel to highlight the "spectres" within the textuality he engages, self-consciously halting transformation in favour of a call to unsettling. In other words, like 2Bears' "Ten Little Indians," Abel's *Injun* remains "a conversation with spirits and spectres, one that takes place through electronic . . . new media technologies . . . wherein these ghosts of history are forced to (re)appear so that they might face up to their haunting"—their unsettling—"of the living" (26).

Injun mobilizes this unsettling within the non-Indigenous reader, from Abel's discordant digital performance, to his data mining of uncomfortable language, to his explosive typography. Abel locates in print literary and digital spaces the structures of settler colonialism that have shaped and continue to inflect settler-Indigenous relations both within and outside of literature. While both spaces can be contextualized by metaphors of *terra nullius*, Abel decolonizes these spaces through an active resistance in language. Abel utilizes digital tools to reclaim the language that has been used to define and disenfranchise Indigenous peoples on the page, in meatspace, and in cyberspace. His ultimate turn toward a digitized oral performance reinstates Indigenous modes of storytelling and communicating, while also necessitating a lingering unsettling in non-Indigenous readers, summoning the spectres of settler colonialism that still haunt.

NOTE

1 Prior to engaging with Abel's *Injun,* I want to identify my own positionality as a white, settler scholar writing on *Injun* from what settler scholar Max Karpinski calls "a position of listening and learning" that "welcom[es] both conversation and correction" (66). I hope to read Abel's poem in a way that, according to settler scholar Sam McKegney, "encourages a healthy skepticism about claims made by non-[Indigenous] critics" and "privileg[es] . . . the work of [Indigenous] scholars" and "writers" in "a sincere attempt to produce the most effective criticism" (qtd. in Karpinski 66-67). Willie Ermine, focusing on the relationship between Indigenous law and the Canadian legal system, describes an "ethical space of engagement" as a productive "framework for a dialogue between human communities," "examining the diversity and position of Indigenous peoples and Western society" (193). It is my aim to write within a similar ethical space of engagement, with an awareness of the risks inherent in "reading [Indigenous] literature by way of Western literary theory," including "violat[ing] its integrity and perform[ing] a new act of colonization and conquest" (Blaeser 55). With this, I hope to enter into the dialogue with caution and an openness to contestation and amelioration.

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