

The White People Problem: Experiments in The Reverse Gaze

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### **Author's Declaration**

Author's Declaration I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I authorize OCAD University to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public. I further authorize OCAD University to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for scholarly research.

**Abstract**

The White People Problem is a series of experimental works that seek to engage white settlers on issues of colonialism, inequity, and privilege in Canada. Grounded in Boyce’s personal experiences, this work is her response to conversations within her family and social in-groups in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Using an interdisciplinary approach, Boyce combines everyday objects, statistical data, and comparison via self-location, to create an “inverse” white gaze. Viewers of the work are asked to consider the ways in which they benefit from a colonial system in a country whose policies continue to perpetuate a legacy of harm against Indigenous Peoples. Specific technologies and methods used include photogrammetry, 3D printing, metal casting, sculpture, augmented reality, autoethnography, mould making, and screen-printing.

## **Acknowledgements**

I recognize that I am a settler in this land, and that my work and practice takes place on Indigenous territories across Ontario. The territory this thesis is presented on is part of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty, an agreement between the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. This territory is also covered by the Upper Canada Treaties.

I acknowledge all the Indigenous peoples who have been living on the land since time immemorial and hope to continue to engage in meaningful work and relationships that move towards decolonization and conciliation.

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## **Dedication**

Varten Mummu, joka kertoi minulle, että kun psyykkinen kertoi hänelle, että hänen perheensä kirjoittaisi ja tekisi suuria asioita, hän tiesi, että hän oli minulle.

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## **Definitions**

Below is a list of terms and definitions from the Oxford Dictionary, that I am using them within this document.

Colonialism: The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.

Settler: A person who moves with a group of others to live in a new country or area. In Canada and this thesis, the term is also applied colloquially to the descendants of settlers.

White Settler: A white person who settles in a non-white territory.

Canadian: Relating to or characteristic of Canada or its inhabitants. Many Indigenous Peoples in Canada do not identify as Canadian, as Canada is a colonial term and they are members of their own Indigenous nations.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter begins with my own self location and context on the prompts for this work. It then discusses my intention, goals and research questions. Positionality affects approach, and so it is important that I first introduce myself (Kovach 110). I am a white settler from the Northern Ontario city of Thunder Bay, which is located on the traditional lands of the Fort William First Nation within the Robinson Superior Treaty and is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and the Métis. Thunder Bay is considered to be the most racist city in Canada (Bellgrade). Here are some other facts about it.

Indigenous people make up 16 percent of the city's population, according to the Ontario Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. This is a significant number for a country that has a reported total Indigenous population of just over four percent (Stats Canada, 2016). The city has a violent crime index of almost double the national average and was ranked number one for hate crimes in 2018 by *Maclean's* magazine. Furthermore, "anti-aboriginal hate incidents" in Thunder Bay accounted for one third of all hate crimes nationally in 2015 (Stats Canada, 2017). In a city with such high numbers of hate crimes against Indigenous peoples, in a country where one in four Indigenous women are missing or murdered, the conversations the people in my family (and many of their friends and neighbours) are having are not about the change that needs to occur in the city's police force, which has been under investigation for systemic racism for the since 2018 or voicing concern for the nine Indigenous youth that have been found dead in the city's waterways between 2011 and 2017. Instead, they are mainly about a perceived uptick in crime in the city – a trend they attribute to all of the "Indians" coming in from the remote reservations and "ruining" *their* town. While violence against Indigenous bodies is ignored, concern for white comfort rises.

When I spoke to my father about the police not investigating an Indigenous teen's disappearance, I was met with excuses on behalf of and pity for the cop (see Conversations section in Appendix) "Imagine how tired the police must be of getting all these calls all the time," they said. To me, it was obvious that this officer was literally being *paid* to care and still did not. My family member, on the other hand, was comfortable excusing his (lack of) actions. The missing teen I referenced in that conversation was later found dead. Perhaps if the police had investigated instead of telling his guardian that "he was probably out partying and would turn up after the weekend" (Talaga, 2017), that child might still be alive. All this is to say that I know and interact routinely with people that don't see Indigenous people as full people (an attitude that extends to other people outside of the white race). Most of them don't recognize it; they believe that they believe in equality. And it's terrifying and dangerous.

This thesis is thus directed at Canada's white settler community and seeks to engage and prompt reflection on the too-often ignored (in white settler circles) issues of colonialism, racial difference, and white privilege. This work is my response to conversations I've had with my own family members (I use family in this document as an all-encompassing reference to the white people whose words inspired this work, though some are in fact acquaintances) on the above issues. Rather than bringing bar graphs to Christmas dinner, I use a practice-led, approach that is infused with elements of autoethnography to create multiple experimental pieces that work to reverse and subvert the white gaze through recontextualizing what I see as an inherently white-washed, colonized, misunderstanding of reality in the territory that has been re-designated "Canada." I began this work with the optimistic notion that my white, rural, settler family weren't necessarily bad people, but that perhaps they had bad information.

The primary goal of this work is to recontextualize commonly held white beliefs gathered through conversation with my white family and community. I attempt to subvert the normalization of the great white myths of nationhood and white hero-pioneers (John A. MacDonald, Davey Crockett) by challenging the audience to see their own complicity in the here and now, in a colonialist system of white supremacy.

As I have engaged in a practice of art-making that often works in self-expressive metaphor and abstracted rather than literal didactics, it was quite difficult to measure how effective my work would be in providing useful or “good” information. As a response to my own worry about this aspect, I have decided, tongue-firmly-in-cheek, that anyone who doesn’t like this work is a bad person, which has made things *much* easier. I kid. However, this project doesn’t focus on measuring specific results outside of my research questions – instead, it focuses on my goal of expanding my own practice and skillset through working across several different mediums and methods of fabrication.

This thesis serves two key purposes: Firstly, to continue the social and political aspects of my practice of making, which has always been concerned with issues of social or political import (such as the topics discussed in this paper). For much of my twenties, I worked overseas as a documentary photographer covering stories on a variety of human rights issues. For the last few years, my developing art practice has carried on in a similar, though more expressive, vein; after Russia announced its anti-gay propaganda law, I photographed portraits and shot long-form narrative interviews with the LGBTQ community there during the Sochi Winter Olympics.

Secondly, to expand my mainly photographic practice into a more interdisciplinary one, through creating work in whatever medium an idea called for. I took an approach that says the medium is the *method*, not the message (sorry Marshall McLuhan), meaning that for my practice,

I will work in whatever medium best suits my messaging. This is not actually to disagree with McLuhan's phrase, which refers to the idea that the form in which a work is made influences that work's messaging (McLuhan, 1967); rather, I am focussing on working in whatever form best suits my current messaging. So, I'm engaging with a kind of a reverse McLuhan, if you will (and I hope you do). As stated previously, this work is experimental, largely in the sense that I am a relative novice in the mediums that I have explored throughout the making process. As such, I approached the making for this project with the knowledge that with every new medium I chose, I was courting failure in a new way. However, failure has been an inextricable part of this process from day one – my failure to reach members of my family when countering their claims with no, the “Indians” weren't ruining “their” town. My choice to work in mediums that were new to me ensured that I would fail multiple times over the course of this thesis – after all, how does one learn a new skill if not through failed attempts and practice? I also knew there was a distinct possibility that I would fail in my attempts to not be a problematic white person.

However, placing myself in the role of novice or learner in the conversations that I have had with Indigenous artists, writers, and educators is in keeping with advice I received from Sto:lo author Lee Maracle: that I needed to spend more time out of the “the Knowers Chair.” For Maracle, the person occupying the chair is that of teacher and is almost always a position in Maracle's experience that non-Indigenous Canadians assume is theirs and are unlikely to ever consider giving up willingly. The funny thing was, the day I went to meet with her I'd already read *My Conversations with Canadians* and had a mantra of “don't be in the knower's chair” playing in my head all the way to her Toronto office. Within minutes, I was called out for occupying that chair.

I position the work I made as a follow up or response to conversations I've had, the medium takes the form that response dictates which can be a hard process to articulate. In his thesis *Tool-things: The Making of an Apprentice*, Michael Simon (2018) wrote ironically – and he wrote it so well – about the slippery form this type of process often takes and just how hard it can be to write about making:

I juggle these words, for what feels like the thousandth time. I add and subtract from them with each new reading, conversation or venture down the internet hole. Their hierarchy shifts daily. Trying to make sense of them, I fight to get them out of my head in some coherent way. I attempt to arrange them in a mind map on piece of heavy paper from an oversized drawing pad, then I move to tracing paper, maybe fluorescent post-it notes will work, or my black notebook, finally I go to my laptop. The longer I try to force them into order the less sense they make. Frustrated, I push my computer aside and grab my notebook again and make a drawing. This time, it's a pair of screwdriver handles connected to either end of a single shaft. It takes less than a minute, but this makes sense to me. (Simon, 2018: 27)

Simon followed his simple drawing of a screwdriver, which ended up forming the first iteration of a large portion of his master's thesis. My process is similar in that I was able to develop my work by talking out my ideas and producing self-reflexive sketches, rather than putting it into the words of academia. If that sketch was of a sculpture and I'd never sculpted before, then lo and sign me up to audit a bronze casting class! Out of this process, I developed some questions: First, how might an artistic practice be used as a meaningful tool to engage and inform white people about their role in colonialism and systems of white supremacy? Further, how can I abstract or represent via metaphor the atrocities of colonialism and systems of white supremacy by focusing

and centering on the perpetrator, and how can I accomplish this without creating narratives of visual representations that re-victimize Indigenous peoples and people of colour? Finally, what methods and best practices produce creative work that may be data-driven, without being overly didactic?

Though these questions were not originally specific to the relationship between Indigenous peoples (a term used in this document for brevity, to encompass First Nations, Inuit, Metis peoples) and settlers (non-Indigenous peoples) living on Turtle Island, now known as Canada, throughout the thesis process, much of the content of this document grew naturally in that direction based on the content of the conversations being had on my trips home to Thunder Bay. Often, within minutes the tensions between settlers and Indigenous people would become apparent, via a complaint made in the car from the airport at the sight of an Indigenous man walking down the street, about how this *used* to be a nice place. I can't help but think his people probably had the same sentiment...

I do not believe many white artists are engaging actively in the hard conversations with white people in this country that are necessary if we truly want to be a nation that values equity.

This view is further supported by the lack of Canadian settlers that I was able to locate while preparing my literature review chapter. If one wants to effect change, changing the views of the people in power on is the surest way to do it, and the people in power in Canada in 2019 are still the ones wearing white skin (Coulthard, 2014). They/we (myself included) are a huge part of the problem, and we are also the key to many possible solutions via the privileged positions we hold.



### **A Brief Introduction of Work**

The work I made is discussed at length in Chapter Four: The Response; however, I do mention a few key works in the chapters preceding number four and so I provide a brief description of them below.

*Water For Whites* is a large wall depicting a topographic map of Ontario, complete with running water taps. This work compares access to clean water between my Northern Ontario hometown and that of several surrounding Indigenous communities that are on long term water advisories.

*Missing* is a sculpture of a milk carton with my mother's face on it. This work is meant to discuss the care with which her missing persons case was treated by the police and news media versus that of Indigenous women in the same circumstances. This work has an augmented reality component that when engaged, removes my mother's image and replaces it with a seemingly unending stream of missing Indigenous women. These images were used with the consent of the CBC's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Online Database.

*1868-2019* is a cast hand sculpture meant to be reference colloquially to "the long arm of the law" and the RCMP [spell this out in full]'s history of colonial and sexual violence. The wall mounted hand with a police cuff and buttons reaches out, fingers curled in a grabbing gesture that is meant to evoke a different narrative of the police than is commonly held (in my family at least): that of aggressor and taker rather than protector.

## **First Pass**

Coming as I do from a background as a photojournalist, my first response to these types of questions was to do a documentary film entitled *What the fuck is Wrong with Thunder Bay?* I am still planning some version of this film, but early into my research I realised that the period allotted for my degree, would not allow me to forge the relationships and collaborations needed to complete this work at all, let alone appropriately. I then looked to virtual reality before I learned here in Digital Futures, just how very clichéd the notion of virtual reality as empathy machine was (Milk 2014). My work is now being led by my own life experiences as an insider having those fights at Christmas dinner, with a “fiscally” conservative uncle, where if only I’d brought the right pie chart instead of actual pie... maybe...

So.

This thesis is that conversation with settler people at large, (in some instances this could include non-Indigenous people of colour living in Canada,) and my white family specifically. A large part of my motivation comes from these types of conversations, and the making I am doing is in response to them. A significant part of my process also involved talking out my ideas and speaking with artists, makers, and intellectuals that know more than me and/or have worked in this vein previously. This means there is a circular aspect to this project: Motivated by aggravating conversations largely borne of misinformation and notions of white victimhood, informed and armed by conversation with more left-leaning Indigenous and settler folk, I filter all of this through my head, and the work I make is my contribution to the conversation. Life + Fights = Phone a friend + reflection + making = Art?

## **One City, Two Classes of People: Some Context for Systematic Racism and Violence**

A 65-year-old native man, Adam Yellowhead, was found dead – murdered – in an area frequented by people who drink mouthwash to become drunk. The lead investigator for the Thunder Bay Police Service wrote a fake press release about arresting a suspected killer, intended only for the eyes of his fellow police officers: “Fresh Breath Killer Captured!!!” But then the investigator mistakenly sent out the fake release. Oops. (*Globe & Mail* editorial, 2012 with updates 2018).

After the Thunder Bay Police Service mistakenly issued this mock news release, a human rights complaint was filed and numerous local articles were written about how insulted the police were that a complaint against them was filed. Thunder Bay mayor Keith Hobbs rationalised the racist joke as a “coping mechanism” for police. Interesting to note, the now-former mayor is currently awaiting trial for charges of extortion and obstruction of justice on unrelated matters (*APTN Indigenous Deaths in Thunder Bay: A Timeline*).

I believe one of the core issues at play is that white settlers, including police, still have a colonialist mindset that makes some bodies less valued than others (similar to the necessity of the Black Lives Matter Movement, needing to point out literally, that black lives have value). On some level, they don’t see Indigenous people as full humans. How does this disconnect happen? And how we can start to correct it? Until white settlers develop a basic sense of human empathy for Indigenous peoples, there will never be true efforts at reconciliation from a cultural or government standpoint.

## **Looking in My Own Canoe: Conversations as Prompts/Dispatches from a White In-group**

As a settler, I do not think it is appropriate to employ Indigenous ways of knowing for my own use. Moreover, even if I did so, chances are I would get it wrong, doubling my misstep and creating work that is incongruent with my goals. However, I do feel a responsibility to be informed on and by ways of knowing and pedagogy, such as Indigenous witnessing, as a framework for disseminating a better understanding of the trauma and resilience of Indigenous peoples both historically and at present. Aboriginal or Indigenous witnessing as a concept comes from the Cree term *seh tos kak ew* – “A person who testifies to a certain situation,” as defined in the *Alberta Elders’ Cree Dictionary* – or more generally speaking, the “keepers of history when an event of historic significance occurs” (TRC, 2015). It is important to note that Canada is made up of many Indigenous nations, and this principle does vary among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

These acts of remembering could provide the opportunity for some small acts of mental decolonization, wherein settler community members can as Judy Iseke tells us “...allow the understanding of someone else's life to interrupt their own” (112). In my own life, when working as a photojournalist, my own task was to bear witness and report back, and this has remained a through line as I now play witness both to and from my own family through my making. I refer often to conversations as a method of prompt, process and response (through the work). And I think it important to note that Margaret Kovach who is of Plains Cree and Saulteaux ancestry, has written extensively on the use of “...the conversational method as a means for gathering knowledge” (40), regarding Indigenous research methodologies. I discovered this specific are of Kovach’s research after I had already incorporated conversation as a method within my own work, in fact they were the impetus for this line of making. So, while I am not

intentionally appropriating the conversational method as it pertains to Indigenous research practices and traditional ways of knowing and sharing knowledge, I acknowledge a parallel.

### **Who is Worth What?**

Studies in neuroscience suggest that the amount of empathy a person feels for another is in direct correlation to how much of themselves they see in that person (Beckes et al. 2012). This sense of self–other overlap is linked with shared ethnicity, class, and other life experience (Meyer et al. n.p.) However, self–other overlap can be increased in strangers simply by completing a short task together, such as playing a video game collaboratively for ten minutes, and which can generate meaningful levels of empathy (Beckes et al.). Why then was Canada celebrating its 150th “birthday” in 2017, while its Indigenous people still lack access to basic necessities of life under the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and while one in four Indigenous women is murdered or missing? Are Indigenous people seen as so deeply “other” that non-Indigenous people are unable to empathize with life and death issues such as access to clean water? Is the disconnect between Indigenous and settler communities so large that they truly don’t have enough shared experiences with each other to foster the same level of self–other overlap that a few minutes of playing a video game creates?

The racist incidents and statistics cited throughout this document show clear systemic race-based violence being enacted on Indigenous communities, yet outside of Indigenous groups, where is the outrage and public concern? This issue is what my work *Missing* speaks to. As I am trying to follow an ethos of accessing and speaking to these issues from a reverse-gaze framework that uses my own self-location wherever possible, I use the story from my own life to

illustrate what happens when a white woman goes missing in Canada. When my mother was reported missing from Thunder Bay in November of 2017, there were four Indigenous women who were also missing from the city that week, but when I typed “missing woman Thunder Bay” into the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) national website, my white mother was the only woman listed as missing on the country’s largest national news platform. The violence this country enacts on Indigenous bodies has become so normalised that when a white woman goes missing it is deemed newsworthy and when four Indigenous women do the same, it’s just a Thursday.

### **Intent**

Bonnie Devine, who is an artist and educator from Serpent River First Nation, attempted to, in her words, “inoculate” me (against my own idiocy, I suspect), and gave me invaluable (and in hindsight, obvious) advice early on in my thesis process: Indigenous people do not need to be told about the issues and violence they face in this country, so my own community was where the telling and the work needed to be done. Her advice to “stay in your own canoe, because when you try to get into mine too, you make them both tippy” has been a guiding force throughout in terms of perspective and framing in this process. I have found myself asking on multiple occasions, “How can I reframe this so it’s in my canoe?” This has helped reassert the reverse gaze, which has kept my focus for making objects in this thesis on creating visuals that, when depicting an injustice or form of violence, use settler rather than Indigenous bodies.

I’m very interested in Dr. Gerald McMaster’s work around what he thinks of as the “reverse gaze” (McMaster, 2016) and how I might use it to subvert the default Eurocentric way of looking at Canada’s past and present. McMaster looks to the “contact zone” – a term was

coined by literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt – to refer to “social spaces where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt, 1991). In his research, McMaster uses the contact zone to “examine Indigenous peoples’ views – past and present – of colonizing populations through the visual arts, and how both sides influence one another” (cited in Oesthoek, 2016).

A primary criticism of non-Indigenous social justice and decolonization efforts is that they fall into a category of hollow settler “moves to innocence,” whereby settler guilt and complicity are avoided in work that often benefits only the settler and/or their career (Tuck & Yang, 2009). Decolonization in this context refers to the process of understanding the history of Indigenous colonization and rediscovering ancestral traditions and cultural values while considering possible futures (Smith, 1999). I also refer to it within [first name] Regan’s suggestion in *Unsettling The Settler Within* that decolonizing must include learning how to “unsettle ourselves to name and then transform the settler – the colonizer who lurks within – not just in words but by our actions as we confront the history of colonization, violence, racism, and injustice that remains part of the Indian Residential School legacy today” (2010: 11). These thinkers have provided a sort of checklist for me. As I went about my making and writing, I often found myself asking, “Is this idea a hollow settler move?” or, in the case of my work the *Acknowledgment Machine*, “Does this effectively critique such moves?” In terms of unsettling myself, I found the best way for me to do this was again through the application of conversation in addition to my readings. Problematic conversations based in ignorance prompted this work, so it made sense to me that productive conversations with knowledgeable Indigenous writers, artists, and educators like Bonnie Devine, Lee Maracle, and Aylan Couchie might provide some solutions.

These conversations produced insights for addressing common settler retorts and misconceptions, in an accessible way that creates empathy without pity and educates without shaming. It is this conversational framework I have tried to emulate in my practice and life. When attempting to discuss Indigenous-settler police relations and the wicked combination of violence and apathy therein through my work, I don't feel that as white artist I have a claim to depict that issue (without Indigenous collaboration perhaps) in the way that Kent Monkman does in his paintings *The Scream* (2017) or *Victory for the Water Protectors* (2018). In both of these works, police officers can be seen acting in a physically aggressive manner towards Indigenous women, men, and children. While this is certainly strong and effective imagery in both cases, as a member of the oppressive group in these instances of white settler police violence, were I to make work showing Indigenous bodies being harmed, it would take on a different and potentially harmful meaning.

This intentionality around using the reverse gaze to depict settler bodies as oppressors instead of Indigenous bodies as victims informed the making of *1868-2019* (the all white hand positioned in a “grabbing” motion and RCMP uniform sleeve), and influenced my leaning into the colour white as an aesthetic in both the space and the individual pieces of work.

By using colour to create an overwhelming sense of whiteness that I would contend most people of colour feel routinely in this country, I am symbolically forcing the white people in the room to have some minor experience of that sense of ever-present whiteness themselves. When I did go about making *1868-2019*, I again leaned into this aesthetic, by casting the gold-coloured authentic RCMP uniform buttons in hydrocal, making them and the whole piece a white hue. The depiction of the white grabbing hand without showing who it is grabbing is also intentional in keeping with the above stated ethos.



## **Recontextualize**

My process of experimentation explores ways of re-contextualizing everyday objects in the Canadian household and use their familiarity and innocuousness as a point of entry. As a person might put up a work of art in their home as a conversation starter, I take something from the home, rework it and put it up in an art gallery with the same aim. Robert Gober does this through the careful recreation of everyday household objects, like his 1989 work, *Cat Litter*. I do this within my thesis work in *Missing* where I recreated a milk carton as a vehicle to discuss the prioritization of white over Indigenous bodies in missing persons investigations. At a glance, the milk carton appears like any other save for the missing white woman depicted on its side. When one takes a closer look through the secondary lens of augmented reality, the true purpose of the work is made clear via the scores of missing Indigenous women's faces that are revealed.

## **Represent**

The work I have made represents my core conceptual ideas through various visual objects. The artists and thinkers mentioned throughout this document, both casually and in the literature review, deal with issues around representation within their own practices/research. Dr. Chris Finley (2011) and Kent Monkman 2017 both tackle the white gaze and undoing of the colonizers' depiction of Indigenous bodies. Ai Weiwei (2017) and Gober (1989) subvert the everyday in a way that recontextualizes daily acts and objects into political ones. Robyn DiAngelo (2017) does the legwork (through years of research as a sociologist) of unpacking white people *for* white people and forces the white reader to look inwards, confront their own biases, and question what it really means to be "white." DiAngelo's assumption of the role of

labourer in undoing white bias and ignorance provides me with not only an education on these matters but also an example of someone walking their talk, as it were.

DiAngelo also critiques the white liberal subject, writing, “I believe, that *white* progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color” (quoted in Waldman, 2018, para.6). Not only do these white progressives fail to see their complicity, but they also take a self-serving approach to ongoing anti-racism efforts: “To the degree that white progressives think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived.” DiAngelo claims, “The most effective adaptation of racism over time is the idea that racism is a conscious bias held by mean people” (qtd in Waldman, 2018).

DiAngelo’s book, *White Fragility* (date?), is both a goalpost and cautionary tale with regards to my methodological approach, as DiAngelo is a research scientist and has worked with reams of hard and anecdotal data. From a personal perspective, I, a white settler, attempt to engage other white people in conversation about visual representations of our colonialist and white supremacist history and present moment.

Katy Waldman writes that “The value in *White Fragility* lies in its methodical, irrefutable exposure of racism in thought and action, and its call for humility and vigilance” (2018). Her unpacking of core concepts around white privilege and years of experience running corporate diversity workshops where she tried (and often failed) to talk to white people about racial inequality have made *White Fragility* as close to a “How To” guide as one could hope for in terms of this thesis work, especially as I attempt to translate DiAngelo’s unpacking of concepts and context into my own work.

As someone who is looking to reverse the white gaze and represent historical and current acts of colonial violence in the everyday environment, I must be careful to ensure that any

representations I create do not turn into acts of colonization. The work of the above artists and writers combined with my methodological approaches—sprinkled with DiAngelo’s call for humility and vigilance—are currently the best solution I have for this issue.

## **Recast**

In this project, I attempt to recast my white settler family in their own mind’s eye. My work targets both historical and current methods of whitewashing and inequity that are insidious in our ways of thinking and knowing as settlers and/or white people. If effective, I believe this recasting could cause a shift in the viewer’s perception, away from baked-in historical notions of white colonialists (for example, the genocidal Sir John A. MacDonald) as heroes and nation-builders into realizations of their complicity in current ongoing conditions of inequity. In some cases, this means learning that concepts like *whitewashing* and *privilege* even exist. The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei critiqued a nation’s idea of itself versus its grim reality in his 2017 work *Law of the Journey*. The piece was a giant inflatable boat filled with people wearing life jackets made from PVC, released in Australia during the Sydney Biennale (an implied time of national pride) and used their work and the media to take the country to task over its low refugee acceptance numbers.

The most successful outcome of my thesis would be—as it was with Ai Weiwei’s work—for the white viewer to come away with a sense of their own complicity in the unequal systems they benefit from, and thus have recast their sense of self. In the next chapter, I discuss some case studies artists that work in the same arena that my practice seeks to engage in.



## **Chapter 2: Case Studies as Literature Review**

In this chapter, I look at a wide selection of artists and writers. Their origins and mediums vary widely, but they all do work that falls within the previous chapter's "three Rs" of recontextualization, representation, and recasting the viewer. As I was producing this practice-based thesis, I found that conducting a review of artworks and the approaches artists took to be the most beneficial to my research.

This is not to say that I haven't been informed by other literature for this thesis; I refer to Sto:lo author Lee Maracle, for example, and how both the conversation she and I shared, and her written work informed my worldview and approach to working within the reverse gaze, but the literature review remains predominantly focused on artwork and artists' practices.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first shows case studies of Indigenous artists and artists of colour doing work in the realm of my three Rs with regards to the politics of race, identity, and/or colonialism. The second briefly details some white artists. The brevity here is intentional in part but also accidental. On the one hand, I enjoy being able to use the small platform of this thesis to offer a space of prominence and import to artists of colour who I respect, who are doing great work in the areas of my research. On the other hand, I couldn't find that many white folks whose work tackled the three Rs'. Certainly not in Canada. In fact, the first draft of this literature review contained only American artists, most of whom I had to categorise under the heading "Problematic White Artists," save for Robert Gober and, on some days, Ti-Rock Moore, which made my literature review more of a 'what not to do'. While I have certainly learned from these artists in the 'don't do' context, they really don't need to be given more air time or space. Subsequently, only the case study on Canada's own Norval Morrisseau-style imitator, Amanda PL, is featured in this chapter.

## **Indigenous Artists and Artists of Colour**

### **Artist: Aylan Couchie**

It should be noted that this artist and I have had conversations about our respective work. She has provided invaluable insight and advice regarding the objects I have made and how a white settler such as myself might go about engaging appropriately on the issues detailed in this thesis.

In her 2017 Master's thesis, *very fine people on both sides*, Aylan Couchie explores counter- or "anti-" monuments as well as her experience working in the arts as an Indigenous artist in the post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) era. She critiques reconciliation projects where a lack of concern for access to things like counselling on a project where Indigenous and settler artists were making work literally in an old residential school building and calls them a "rush towards conciliation." Adding that these projects often had non-Indigenous peoples controlling the plan for reconciliation (Couchie, 2017: 12). Couchie explores the disruption of conciliation by non-Indigenous Canadians and describes them as well-intentioned people that cause harm "by taking space where Indigenous people could be better positioned to implement necessary changes in their respective communities" (13). Couchie continues, "Many settler Canadians are creating their own narrative and in doing so, they displace Indigenous artists, writers and musicians from mainstream conversations surrounding reconciliation" (13). When researching Canadian monuments that were up for potential removal due to the genocidal tendencies of the men they depicted. Couchie noted a connection between people who opposed removal and their views on reconciliation:

I noted that the resistance to monument removal and/or re-contextualization is closely linked to racial ideologies. This understanding provides an indicator as to where people are positioned on the social spectrum of engaging in reconciliation. The power dynamics of monuments as presented in the case studies of Cornwallis and Robert E. Lee, lie within varying degrees of ideologies that include: 1) nationalism mixed with racism and 2) erasure mixed with oppression, or rather, the struggle to free oneself from oppression. (2017: 14)

Through her artistic practice, Couchie made several interventions, discussed below.

### *Land*

The City of Barrie's Canada 150 celebration saw the installation of a commemorative Sesquicentennial Clock. Couchie notes this occurred "...on the same shoreline that once sustained thousands of Wendat and Anishinaabe peoples" (18). As a fundraiser, the city offered the public the chance to purchase custom-engraved paving stones. The stones would then be installed into the parkade. Couchie purchased four of these stones as an intervention into the site (see fig. 1). Two of the stones were ordered in English and two in Anishinaabemowin; they are engraved as follows:

Stone #1: THIS LAND RUNS ON ANISHINAABE TIME

Stone #2: THIS LAND RUNS ON WENDAT TIME

Stone #3: NI WAAMJIGAADEG AKI

Stone #4: NI WAAMJIGAADEG DEBWEWIN (18)



Fig.1. *Stone #3*, courtesy of the artist.

Couchie writes, “By intervening in Barrie’s attempt to maintain the status quo, *Land* quietly disrupts the settler-narrative through the insertion of Indigenous presence. Its intended function is to serve as resistance to Indigenous erasure and as a permanent land acknowledgement” (20).

She cites Natalia Krzyżanowska’s theories on counter-monuments, which I don’t discuss, but is worth noting here as it appears to be the underpinnings of Couchie’s approach and is a concept I find deeply appealing:

Counter-monuments are almost always multi-meaningful with the multiplicity of their meanings open to the desired polysemy of interpretations of the counter-monuments’ end-receivers. Their resistance or the protest component are further emphasised by the fact that, as such, counter-monuments aim to bring to the fore and critique what is often forgotten, omitted or silenced by the collectivity – especially in relation to its collective history – in the official narratives of the past. (qtd. in Couchie, 20)



Materials: Four custom-made plinths, four custom-made acrylic vitrines and smudge ashes saved in a jar. I had the opportunity to spend time in this gallery installation doing the documentation photography for the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design (IAMD) program.

*Aki* builds on the work and phrases in *Land*. The phrases from *Land* are used again here and are further informed "...through materials and mode of display" (Couchie, 2017: 20).

Couchie writes:

As I created the words from ashes, I thought about the preciousness of land and language, one that was lost to me through my grandfather's residential school experience. The decision to display this work, on plinths, under the protection of clear vitrines spoke as much to the value of these delicate words in material form as it does to Anishinaabemowin, one of many Indigenous languages endangered through residential school policy. (2017: 24)

Couchie also has a stencil based on street version of *Aki* that she spray-painted around OCAD during her thesis exhibition that read "THIS LAND RUNS ON HAUDENOSAUNEE TIME," which is the territory on which the OCAD University's Graduate Gallery sits. Additionally, this thesis project had a collaborative component with Anishinaabe artist Raven Davis, who is known for their critical work around Canada 150, called *The De-Celebration of Canada*. Entitled *Emancipate*, the work of Couchie and Davis starts to lose its direct relevance to the way I am interested in making interventions into representation and narratives around colonialism (Davis performs a bodily intervention with the Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville, Virginia while Couchie films and take photos). Still, it is a powerful piece and worth exploring more outside of the context of this case study.

**Artist: Raven Davis**

Davis is an Anishinaabe, mixed race, 2-Spirit multidisciplinary artist and activist. *The Decelebration of Canada 150* is a body of work and a performance piece created to critique and expose the myth of the confederation of Canada and the discourse and erasure of Indigenous people, Indigenous sovereignty, and Indigenous history in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Canada more broadly. This project aligns with my own work in so many ways, both visually and thematically, that I feared I may unintentionally give the appearance of appropriating the style/approach of an important Indigenous artist on these issues. It is fortunate that I found Davis' full 150 projects in the fall of 2018 (I'd seen a portion of it criticizing the free parks pass in 2017) as opposed to after my thesis defence in 2019.

This work calls out colonial violence bluntly and with a sharp, angry wit, and I mean that as a compliment. In particular, Davis' *Doctrine of Discovery Pass* brings together photographs from reservations, edited to resemble a Parks Canada 150 discovery pass, complete with sarcastic PR messaging: "Get curious and discover Canada's unique hidden treasures... Take a journey in time and explore the abandoned homes of Canada's most precious first peoples... A Truly Authentic Canadian Experience!" In *Genocide Enforcer*, a Mountie-shaped whiskey decanter (found object) highlights the relationship of police and Indigenous peoples in Canada (Cronin, *Thecoast.ca*). In *Indians Are Tired c/o Colonial Tire*, Canadian Tire money is arranged in a repeating pattern with Justin Trudeau's face photoshopped on each bill. Davis says, "In our contemporary context, there's an understanding reconciliation has occurred. It hasn't. Within our current governmental structures, the harm is ongoing, and has not ended" (Davis, 2017 n.p.). This is an example of work that closely resembles something I've been working on both

thematically (forcing people to confront colonialism in Canada, working with everyday objects) and in more literal terms: superimposing prime ministers' faces onto new contexts, working with currency (in my case, an augmented reality piece that reimagines the scenes on the \$5 bill), and repeating an image/object.

### *Whiteness is Civility*

This work is an installation with a white Canadian flag used as a projection screen. The piece speaks to the idea that white bodies are equated with natural goodness or civility. Similar to the encoded language people use to equate black bodies with badness or as uncivilised. In the U.S., an “urban” or “dangerous” neighbourhood is code for an area with largely black or African American population (DiAngelo, 2012). Davis says,

White bodies are civil. Ten white people running down the street, that's civil. Ten people of colour running down the street, and something is wrong. Civility has a close relationship to Canada 150. The 'civil' church was instrumental to Indigenous genocide in Canada. It is instrumental in dealing with the 'Indian Problem'. (qtd in Henay, 2017)

Davis' work makes people look at Canada 150 from the artist's lens; from the viewpoint of an Indigenous person, it's pretty easy to see that the Canada 150 celebration isn't for everyone. The work also asks what we as a nation truly have to celebrate and disrupts Canadian notions of history and what is worth honouring.

### **Artist: Kent Monkman**

Monkman is a Cree artist whose work subverts the white gaze and recasts gender and power roles between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Monkman often uses humour to tackle the

white gaze and undoing colonial depictions of Indigenous bodies. For example, *Miss Chief's Praying Hands* are pressed together in the Christian prayer position, while the materiality (silicone rubber) and the shape of the sculpture (that of an enormous buttplug) confer a different meaning on the act of worship. Monkman further uses kitsch and Canadiana in the installation, *Starvation Plates*, where a long table is laid for a feast, with fancy canapes, china, crystal, and silver. At the far end are a few plates on rough boards that are scattered with bones of small animals. The objects in this work, are arranged to highlight the impact of the end of the fur trade on Indigenous people.

Monkman's image often appears in his own work. This ability to self-locate within the work, even though it mostly takes place in a queered colonial Canadian past, is very important. Monkman is still referencing (and is therefore able to insert himself into and comment on) these narratives of oppressive colonialism that are within his own and his ancestors' lived experiences. Similar to Davis' work, part of the power and honesty in Monkman's art stems from him being, to borrow a psychological term, a part of the "in-group" of which he is speaking. Running parallel to this is the concept of "punching up": taken originally from the reference to different weight classes in boxing then colloquially popularised in comedy circles, this refers to the use of rhetoric and critique to mock and dismantle power structures rather than taking aim at the disempowered. There is of course power dynamics at play here that require the person attempting to punch up to appropriately self-locate and check their privilege.

As members of historically oppressed peoples, Monkman and Davis are well within their rights to critique Canada's whitewashed history and demand better of Canadians during Canada 150, the very name of which is an affront to the more than 11,000 years Indigenous peoples have lived on this continent. These two artists are part of a minority group in multiple ways, as they

are also both members of the LGBTQ community. All of this is to say the Indigenous artists I've looked at in my thesis research have made brilliant examples of art that subverts and reverses the colonial gaze and calls into question dominant views of a shared past and, through that, our present and possible futures.

These artists are Indigenous, and I must self-locate as a settler when discussing their work. That means my own process must inherently take a different journey from a different place, and concepts like punching up (more accurately, not punching down) become very important. It is also at least partially why, when Raven Davis' work resembles what I've got in my sketchbook, I react in fear and anxiety. It's not because these are the only ideas I'll ever have; if anything, I have too many ideas for my own good, but part of my discomfort may be that I've never had to actively think about my race as relevant to my work or position in society. Angela Pelster-Wiebe (2018) believes that it is the responsibility of white artists to start tackling white supremacy, but also notes that "white artists often fail at this work because they haven't centered themselves within the violence of their own whiteness" (n.p.). She also recognizes feeling defensive when challenged: "I've learned that to feel the emotions of defensiveness rise up within me is to wake to the violence of my absorbed white supremacy" (Pelster-Wiebe, 2018, n.p.). While I am currently not faced with any scrutiny over my work that has me rattled, this does touch on some of my fears, even as I mull over feeling insecure about "my" ideas that Davis has already executed beautifully. Pelster-Wiebe hits the nail on the head regarding what white people often do when feelings defensive:

I've seen too many liberal, white 'ally' artist/gatekeepers transform that defensiveness into distance between themselves and that feeling, and then hear their proselytizing that

to be white and to address racism is to insert yourself into a conversation that you don't have the right to be a part of. (2018, n.p)

I must be careful to find an authentic way to be a part of this important dialogue, without engaging in the making-safe act of defensiveness and distance. Leaning into rather than away from the hard conversations may in fact be the most important act a settler can engage in. At least as a step one. I found some of my work mirroring Davis' before I encountered it. This told me three (potentially wrong and imaginary or right and terrifying) things:

1. (Selfishly) I am behind the curve of public interest, this has been done better and by someone smarter, and thus my work isn't important.
2. If my work looks like an Indigenous artist's I haven't found my own voice; I've failed to self-locate and am potentially working in an area that isn't mine to take up space in.
3. If the above is true, then I need to work more on my point of view and what I might have to contribute to the discussion as a white settler.

I attempt to resolve numbers 2 and 3 through looking at artists and writers whose work involves race and inequity. Ai Weiwei is an interesting example of someone who speaks truth to power both from part of his own in-group as a Chinese national, but also as someone who has been able to make art that is critical of and advocating for groups that he is in no way a part of such as fleeing refugees.

### **Artist: Ai Weiwei**

Weiwei's work is conceptual, political, and often presented as large-scale installations. He often subverts objects to critique power structures, such as Chinese governmental actions. He showed his 2017 artwork *Law of the Journey*, a giant inflatable boat filled with people wearing

life jackets made from PVC, in Australia during the Sydney Biennale (an implied time of national pride) and used the work and the media to take the country to task over its low refugee acceptance numbers. This work subverts the everyday items in a way that recontextualizes daily acts and objects into political ones. This piece is a successful example of an artist coming from outside of both the group he is advocating on behalf of (i.e., refugees) and the country he is critiquing (i.e., Australia). It is also worth noting that this form of allyship was much more likely to hinder his career than help it, as he was essentially biting the hand that feeds him via presenting this work at the Sydney Biennale. Through this act of putting an issue above his own personal gain, Weiwei uses his privilege and platform in the art world to create space and discussion on the refugee crisis and hypocrisy of nations celebrating their “greatness” while refusing entry to those fleeing war. Here, Weiwei provides an example of what a genuine commitment to allyship looks like. These case studies comprise a very small sampling of the Indigenous and artists of colour that are contributing meaningfully to this field of art making.<sup>1</sup>

### **Problematic White Artists Making Art About Race**

Through looking at the work of the artists researched for this section, I can see some of the good intentions I myself may have from arm’s length, unclouded by emotion as it is not my own work. Through the process of preparing this section, I have learned from the missteps of other white artists and proceed in a more self-aware nuanced way that hopefully avoids causing harm or reinscribing racial trauma as some of the works discussed and footnoted below may

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<sup>1</sup> Other artists researched as part of this category Yinka Shonibare, Zanele Muholi, Kara Walker, *Ogimaa Mikana Project* by Anishinaabe artist Susan Blight and scholar Hayden King.

have done.<sup>2</sup> For this case study I focussed on the work of Canadian artist Amanda PL as the controversy surrounding her 2017 exhibition at *Visions Gallery* in Toronto, Canada.

PL, a settler Canadian painting in famous Anishnaabe artist Norval Morrisseau's Woodlands style. Visions Gallery cancelled a 2017 exhibition of her work in Toronto after public outcry of cultural appropriation (*CBC*). PL's work is so blatantly tone deaf that her paintings themselves won't be critiqued in this case study. However, I did feel that I could learn from her equally tone-deaf response to the backlash. She says she was "surprised" by the reaction and even though a lot of Indigenous people had a problem with her work and the platform it was being given—taking that opportunity away from an Indigenous artist—that "...they think that I'm taking away from the culture, but really I'm not." Adding that it's "a shame to say that an artist can't create something because they're not from that race" (qtd. in Nasser, *CBC*). This artist was told repeatedly by the community she was appropriating from that what she was doing was not OK and in fact harmful, yet she continued to dig in and defend rather than listen. This is where I found my teachable moment in her story: sometimes you need to shut up and listen. And sometimes you'll get it wrong, and how you deal with getting it wrong can be the most important part.

### **People Writing about Race**

In her book *White Fragility*, Robin DiAngelo does the work (through years of research as a sociologist) of unpacking white people *to* white people and forces the white reader to look inwards and confront their own biases and what it really means to be white". DiAngelo claims,

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<sup>2</sup> Dana Schutz, *Open Casket* (2016), Sam Durant, *Scaffold* (2017), Ti-Rock Moore, *Installation of the body of Michael Brown* (2015).



“The most effective adaptation of racism over time is the idea that racism is conscious bias held by mean people” (qtd in Waldman, *New Yorker*, 2018).

Katy Waldman writes that “The value in *White Fragility* lies in its methodical, irrefutable exposure of racism in thought and action, and its call for humility and vigilance” (Waldman, 2018). Her unpacking of core concepts around white privilege and years of experience running corporate diversity workshops are where she tried (and often failed) to talk to white people about racial inequality. The inclusion of these elements has made *White Fragility* as close to a “How To” guide as one could hope for in terms of this thesis work as I attempt to translate the unpacking of concepts and context that she does over into my own work and approach to communicating.

As someone who is looking to work within the reverse gaze and represent historical and current acts of colonial violence in some instances, I must be very careful to ensure that any representations I make do not turn into acts of colonization. My attempt to self-inoculate against this outcome is through reading the work of Indigenous writers and reflecting on Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing.

Lee Maracle provides a pedagogical tool for me via her book *My Conversations with Canadians* (2017). Throughout, she gives longform responses to often-ignorant questions that Canadians have asked her over the last four decades and says it’s time Canadians got out of the “knower’s chair” (52), which is how she refers to the assumption that Canadians are naturally the teachers/helpers/deciders of truth, and Indigenous peoples are the students.

While reading the well-meaning but problematic questions Maracle unpacks and responds to, I ask for my own work, what might the right questions be? What should Canadians be asking? How can I get out of the knower’s chair in the way I move through this world, while also using

my privilege to engage white settler Canadians and dismantle our system of white supremacy, as Maracle says in answer to the problematic white question of “What can I do to help?” (49).

### **Chapter 3: Approach**

In this chapter I list then discuss the methods and methodologies used to create the artwork for *The White People Problem*.

Research Methods Used: Conversational interviews, Autoethnography, Various Production techniques and mediums for making work.

Methodologies used: Practice Led Research combined with the Reverse Gaze.

I experimented with the following methods of making and materials: photogrammetry, 3D printing, alginate casting, plumbing, electronic prototyping to create interactive electronic objects, CNC milling, silk-screening, casting (bronze, alginate, plaster, wax, aluminum) and Augmented Reality (AR).

For the purposes of transparency in this work, I again must self-locate as a white, cis-gender settler. My second form of self-location comes via my research. I look to scholars like Dr. Chris Finley (2017) for an Indigenous viewpoint on the white gaze. To further my understanding (without appropriating) Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge transfer, I have been reading the works of Judy Iseke (2011), who blends traditional Indigenous witnessing with the medium of filmmaking. I have also attempted to develop my own “settler” framework for my practice-led research via my primary advisor, Cree Métis artist and educator Jason Baerg. It is important to note that non-Indigenous researchers, as Ella Bennett writes, “should not claim to be using Indigenous methodology (lacking a tribal epistemic centre);” instead, we should “be informed by Indigenous knowledges and approaches to inquiry, so as to honour the communities we work with” (292). My third self-location, as can be found earlier, in this document’s literature

review, is that I look to locate the tenets of my developing practice and goals in the work of other artists and writers that are successful in achieving my three Rs.

When discussing issues of colonialism, race, and white privilege, there is always the risk of repeating harmful behaviours and becoming part of the problem as opposed to part of the solution. Though my work seeks to engage and educate other settlers with a focus on white people, it is also a process of my own growth and education and is not without problematic aspects and failures.

I believe this self-reflexive approach is key in moving forward, both as an artist and an ally, as it is the very same ask I am making of my audience when they experience my work. I too am complicit in colonialism and benefit from white privilege, and though this is important to acknowledge, it is also important to recognize the emotional labour of non-settler and/or non-white people that I have received guidance and education from, and the inherent risk in this process repeating a Eurocentric, harmful, colonialist pattern both of interaction and knowledge gathering.

### **Reverse Gaze as Methodology**

My approach has been informed by the concept of the reverse gaze. Though this term has not been recognised as a methodology on its own, it upholds the principles of autoethnography, especially when applied to a white settler attempting to reframe the gaze back onto and for their own white in-group. The reverse gaze is described as it relates to Dr. McMaster's research practice in Chapter One. It is also experiencing a moment in the field of anthropology where attempts at "developing a commitment for decentering Western epistemologies and promoting genuine multicultural dialogue in the study of humanity" (Harrison in Ntarangwi 2010: 126) are

being made. It is a fitting irony that a field that was literally founded on the premise of carrying out the white gaze is now seeking (so they say) ways to undo it.

I enacted the reverse gaze as methodology through the following processes: case studies of Indigenous artists asserting their worldview; working within decolonization and the reverse gaze; expressive, reflective, personal discussions; as well as broader social and academic discussions as inspiration for artworks, are all informed by the principal of reverse gaze.

The making I have done has been influenced by the reverse gaze as conceptual and methodological framework in quite a literal way. When I wanted to speak to the issue of a lack of clean water on Northern Ontario reserves, for example, my first instinct as a reformed photojournalist was to visit these communities and do narrative interviews and portraits. Through using the reverse gaze, however, I forced myself to think a little harder and ask how I could speak to this issue without having Indigenous folks take on the labour of educating people (yet again) on the issues. I also asked myself, “How can I engage this topic without representing an Indigenous body? How can *I* do the work?” After all, as Bonnie Devine said to me, as included above, “The Indigenous community doesn’t need to be told these things, yours does, do the work in your own community.” Hence the piece *Water for Whites*, where I show my predominantly white community that has continued access to potable water, surrounded by Indigenous communities that do not. This work illustrates the privileging of a single white community over many, many Indigenous ones in Northern Ontario.

### **Auto-Ethnography as Prompt and Method**

The impetus for this thesis are my experiences growing up in Northern Ontario and seeing the divide in attitudes between Indigenous and settler communities towards Canadian

history and society. This position is an important tool with regards to the underpinnings of the reverse gaze: auto-ethnography is a methodological approach that must, in the end, be directed both towards the topic of investigation and one's position within it, rather than one's personal experiences alone. I employed auto-ethnography through conversations with my settler family members, noting both of our opinions and approaches, then making notes and self-reflexive journaling and sketching. This then led to ideation in terms of how I might better respond to/unpack these problematic conversations via making. In my work, however, I cite autoethnography as more of a method in terms of how I deployed it rather than as a methodological approach. Further, practice-led research encompasses much of the self-reflexive aspects of autoethnography, and I would consider this thesis autoethnographic-ish.

### **Practice-Led Research**

Each piece of work has been made in response to other methodologies I employed such as auto-ethnography. I used an iterative approach to making, and a large part of this document is made up of process documentation such as images/sketches, process journals, and self-reflexive writing about my practice-led research.

The methodology of this thesis draws upon my previous life experiences in Northern Ontario, working as a foreigner in post-colonial countries, and the conversations being had in what I have termed my white in-group, or family. As my making was prompted by a need to offer a critical response to the hate I was seeing in my life and increasingly online; I chose auto-ethnographic method, in that I'm pulling the research from lived conversation, combined with a pluralist, practice-led methodology. Through this approach, I am making things in different outputs and mediums. Both the thing and the medium are dictated by the content and meaning of

my response. For example, my background is in photography, but in several cases I work with either built or found objects from the home.

This is in part due to the fact that the home is where many of my conversations took place (and also where a bigot might feel most safe), hence my making has followed a more sculptural object-oriented path that diverges significantly with my mostly digital photographic past. This is also intentional in that my approach prioritizes the making of things and expanding my practice and skills as a multidisciplinary artist, hence quite literally, a practice-led methodology.

In terms of structure, I followed Gray and Malins's basic formula of artistic research below (2004):

Artistic Process: Acts Inside the Practice (see fig.2):

- Committed to an eye on the conditions of the practice
- Documenting the acts (video interviews, photographic documentation of works in progress and process, notes, online blog)
- Moving between insider and outsider positions (intensive engagement vs reflective)
- Preparing works of art (this is ongoing and in Digital Futures is referred to as prototyping)

Arguing for a Point of View (Context, Tradition, and Their Interpretation):

- Social and theoretical imagination (My research questions + auto ethnographic prompts for making)
- Hermeneutics (How I interpret process, informational interviews, data)

- Conceptual, linguistic and argumentative innovations (ways of saying, ideas, notions and concepts that introduce something new)
- Verbalization (Colloquium, Defense, and exhibition)

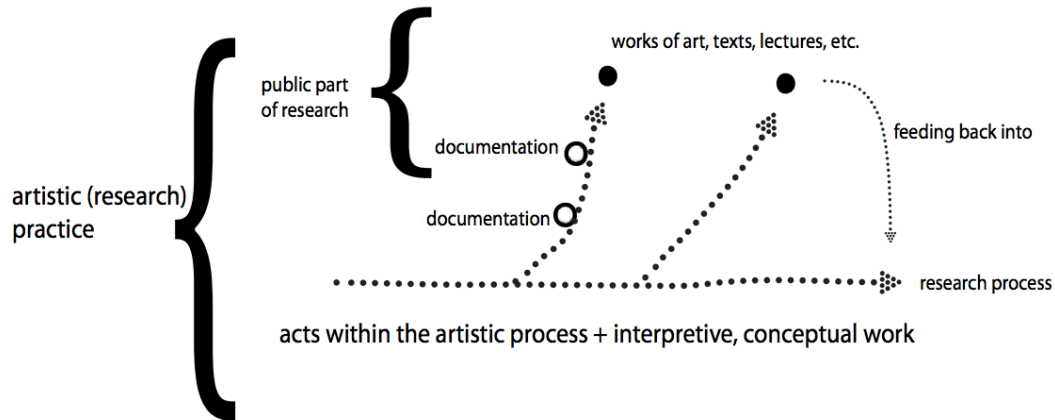


Fig.2. Diagram from Gray and Malins of *acts within the artistic process*  
 Source:[http://www.upv.es/laboluz/master/seminario/textos/Visualizing\\_Research.pdf](http://www.upv.es/laboluz/master/seminario/textos/Visualizing_Research.pdf)



## **Chapter 4: The Response**

### **Chapter Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the impetus for and medium of each piece of work made throughout this thesis. As much as possible, I use self-location as a point of entry when discussing Indigenous-settler issues of inequity, such as in *Water for Whites* (below) where I try to use my privilege as point of comparison and complicity. In *Water for Whites*, I compare my own hometown, which has a settler majority, with many of the surrounding Northern Ontario communities that are on long-term water advisory alerts (i.e., they have to boil, or in some cases ship in, water to bathe and drink). One reserve has had a water advisory for over 20 years at the time of this research (*Ending long-term drinking water advisories*, 2018).

This work encourages people to look at the topographic map of the province and consider why Thunder Bay (1,800 km northwest of Toronto) has clean, potable water, while communities within 600 km of the province's capital do not. A predominantly white colour palette is employed throughout the space and each object. In the exhibition, they are meant to be displayed as a deconstructed home-meets-gallery layout. Everyday household items are mounted out of place (a fridge door hangs on a wall, soda cans are set on plinths), and the colour white is, ironically, used as an equalizer. At a glance, each object seems similarly unremarkable. It is only upon closer consideration that their true meanings become apparent.

A good example of this would be the literal look through a different lens that Augmented Reality (AR) provides in *Missing*. One of the aims of the white-on-white motif is to provide the viewer/experiencer with a sense of overwhelming whiteness. As this work is directed at white people specifically, this aesthetic works to confront white people with an overwhelming

whiteness that hopes to metaphorically mimic, in some small way, what people of color experience continually: these white structures of oppression are a constant, but many white people don't see them. I believe that as long as white people (who hold much of the power in this nation) continue to not *see* the facets of oppression, they won't act against them.

## Have a Coke



(Fig. 3.) *Have a Coke* in gallery

Medium: Cast aluminum and 3D prints. Iterations: Two aluminum, 11 3D printed versions.

*Have a Coke* uses auto-ethnography via comparison through self-location as an entry point to discussing issues of food insecurity in Canada's northern (mostly Inuit and/or Indigenous) communities and reserves. Through contrasting the price of a 12-case of soda in my hometown of Thunder Bay with the Inuit hamlet of Arctic Bay, this work highlights just how inaccessible, either through cost or availability, basic foodstuffs can be outside of areas with settlers as the majority of the population. Through my research I found that Arctic Bay had the largest difference in price from my own city; this, coupled with the similarity in names, moved me to choose Arctic Bay for my comparison. However, it is important to note that other communities in Ontario like Attawapiskat are currently suffering from inflated food prices, with

raspberries priced at \$0.50 CAD a piece (White, 2018) and a case of orange soda routinely selling for over \$26 CAD (Murray, 2016).



(Fig. 4.) Source: Food Secure Canada via CTV, 2016

### **Water for Whites**

*Water for Whites* serves as an anchor point for the work in the gallery setting. Due in part to its sheer scale (over 4x6ft), it is arguably the object in the space that carries the most direct pedagogical messaging and clear didactics: here is a CNC milled (see fig. 7) topographic map of Northern Ontario with five taps, and visibly dirty water pours out of four taps representing the Indigenous communities while the one centered (read: prioritized) tap meant to represent my community with a white majority, runs clean.



Fig. 5. Final version in operation at the Toronto Media Arts Centre.

## **Missing**

Medium: Milk Carton Sculpture, Silk Screening, Augmented Reality (AR). Iterations: One cast aluminum version, one 3D printed backup, 6 test iterations.

*Missing* is a clear response to the prioritization of white bodies over Indigenous ones. The racist incidents and statistics cited throughout this document show that there is clearly systemic, race-based violence being enacted on the Indigenous community, yet outside of Indigenous groups, there is little outrage and public concern. When my own mother went missing from Thunder Bay in November of 2017, there were four other (Indigenous) women also missing from the city that week; but when I typed “missing woman Thunder Bay” into the Canadian

Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) national website – the country's largest national news platform – my white mother was the only woman listed. The violence this country does to Indigenous bodies has become so normalised that when a white woman goes missing it is considered to be newsworthy, but when four Indigenous women do the same, it's just a Thursday. *Missing* appears to be a white milk carton on a long, narrow wall-mounted shelf. It is blank save for the black and white image of a white woman printed on one side in the style of a 1980s missing person ad. Here is where AR provides a literal other lens to look through. When viewed through AR on a mobile phone, the screen is filled with milk cartons with the faces of missing Indigenous women pulled with permission from the CBC's missing and murdered Indigenous women database. The images continue to change to a new woman, a new face, every few seconds. The intent is to, again, make a comparison via my own self-location. When my mother went missing in Thunder Bay, it was national news. She and I both have the privilege of police concern for the well-being of our bodies because we are white.

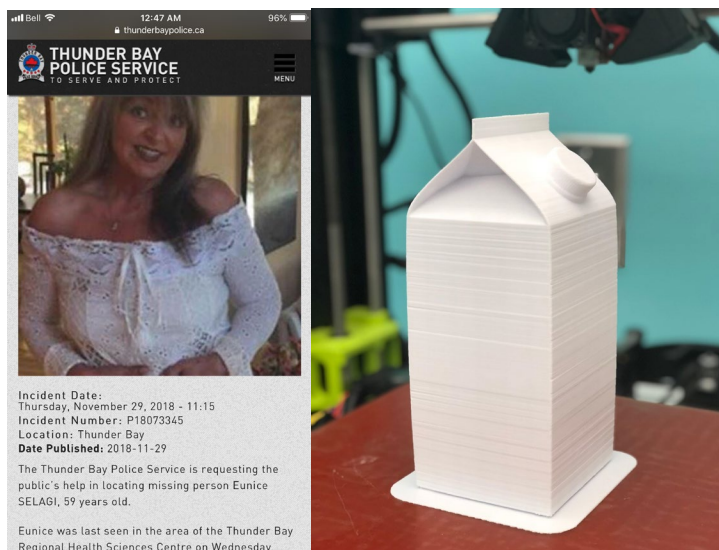


Fig. 6. Screenshot of my mother's missing person report. Fig. 7. 3D printed prototype



Fig. 8. Final result in gallery.

**1868-2019**



Fig. 9. Hydrocal prototype. Fig. 10. Final sculpture.

Medium: Hydrocal casting of human hand made with alginate mold, authentic RCMP buttons cast in hydrocal via silicone mold. Resin casting made with alginate mold. Iterations: Four hydrocal hands, Four Resin hands. I also employed photogrammetry to create a digital rendering of the hand as a backup that could then be 3D printed.

The all-white Mountie hand of this piece reaches out from a white wall in a grabbing gesture. The RCMP insignia can be seen on its sleeve coat buttons. A specific model was selected to be cast for this object based on size and type of hand (large, visibly veined) and intentionally positioned in an aggressive “grabbing” manner. This work is in response to a multitude of events in the RCMP’s history up to the time of this document’s writing. Originally the North-West Mounted Police, they were formed largely to “tame wild Indian tribes” (Brown 40), then throughout the 1900s, the RCMP forcibly removed children from their homes to attend Canada’s infamous Indian Residential School System (LeBeuf, 2011). The mounted police have also been accused of multiple cases of sexual harassment against female officers (Tunney *CBC News*), and in January of 2019, they broke the Wet’suwet’en First Nation checkpoint blockade (located on Wet’suwet’en land) arresting 14 pipeline protesters (Bellrichard 2019). A video posted to the CBC’s website shows RCMP officers climbing the barricades, grabbing protestors and handcuffing them while they lay on their stomachs in the snow. One could argue the pipeline case is different and more of a political grey area than the black and white of my previous historical references, but regardless of the semantics of each scenario, the imagery of the grabbing hand I use in this work is a use of symbolism that is meant to speak to the present day as much as the past.





Fig. 11-14. Process

## Passive Aggressive Fridge



Fig. 15. Installation view.

Medium: Found fridge door, magnets. Iterations: Found one fridge door, ground off rust using an angle grinder.

*Passive Aggressive Fridge* plays with the (North American) notion of the kitchen fridge as a family communication hub. Magnets often hang report cards, reminders to pick up groceries or little Timmy from wherever, or in my house, passive aggressive notes to one another. In my house, the washing machine was also the site of many dot matrix-printed threats about it being “half load season for trucks, not washers,” but I suspect that’s a bit more of a Boyce-specific

colloquialism than the fridge. The vintage white Westinghouse fridge door is wall-mounted with black sans serif letter magnets that are arranged to read: “I don’t know how to explain to you that you should care about other people.” The phrase is repeated multiple times via different notes and detritus that is tacked on the front of the fridge.

This exact phrase is taken (with permission) from Huffington Post contributor Kayla Chadwick (2017), though the sentiment is one I and many other people have echoed. Chadwick used the phrase when writing about her inability to engage in debate with people who opposed universal healthcare, for example, “Our disagreement is not merely political, but a fundamental divide on what it means to live in a society, how to be a good person, and why any of that matters” (Chadwick, 2017, n.p.). This sentiment is something that I have experienced time and time again in my auto-ethnographic conversations. I come up against the challenge of having first to attempt to teach basic empathy. How do you debate someone into caring about other people? (Chadwick). I found that after throwing all the facts I had in my arsenal at these conversations, even when I made a connection to something that tapped into their personal emotional wheelhouse (e.g., “Dad, you have two daughters. Imagine that we were Indigenous women. With the 1 in 4 missing or murdered rate, how would you feel?”) I really didn’t get anywhere substantive. You can’t logic someone out of a belief that they didn’t come to logically: “They will not yield to argument; for, as they were not reasoned up, they cannot be reasoned down” (Ames, 1804, n.p.). So, magnets on the fridge it was.

### **Family Heirloom, Colonial Rifle, 1904**

Medium: Shotgun with firing pin removed, white paint. Found in Grandmother’s closet.

Iterations: One.

Leaning on a white wall in a corner of the exhibition, *Family Heirloom* doesn't occupy a place of honour. Rather, it is barely noticeable among all of the other white objects on plinths or mounted in places of dominance. This is one of the works that more literally embodies both my aims and my actions. Through an affect of overwhelming whiteness, all the objects have been recontextualized. In any other room, a rifle in the corner would likely be obvious and threatening, but in this context of overwhelming whiteness both culturally and aesthetically, a weapon seems as normal as a can of coke. *Family Heirloom* makes literal the many weapons of settler culture and violence are codified as normal behaviours and objects. In fact, this was a normal object in my home; as a teenager I had a rifle in my room.

The rifle featured in this work, which I drilled the firing pin out of and painted white, was found in my grandmother's house. When I was working on this piece, I thought a lot about the man who shot and killed 22-year-old Red Pheasant First Nation Cree Colten Boushie and how he also had a weapon on hand in his home. Though his was a loaded semi-automatic Russian pistol, and though he shot the unarmed man in the head at point blank range, he was acquitted of murder by an all-white jury. Boushie's mother who was not present at the time of her son's shooting had *her* house searched by the police while she grappled with the news of her son's death. (Queenville, 2018).

## Colonial Radio



Fig. 16. Radio in gallery



Fig. 17. Wide shot of installation of radio

Medium: Repurposed vintage radio, Adafruit Feather microcontroller and Featherwing Musicmaker. Iterations: Current work in progress.

*Colonial Radio* plays a constant drone of racist quotes from Prime Minister John A. MacDonald and Duncan Campbell Scott, who was the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs from 1913 until 1932. The radio has multiple audio tracks that the user can turn the dial to and from. However, they cannot turn down the volume or turn it off.

This object was born out of my frustration over my inability to effectively communicate the true nature of men like MacDonald and others to my family. When trying to discuss the cultural and literal genocide enacted on Indigenous peoples, I would often be met by something akin to “Those were different times,” or “Yeah but he built this nation.” My hope is that by confronting the listener with the actual words these men said, they no longer prescribe “different times” as an appropriate excuse for a person who thought “The executions of the Indians ... ought to convince the Red Man that the White Man governs” (qtd. in Joseph, *10 Quotes John A. Macdonald Made about First Nations*).

## **Chapter 5: Future Research & Conclusion**

In this chapter I review work that is still in progress. I then summarize and reflect on my goals and research questions.

### **Work in Progress**

#### **The Acknowledgement Machine**

Medium: Vacuum formed plastic, Arduino microcontroller, coin slot, thermal printer. Iterations: Currently a work in progress.

*The Acknowledgement Machine* is a critique of some settler land acknowledgements I have witnessed that rang hollow to my ear. This is currently a work in process regarding my being able to articulate my messaging around the piece appropriately, and because the person I hired to assist me with some of coding was unable to complete the task.

*The Acknowledgement Machine* looks like a simple vintage soda or tampon machine one might find in their daily life. Embossed on its white front is the word *Treats*, with a fully functional coin slot, change button, and what appears to be a slot at the bottom from which to receive treats. After inserting a coin, the machine takes the money then does nothing. After pressing the “change” button once, it acknowledges that it took the money and thanks you via a paper receipt that is printed from what is most definitely not a treat slot. The more the button is pressed, the more condescending the machine becomes, with the last statement it prints reading “Words without action are meaningless.”

## **Conclusion**

What a ride it has been! I've made many things and broken many more. In regard to my artistic output goals and practice, this process has been technically successful in that I worked across many new and varied mediums, and greatly expanded my skill set. Now when I write interdisciplinary artist on my website biography, I'll actually mean it.

In terms of my main research questions on how I might use artistic practice as a meaningful tool to engage and inform white people about their role in colonialism and systems of white supremacy, I haven't measure that yet, and only plan to anecdotally in terms of the feedback I receive at my oral defence and during the installation of the work. I do feel that I have successfully worked with the reverse gaze and that all of the pieces I have created have been made with intentionality and are centered around the perpetrator (where relevant) rather than creating representations that re-victimize and cause harm. But that is not for me to say; it is for the audience of my work to decide. And if I'm told I am being wrong-headed or problematic, it is up to me to listen and course correct, unlike Amanda PL of literature review infamy.

Upon reflection, it could be argued that *Missing* does not work within the reverse gaze as it does depict Indigenous women. This was a carefully calculated choice on my part and I weighed the pros and cons of using icons or symbols rather than real women, but in the end I decided that the representation made of these women should not be by my own hand as it would be in the case of an icon or graphic; I would use images that had been consensually sourced and vetted, and the images would be of currently missing women and thus in everyone's interest to be seen. And finally, I believe that the act of using my own personal story and depicting my

mother (and her/our privilege) places me and this work in a position of vulnerability and equal status with the missing women shown and their family members.

As the making of this work was my response to conversations, media and teachings both good and bad that I have taken in during my life and the time of making this work, each object now serves as an autobiographical document in its own right. If an object is perceived by its audience to be ineffective in its communication and does not work within the reverse gaze, then I have failed, and this provides me with insight into my own practice and how I might do better in future. I do not claim to have made brilliant or life changing work, or even that it was done particularly well, but I do know that the work I have started through this thesis process and the conversations therein, is necessary and needed, in my family, and perhaps yours too.



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[&SortSpec=score+desc&HighLightFields=title,name&Language=fra&QueryParser=lac](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/lac-bac/resultats/images?form=image&lang=fra&FormName=Image+Search&PageNum=1&SortSpec=score+desc&HighLightFields=title,name&Language=fra&QueryParser=lac)

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## **Appendix A: The Conversations, Notes from Behind Pasty Lines**

Though the conversations had within my own white group were the prompt and a large part of the methodological approach for this work, I have chosen to place my autoethnographic notes from these conversations in the appendix, to avoid potentially reinscribing trauma by forcing someone to have to engage directly with some of the often-vitriolic conversations that my work is in response to. It is also why my work creates a new object that tries to shift a biased or ignorant white point of view rather than creating visuals that focus on “educating” by showing white harm and violence to make my point. People of colour need no reminder of how ever present racial biases and white violence are. Similarly, my autoethnographic online research can also be found in the appendices.

### **Police**

Who: Dad

What: Discussing reports from Tanya Talaga’s *Seven Fallen Feathers* of woman calling the police because her 15-year-old ward hadn’t come home. Was told by police that he was probably just out partying and would come home on his own after the weekend.

Dad Response: Yeah but imagine how tired that cop is of getting these calls day in and day out.

Me: You have more empathy for a tired (hypothetically tired that is) cop than a potentially dead Indigenous minor, who the cop is literally his job to care about.

Who: Dad

What/Who: Tina Fontaine death. In car driving in Thunder Bay

Me: Remark about how her alleged killer got off.

Dad: Well if she'd been in school where she belonged, this never would have happened.

*Note:* Tina Fontaine died in August of 2014, (15 years-old) school was not in session as it was the summer break. His mind immediately went to a place of assuming the victim was not only complicit in her own death, but also assumed her to be a criminal via the assumption that the minor was truant from legally mandated high school. He did not comment in anyway on the white middle-aged man accused of murdering her. Even though it was now 2018 and this case and trial had been in the news for years, he still had no idea that Tina was on summer break at the time of her death, and was staying in a Winnipeg hotel she was put up in by Manitoba Child and Family Services. She wasn't some kid skipping school and getting into trouble, she was in the system, as system that chose to put a 77 lb 15-year-old child from a rural reserve in an urban Winnipeg hotel.

Who Dad & Cousin

What/Who: Shooting death of 22-year-old Colten Boushie by Gerald Stanley.

Response: Stanley shouldn't be charged with murder; these kids were on his property and stealing. AKA White victim, assumed Indigenous criminal.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/what-happened-stanley-farm-boushie-shot-witnesses-colten-gerald-1.4520214>

Me: (ignoring that Stanley's farm is on traditional Indigenous lands) The kid he shot was in the back of the SUV they were driving, Stanley shot him in the head point blank with a semi-automatic handgun.

Cousin asserts Boushie deserved it, Dad seems to agree that if you trespass and try and steal someone's property, you in essence had it coming/knew the risk.

Me: Boushie was asleep in the car. Me and David used to carhop and steal change when we were teens, and didn't you steal a car once? Did we all deserve death?

Dad: Claims it was a misfire/hanging bullet

Me: They had a weapons expert testify

Later conversation when Stanley found not guilty: Claims trust in the legal system that they must know things we don't. At other times, though has complained about Indigenous criminals getting off with a slap on the wrist.

### **Uncle says N word.**

New Year's Day 2019: About former NHL goalie, Grant Fuhr "...that N\*\*\* goalie." What was most notable to me was how it wasn't said with malice- in fact he likes Fuhr, but it was also said with a complete lack of care for what the word means and what it means for him to wield it.

More to this not yet written down...

Conversation with Jimmy re: him dead naming a trans woman and not understanding why she was made as he was being tolerant. +Why our uncle saying the N word was the hill I chose to die on esp. on the holidays, given the fact that he often says stupid shit.

Me: Your tolerance is not a gift you give. Response about white supremacists attacking a black friend of mine the night before and that the words you use even if you don't "mean them" have meaning.

### **MMIW**

Dad: Most of them are killed by their spouses

### **Res school system:**

Dad: Happened 1800s

We've had multiple conversations on this and he now knows the last residential school didn't close until the 1990s and does claim (fairly) that this was never taught to him in school.

Does still think that it was terrible, but people must move on. No conception of intergenerational trauma. I've tried positioning it in terms of his lifetime, that he or I are both old enough to have been taken from our homes and forced to attend residential school where it was common for children to be starved, beaten and sexually assaulted.

What kind of shape would our family be in if his mother had been starved and raped by a priest and lost her ability to speak her language? I also discuss the lack of practical skill sets (beading, a certain recipe, conflict resolution etc.) that no longer are passed down intergenerationally when children aren't raised by their own families, coupled with a distrust for institutions like

school, making generations of people that are missing their traditional culture and knowledge, while being unable or unwilling (understandably) to participate or prioritize “Canadian” education for their own kids. And who can blame them?

Now it can be argued that I am making an essentialist generalization to prove my point here, and that it is inherently problematic of me to speak on behalf of residential school survivors or any Indigenous person’s experience for that matter. To this I say two things: The story I am telling my father and the way in which I’m attempting to make a connection between intergenerational trauma and a hypothetical version of our own family is based on conversations with Indigenous educator and activist Rachel Mishenene of Eabametoong First Nation. Rachel has a talent for breaking down complex socio-political topics via her own method of conversational storytelling in a way that makes the subject she is discussing accessible and digestible. In the conversation with my father on residential schools I am attempting to take on the emotional labour Rachel spent educating and do the same within my own family.

### **Our Indians**

Who: Grandmother

Topic: I am discussing a project I am working on with an Indigenous person. I use the term Indigenous. My grandmother doesn’t understand the term, I explain. She says Indian, I say they’re not Indian and never were, that’s a name white insisted on calling Indigenous people even centuries after being corrected.

### **Too traumatised not to murder**

Dad re cousin N robbed, bullied in school by Indigenous students



Said N couldn't be a cop, he's too biased, he'd end up murdering one of them

**Neighbour**

Re: a trip to Finland: "They've got N\*\*\*\*\*s over there that speak Finn!" - Laughs.

More images and video can be found at [openresearch.ocadu.ca](http://openresearch.ocadu.ca).