

THE OCCUPATION OF SPACE

Creatively Transforming Indigenous Living Histories in Urban Spaces

JULIE NAGAM

Colonialism is often bound by the geopolitics of particular spaces, which can dictate settler and Indigenous relations. This brief essay stresses that the social production of colonial space is tied to Western tools of mapping and cartography, which are themselves enmeshed with Western concepts of time and space. It introduces and affirms Indigenous and alternative ways of thinking about space and time. Critically interpreting the tension between modern progress and alternative ways of knowing allows for the potential to rethink how Indigenous people were mapped and, as geographer Ken Brealey argues, were actually mapped out of their land.¹ I assert the potential of space in particular ideas of Native space that challenge the concepts behind traditional Western cartography. I am interested in grafting a new route, an alternative cartography grounded in creative, conceptual, and material understandings of geography, which will deal with place, space and location.² I am interested in re-mapping the land through selected artworks that are grounded in an imagination of space that could be space understood as perpetually under construction or stories-so-far³ and ongoing stories of place.⁴

In this paper I briefly reflect on the concealed geographies of the City of Markham in relation to the Markham Museum. A handful of artists in the exhibition, LandSlide: Possible Futures created artworks that were critical of settler ideologies in the occupation of space, and described the settler relationship in Canada and the founding ideologies that continue to affirm the settler's national stories that confirm their ownership and right to the land. This paradigm has been teased out more recently, but the earlier work of sociologist Sherene Razack still remains so pertinent. She argues that,

a white settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy. In the national mythologies of such societies, it is believed that white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land; Aboriginal people are presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated. European settlers thus become the original inhabitants and the group most entitled to the fruits of citizenship. A quintessential feature of white settler mythologies is, therefore, disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of the labour of people of color. In North America, it is still the case that European conquest and colonization are often denied, largely through the fantasy that North America was peacefully settled and not colonized.⁵

White settler mythologies are deeply implicated in the idea of terra nullius—land that is empty or considered to be uninhabited. These mythologies in the occupation of space continue to affirm the settler as the rightful owner of the new 'found' land. Settler ideologies continue to plague Indigenous people since it is these myths that are mobilized in settler cities to preserve and reproduce knowledge that reaffirms their ownership of the space. These stories become highly problematic for new immigrants and refugees because there is a total erasure of Canada's complicated histories. Therefore, I am drawn to convey the importance of concealed geographies in Canadian urban spaces such as the City of Markham and how it relates to issues of heritage within the context of my past and current research, where I have argued that the work of Indigenous artists is representative of their embodied practices and knowledge⁶ and it is their artwork and artistic practices that are intrinsically linked to their relationship to place. In other words, their artwork is an articulation of embodied knowledge expressed through their creative practice, which narrates Indigenous stories of place. In LandSlide there were a handful of art installations that creatively explored narratives that challenge and contradict myths of settlement. In my mind these artists are interested in transforming Indigenous stories of place and settler narratives into a kind of possibility, to become something beyond a colonial or imperial space.

I will begin by contemplating how concepts of heritage are mobilized to perpetuate the settler obsession to reaffirm a connection to the land. I want to complicate this notion of settlement by foregrounding specific artists and their ability to re-write and re-create a visual narrative rooted in or about Indigenous stories of place and settlement. Indigenous stories of place are firmly located within concepts of Native space, which can be understood as a network of relationships akin to those traditionally navigated over waterways and across land. Some examples of LandSlide artists that attempted to transform these dominant narrative are Jeff Thomas, Maria Hupfield, Phil Hoffman, Patricio Davila and Dave Colangelo, Jennie Suddick, and Terrance Houle. For example, Thomas' photographs confront settler constructs with whimsical self-representations of Indigenous people that are both stuck in the archaic past and are visibly part of the present and future image of the city. Thomas' act of reclamation is not about returning to a pre-contact ideal, or about documenting the everyday life of Indigenous folks in the city; instead, it is about creating a whimsical, fantastic, complicated image that is indisputably contemporary.⁷ Alternately, Hoffman's *Slaughterhouse* resurrects images of the past to drudge up his own narratives (Hoffman Meats) intertwined with the national archives of land activist Nahnehwequay, landscape painter Homer Watson, and the organic farmer Michael Schmidt, to beautifully articulate the nuances and layers between settler and Indigenous narratives.

My interest in Thomas, Hupfield, Hoffman, Davila and Colangelo, Suddick, and Houle is situated in their artwork's ability to challenge the grid system constructed by settler culture that has over-written Indigenous mappings and knowledge of the cityscape. Indigenous scholar Mishuana Goeman argues,

Understanding Native space as a set of connections from time immemorial thus counters the spatializing power of Western patriarchal law. Our ability to understand the connections between stories, place, landscape, clan systems, and Native Nations means the difference between loss and continuity. Stories in all their forms continue to bind these fragile, complex, and important relationships to each other.⁸

As I have claimed elsewhere, stories of place illuminate Indigenous histories and relations to the land in city spaces and, as Goeman argues, these stories and relations are fragile and complex, as they reflect the power relations between different Indigenous nations, settlers, and new immigrants, and this is the lived situation for people in Markham and southern Ontario in general. Indigenous stories are bound by particular histories of conquest, capitalism and colonialism. It is the connections between stories, place, landscape, and nations that create the conditions of Native space.⁹

I am interested in the intersectionality of creative, conceptual, and material geographies within art practices because geography is about knowledge and the ways we know, which is part of the powerful process of colonization, exploration, and conquest.¹⁰ Space is about place and each location has a particular set of histories and relationships. Geographer Katherine McKittrick¹¹ argues geography can be understood as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations, concealed geographies (non-white non-European mappings), as “rational spatial colonization and domination: the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and lands.”¹² The goal of this pithy essay is to explain the importance of bringing forth the buried or hidden Indigenous stories of place within spaces such as Markham. The conquest and control of Indigenous peoples and their land is part of the social production of space. Practices of subjugation are spatial acts¹³ and the way in which Indigenous people have been bound to colonialism and conquest confines their histories and relations to place. The object of interest here, then, is how Indigenous artists such as Thomas, Hupfield, Houle, and others, narrate Indigenous stories of place within the socially produced colonial space.¹⁴ Our everyday actions are part of the land that surrounds us; it is the physical and metaphysical space that impacts our relationship to it. McKittrick argues, “geography is not, however, secure and unwavering; we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is.”¹⁵ I propose that a new relationship can be forged through re-mapping, re-imagining, and re-thinking the material realities of concealed Indigenous stories of place.¹⁶

My own installation and those of Thomas, Hupfield, Hoffman, Davila and Colangelo, Suddick, and Houle attempted to create a dialogue in order to transform the narratives of history, heritage, culture, archeology and geography to imagine the possibility of space. Within these discourses, I draw on cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai’s ideas of the everyday cultural practices. In his book, *Modernity At Large*, he argues these everyday cultural practices are part of the possible transformation of

the imagination. Appadurai’s ideas of understanding the imagination as a social practice, he states,

space and time are themselves socialized and localized through complex and deliberate practices of performance, representation, and action. We have tended to call these practices *cosmological* or *ritual*—terms that by distracting us from their active, intentional, and productive character create the dubious impression of mechanical reproduction.¹⁷

These ideas of performing imagination come from the cultural understandings of stories of place that are not situated in the colonial and settler narrative. Each artist is talking up the idea that culture is not a substance but “a dimension of phenomena,” which attends to the situated and is an embodied difference.¹⁸ To define culture as only the differences that separate one group identity to another is a disservice to the multiplicity of people and identities. Instead, as Appadurai posits, “Culture 1, constituting a virtually open-ended archive of differences is consciously shaped into Culture 2, that subset of these differences that constitutes the diacritics of group identity.”¹⁹ He explains,

Culturalism, put simply, is identity politics mobilized at the level of the nation-state. And it is the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national and transnational politics. It is frequently associated with extraterritorial histories and memories, sometimes with refugee status and exile, and almost always with struggles for stronger recognition from existing nation-states or from various transnational bodies.²⁰

Many of the artists in the exhibition reflected on their own histories and memories to narrate their own visual stories. Specifically, when a nation such as Canada is bound to the settler identity or Indigenous people and new immigrants are confined by exclusive criteria, there is a loss of the multiplicity of knowledge from different groups of people. Culture is transformative and fluid, especially in dense urban populations such as Markham. Once these rigid definitions are removed we then can begin to understand the possibility of imagining culture and artistic practice as transformative.

Why does heritage matter in a just and sustainable world? The creative interventions that Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists articulated in LandSlide and other public art exhibitions are grounded in the geopolitical and settler colonial geographies of the spaces they work in. Issues of heritage have produced historical images of Indigenous people that have kept us in a frame that renders us frozen and voiceless; this tradition of visual representation has had considerable long-term effects. Indigenous art historian Richard Hill articulates the devastating implications for Aboriginal people in this context, arguing that the colonial narrative has confined Aboriginal people to the dichotomies of civilized versus savage, heathen versus Christian, and nature versus culture.²¹ In this exhibition we can see the work of Jennie

Suddick and Terrance Houle, both playing with memory, loss, and land. Houle's dark and ghostly installation *There's Things That Even a Drunk Will Never Forget*, catapults us back into the time of the mid-1800s where he exposes the audience to the shady side of the gang activities such as adultery, betrayal, and murder. In this work, Houle demonstrates that the complex relationship of the civilized and the savage is not fixed because settlers can take up these spaces and complicate these notions.

Many of the artists in LandlSlide engaged with the urban environment and the handful of artists here discussed were simultaneously able to challenge the settler narrative, allowing the participants or viewers of the exhibition to acknowledge geopolitics and historical colonial conditions. Issues of heritage become problematic when we are situated in museums and institutions that do not ask or demand the audience to become aware of the politics of existing settler ideologies. An example of these ideologies is the settler colony's recurring narrative that they are rightful proprietors of the supposedly new found land. This narrative is foundational in the construction of urban spaces such as Markham and it plays a pivotal role in the recorded history of the city. In the Markham Museum the reconstructed buildings represent the rationale behind the invasion and destruction of the complex Indigenous societies of the Americas. The lack of Indigenous bodies in these kinds of spaces erases the Indigenous peoples' connection to the land for thousands of years. When Indigenous bodies and knowledges are "seen," the master narrative is challenged and settler ideologies are ruptured. When these bodies are "out of sight" these stories remain concealed, which have "real and discursive socio-spatial process of evidence struggles—over soil, the body, theory, history, and saying and expressing a sense of place."²² My installation, *singing our bones home*, made reference to the archeological site that contained the buried bodies in the ossuary. These bones stain the soil with memories, histories, and stories for Indigenous people. At the same time they exist to teach the settler of the outstanding connection to place and land for Indigenous people. To code these bodies as part of the present and the future allows for real and imagined geographies that (re)create a spatial terrain that maps Indigenous bodies into the cityscape.

Museums such as Markham's contain artifacts and personal belongings. These artifacts carry and hold sacred memories and knowledge and carry with them a living history. However, their significance seems lost under their current presentation. From an Indigenous perspective, most artifacts are considered to be alive and need to be cared for by their home communities, not in the traditional archival sense but in an embodied practice where they can continue to tell their stories and pass along their knowledge. This is demonstrated in Hupfield's work, where she carefully re-creates the artifacts and strategically places them into the archival window. She is giving life to new artifacts and at the same time reaffirming an Indigenous presence into the archive.

When settler ideologies are perpetuated there is a loss of Indigenous stories of place, which destroys any connection to the land that new immigrants and refugees could experience. If we imagine the space through different or multiple historical narratives, we can break open a place for a more nuanced view of the relationship to the geo-politics of the land in the occupation of space. With an understanding of the his-

tory of conquest, colonialism, and capitalism, a person can open their mind to different possibilities of space and place. Otherwise, entrenched in the dominant narrative, an individual can only witness what Fanon argues is the divide between colonizers and colonized.²³ Once the histories of Indigenous people are erased, the only memory left is the imperial view of discovery and ownership. This memory underlies the current political climate in Canada, perpetuating the colonial hold on the landscape. Many of the artists in the show LandlSlide: Possible Futures are attempting to reflect this complex colonial relationship, asking the viewer to contemplate how these interpretations of historical narratives impact the relationship between Indigenous, settlers and new immigrants and it is this engagement that will continue to radically rupture the settler narrative and provide a promise to a just and sustainable future.

NOTES

- 1 Ken G. Brealey, "Mapping Them 'Out': Euro-Canadian Cartography and the Appropriation of the Nuxalk and Ts'Ilhqot'In First Nations's Territories, 1793–1916," *The Canadian Geographer* 39.2 (1995).
- 2 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- 3 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).
- 4 Julie Nagam, "Mapping Stories of Place: An Alternative Cartography Through the Visual Narrative of Jeff Thomas," in *Diverse Spaces: Examining Identity, Heritage and Community within Canadian Public Culture*, ed. Susan Ashley (New York: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013); Julie Nagam, "(Re)Mapping the Colonized Body: The Creative Interventions of Rebecca Belmore in the Cityscape," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35.4 (2013): 147–166.
- 5 Sherene Razack, *Race, Space and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 1–2.
- 6 Nagam, "Mapping Stories"; Nagam, "(Re)Mapping"
- 7 Nagam, "(Re)Mapping"
- 8 Mishuana Goema, "(Re)Mapping Indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature," *American Quarterly* 6.2 (2008): 300.
- 9 Nagam, "(Re)Mapping"
- 10 McKittrick, 61.
- 11 Ibid., xii.
- 12 Ibid., x.
- 13 Ibid., x.
- 14 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1974).
- 15 Ibid., xi.
- 16 Nagam, "Mapping Stories"; Nagam, "(Re)Mapping"
- 17 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 180.
- 18 Ibid., 13.
- 19 Ibid., 14.
- 20 Ibid., 15.
- 21 Richard William Hill, "After Authenticity: a Post-Mortem on the Racialized Indian Body," in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*, ed. Kathleen Ash-Milby (New York: New York Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 99.
- 22 McKittrick, 121.
- 23 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).