

Stories of Place, Location, and Knowledge
Criticism Thesis

by

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A criticism thesis presented to the OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in
Criticism and Curatorial Practice

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 2011

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Abstract

Stories of Place, Location, and Knowledge

Master of Fine Art, 2011

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This thesis undertakes an interpretation of two exhibitions of Aboriginal art, *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)*, both of which took place at Urban Shaman Gallery: Contemporary Aboriginal Art in Winnipeg during 2010. *Writing Home*, curated by Faye Heavysield, is a solo exhibition of Bonnie Devine's visual representations depicting conversations between people and place at Serpent River First Nation. I argue that Devine's works position the reserve as a place that is animated by personal narratives and inscribed by history and memory in the land. *RESERVE(d)* is a collaborative exhibition by Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet. Through the installation of large format photography, sculptural works on Plexiglas, video projections, and ambient audio, *RESERVE(d)* re-creates a physical place—the reserve—in the context of another physical place—the gallery. I argue that Burton and Monnet's installation serves to collapse linear and cartographic conceptions of time and location into speculative sites for imagining the mechanisms of generational and place-based Indigenous knowledge.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank the artists whose work I discuss in this thesis: Bonnie Devine, Kevin Lee Burton, and Caroline Monnet. It has been a privilege to write about their work and to spend time with them over the past year. I wish to thank these individuals for generosity and collaboration in the development of my research. Thanks also to Amber-Dawn Bear Robe, Director/Curator at Urban Shaman Gallery: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, for taking me on as an intern over the summer 2010 during which this thesis exploration first began.

This thesis would not have been possible if not for the generous support and encouragement of my kind and generous advisory committee. For her keen interest and unwavering dedication to the development and editing of my thesis, I would like to thank my primary advisor Dr. Dot Tuer. I would also like to thank my secondary advisors, Julie Nagam and Andy Patton, for their supportive enthusiasm throughout this process. Thank you also to Caroline Langill and Dana Claxton for their considerate presence and questioning during the oral examination of this thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of my colleague Lisa Myers.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge my parents for seeing me through countless challenges and for providing me with the motivation needed to complete this thesis. To my father, Vern, and my mother, Rhonda, for showing me that when you love your work, you never have to work a day in your life. Thank you both for teaching me from an early age that I can accomplish anything that I put my mind to.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

for my grandmothers, Rose Marie Morrisett and Nancy Redekopp

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Chapter One

Framing A Critical Aboriginal Art History

I was recently at a family dinner in Winnipeg when my mother and father's friend Ron Cook came to visit from Thompson, Manitoba, where he currently works developing Cree language programs in northern schools. During dinner and then later over tea, I noticed that while Ron speaks Cree and English fluently, he always speaks with great care in both languages, slowly and intentionally shaping his words. He explained that it takes time to try to translate a thought from Cree into English, and vice versa; during this process of translation, something always changes. His explanation raises the question of whether there is more at stake in his intentionality than the shaping of words: whether his process of translation also reflects a world view that is intrinsically attached to language. If this is true, then the sphere of language is bounded by a series of ideological investments, which suggests that rather than meaning being lost in translation, it is rooted in different ways of knowing similar or same experiences.

During dinner that evening, I listened as Ron and my father discussed, at length, the meaning of the word *respect*. Punctuated by other conversations and stories, Ron explained that respect meant taking care of the ones that you love, later adding that it meant protecting them too. This way of thinking about respect as linked to experience provides a culturally specific context for the definition proposed by my Oxford English Dictionary, which defines respect as "a feeling of deep admiration for someone elicited by their qualities or achievements." In this thesis, I undertake an interpretation of two

exhibitions by Aboriginal artists, *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)*, in which the central themes of land and place are similarly linked to culturally specific experiences.¹

Writing Home and *RESERVE(d)* both took place at Urban Shaman Gallery: Contemporary Aboriginal Art in Winnipeg during 2010.² *Writing Home*, curated by Faye Heavyshield, is a solo exhibition of Bonnie Devine's artworks which provides visual representations to illustrate conversations between people and place—between the artist, her peers, her loved ones, and the physical location of Serpent River First Nation.³ Devine's processes of translation and narration in the act of “writing home” provide significant insight into the potential for locating the reserve as a place animated by subjective stories that inscribe specific histories and memories in the land.

RESERVE(d) is a collaborative exhibition by Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet. Through the installation of large format photography, sculptural works on Plexiglas, video projections, and ambient audio, *RESERVE(d)* raises questions concerning the reality of life on the reserve and its re-presentation. As an installation-based exhibition, *RESERVE(d)* re-creates a physical place—the reserve—in the context of another physical

¹ While there are many different words used to indicate Aboriginal, including Native, Indian, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, I have chosen to use the term Aboriginal to refer to the artists whose work I have researched in this thesis. By using the term Aboriginal I intend to reflect the current Canadian context for the above terms, and by capitalizing the term Aboriginal, I respectfully situate these artists as members of the Aboriginal people of Canada.

² Throughout this thesis I will refer to Urban Shaman Gallery: Contemporary Aboriginal Art as Urban Shaman.

³ *Writing Home* was first mounted at Gallery Connexion in Fredericton, New Brunswick from February 2nd to March 21st, 2008. The exhibition later travelled to Urban Shaman in Winnipeg, Manitoba from February 12th to March 27th, 2010. This paper reflects my understanding of the exhibition based on the context of my visit to Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art in early 2010.

place—the gallery. In so doing, it collapses linear and cartographic conceptions of time and location into speculative sites for imagining the mechanisms of generational and place-based knowledge specific to Aboriginal experience, history, and memory.

My thesis research began during an internship position I held at Urban Shaman in the summer of 2010. Urban Shaman’s mandate focuses on “the promotion, dissemination and expansion of discourse relating to contemporary Aboriginal art on a local, national and international level.”⁴ Urban Shaman represents a unique and challenging facet of artist-run-centres, both locally within the city of Winnipeg, and nationally as one of only a small handful of Aboriginal art galleries in Canada. As a venue for Aboriginal art, Urban Shaman functions as a space for critical exchange in the presentation of emerging and established artist-practices through a programming model based on the submission of

⁴ Urban Shaman’s mandate reads as follows:

“Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art is a nationally recognized leader in Aboriginal arts programming and one of the foremost venues and voices for Aboriginal art in Canada. Our focus on developing new programming and new ways of presenting it, have resulted in increased exposure and the expansion of our activities. Urban Shaman is dedicated to the Aboriginal arts community and arts community at large. Our mandate is the promotion, dissemination and expansion of discourse relating to contemporary Aboriginal art on a local, national and international level.

We are committed to serving the needs of emerging, mid-career, and established Aboriginal artists through exhibitions and associated programming, workshops, residencies and curatorial initiatives.

We are committed to facilitating artistic production, education, and the appreciation of contemporary art as an important and empowering tool for Aboriginal peoples.

We are dedicated to meeting the needs of artists by providing a vehicle for artistic expression in all disciplines and at all levels by taking a leadership role in the cultivation of Indigenous art.”

Urban Shaman Gallery: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, gallery website, *Mandate*, <http://www.urbanshaman.org>.

artist and curator proposals. Exhibitions are evaluated by “artistic merit and relevance to the broader understanding of contemporary Aboriginal art” by a committee comprised of the Director, board members, guest artists, community representatives, and curators.⁵ In this way, Urban Shaman serves emerging and established Aboriginal artists through producer driven processes which are framed by Urban Shaman’s commitment and their understanding of contemporary Aboriginal art. As such, Urban Shaman’s programming responds to the changing needs of Aboriginal artists as a culturally identified demographic through processes of widely solicited proposals that are then adjudicated by way of peer-review. Within this particular programming process, Urban Shaman helps to shape contemporary Aboriginal art discourse in relation to a broader exhibition Aboriginal art history.



figure 1. Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art, logo designed by Sébastien Aubin.

⁵ Urban Shaman Gallery: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, gallery website, *Submissions*, <http://www.urbanshaman.org>.

In the context of the role of Urban Shaman in shaping Aboriginal art discourse, Bruce Ferguson argues in his essay, “Exhibition Rhetorics,” that:

[e]xhibitions are publicly sanctioned representations of identity, principally, but not exclusively, of the institutions which present them. They are narratives which use art objects as elements in institutionalized stories that are promoted to an audience. Exhibitions act as the visible encounter with a public which receives and acknowledges their import and projected status as important signs of important signs. The “voices” heard within exhibitions – the number and kind of dead artists, the number and kind of women, the kind and number of media etc. – constitute a highly observable politics, with representations as their currency and their measure of equality in a demographic process.⁶

By identifying the processes of authorship in exhibition representation, Ferguson points to the exhibition as a constructed environment. His essay interrogates this issue of authorship, especially as it pertains to the quieter “voices” by positing:

Who speaks TO and FOR WHOM and UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS as well as WHERE and WHEN the particular utterance occurs are significant questions that can be asked of any communications performance.... By asking TO WHOM and FOR WHOM we can establish the administrative nature of the relationship: whether it is commercial or casual, individually professional or institutionally mediated, intimate or formal, a teacher to a student, a slave to a master, and so on. In other words how is this particular

⁶ Bruce Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics, Material speech and utter sense,” in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 175-176.

voice filtered and mediated by its connections to other people, other institutions, other kinships and networks of influence?⁷

Following upon Ferguson's arguments, Urban Shaman can be understood as both a vehicle for critical exchange and as a site of agency for Aboriginal artists. In this context, the programming of both *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* in the same year point to pertinence of land and place in Aboriginal art.⁸

When I first started working at Urban Shaman in May, 2010 the gallery was mid-way through its presentation of *RESERVE(d)*. It was a great privilege to speak with gallery visitors about the exhibition, and to spend time within the experiential environment that Burton and Monnet had created to reflect, in their own words, the vibrancy of First Nations Reservations, both in the past and present. Prior to beginning my internship, I had viewed Bonnie Devine's exhibition *Writing Home* at Urban Shaman in February 2010. Devine's sculptural and sound works, which were conceived of and realized in part at Serpent River First Nation Reservation in Northern Ontario, embody the significance of personal narratives for Devine in relation to reserve land that has been contaminated by uranium resource extraction. Devine's process of writing, gathering physical impressions from the rock face at the river that runs from Elliot Lake downstream

⁷ Ibid., 183-184.

⁸ Both *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* were programmed at Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art during 2010 and will form the primary site for investigation in this thesis. Previous to being exhibited at Urban Shaman, *Writing Home* was first displayed at Gallery Connexion in Fredericton, New Brunswick in 2008. *RESERVE(d)* was designed specifically for the Main Gallery space at Urban Shaman where it was first exhibited, and the exhibition continues to travel in digitally adapted form through collaborative involvement with the National Film Board of Canada (in production).

through the reserve, and her casting of the rock, each, in their own particular way, exemplify communications with place and raise issues about place. Through the viewing of these two exhibitions within a period of eight months, it became clear to me that, despite their different conceptual approaches, the exhibitions shared significant narratives of land and place told through personal history, memory, and experiential knowledge.

The subsequent research generated by my viewing of these exhibitions has encompassed scholarly inquiry as well as conversations with the artists and travel to Serpent River. During what became a two-fold process, I listened to the concerns of the artists whom I researched and sought to represent these concerns through my own separate, yet related, responses to and reflections on the exhibitions. As I engaged with, and continue to engage with, descriptions and concepts of Aboriginal art by Aboriginal artists, curators, and thinkers in relation to Western knowledge frameworks, colliding worldviews surfaced in my struggles to represent *and* respect the artists and artworks that I write about in this thesis. I have chosen to articulate, and not to reconcile, this collision of worldviews. By privileging personal testimony and critical self-introspection specific to Aboriginal conceptions of land and place, I record and theorize the issues that are raised when considering how *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* challenge established Western epistemologies through each artists' personal testimony.

In her introduction to her essay, "Interventions in Digital Territories: Narratives in Native New Media," curator Candice Hopkins describes a book by Thomas King which begins with a creation story. In telling this story King recalls that some elements remain the

same, and others—such as intonation and phrasing—shift with each retelling.⁹ In turn, Hopkins notes in her essay that the contradictions that emerge from a story being both static and dynamic reveal how an Indigenous¹⁰ worldview is fluid and not fixed:

[R]eading across these contradictions is generative as it reveals a worldview: one in which truth is considered separate from fact, where originality coexists within the copy, where change is an inherent part of tradition.¹¹

Similar to how Ron Cook’s explication of respect alerted me to how language is framed by experience, Hopkins’ observation that “reading across [the] contradictions” of storytelling reveals how an Indigenous worldview is always in the process of formation, which has been an integral component of this thesis.

In this context, it is important to note that the history of Aboriginal art in Canada has shifted in recent years from a largely Western and anthropological-based perspective, which ascribes to Indigenous peoples a static worldview, to one that is now written by an increasing number of Aboriginal artists, writers, curators, and historians to demonstrate how Western interpretations of Aboriginal art reflect a colonial bias. In his 1991 catalogue essay for the exhibition *Visions of Power*, Alfred Young Man writes:

Prior to 1978, the Contemporary Native Art movement was just beginning to gain ground in an art world that had written off North American Indian

⁹ Candice Hopkins, “Interventions in Digital Territories: Narrative in Native New Media,” in *Transference, Tradition, Technology*, eds. Dana Claxton, Steven Loft, Melanie Townsend (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2005), 128.

¹⁰ In this thesis I will be primarily using the term Aboriginal (see note 1, page 1), however I will also use the term Indigenous when referring to issues and concepts that have international relevance. This term is also capitalized to ensure a respectful understanding of Indigenous peoples who identify themselves as the first inhabitants of their territory.

¹¹ Hopkins, “Interventions in Digital Territories: Narrative in Native New Media,” 128.

history, cultures, and societies as “on their way out,” a vanishing race, in spite of the fact that Native artists in the preceding 100 years had been producing art in the underground fashion whenever and wherever they found the occasion to do so.... Virtually all critical analysis of Native art during this era assumed that Native artists were culturally and intellectually inferior, upward bound from some pre-civilized, even stone-age state of existence, not yet evolved into that “superior” state-of-mind practically everyone in the Western world considered to be the crown of creation.... Native artists continued to produce through more than a century of colonial oppression which took the form of anti-Indian legislation, the pass system, broken treaties, institutionalized racism, bureaucratic ineptitude, theft of land, resources, artworks, and bogus colonial education about their own history.¹²

As Young Man also points out:

Not unexpectedly, anthropologists have no intention of “abandoning the safari” and simply create new paradigms to categorize and catalogue whatever arises, and the battle over the image of the Native in Native art thus continues unabated.¹³

As a result, the emergence of a new paradigm of art history in which Aboriginal artists are considered part of, and not separate from, contemporary art production has been actively generated by Aboriginal artists themselves.

The emergence of this new paradigm was marked by two important exhibitions that took place in 1992: *Land, Spirit, Power* at the National Gallery of Canada and *Indigena* at the

¹² Alfred Youngman, “Towards a Political History of Native Art,” in *Visions of Power*, (Toronto: The Earth Spirit Festival, 1991), 25-26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

Canadian Museum of Civilization.¹⁴ While both exhibitions served as fundamental catalysts for asserting an Aboriginal voice in Canadian art history, *Land, Spirit, Power* is most relevant to this thesis, in that it contributed to formative discourses concerning the concepts of land and place in Aboriginal art.¹⁵ In contextualizing the exhibition, curators Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend Gault state:

Modern society has, to a large extent, lost the sense of the sacred. This may be nowhere more evident than in its contradictory, contemporary attitudes to the land. The “spirit of a place,” or the “spirit of the land,” is often spoken about lightly. Place is in the background of our daily activities, shaping them without attracting our attention...As the ongoing struggle of the aboriginal people of North America for their ancestral lands reveals, the land has social meanings that are profoundly spiritual and intensely political in their implications.¹⁶

The curatorial premise of *Land, Spirit, Power*, which identifies how cultural beliefs, the sacred, and daily activities are inextricable from ancestral land, has influenced subsequent exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art. However, there is no singular perspective on *what* place expresses an Aboriginal worldview. For example, Marcia Crosby’s 1996 curated exhibition *Nations in Urban Landscapes*, which took place at the

¹⁴ Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, “Introduction,” in *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, eds. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992), 11-23.

The year 1992 marks the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of the Americas. McMaster and Martin address how *Indigena* responds to this historical date in time in their “Introduction.”

¹⁵ In this short introductory chapter, I offer select examples of exhibitions and issues in museum studies since 1992. For further information please see Appendix A: A Brief History of Exhibitions and their Catalogues.

¹⁶ Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “Land, Spirit, Power,” in *Land, Spirit, Power* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 12.

Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, British Columbia, situated Aboriginal artists Faye Heavy Shield, Shelley Niro, and Eric Robertson within the space of the city rather than in relation to ancestral land. Crosby states:

It must also be said that the concerns of those people who have been historically displaced from traditional lands, sometimes for generations, and who now live in diverse and hybrid communities, are not necessarily the concerns being represented by First Nations leaders. Many of these displaced people may have no desire to physically return to a “home” they no longer know, or have never known. For others, exploring the connection and intersection of their “roots” with the hybridity of their lives is integral to their sense of cultural identity. While it is true that many non-status and/or urban aboriginal people have ambiguous relationships with the ancestral lands, many are, never-the-less, very supportive of aboriginal self-government. One thing is certain, all Indians *do not* have a “relationship” with the land, nor have access to it.¹⁷

An important distinction also needs to be made between the diversity of perspectives concerning the significance of land for Aboriginal peoples and the homogenizing function of landscape in Western art history. In her curatorial essay for contemporary artist Rebecca Belmore’s artwork *Wana-na-wang-ong*, curator and writer Lee-Ann Martin cites Belmore as stating that “This [*Wana-na-wang-ong*] is not about landscape, it’s about land.”¹⁸ For Aboriginal scholars and artists, the difference between land and

¹⁷ Marcia Crosby, “Lines, Lineage, and Lies or Borders, Boundaries, and Bullshit,” in *Nations in Urban Landscapes: Faye HeavyShield, Shelley Niro, Eric Robertson* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1998), 26-27.

¹⁸ Lee-Ann Martin, “The Language of Place,” in *Wana-na-wang-ong: Rebecca Belmore*, (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1993), no page numbers (parenthetical context added by the author).

landscape (what is seen, or perceived), involves cultural understandings of land as place, and of landscape as *viewed* place. As cultural scholar Mishuana Goeman writes:

Indigenous peoples make place by relating both personal and communal experiences and histories to certain locations and landscapes – maintaining these spatial relationships is one of the most important components of identity.¹⁹

In this thesis, I consider the ways that Devine, Burton, and Monnet share their experiences of land as place. In both exhibitions, place is fundamentally about the reserve. In *Writing Home*, Devine worked in close communication with the Serpent River First Nation, Ontario; in *RESERVE(d)* Burton and Monnet reference the reserves God's Lake Narrows, Manitoba and Kitigan Zibi, Quebec. While I consider the relationship between these two exhibitions, I have chosen to draw from the reserves' historical context only insofar as it accounts for the artist's interpretation of that place. In this sense, I consider the term *reserve* as a concept relating to moments of experience within a given territory.

To mediate the artists' interpretation of place in both *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)*, I work first from conversations or texts produced by Bonnie Devine, Kevin Lee Burton, and Caroline Monnet. I also draw from various exhibition catalogues written by Aboriginal artists and scholars since 1992. In so doing, I align myself with Jimmie Durham's sentiment that the catalogue, unlike many other forms of texts, has a unique

¹⁹ Mishuana Goeman, "From Place to Territories and Back Again: Centering Storied Land in the discussion of Indigenous Nation-building," in *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* (Brisbane: Indigenous Studies Research Network QUT, 2008), 1:24.

capacity to generate knowledge about contemporary art: “[o]nly catalogues which can now stand on their own are useful; everything else must be, at best, academic artefacts.”²⁰ Durham privileges the catalogue because it documents art practice in the making and stands in opposition to texts that have historically been written in such a way to demote Aboriginal artistic production.²¹ With their roots in anthropological methods or Western perceptions of civilization, such texts serve to promote questionable lines of thought often accompanied by their visible ideological influences.

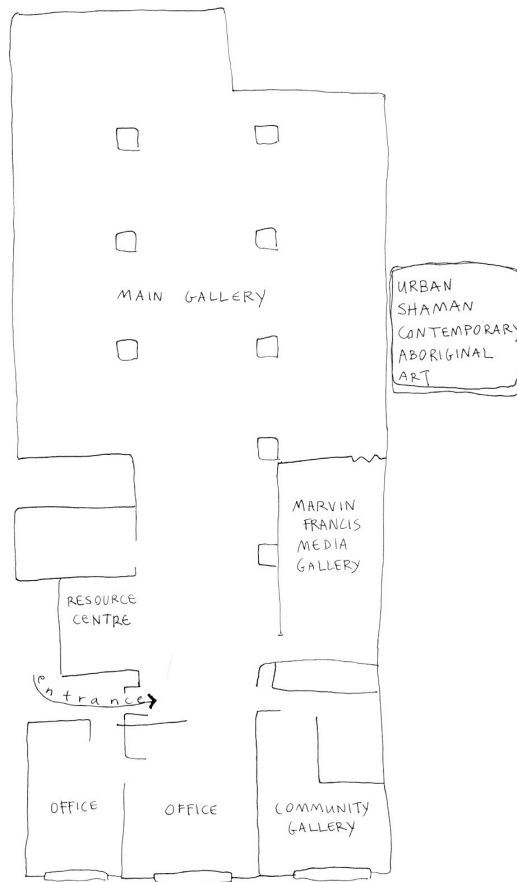


figure 2. “Urban Shaman Gallery: Contemporary Aboriginal Art.” drawing by the author.

²⁰ Jimmie Durham quoted in Alfred Young Man, “Towards a Political History of Native Art,” in *Visions of Power* (Toronto: The Earth Spirit Festival, 1991), 29.

²¹ Young Man, “Towards a Political History of Native Art,” 25-26.

In this respect, I am particularly interested in how catalogues act as significant markers of contemporary issues attached to moments in Aboriginal art history as they take place within institutions. Because catalogues usually coincide with the exhibition, they are published within short time frames and, as such, they serve as an ideal vehicle for documenting the immediacy of the art works' significance. Catalogue essays, while sometimes considered the lowest forum for art writing,²² have also enabled in-house and guest curators, and contributors to assert Aboriginal voices and concerns. In recent years, the catalogue has provided artists with the opportunity to write about their own practices. Exhibition catalogues are often the result of transitory collaborations between curators, artists, writers, and institutions, which affords the chance to explore the more experimental and subjective qualities of writing about art. By drawing from a selection of catalogue texts that accompany recent exhibitions of Aboriginal Art since 1992, I privilege Aboriginal art as an internally developing field of study and the catalogue essay as a historical record.

One key aspect of exhibition catalogue writing in recent years has been the negotiation of nuance and difference within a heterogeneous community of Aboriginal artists and writers. Aboriginal people, today, now live anywhere between the reserve and the city, and Aboriginal identity has become far more complex than simple definitions that the

²² "The Catalogue is Out!" *Are Curators Unprofessional?* (panel discussion, Banff Centre, Banff, AB, November 14, 2010).

This reference refers to a panel presentation and discussion titled "The Catalogue is Out!" at the Banff Centre's recent conference *Are Curators Unprofessional?*, in which speakers Bruce Ferguson, Matthew Higgs, Phillip Monk, Monika Szewczyk and Michael Turner discussed the function of the catalogue in relation to criticism, curatorial writing, and art history while questioning its future as a viable method of publishing.

terms First Nations, Métis, and Inuit can provide. There is a lot of discussion about contemporary and historical Aboriginal art that occurs from the position of *us* and *we*, with an imagined, and sometimes stated, *them* to stand in opposition to. *We* have come through an endless series of struggles to have *our* artistic practices recognized. But *we* are not all First Nations, and even those who are may or may not have status. The Métis and the Inuit have a different, albeit a related, history to that of other Aboriginal peoples. Much of this relates directly to governmentally legislated terms, which have in their history a sordid past relating to issues of authenticity. To neglect these differences, and the inheritances of these terms would be remiss. *We* can choose to appreciate the evolving understanding of who *we* are as Aboriginal people and the consequences that this has for the future of critical Aboriginal art and art writing. That is, our differences can be appreciated in the context of *our* changing sense of self in culture. To address these concerns I have chosen to adopt the framework of the curatorial essay in discussing *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* separately in Chapters Two and Three.

Issues of terminology and representation within contemporary Aboriginal art are also part of a larger history of colonialism. In his 2006 lecture at The Arctic Centre in Rovaniemi, Finland, art scholar and writer Richard W. Hill discussed the term Indian as opposed to the term Aboriginal to show how the images and mythologies of a cultural Other has “both contemporary relevance and implications for the possibility of Indigenous agency”²³ that extends beyond national borders. On the formation of cultural nationalism,

²³ Richard W. Hill, “Representations and Problems for Indigenous North American Agency,” in *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism Act 4: Finnish Sapmi*, June 16-July 9 (2006): 1. <http://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org/files/index.htm>.

Hill considers a framework of difference between the authority of colonizers (as civilized) and the inferiority of colonized subjects (as the primitive).²⁴ He argues that civilization as a colonial imperative cannot end as long as difference remains integral in the maintenance of an established colonial authority and subsequently of a colonized inferiority. He further states that like Homi Bhabha's ideas around alterity, Indigenous realities continue to operate under the effects of colonization, insofar as historical injustices are transmitted to future generations. Hill points to how the colonial past of Residential Schools in Canada has affected Aboriginal peoples through restricting or severing access to traditional cultural knowledge. People move forward, but they do so changed by the pasts that they carry with them. The fact remains that there is nothing "post" about colonialism in Canada and that Aboriginal people face recurrences of colonization in contemporary guise.

In his article "On Romanticism," Paul Chaat Smith identifies instances of this recurring colonization in the persistence of mythologies of the Indian inherited by Western Culture. Chaat Smith describes a famous piece of Indian oratory, "Brother Eagle, Sister Sky," that was written by a Southern Baptist, and later published by a University of Texas professor. He also recounts the stories of Geronimo, who infamously drove a Cadillac donning complete regalia in 1905.²⁵ Perhaps this is something like what Hill is talking about when he states that, "these discourses [tropes of the Indian's relationship with nature] have functioned against our agency in the mainstream, but also how they have, in some

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁵ Paul Chaat Smith, "On Romanticism," in *Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 13-21 (parenthetical context supplied by the author).

instances, been internalized in indigenous communities, particularly around certain forms of cultural nationalism.”²⁶ These examples illustrate how we as Aboriginal people have lost the power to define ourselves, and instead we become defined by others.

In considering the issues of agency raised by Hill and Chaat Smith, who point to how colonialism results in a loss of power and a loss of ability to define a sense of self, I want to suggest that the role of Aboriginal artists in defining a sense of self is essential to negotiating the terms of contemporary Aboriginal art. Acknowledging the artist’s subjectivity and voice delimits the power of mainstream interpretations by privileging and promoting Aboriginal perspectives. The very presence of an Aboriginal artist-run-centre begs the question: what does *Aboriginal* mean in terms of artistic practice, and under whose terms does this marker of identity take form? A critical dialogue of contemporary Aboriginal art must be then, both a historically reflexive project as well as an immediate inquiry that demands continued redefinition of often disparate and potentially conflicting realities. For instance, as an adjective, *contemporary* might mean the subjective realities of mixed race individuals or, of the historical changes that now present Aboriginal people in increasingly urbanized settings. Perhaps most obviously *contemporary* might also suggest the emergence of generationally specific differences within Aboriginal art practices that reflect not simply binaries of elder vs. youth but possibly most predominantly between established and emerging artists whose priorities naturally reflect their own changing needs in various social spaces. Agency then,

²⁶ Richard W. Hill. abstract for presentation paper “Representations and Problems for Indigenous North American Agency,” in *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism Act 4: Finnish Sapmi*, June 16-July 9 (2006): no page number. <http://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org/files/index.htm>.

becomes an all-encompassing concept, which recognizes subjective experiences of Aboriginal people in ways that are meaningful to them.

The three artists involved in *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* each work from their own subjective knowledge of self in relation to their respective pasts. These exhibitions situate these artists' subject positions in place and time in ways that reflect the incongruous nature of the term *Aboriginal* – which I hope to have shown to be not only a normal and contradictory situation, but also one which reflects a commendable level of critical engagement on part of the artists as well. Devine's visual relay of the place of Serpent River through tactile sculpture and written correspondence is unlike that expressed by Burton and Monnet. Within *RESERVE(d)*, there is difference between places that show the multiplicity of voices between Burton and Monnet's experiences at God's Lake Narrows and Kitigan Zibi. From their located and specific histories – inclusive of both events and relationships with people in place – Devine, Burton, and Monnet record their histories through artworks within an exhibition. By providing the following texts on *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* I offer my understanding of these stories through my own experiences with the exhibitions, and my conversations with the artists.

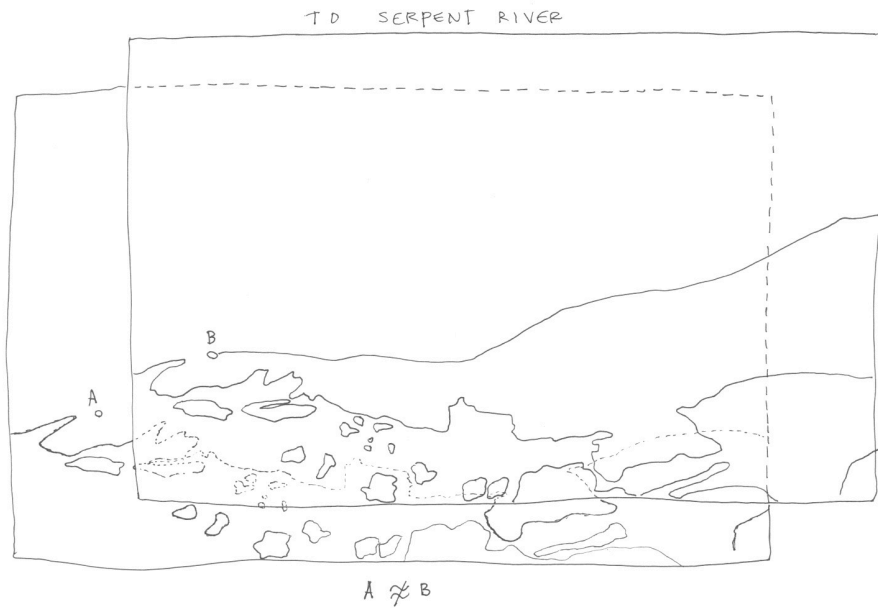


figure 3. “to Serpent River,” drawing by the author.

Super 8 Hotels Reservations noreply@google.com Devine, Bonnie	Super 8 Hotels Confirmed Reservation Notification bdevine@ocad.ca sent you: Serpent River, ON POP, Canada via ... Map to the site	December 17, 2010 December 17, 2010 December 17, 2010	8:47 AM 3:13 PM 3:15 PM
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From: bonnie devine
 Subject: **Map to the site**
 Date: December 17, 2010 3:15:00 PM CST
 To: suzannemorrisette

Hi Suzanne,
 I almost forgot I promised to send you a map. I've located the spot on google maps (satellite version) and will send you that link separately. Here are text instructions to go with it.

Travelling west on Highway 17 through Serpent River First Nation, the highway will take you across a scenic bridge over the Serpent River (you likely know the place I'm speaking of) and through the village of Serpent River.

About halfway through the village turn left on Handy Spot Road. It's the only left in the village, a small road. Drive right to the end of Handy Spot Road (about 1 kilometer, perhaps less). Turn right onto Riverview Road. Riverview may not have signage, but it's the only road at the top of Handy Spot Road. Drive 50 to 100 feet west along Riverview and watch for a gravel driveway on your left. It will be the first driveway you'll come to. It leads to a clearing/parking place and the village water purification plant at the edge of the river. Park your car and head toward your left on foot, you'll have to climb down a few concrete ledges and onto the rock, but you'll hear the falls and soon see the spot. This is the place. Depending on how high the river is, you may be able to climb onto the rocks in the center of the river.

Watch your step! The rocks can be treacherous especially if it's been snowing.

If you can't make the journey this time, let's try to do it together in the spring.

Best wishes,
 Bonnie

figure 4. personal email correspondence between Bonnie Devine and the author. 17 December 2010.

Chapter Two

Call and Receive: *Writing Home*

On December 17th, 2010 I drove out to Serpent River First Nation, a small community located on just off the Trans-Canada Highway on the north shore of Lake Huron in Northern Ontario. The weather was terrible, with blowing snow and icy road conditions. After a couple of attempts, I managed to turn onto Handy Spot Road, which ended soon after it began at a fork in the road. I took a left when I should have taken a right, which lead me to an out-of-service bridge and an empty lot. Every turn in my car I signaled (first) and turned (second) with the type of hesitancy that comes from being out of place. Even though I follow the map and instructions that Bonnie provided, it occurs to me that this is not the place. Although I eventually reach my destination, it occurs to me that I am not certain where I am. Here I have found a location whose history I have researched in the context of an exhibition, and I realize that, until now, this is how I have come to know the place of Serpent River First Nation, Ontario, Canada.

In her artist statement for the exhibition *Writing Home*, Bonnie Devine writes about taking this same trip to the site of her former home at Serpent River. She describes driving up the same wavering road to the top of a hill where she turns right and then left onto a gravel road, past the brick water filtration building, further still past the gravel and onto the grass. She arrives at an outcrop of rock that Devine calls the palm of the river.

Here the water rolls over and in between finger shaped grooves in the rock's surface.²⁷

She writes about the rock as a container of history, as a place of witness:

I have come to listen, believing the rock is filled with stories. I have come to read, believing the rock is a text. I have come also, it must be said, to write ... believing. The day that began in sunlight ends with a bitter west wind and a low cover of cloud. I pull the casts I had hoped to pull. They are frayed and less perfect than I had hoped. They are still slightly damp but just firm enough to hold their forms. They leave traces of plaster and shreds of cotton on the rocks when I lift them. Excuse me, I say to the river. I take many pictures of the rock. In the places where it is impossible or impractical to lay the paper down I lay the lens's subtle blade instead. To the rock I say, excuse me.²⁸

Devine notices her own trespass upon this site and she recalls the reasons why she has come back to this place. This place was her home, though she has lived most of her life in Toronto.²⁹ Returning home, Devine takes inventory of marks along the rock's surface, of the water levels along the river, and of other pieces of geological evidence. She identifies that the purpose of this trip is to gather impressions from the rock through paper, plaster, and photographic methods of capture. She speaks, she listens, and she records what she can, as best she can, through the different artistic means available to her. For trespassing on the land she excuses herself, "Excuse me, I say to the river... To the rock I say, excuse me."³⁰

²⁷ Bonnie Devine, in conversation with the author, December 4, 2010.

²⁸ Bonnie Devine, "An Artist Statement," in *Writing Home/Lettres A Mon Chez-Moi* (brochure containing curatorial statement and artist statement), no page numbers.

²⁹ Devine, in conversation with the author.

³⁰ Devine, "An Artist Statement," no page numbers.

It is clear from reading Devine’s artist statement for *Writing Home* that respectful negotiation of place is extremely important to her. Devine arrives at Serpent River with some awareness of how she expects to make her work, equipped with materials such as paper and plaster. She is met by the elements and she modifies her plans accordingly. The resulting works – four sculpted works on 8.5” x 11” paper; four cast glass sculptures encased in wood; four diptychs; a video projection; and an audio component – each show an attempt to communicate with this place through her varied, material-based practice.

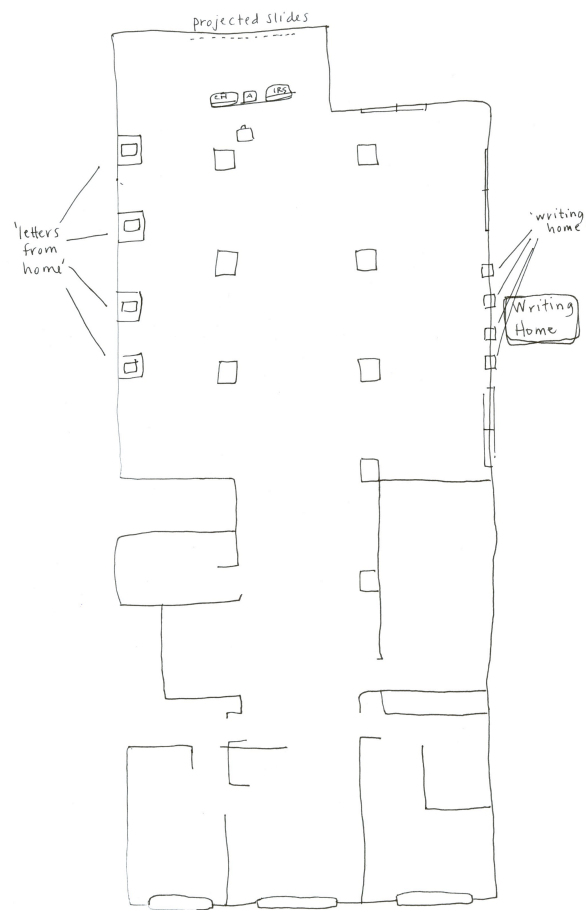


figure 5. “*Writing Home* floor plan at Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art.” drawing by the author.

In her artist statement, which Devine wrote during her encounter with the place of Serpent River First Nation, she described several processes for the preparation of the artworks that comprise the exhibition *Writing Home*. She explains her process for creating the four paper sculptures, also titled “Writing Home,” and the dense glass castings called “Letters from Home.” Devine also describes taking the photographs and engaging in written correspondence. These are each named for a person to whom she was writing, “Letter to Sandy,” “Letter to William,” “Letter to Leonard,” and “Letter to Grandfather.” Through these three related series of works, Devine corresponds with the land as a site of personal and familial significance by experimenting with different visual methods of communication. Each series expresses, in dialogue, a testimony for something that is otherwise unspoken, between the artist and some other person, place, or thing. In this chapter I discuss how these three series of works, represent and reflect the relationship of Bonnie’s cultural beliefs to self and land.



figure 6. Bonnie Devine working at Serpent River, October 2007. photo credit: Sean McCullough.



figure 7. installation shot, “Writing Home,” from *Writing Home*. photo credit: Scott Benesiinaabandan.



figure 8. Plaster Casts for “Letters from Home,” photo credit: Bonnie Devine.



figure 9. installation shot, "Letters from Home," from *Writing Home*. photo credit: Scott Benesiinaabandan.

Of the three series, “Writing Home” and “Letters from Home” are the most physical manifestations of this relationship for they involve a tactile relationship with the rock face and some other material conduit. They are also the most ambiguous in their adaptation of language and message, sharing a process of casting from the rock face. “Writing Home” displays a hardly legible written correspondence between Devine and one of her close friends in which they discuss the gesture of writing home. The paper sheets of this correspondence are gnarled and discolored, referencing the surface texture of the rock face after having been wetted and left to dry there. In this way, Devine speaks to her home by revealing her conversations of shared wonder, interest, and expectation. The words that once ran neatly lined over the width of the page, now bend over one another, blurred by having been saturated with water and scraped by the friction of contact with the rock. These letters home have been distorted and consumed by the rock to the point that they no longer read legibly. As markings, they exhibit the residue of this encounter and prove that in some way, that this message was received by the rock.

Inversely, “Letters from Home” consists of four glass sculptures produced from the negative imprint of plaster casts that Devine pulled from the rock at Serpent River. These works are visually similar to those of “Writing Home” in that they measure the size of a standard piece of paper. Both bodies of works receive and translate the form of the rock’s surface much like the tactile language of Braille raises off a piece of paper. Each share an inverse relationship of giving and receiving; defined by the processes used to sculpt their medium, they represent only one direction of a two-part conversation. With the other part of this conversation absent yet evoked through material transformation, the language of

these works remains a highly codified visual form. The materials are the malleable witness to these exchanges between people and place.

While Devine accesses the land of her home through the aesthetics of presence and absence in her use of positive and negative sculptural techniques, she also enters into dialogue with other people, both actual and imagined, through the four horizontal works that juxtapose photographs with written texts. The photographs depict naturally occurring anomalies in the rock's coloration, shape, and mineral content from an aerial view. They record surface markings that allude to the rock's formative geological history. Devine explains that she felt these rock forms recalled the deliberate mark-making of petroglyphs, though in reality they were formed by the meeting of a limestone ridge up through Owen Sound and Manitoulin Island and the granite terrain of the Northern Ontario Shield along the northern banks of Lake Huron on Georgian Bay.³¹ In the texts that are juxtaposed with the photographs, which addressed to four recipients—Sandy, William, Leonard, and Grandfather—Devine reflects on her relationships with these people, and their contributions to her understandings of this place. The content of the texts reflects both her own original writing in addition to adaptations of the Robinson Huron Treaty, a significant regional document describing various First Nations groups and governmental interests with the land.

³¹ Devine, in conversation with the author.

These details belong to a body of research undertaken by Devine during her Master of Fine Art studies at York University for which she published an accompanying text called "Radiation and Radiance." Devine's background in the geopolitical history of the area around Serpent River First Nation includes a knowledge of naturally occurring geological phenomenon in addition to the history of surveying, First Nations land redistribution, natural resource extraction and uranium mining, and the residual effects of these historical encounters on present populations of people and biological systems.



figure 10. "Letter to Grandfather," from *Writing Home*. photo credit: Drew Gilbert, courtesy of Gallery Connexion.



figure 11. "Letter to Leonard," from *Writing Home*. photo credit: Scott Benesiinaabandan.



figure 12. “Letter to Sandy” and “Letter to William,” from *Writing Home*. photo credit: Drew Gilbert, courtesy of Gallery Connexion.

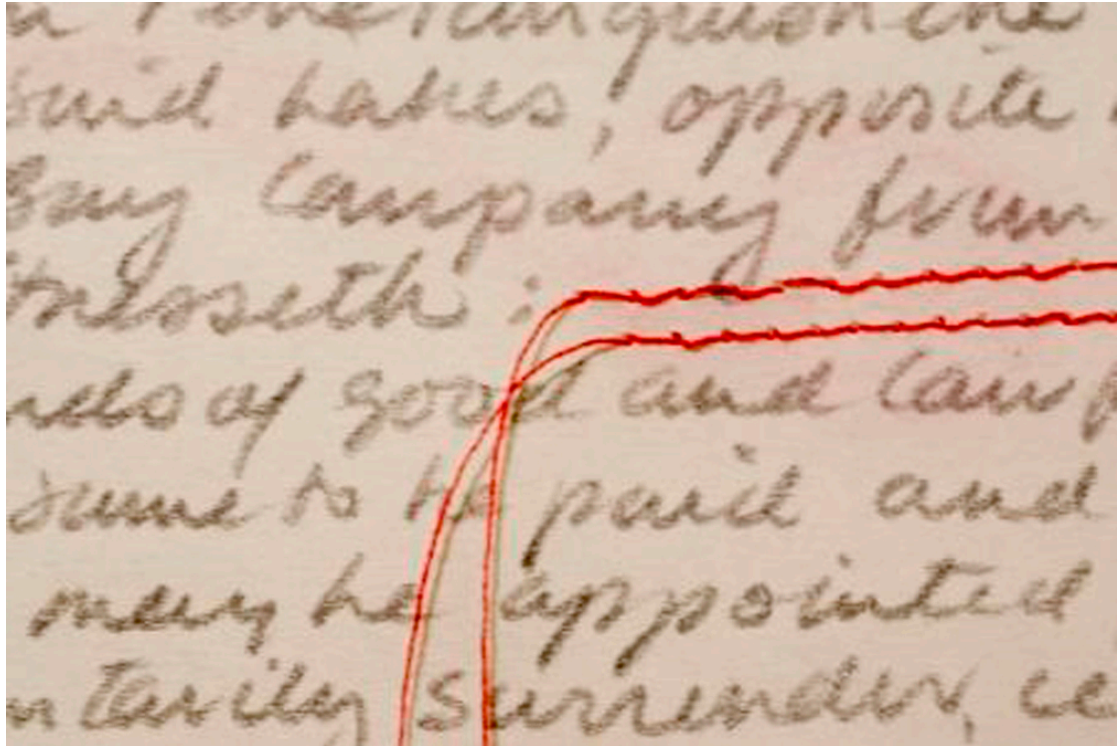


figure 13. “Letter to Grandfather” (detail), from *Writing Home*. photo credit: Drew Gilbert, courtesy of Gallery Connexion.

Like the correspondences embedded in “Writing Home” and “Letters from Home,” each of these four diptychs uses variations on the practice of writing to communicate in ways that combine an intuitive relationship of mark making and the more uniform practice of writing using the English and cursive text. In each these works, red and orange thread represents a codified form of writing. In “Letter to Leonard,” this sewn thread runs across two paper-sized rectangles like writing on a page. The standard paper sized format of the two sewn forms references the written word, though the message here is unclear. Devine deliberately chose to render her message in code, and in doing so she gives presence to her communications with land and with people that would otherwise leave no material trace.³²

Together these artworks form an archive of correspondence that questions the possibility of an affective or otherwise imagined bond between people and place. The gesture of *writing home* in whatever form becomes a speculative gesture to locate, translate, and makes correspondence visible between people and place. These processes (Devine’s artistic research and production methodologies) rest at the core of the works within the exhibition *Writing Home* and are fundamental aspects of the completed visual works.

Viewers are made privy to three essential concepts related to the making of the works included in *Writing Home* through Devine’s artist statement: that this rock is a

³² Ibid.

When asked what the contents of this letter were, Devine declined to comment and instead explained to me that this letter was addressed to someone with whom her relationship was strained.

text, that Devine is its reader, and that this relationship between text and reader is made available, at least in part, by Devine's stated belief in the capabilities of this transaction. Beyond these assertions, Devine provides little in the way of explanation for the reason, significance, and mechanisms of this encounter other than that she states that it happened. I am initially drawn to ask *how*: how does a rock contain text, how does a person "read" such a text, and what does the presence of belief infer from an encounter with/in land? As I ask these questions, I realize that maybe this type of inquiry neglects to address the key relationship between Devine's process and her stated *belief*. In the absence of one straightforward answer to any these questions, and with the suspicion that Devine's belief differs fundamentally from a dominant view that permeates and "frames the indigenous experience," I would like to suggest an alternative line of questioning.³³

Rather than asking *how*, I would like to consider *under what terms* do people and place enter into dialogue with one another, and how the influence of epistemology frames these experiences. Using this approach, it becomes possible to insert other perspectives, including Indigenous concepts, and locational or spatial theories,³⁴ to understand the potential for studying person-place encounter. For instance, if a rock contains text can it also communicate through language or retain information over time? What presumable

³³ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 19.

In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses the importance of acknowledging the systems of power that frame, and at times oppress, Indigenous lived experience. I point to Bonnie Devine's belief in the innate abilities of the rock to contain history as a text (as having agency) that is rooted in an Aboriginal belief in the live force in the natural setting. I provide this to show one instance of an oppressed perspective in contrast to a Western conception of the world.

³⁴ Danny Butt, "Local Knowledge and New Media," in *Place: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 2.

agency would the rock carry to be able to communicate? What degree of translation, or negotiation of common language, is necessary in order to ascertain meaning from such an encounter? Does the agency of place and object supersede encounter and if so, under what terms? Is it imparted because of or through an encounter with cultural *belief*? In order to begin to answer these questions, I will need to address an underlying issue at the heart of this discussion that is, the idea that space is a cultural construct, which we perceive through the lens of some system of *belief*.

Devine's belief that rock holds the ability to retain and communicate histories over time belongs as a concept of cultural significance to a knowledge inherited from an Aboriginal epistemological frameworks. It operates under the terms that the rocks are our elders whose wisdom we respect in language and in our actions much like the way one respects a person through kind speech and gestures. As Mishuana Goeman writes, land can also be a place of intimate personal identification in collaboration:

The land acts as a mnemonic device in many ways, by being the site of stories, which create cohesive understandings of longing and belonging.³⁵

Devine herself speculates that treating objects and place with agency is often ill received as a concept due to the inadequacies of translation in oral language. She explains that in Ojibwa language, objects and places can be addressed just as one would address a loved one or a friend.³⁶ This differs immensely from the English language that describes things and places (as inanimate) separately from people (as animate), a perspective and

³⁵ Goeman, "From Place to Territories and Back Again: Centering Storied Land in the Discussion of Indigenous Nation-building," 25.

³⁶ Devine, in conversation with the author.

characteristic of the English language that is easily taken for granted as the all encompassing truth. Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose describe this construction of knowledge of the world as based in “transparent space,” which “assumes that the world can be seen as it really is and that there can be unmediated access to the truth of objects it sees; it is a space of mimetic representation,” a verifiable fact of history.³⁷

In the context of Canadian First Nations Reservations, transparent space seldom reflects the interests of Aboriginal people; rather it serves the interests of the largely white settler societies who constructed the historical record and law of the land: what Eric Wolf identifies in his book *Europe and the People Without History* as the disjuncture between “the people who claim history as their own and the people to whom history has been denied.”³⁸ Sherene Razack describes the “mythologies of white settler societies” as “spatialized stories” that depend on a collection of subjective accounts of territory and land.³⁹ Razack asserts that spatial stories tend to originate from positions of power, and that in this way space becomes naturalized, “empty,” or, free of construction, narrative, and authorship.⁴⁰ She suggests “spatial theory” can serve as site of resistance to this naturalization by showing the complex network of stories at play in any given, but specifically located, place. As such, Razack prescribes a theoretical and historically based

³⁷ Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, “Introduction: Women’s Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies,” in *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* eds. Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 5.

³⁸ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 23.

³⁹ Sherene Razack, “When Place Becomes Race,” in *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, ed. Sherene Razack (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

un-mapping and denaturalization of transparent space in order to expose, reveal, and reverse subjugated knowledge and locational histories, not as points of comparison but as equally legitimated and valuable sources for understanding the world around us. In this view, the possibilities for belief based on different systems of knowledge are increasingly multiple, even if they are not accepted with equal value by dominant settler societies. What Razack's theory provides is the potential for validating the presence and prevalence of culturally based and location-specific stories of place and people.

Returning to Devine's artist statement, it is now evident that Devine's work is an act of representing place as a spatial construction of her own making. Through her process of dialogue with the people and land of Serpent River First Nation, Devine's account is also subject to other layers of history that have affected her home and family. The site where she lifts her plaster casts for "Letters from Home" has been affected by residual uranium from an abandoned mine to the north of Serpent River in Elliott Lake.⁴¹ The land where her grandfather once trapped was redistributed to foster new developments for this radioactive mining town and the surrounding municipality. Devine's choice of site specificity and material investigations convey her memories and associations with that place; they also recall other histories that accumulate in that place over time. I highlight her process here again in order to emphasize the significance of an epistemologically-

⁴¹ Devine, in conversation with the author.

Devine stated that the prevalence of radioactive uranium within the water and soil at Serpent River continues to be supplied by the mine at Elliott Lake despite repeated efforts to close and seal the mine site. She recalls stories where moccasins quickly deteriorate when walking across contaminated grounds and states that the health of long term residents continues to be affected by trace amounts of harmful chemicals in the water and surrounding environment.

based approach to the formation of artworks. Maori writer and researcher, Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that, “[i]n many projects [relating to Indigenous methodologies] the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate.”⁴² By privileging such processes in her art making, Devine creates works that embody a complex and eloquent language of representation of person-place encounter in which it is the land that speaks back.

⁴² Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 128 (parenthetical context added by the author).

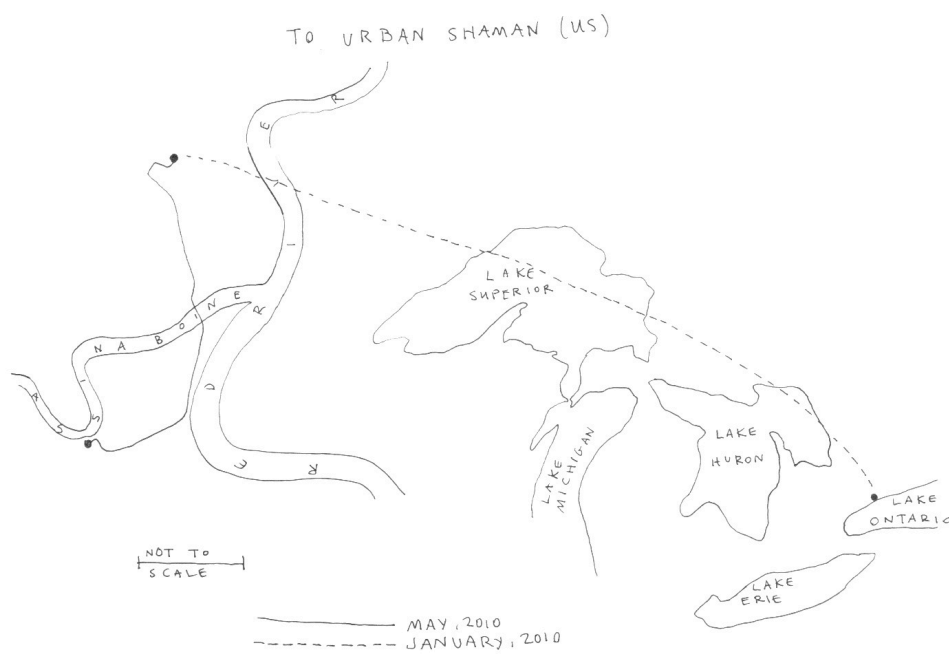


figure 14. "to Urban Shaman," drawing by the author, 2011.

Chapter Three

Far and Near: *RESERVE(d)*

*Over the past two years, I have travelled between Winnipeg and Toronto by car and by plane. In two and a half hours one can fly over this vast distance. On particularly cloudy days, one can get from Toronto to Winnipeg without even noticing the ground beneath them. In the process of researching and writing about Bonnie Devine's exhibition, I visited the place of Serpent River First Nation that I had flown over so many times and passed en route by car to Winnipeg. On that winter day when I turned off the highway and drove along the winding road to Serpent River there was a foreboding wind howling in between the trees which told of the snow squalls up ahead. I may never have reached the exact place that Bonnie describes in *Writing Home*, but I did come to learn something of that place which I had not known previously. While this excursion did not provide the type of encounter with the place of Serpent River that I had expected it would, it did enable a critical relationship with the land that holds great personal history for Bonnie and her family. The works within *Writing Home* have an intimate connection to this place, and they ask an intimate dialogue with a viewer.*

*The exhibition *RESERVE(d)* had very different demands. Unlike *Writing Home*, travel to the places represented in *RESERVE(d)* was, perhaps, impossible as it drew from sources at two reserves simultaneously. To complicate matters, not all aspects of *RESERVE(d)* represent moments in the present. If *RESERVE(d)* was not at God's Lake Narrows or Kitigan Zibi, or in the present, where and when was it located? In the gallery? In the viewer's experience? In the history and memories of the reserve? During the process of*

researching and writing about RESERVE(d), Cousin's – a local favorite and after-hours drinking establishment in Winnipeg's Wolseley neighborhood – became the place of my intimate dialogue with the artists.

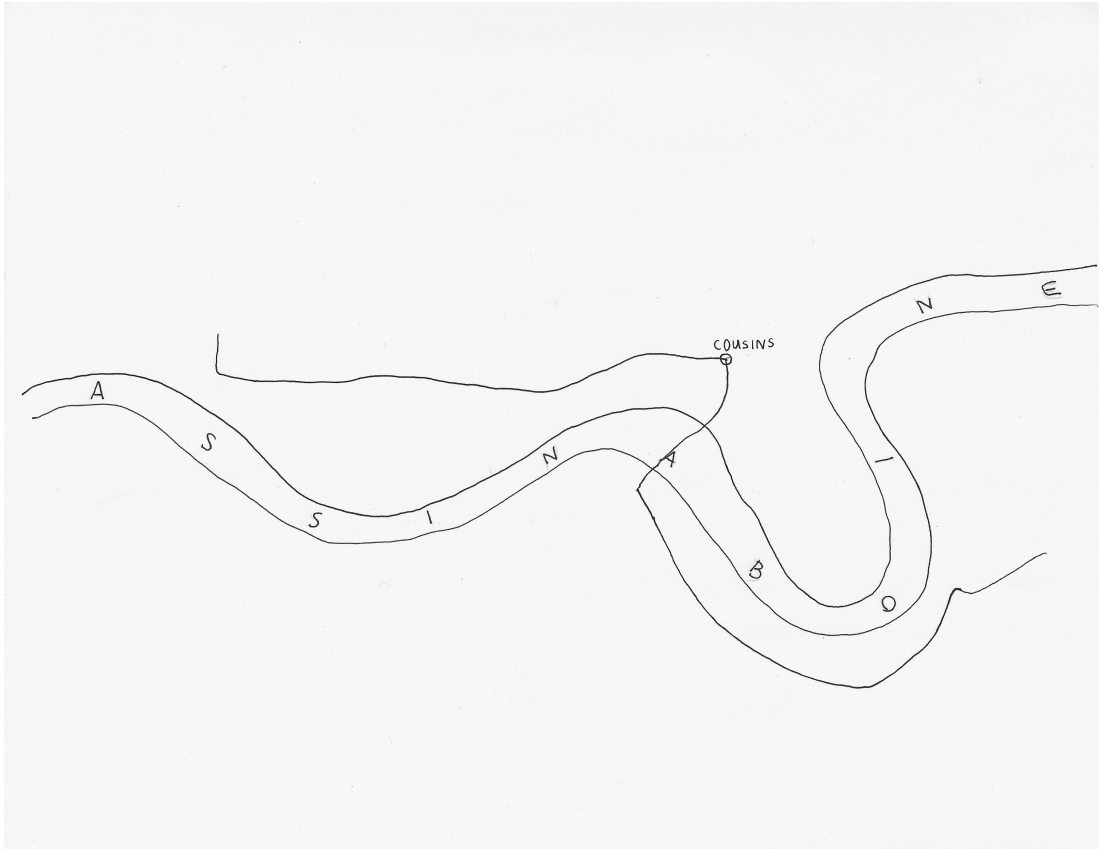


figure 15. "Cousins," drawing by the author, 2011.

RESERVE(d) was first conceived at Cousin's when Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet discussed their interest in working together on a project based on their own experiences with First Nations Reserves. Working from his knowledge of his childhood

home at God's Lake Narrows, Manitoba, Burton sought to represent loved ones from his home, and the places where they currently reside. Monnet's understanding of the reserve stemmed from a different type of knowledge based in her memories located at Kitigan Zibi and the Outaouais region of Quebec. As a collaborative venture, both Burton and Monnet visited God's Lake Narrows, gathered source material, edited and produced installation elements, and assembled all the elements at Urban Shaman in April, 2010. *RESERVE(d)* was a site where both of their experiences at different locations converged within a single gallery setting, and with which the artists intended to show the historical and contemporary significance of the reserve. The resulting works within the exhibition reflect the artists' intentions to unhinge the homogenous, and often negative, preconceptions attributed to reserve life. Through the specifics of the installation and the combination of individual art works, the artists counter linear time and cartographic space to locate the reserve as a place in the gallery where generational and place-based knowledge resides.

Life on First Nations Reservations⁴³ is a physically and cognitively distant concept for most of the Canadian population. Save for a select few urban reserves, reserves are generally located far from the consciousness of those living urban centres. The term *reserve* is itself fraught, as it is now used to describe a vast multitude of places with diverse, localized histories. For instance, the two reserves represented by Burton and Monnet in their exhibition, God's Lake Narrows and Kitigan Zibi, are both separated by

⁴³ In the interest of clarity and consistency throughout this thesis, the place of the First Nations Reservation will herein be referred to using the more colloquial terminology *reservation* or, *reserve*.

great distances and are spatially distinct. God's Lake Narrows is a fly-in community located in North-Eastern Manitoba, whereas Kitigan Zibi is located just North of the St. Lawrence River and Ottawa along a network of provincial highways. Issues of access and visibility differ between these places, as do their colonial pasts. Despite these differences, all reserves are lumped together by the Canadian media, which portray the quality of life on many reserves in a negative light. Substandard housing, inadequate access to clean drinking water, and the increasing cost of food are among the most common of the issues reported in mainstream media. This creates a perception of contemporary Aboriginal life as only related to poor social conditions on reserves, which neither accounts for the diversity of different reserve populations and other dimensions of their lives, nor for the fact that many Aboriginal peoples live off-reserve and in urban centres.

In Burton's and Monnet's proposal for *RESERVE(d)*, they acknowledge the impoverishment that many Aboriginal people continue to face both on and off reserves, but they also suggest the danger in upholding this monocular view. Rather than considering the reserve as a place of strict impoverishment, Burton and Monnet sought to show the intricacies of the reserve as a place of personal significance and history.⁴⁴ *RESERVE(d)* activates their stories of the reserve through the integration of representations of locations and of personally forged memories within those locations. The objective of the artists to challenge a homogenized perception of Aboriginal reality in *RESERVE(d)* is mobilized through visual and audio components, whose varied

⁴⁴ Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet, in conversation with the author, February 2 2011.

references challenge stigmatized conceptions of reserves by spatially and conceptually representing personal and familial relationships to reserve territory.

By situating the reserve within a discursive framework based on their experiences of specific reserve territory, Burton and Monnet construct an environment that challenges commonly held notions of the reserve.⁴⁵ *RESERVE(d)* engages viewers with representative elements, such as photographs, that transport land and people from their original and distant locations and present them within the intimate setting of the gallery within an urban centre. In so doing, the static definition of reserve gives way to their intimate knowledge of the reserve. This knowledge is embedded in the spatial environment created by *RESERVE(d)* as well as within its representative elements.

At the entryway to *RESERVE(d)* viewers are met by a life-sized black-and-white photograph of Mani Pisandawatch – Monnet’s great-grandmother – printed on a piece of Plexiglas (circa 1940). Behind this, and projected from above, a projected image of Monnet shines through this Plexiglas image and onto a white sheet of vinyl. To enter into the exhibition viewers step around this image to the left or right, first following the gallery walls onto which panoramic videos depicting a rural winter scene are projected at the four gallery corners. In between these videos hang black and white photographs of various birds – a raven, a heron, and a loon – adhered onto a Plexiglas surface. An interior circle of photographs, comprised of six full colour images framed in Plexiglas, hang at eye-level – with enough room between each image to gain entry. This inner circle

⁴⁵ Blunt and Rose, “Introduction: Women’s Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies,” 4-5.

divides the gallery space into an outside circumference (marked by the gallery perimeter) and an inside space (created by the interior circle of full-colour photographs). Looking towards the interior circle, photographs of northern house exteriors are visible. Entry into the interior circle reveals photographs of Burton's family and friends inside of these homes. The presence of an ambient audio component permeates the gallery at a soft and undulating volume.



figure 16. installation shot, from *RESERVE(d)*. photo credit: Jonathan Couchman.

While *RESERVE(d)* resulted from the collaborative efforts of Burton and Monnet, individual works are not associated with specific artists through the use of labels or extended panels, as is often customary in exhibitions to denote specific authorship and

media. Instead, *RESERVE(d)* becomes a single site in which various components coalesce as one event and where collaboration is marked by the interaction and shared conceptual development of the entire project. The installation of the works enables any number of vantage points from which to experience the exhibition, and from which all components of the exhibition are visually accessible. From the outside circumference of the installation, looking inward, viewers see the houses, the videos of panning landscapes, and the birds on Plexiglas. From the interior circle, looking outwards, viewers first see the house interiors and their inhabitants, then the video projections alongside the birds on Plexiglas. Mani is always visible at the entrance with her likeness providing the anchor for the exhibition.

In *RESERVE(d)*, separate and shared moments in the space and time of God's Lake Narrows and Kitigan Zibi in the Outaouais area of Quebec coincide in the artists' contributions to the exhibition. Colour photographs of families and their homes depict Burton's present day associations with God's Lake Narrows, while Monnet's Plexiglas images show birds and her imagined relationship with her great-grandmother, Mani Pisindawatch, who was from Kitigan Zibi reserve.⁴⁶ The photograph of Mani was taken in Kitigan Zibi, Quebec circa 1930. The interior circle created by the large format photographs – both the exterior images of houses and interior images of their inhabitants – were commissioned photographs taken by Winnipeg-based photographer Scott Benesiinaabandan at God's Lake Narrows. The four video projections were recorded

⁴⁶ Caroline Monnet, in conversation with the author, March 10 2011. Monnet was born after her great-grandmother had passed, and through this work, Monnet speculates as to how it is that she may know her grandmother through blood memory.

during a visit to God's Lake Narrows. The skills of Winnipeg-based designer Sébastien Aubin were enlisted in the final execution of the installation. Lastly, Burton and Monnet commissioned Quebec-based sound-artist Simon Guibord to complete the score for *RESERVE(d)*'s sound component.

From their very first meeting, Burton and Monnet conceived of *RESERVE(d)* as an installation of artworks in a spiral formation in which viewers could travel in a circular motion towards a centre-most point. This path leads through representations of an outdoor place where viewers first stand between houses (photographs) and a boundary of trees (video), into each of the house interiors (photographs, reverse), and then arrive at the centre of the spiral, where the six photographs of house exteriors are mirrored by the six house interiors. The delineation of space in *RESERVE(d)* locates the visitors in relation to the multiple places on the reserve simultaneously. At any given time while in the gallery, viewers are witness to the same set of visual elements though they are able to observe them from distinctly separate vantage points. From the outside looking in, viewers are situated in an imagined outdoor setting, in between a panoramic landscape looking towards a cluster of houses in the centre of the gallery. In this way, visitors walking the circumference of the gallery would find modified views of the same sight line. From the inside looking out, viewers are situated “indoors,” looking out on a winter scene.

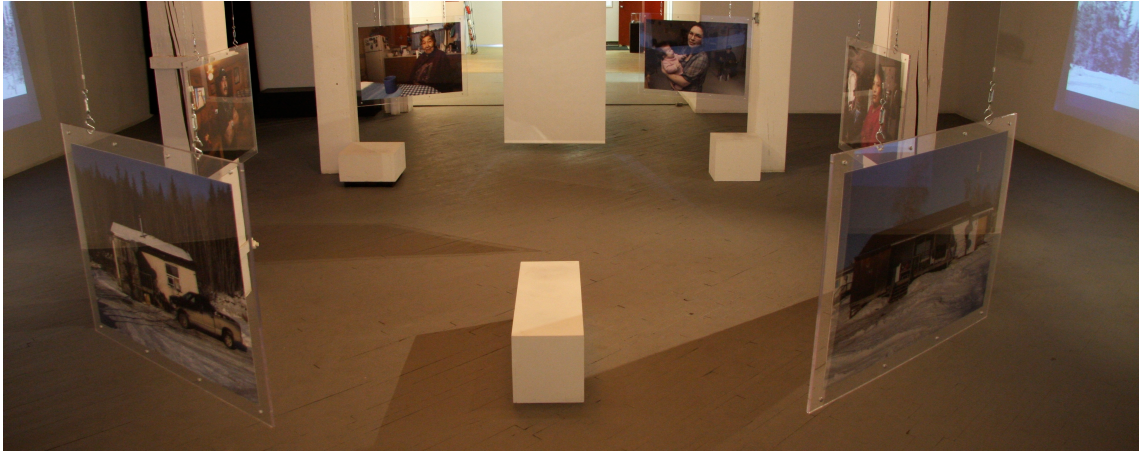


figure 17. installation shot, from *RESERVE(d)*, photo credit: Kevin Lee Burton.

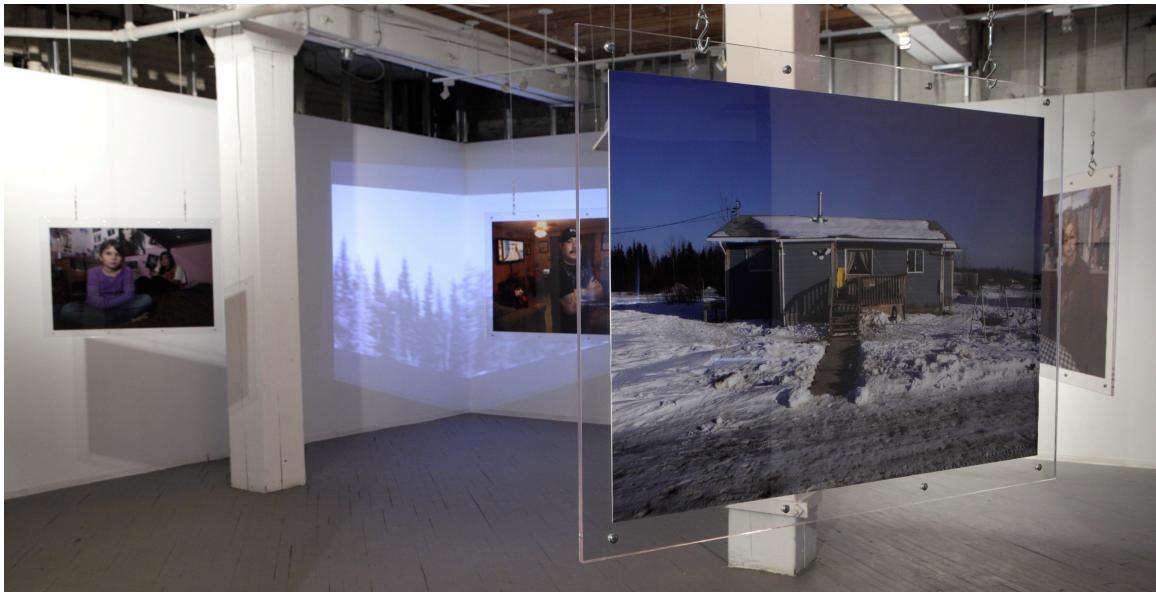


figure 18. installation shot, from *RESERVE(d)*, photo credit: Scott Benesiinaabandan.

Upon entering the centre circle of photographs, viewers are confronted by two different perspectives of the exhibition. The first involves an individual consideration of each interior photograph in relation to the “outdoor” space visible behind and around the photograph. In this sense, each photograph depicting an interior setting has a relationship to the outdoor setting in much the same way that an actual house interior would relate to the setting outside its windows. When seated in the middle of the exhibition, all six photographs hang in a circle surrounding the viewer. This particular area of the gallery becomes interpolated into the warm interior of a home at God’s Lake Narrows with the photographs themselves acting as the boundaries or walls of this space. Here the definitions between inside and outside, gallery and reserve begin to blur. Where one begins to fall away the other takes over. The experience of conflicting spaces resists precise location, and requires the suspension of one’s belief to see something that was not previously apparent. Here the works coalesce into one installation in which different vantage points offer a wealth of narratives. Brian O’Doherty describes this type of interaction in his essay “The Gallery as Gesture” where the gallery (with roots in the tradition of white cube gallery spaces) acts as an “alchemical medium” in which art is deposited and contextualized.⁴⁷

One further example of the ways in which the installation of *RESERVE(d)* challenges a sense of place and time occurs along the gallery walls where four video installations, shot by Caroline Monnet and edited with the help of Sébastien Aubin, depict a winter landscape of coniferous trees. The camera in each video pans slowly from left to right so

⁴⁷ Brian O’Doherty, “Gallery as Gesture,” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 321.

that in effect the perimeter of the gallery space ‘spins’ clockwise around the interior of houses. In my conversation with Burton and Monnet, they revealed that the wintry landscape, which was videotaped at God’s Lake Narrows, closely resembles the landscape of Outaouais. Having realized that the terrain of both places was similar, the artists considered how the geological pathway created by the Shield territory, which sweeps down from Northern Manitoba, across the southeastern border into Ontario, across northern Ontario, and through to Outaouais, ties these two places together conceptually. By evoking a land mass that both God’s Lake Narrows and Outaouais share, the video represents the reserve as a place that extends across vast distances, and is not circumscribed by provincial or federal borders.



figure 19. “Place?” drawing by the author, 2011.

RESERVE(d) also questions constructions of time. This can be seen most clearly in the image of Mani who stands at the threshold to *RESERVE(d)*. In this exhibition component, Monnet constructs a relationship with her great-grandmother, whom she has never met. Through this imagined relationship, Monnet observes in herself moments of her past, presuming that her body carries with it the memories of her ancestry.⁴⁸ Her examination of this memory is dissected through a material-based investigation and can be broken down into stages to show how this embodied memory takes place. Upon first glance, the large photograph of Mani Pisandawatch appears to stand still at the entrance to *RESERVE(d)*. Upon further investigation or, upon returning to this image after visiting other aspects of *RESERVE(d)*, viewers may notice slight changes in her appearance, or movements that allude to the projection that shines through the Plexiglas photograph. This projection, a video of Monnet herself, shines through the image of Pisandawatch and back onto a piece of vinyl the size of the Plexiglas just behind. Atop of this vinyl both Mani's shadow and Monnet's video coincide creating a temporary moment of shared space despite the temporal and spatial impossibilities of this event happening in reality. Both the projection of and the shadow cast by Mani's portrait transfer onto this vinyl, creating a momentary space to collapse the distance between two women separated from one another by time and location; both exist at once in visual representation.

⁴⁸ Diana Taylor, "Memory as Cultural Practice: Mestizaje, Hybridity, Transculturation," in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003), 80.

From Monnet's memories of the reserve through her great-grandmother at Kitigan Zibi to Burton's personal knowledge of God's Lake Narrows, *RESERVE(d)* functions as a site of convergence between experiences where both artists demonstrate that contemporary Aboriginal life on, or in relation to, the reserve cannot be easily reduced to a singular definition. Through the spatial configuration of the elements in the exhibition, Burton and Monnet enable a discursive environment in which Western cartographies and linear time are challenged by the simultaneous presentation of multiple locations and generational knowledge. *RESERVE(d)* is its own location in its own right. It serves as a site of resistance against fixed notions of Aboriginal life on the reserve where personal memories of the past and experiences of the present converge.

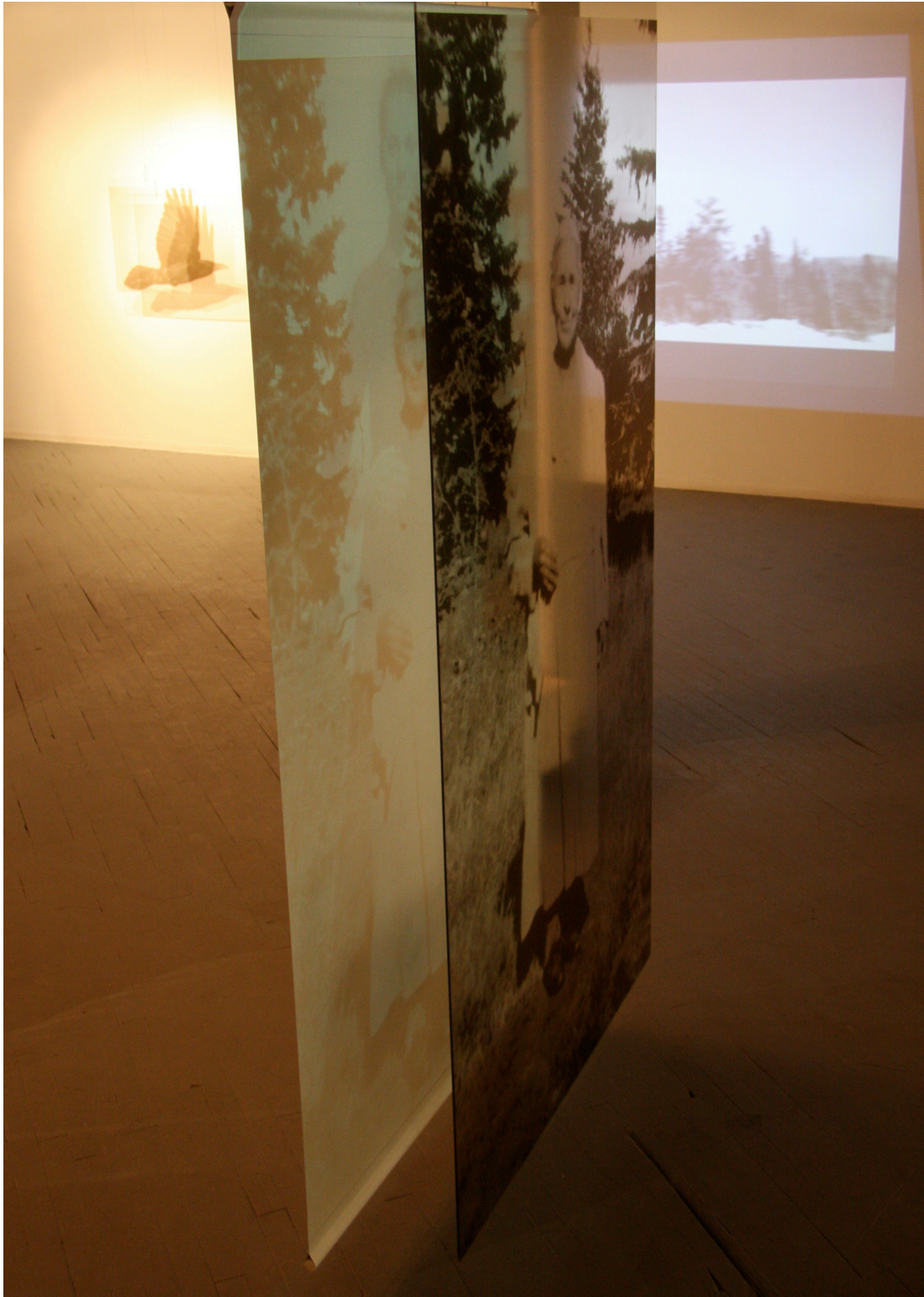


figure 20. installation shot, from *RESERVE(d)*. photo credit: Kevin Lee Burton.

Chapter Four

Place and Knowledge

In this thesis I have highlighted how *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* are exhibitions that represent the reserve as a place of personal and inter-personal negotiations with land, memory, and historical legacies of colonialism. From the material specificity of their articulation, both exhibitions provide the possibility to imagine the reserve as a place where located and locally situated histories and Indigenous knowledge emerge. The differences between Western and Indigenous ways of knowing expose an estrangement from commonly accepted understandings of land as inert: such is the case in Devine's understanding of land as having agency witnessed through her interactions with the rock face at Serpent River First Nation. Within Aboriginal cosmology, rocks are believed to be symbolic of the grandmothers and the grandfathers. That Devine treats them with the same reverence as an elder comes as no surprise.

In his contribution to the anthology *Place: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice*, Danny Butt describes the differences between Indigenous and settler society knowledges. Drawing on the insights of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, he proposes that “between colonial and colonized cultures” there are three axes where aporia or irresolvable contradictions can be observed: the role of cartography, concepts of time, and the function of knowledge. Butt considers the significance of aporia “in the deconstructive sense – [as] contradictory impulses that are not necessarily resolvable, because they are constituted by the disjuncture between colonial and colonised

cultures.”⁴⁹ In the writing of this thesis, these “contradictory impulses” become essential moments in which reconciliation is not desirable; instead, they make possible new ways of thinking about difference within ambiguity.⁵⁰ Rather than seek to resolve the impasse between two forms of disjointed knowledge, I identify how the contradictory moments apparent within *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* create the appropriate conditions under which alternative histories can take form. These two exhibitions lend specificity and voice to alternative histories that are still implicated in Western art canons through the historical precedence of colonialism, and through Western ways of knowing land.

Today the world is highly mapped into specific codified areas – towns, cities, provinces, countries, etc. This form of knowledge has perhaps become the most ubiquitous way of knowing place, to the extent that it has become a naturalized reality – generally speaking, people now live within a given area of gridded space made up of roadways. While travelling to and from Urban Shaman, visiting with Devine, Burton, and Monnet in Winnipeg and in Toronto, and driving to Serpent River in the cold month of December, I learned about the ways that this research is also implicated in systems of mapping. It both frames and is framed by other ways of organizing systems of knowledge. Perceptions of the ways that people are situated in space and the writing of history therefore go hand in hand; conceptions of space inform the ways that people are mapped into a historical record. This binds representation – in written text or in art – to the values of its surveyors

⁴⁹ Gayatri Spivak quoted in Danny Butt, “Local Knowledge and New Media,” in *Place: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice*, eds. Danny Butt, Jon Bywater, and Nova Paul (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 3 (parenthetical context added by the author).

⁵⁰ Butt, “Local Knowledge and New Media,” 3.

who construct narratives over time and in geographies, making one story from many, making landscape from land. Within this system of representation a consideration of place, or space imbued with meaning, has the ability to un-map dialogues based in a sense of fixed truth purported by universal or totalizing histories. Through their exhibitions Devine, Burton, and Monnet expose these totalizing histories and inscribe their own instead. My role in this process has been one of an observer and an interpreter, the importance of which comes from my attempt to identify and acknowledge the ways that I too am situated in places as a researcher and a writer.

Both *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)* demonstrate alternative perceptions of understanding land. Devine's place is her own: I could not get there without her guidance. Through an acute awareness of her own family history, along with the history of surveying and resource extraction in the area around Serpent River, Devine creates a place with uncertain borders. Devine's process of working with the rock face at the site of her childhood home illustrates her respectful awareness of that location as an animate setting that she can visit and create exchanges with.

RESERVE(d) stems from a very different understanding of place, in which concepts of time and space collide and merge in order that the exhibition environment becomes a layering of places. By working collaboratively, Burton and Monnet enmesh their personal histories, past and present into a single space and as a result, they create an imagined place of the reserve. In so doing, they reveal the disjuncture between Indigenous and settler society views, with the latter's linear concept of chronology prevailing as

dominant mode of perceiving time and space. *RESERVE(d)* challenges this dominant mode of perception through the simultaneous integration of source material from different locations, as well as through Burton and Monnet's imagined relationship with their pasts within a present moment. Much like the way Devine corresponds with place through text and sculptural process, Monnet speculates on her own relationship with her great grandmother, whom she has never met, through a decisive channeling of blood memory.

How then, does this re-mapping of place through artist-story, as Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective has asked, "avoid the predicament of an expression of mastery over the landscape we intend to survey"?⁵¹ In this thesis, I have responded to this predicament by exploring the stories embedded in *Writing Home* and *RESERVE(d)*. If dominant conceptions of space preclude a negotiation of difference within an Aboriginal art history, then the assertion of the legitimacy of storied place holds the capacity to reveal and re-inscribe the internal complexities and specificities of Aboriginal realities. It is these storied places that Devine, Burton, and Monnet offer us as viewers of their exhibitions. Their art making becomes a testament to Aboriginal ways of knowing that are in a constant state of formation which in the case of these two exhibitions are anchored in the storied place of the reserve.

⁵¹ Raqs Media Collective. "Pacific Parables," in *Place: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 10.

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Appendix A:

A Brief History of Exhibitions about Land and Place since *Land, Spirit,*

Power

1991 | *Visions of Power* | The Earth Spirit Festival at Harbourfront | Toronto, Ontario

1992 | *Land, Spirit, Power* | National Gallery of Canada | Ottawa, Ontario

1992 | *Indigena* | Canadian Museum of Civilization | Ottawa, Ontario

1994 | *Wana-Na-Wang-Ong: Rebecca Belmore* | Contemporary Art Gallery | Vancouver, British Columbia

1998 | *Nations in Urban Landscapes* | Contemporary Art Gallery | Vancouver, British Columbia

1998 | *Reservation X* | Canadian Museum of Civilization | Ottawa, Ontario

2002 | *Mapping Our Territories* | Walter Phillips Gallery | Banff, Alberta

2011 | *It's Complicated – Art About Home* | Evergreen Gallery | Evergreen State College | Washington, District of Columbia

