

to construct and live within a present that belongs entirely to us.”<sup>24</sup> Simpson recognizes that Indigenous artists resituate traditional subjects from a frozen past to a dynamic present. She argues that in this act, “The pieces suggest movement, the passing of time, the dialectic of history, and, most importantly, the process of tradition.”<sup>25</sup> Laura E. Smith reinforces this view: “The deconstruction of photography has unraveled photographic fixity over certain notions of the Native Americans; other writers such as Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, and Frantz Fanon have explored the challenges faced by everyone to ever realize a complete sense of self.”<sup>26</sup>

Where then are the intersections with cultural theory and art world analysis for artists from cultures like the Haudenosaunee or any discrete First Nation or Indigenous community? Are they seamlessly integrated into the discussion of globalization as transnational, or forever fixed in anthropologically defined notions of authentic culture? Transnationalism still hangs onto nation-state formations but privileges the flow of people across national borders. It cannot accurately locate Indigenous space within the transnational, while simultaneously ignoring Indigenous self-determination and, ultimately, inherent rights. Specifically, North America remains a problematic space because it has yet to acknowledge the habitual movement of Indigenous peoples across US, Canadian, and Mexican borders or Indigenous homelands.

The tension between “legal” migration and the status of millions of people as refugees complicates how Indigenous peoples in North America reconcile our relationship to nation-state borders. Deloria’s idea of the “nation within nations” was popular in the 1970s as a way of thinking about nationhood and sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> The Haudenosaunee, however, are thinking not only about nationhood, but also sovereignty as a means to protect and reimagine our philosophies and way of life. Art or making culture is integral if not central to the affirmation of these ideals. Just as feminism addressed a critical blindness in how art is understood, I argue that to consider Indigenous art without understanding the complexities and nuance of sovereignty would be a parallel omission.

Jolene Rickard, an associate professor in the art history and art departments at Cornell University, is focused on the intersection between Indigeneity, art, and colonialism. Her actions include the 2015 Creative Time Summit: The Curriculum (YouTube); “The Emergence of Global Indigenous Art,” a catalogue essay for the watershed exhibition *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2013; and cocurating the inaugural exhibitions for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, 2004.

24. Audra Simpson, “Iroquois Identities,” in *Kwah Í:ken Tsi Iroquois = Oh so Iroquois*, ed. Ryan Rice (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery, 2008), 24.

25. Ibid.

26. See Laura E. Smith, “Photography, Criticism, and Native American Women’s Identity: Three Works by Jolene Rickard,” *Third Text* 19, no. 1 (January 2005): 53–66.

27. See Deloria and Lytle, *The Nations Within*.

Sovereignty is not a thing, but an action; it is a form of doing.<sup>1</sup> It is asserted in everyday ways through the use of our voices, rhetoric, and gestures that affirm belonging, and disavow the rights of others. Negotiations with sovereignty take place through our daily encounter with traffic signs, walls, gates, and the infrastructure of the city itself. Civic infrastructure asserts the nation state’s sovereign will on Indigenous territories, maximizing the smooth passage of certain indi-

viduals across Indigenous lands and waterways, while halting the attempts of other individuals to cross their own lands divided by fences and walls. The sovereignty of civic infrastructure is asserted materially, visually, and aurally. It is also engaged perceptually. As you read the signs “no trespassing,” or “beware dog,” your eyes, governed by sovereign sight, may take heed of these words written in English, according to state-sanctioned values of sovereignty. Your vision accepts the fences that demarcate private property even when such property exists on unceded Indigenous lands. Or yet perhaps your eyes are instead guided by Cree, Anishinaabe, Musqueam, Métis, two-spirit (and other multiply permutational)

cultural values; you have learned to assert perceptual sovereignty against civic infrastructure’s colonial “lang-scape.”

Those who theorize cultural and artistic practices of Indigenous sovereignties have tended to focus on particular works as markers and documents of nationhood, of self-determination, and of nation- and community-specific values.<sup>2</sup> Within this discourse of Indigenous artistic sovereignty there has been a tendency to shy away from the reception of work by the various settler and Indigenous audience members, spectators, and readers who encounter them. To address this gap, this essay advocates for a closer engagement with sovereign forms of perception, and for a critical reassessment of how Indigenous works and words are ascribed sovereign effect. It considers several text-based public artworks: the iteration of Edgar Heap of Birds’s *Native Hosts* situated on x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm / Musqueam lands at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver; Cheryl L’Hirondelle’s *uronndnland* (*wapahta ôma iskonikan askiy*) outside Morely, Alberta; and works by the collective Ogimaa Mikana, including the group’s billboard projects and heritage sign interventions in Toronto and Barrie, Ontario.

### Sovereign Art, Sovereign Perception

visual sovereignty ≠ sovereign seeing

sovereign speech ≠ sovereign listening

sovereign writing ≠ sovereign reading

In 2011 the Tuscarora scholar and artist Jolene Rickard advanced the important critique that although “a singular idea of sovereignty as a legal construct has evolved into multiple interpretations by Indigenous artists . . . many Native scholars caught in a system of Western validation have not embraced a more fluid and diverse interpretation of sovereignty.”<sup>3</sup> The equations above disambiguate forms of sovereignty that reside in objects, “doings,” and perception as distinct and nondeterministically linked. Decoupling these forms of “sovereign doing” both heeds Rickard’s call to move away from measuring sovereignty against Western

Dylan Robinson

## Public Writing, Sovereign Reading: Indigenous Language Art in Public Space

1. An increasing amount of writing by Indigenous artists, curators, and scholars over the past twenty years has addressed how Indigenous art and cultural practices do the work of sovereignty through various assertions and affirmations of law—visual, aural, kinetic, or a combination of these. Here we can include Jolene Rickard’s foundational writing on visual sovereignty and Michelle Raheja’s examination of visual sovereignty in film, Robert Warrior’s examination of intellectual sovereignty, Beverly Singer’s description of cultural sovereignty, and Mique’l Dangel’s scholarship on dancing sovereignty. See Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); and Mique’l Dangel, *Dancing Sovereignty: Protocol and Politics in Northwest Coast First Nations Dance* (diss., University of British Columbia, 2015). While much of this writing has located sovereignty within specific works (visual art, film, writing, dance), each writer also emphasizes the processual and relational aspects of creation and production over a static sense of objecthood. For excellent overviews of work on the relationship between sovereignty and the arts, see Jolene Rickard, “Visual Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (2011): 465–86; and Michelle H. Raheja, “Visual Sovereignty,” in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Raheja (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015).

2. I resist delimiting an exclusive definition of sovereignty, as to do so would be to overdetermine the multiple nation- and community-specific understandings of how sovereignty is expressed, and what other (better) words express the core values and governance of Indigenous communities. I have more and more frequently heard



**Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Hosts*, 1991**, installation view detail, First Nations House of Learning, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm territory, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, 1991–2007 (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds; photograph by the author)

Coast Salish nations use the terms nuts'a'maat (Hulqumiñum) or lets'emot, (Halq'eméylem), meaning "one thought, one heart," to articulate what I understand as a particularly intercommunity understanding of the kinship ties between families that do not reduce to a Western state model of sovereignty based on territorial boundaries. Given this essay's consideration of perception, I question the degree to which such terms are conflated with the discourse of reconciliation that reduces the ontology of Coast Salish sovereignty to feel-good universalism. For more on nuts'a'maat in the context of "overlapping" land claims, see Brian Thom, "Reframing Indigenous Territories: Private Property, Human Rights and Overlapping Claims," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 38, no. 4 (2014): 3–28.

3. Jolene Rickard. "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 470.

4. Interview with Sonny McHalsie, in Deidre Ann Wilcock, "Living Landscapes: 'Ethnogeomorphology' as an Ethical Frame of Communication in Environmental Decision-Making" (diss., York University, 2011), 234.

5. Bill Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). See also Anthes, "Ethics in a World of Strange Strangers: Edgar Heap of Birds at Home and Abroad," *Art Journal* 71, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 58–77.

6. See Robert Warrior, "Vandalizing Life Writing at the University of Illinois: Heap of Birds's Signs of Indigenous Life," *Profession*, 2011, 44–50.

legal definitions, and resists overgeneralizations that indices of Indigenous sovereignty (wampum belts, coppers, contemporary Indigenous artworks, oration, songs) are perceived as such by Indigenous and settler viewers alike. To do so is to understand that "visual sovereignty" as a thing or object taking visual-material form is different than the action of sovereign sight or seeing; that forms of sovereign speech do not mean that such assertions will be heard as such; and that sovereign writing does not guarantee that the same textual sovereignty will be legible to every reader. These statements are true not only in the sense that Indigenous visual, written, and sonic expressions of sovereignty are not necessarily perceived as such by settler subjects (or Indigenous subjects unfamiliar with sovereign expressions of other nations), but that there is agency in Indigenous perception to resist sovereign doings of the settler state. Indigenous subjects exert agency through resurgent perception: sovereign vision that actively and imaginatively revises a painting of settlement; sovereign listening that hears differently the soundscape of the territory we are from; and sovereign touch that is intercorporeal (that is, between human and other-than-human relations) rather than a singular touch made toward a non-acting object.

Decoupling the deterministic relationship between sovereign object and reception opens up more nuanced understandings of sovereign form, structure, and sensory experience as perceived by Indigenous and settler subjects. But we must also acknowledge that these understandings may be rendered inert should they merely be expressed again through the logic of settler-colonial forms of writing, language, and concepts. The word "sovereignty" itself is inadequate to describe the nation- and community-specific work that we do as Indigenous artists, writers, and knowledge keepers. Similarly, the word "perception" is not accurate enough to name forms of Indigenous sensory experience today, and how our ancestors sensed the world. In Halq'eméylem, Stó:lō people would use the word síwél, "to become attentive to, or to prick one's ears" and note how we see, listen to, and feel the schweli of the land, the mountains, and the plants. shxweli, as Naxaxalhts'i Sonny McHalsie says, "connects us to everything that's around us . . . our ancestors as well as those ancestors that were transformed into those mountains."<sup>4</sup> Sensory experience here is relational at its core—a form of connection between us and to life around us wherein we are simultaneously sensing and being sensed. Nation- and community-specific conceptions of our relationships to land and Indigenous sensory experience must emerge from grappling with Indigenous languages, concepts, and their values. Within this context, this essay assesses the degree to which text-based public artworks by Indigenous artists express sovereignty, and the extent to which such sovereignty is legible to readers.

### **You are a guest. Who is your host?**

Edgar Heap of Birds's series *Native Hosts* has been installed in several iterations across the United States, a continuing project that has been cogently outlined by Bill Anthes.<sup>5</sup> Most controversially, the piece was the subject of vandalism when situated at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.<sup>6</sup> In each of these iterations, Heap of Birds's signs are explicit in their request for viewers to recognize that, despite not being aware of it, they are guests in Indigenous territories. At

the University of British Columbia (UBC), Heap of Birds's signs quite literally tell the public that the Provincial assertion of state sovereignty—the assumption of “British Columbia” as fact—is backward. In a prominent location in front of the First Nations House of Learning, for example, students, faculty, staff, and visitors are reminded that “Today your host is Musqueam.” No such reminder is needed for xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people, however. Despite UBC's location on lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people, located at the mouth of the Fraser River, until 2011 few visual markers recognized xʷməθkʷəy̓əm sovereignty on campus grounds.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, if anything, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm sovereignty has consistently been undercut by prioritizing the installation of other nations' poles on xʷməθkʷəy̓əm lands. So, too, could this claim be made of Heap of Birds's Native Hosts signs that recognize other First Nations whose territories are notably distant. Elsewhere on the UBC campus, Heap of Birds's signs announce to the public, “Today your host is Haida,” “Today your host is Kwagiulth,” and “Today your host is Lilwat.”

In their original context, created for the specific site of the Vancouver Art Gallery for the exhibition *Lost Illusions* in 1991, the signs might be understood as standing in relationship with the large urban Indigenous communities in Vancouver, and as such this inclusion speaks also to the sense of belonging felt by a large number of Haida, Kwagiulth, Lilwat, and those from other First Nations in British Columbia who call Vancouver home. At sites such as as seṇákw, x̱wáyx̱way, and across downtown Vancouver, the phrase “Coast Salish territories” has stuck as a way to refer to the fact that the lands and waters were and continue to be cared for by people from neighboring nations including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Səlilwət (Tselil-Waututh), Sḵw̱x̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and Stó:lō. Yet this shared stewardship of lands by different nations in downtown Vancouver is a different issue than where the signs are installed on xʷməθkʷəy̓əm land at UBC. Despite their ability to raise awareness of the Indigenous people across British Columbia whose territory settlers occupy, Heap of Birds's signs were not, like the majority of structures across the campus, created specifically to serve the needs of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people. Although these signs recognize the many Indigenous territories currently occupied by British Columbia, they overstep protocol and the proper acknowledgement of who is host and who is guest in this particular place where they are currently located. Indigenous students, faculty, and others from diverse nations may call the UBC campus home, but to identify the Lilwat or Kwagiulth or Haida as “host” in xʷməθkʷəy̓əm territory is misacknowledgement. Like a road sign that acknowledges the colonial name of the city one is entering, these signs work against the important need to not just acknowledge the sovereignty of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm nation, but the need for the university to recognize the importance of having xʷəlməxʷ (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people) and sí:yá:m (respected leaders) determine the kind of signs needed.<sup>8</sup> As students, faculty, and visitors walk the carefully manicured boulevards of UBC, we are not the guests of Haida, Lilwat, or Kwagiulth; we are the guests—the uninvited guests—of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people.

To students who arrive at UBC without any knowledge of where they are, such signs work against the affirmation of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm sovereignty. Additionally, the signs' language of hosting elides the specificity of this particular place and instead more simply say that “there are Indigenous peoples here,” where “here” refers not to the specific territory they are on, but the province of British

7. The Museum of Anthropology's website notes, “In 2011, the MOA and the Musqueam celebrated the official naming of the Welcome Plaza xʷəniwəṇ ce:p kʷəθəθ nəwəyət, “Remember your teachings.” The Welcome Plaza features artworks by Musqueam artists: Salish Footprint by Susan Point and Transformation by Joe Becker. Adjacent to the Welcome Plaza stands an Ancestor Figure by Susan Point.” “Building + Spaces,” at <http://moa.ubc.ca/building/>, as of July 23, 2017.

8. It is important to note here the significant steps UBC and the First Nations and Indigenous Studies program (FNIS) have been taking to address this challenge. This includes the Belkin Gallery at UBC working toward the development of Musqueam public work as part of its public art collection, and UBC's installation in 2016 of a post carved by xʷməθkʷəy̓əm artist Brent Sparrow Jr. As Sparrow writes, “This qeqən (post) tells the story of the origin of our name xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam).” See “Musqueam Post Dedicated at UBC Vancouver Campus,” UBC media release, April 6, 2016, at <http://news.ubc.ca/2016/04/06/musqueam-post-dedicated-at-ubc-vancouver-campus-today/>, as of November 20, 2016. FNIS has also led the initiative Knowing the Land beneath Our Feet, a project currently in consultation with xʷməθkʷəy̓əm nation to create curriculum materials and sustainable lesson plans “that enable students to experience what it means to be on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the hən'q'əmin'am'-speaking Musqueam people,” “Knowing the Land beneath Our Feet,” at <http://fnis.arts.ubc.ca/research-resources/knowning-the-land-beneath-our-feet/>, as of June 28, 2017.



**Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Hosts*, 1991**, installation view details, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm territory, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, 1991–2007 (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds; photographs by the author)



Columbia more generally. The phrase “your host,” repeated without variation for each nation, additionally flattens the difference in each nation’s protocols for hosting. Lastly, Heap of Birds’s inclusion of different nations continues the practice of deemphasizing the sovereignty of Coast Salish nations through a gentrification-driven covering of Vancouver with Indigenous design, northwest coast formline, and art other than that of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Səlilwət, Skwxwú7mesh people.<sup>9</sup> Under the framework of Indigenous recognition this inclusion might be understood in relation to what the historian Jean Barman identifies as the replacement of Coast Salish villages in Vancouver’s Stanley Park with a more “sanitized indigeneity got from elsewhere.”<sup>10</sup> Barman’s research has documented the removal of Coast Salish families from Stanley Park, and the subsequent tourism-driven decision to raise Haida and Kwak’wak’wakw poles there. Situating these poles in the park was part of larger tourism initiative of importing poles carved by northern First Nations artists to locations across Vancouver because of their status as supposedly the most “advanced” of Indigenous art forms. Yet given the history of Yéqwelhtax—northern First Nations who raided Coast Salish communities in the area now known as Vancouver, killing many and taking slaves—the act of raising northern poles on Coast Salish territory is thus not merely one that elides the Indigenous histories of Lhq’á:lets, but one in which our historical adversaries’ culture is exalted in our territory.<sup>11</sup> Imagine for a moment placing a statue of Vladimir Putin or the flag of Russia in front of the White House. For visitors who pass by *Native Hosts* with a growing awareness of the importance of acknowledging Indigenous peoples, these signs may be perceived as taking part in the recognition of sovereignty. But, as xwelmexw, as I pass Heap of Birds’s statement “Today your host is Kwagiulth,” I am confronted by the site-nonspecificity of recognition. Indeed, although Heap of Birds’s *Native Hosts* seeks to deploy the civic authority of the sign toward a recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, I read the grammar of its repetition on UBC’s campus (the interchangeability of one nation for another within a repeatable format) as leveling the specificity of how sovereignty is defined and practiced by different First Nations.

### “Look at this.”

If Heap of Birds’s *Native Hosts* seeks to mime civic authority through its sign form, Cheryl L’Hirondelle’s stone tag on the Trans-Canada Highway outside Morley, Alberta, is reminiscent of a DIY civic welcome. In *wapahta oma isonikan askiy*, L’Hirondelle’s gathered stones form several words in Cree syllabics. Yet, while L’Hirondelle has called the work a “stone tag,” on first seeing the work, I could not help but read it in relation to a corporate form of landmark: the white painted stone advertisements and business logos often called “topariums” seen often alongside highway entrances and exits. My perception overrode L’Hirondelle’s other categorization of “tag” not because her work bears a more explicit resemblance to topariums than graffiti tags, but because these announcements were ubiquitous along highways when I was a child and youth. Driving the Trans-Canada Highway along te stó:lō from Surrey to Hope in British Columbia meant seeing city names rendered consistently in shrub, flower, or stone.

9. I have engaged with other public artwork in Vancouver by First Nations artists, and *Welcome Figures* in particular, as assertions of sovereignty in Robinson, “Welcoming Sovereignty,” *Performing Indigeneity*, ed. Yvette Nolan and Richard P. Knowles (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2016).

10. Jean Barman, “Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver,” *BC Studies* 115 (2007): 4.

11. Lhq’á:lets is the Halq’eméylem name for the area now known as Vancouver.



Cheryl L’Hirondelle, *uronndnland (wapahta oma isonikan askiy)*, 2004, installation view, TransCanada Highway, Alberta (artwork © Cheryl L’Hirondelle; photograph by the artist, reproduced with permission of the MacKenzie Art Gallery)

Surrey, Langley, Fort Langley, Abbotsford, Mission, Chilliwack, Hope

≠ / ewe

tótel:exw s’olh tēmèxw

The repetition of such highway signs covered over xwélmexw history with such aggressive high definition in anxiety of their sovereign lack. While this repetition seeks to normalize the legitimacy of state power, its ultimate effect is rather to normalize the very understanding of discrete boundaries. In the rhetoric of “you are now entering” and “welcome to,” we come to understand sovereignty as determined by an exclusivity of borders, rather than through nation-specific understandings of sovereignty. This is particularly important given the values of nuts’a’maat (Hulqumínum) or lets’emot (Hal’qeméylem) that many xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Səlilwət, Skwxwú7mesh, and Stó:lō communities use to acknowledge kinship ties between families across what the state would consider the necessity of delineating exclusive borders. Despite this, I acknowledge my first impression of *uronndnland*, to show how the internalization of Western conceptions of sovereignty guided my own perception of place.

Despite my perception that brought the forms of toparium and tag into relation, the differences between L'Hirondelle's tag and the corporate logos and civic welcome signs are much more significant than the fact of their different orthography in Cree syllabics and Standard Roman Orthography, or their intentions to announce colonial or Indigenous place names. In L'Hirondelle's practice of recognizing the land, the words speak not to the broad public, but instead to a particular readership of elders and language readers familiar with syllabics of the place now called Morely, part of the Stoney First Nation. Placed on the sharply sloped edge of the highway just outside the Morely reserve, the words remain untranslated. For those who can read syllabics, they have at least two separate functions. First, they recognize the reserve land as a "leftover strip," *isonikan askiy*. As L'Hirondelle notes, "It's one of the Cree terms for 'reserve,' it's how you say 'reserve' and it means the 'leftover strip of land,' meaning, there was once a much larger terrain or territory that a band would have traversed on, and this—what's been granted by the Canadian government or allotted by the Canadian government—is a leftover strip from what the whole of the land would have been."<sup>12</sup>

Second, the words ask those who can read Cree syllabics to perform a deceptively simple action: to look at the land. "Look at this," the words ask. In such a way we might consider the work acting as a memorial of sorts: to remember this history of leftover strips and erosion of Indigenous rights. In another sense we could equally say the work calls readers to engage with this particular strip of land, existing as it does inconspicuously for thousands of tourists who speed by on their way to snowboarding, skiing, and wildlife-viewing adventures in Banff. It reminds us of the "progress" of highways that have cut across Indigenous lands making routes for tourism and capital to flow. In contrast to L'Hirondelle's tagging, countless First Nations territories that are passed through remain unmarked with the significance of their names and histories. Colonial place names and advertisements instead cover over Indigenous lands with the language of destination and commodity desire. On the Gardiner Expressway that leads in and out of Toronto, for example, drivers are greeted by fourteen business logos formed by yew shrubs: *Taxus densiformis*, "a small needled evergreen, spells out logos of companies like FedEx, Chubb, and TD Waterhouse in attempts to nab the attention of passersby on the busy thoroughfare. A reported 350,000 people take in the ads in the course of their daily grind. With land leased from CN Rail, the ten-metre-long topiary ads have become an entrenched city landmark over the past 17 years, strung along hillsides."<sup>13</sup> The "Welcome to the City of Toronto" toparium advertisement and others are maintained by a crew of gardening personnel: "14 full-time employees at peak season, meaning at times there's a staffer on hand for each one of the ads, due to the ongoing labour of upkeep." Unlike the careful maintenance of planted highway signs that claim the land through a permanent, unchanging language-mark, L'Hirondelle's work has had an evolving relation with the land on which it is situated.

In June of 2016 L'Hirondelle and I visited the work, which had dramatically changed over the years, with the movement and shifting of the land.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle: A lot of grass has grown up around it and you can see that the whole first part has kind of slid—some of the rocks have slid down, which is making it unintelligible. So right now, it's not saying, "Look at this!"



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *uronndnland (wapahta oma isonikan askiy)*, 2004, installation view, TransCanada Highway, Alberta, May 2016 (artwork © Cheryl L'Hirondelle; photograph by the author)

Right now it's only saying—"Leftover strip of land."

Dylan Robinson: So the look has been taken away?

L'Hirondelle: Yeah.

Robinson: That's interesting.

L'Hirondelle: And it's a rockslide that made it happen. And of course those are animate beings. Those are grandfathers that have slid down.<sup>14</sup>

Here, a line cannot be drawn between the animacy of objects and language, particularly given the Cree understanding of language as creating the world as it is spoken, rather than simply reflecting the world around us.<sup>15</sup>

Without the anxious maintenance and ongoing manicure that reinforces civic identity and the branding of cities through vigilant replanting, pruning, and painting, the words "wapahta oma isonikan askiy" are now more faintly discernable as "isonikan askiy." The disrepair of public artwork is commonly understood to result from civic indifference and poor funding for the ongoing maintenance of public works. Such works are thought of as the relics of former public-art eras, existing in states of deterioration. Yet from an Indigenous perspective that prioritizes situational knowledge—that is, that the protocols that govern how knowledge sharing takes place are dependent on the context of whom we are speaking with, the time when such knowledge is shared, and the relationships held (or not

12. Author's interview with Cheryl L'Hirondelle, May 27, 2016, while driving from Banff to Calgary, Alberta.

13. Matthew Blackett "Gardening for Ads," *Spacing*, February 14, 2010, at <http://spacing.ca/magazine/section/inner-space/gardening-for-ads/>, as of November 26, 2016.

14. Author's interview with L'Hirondelle.

15. My thanks to Cheryl L'Hirondelle for sharing this insight with me.



**Ogimaa Mikana, Formerly colonial plaque at Casa Loma, 2015**, installation view, Davenport Road and Spadina Road, Toronto, June 2015 (artwork © Ogimaa Mikana; photograph by Susan Blight)

held) between those who are gathered—the permanence of public art evinces a Western epistemology of knowledge stasis. As curator Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish) notes in relation to Indigenous masks and regalia on the northwest coast, in the display culture of museums that values stasis, “these objects are not only taken out of their life cycle but are also never allowed to rest, because they are permanently on view.”<sup>16</sup> Or as artist Mike Dangeli (Nisga’a) and scholar Mique’l Dangeli (Tsimshian) have previously shared with me, museum practice holds and displays our culture for the general public by keeping it, in their words, “on life support.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, to value the life and agency of Indigenous material culture, whether regalia or artwork, whether public art or private song, is to ask similarly that we consider the conditions of life that might unwittingly perpetuate keeping our culture on life support. To enforce the maintenance of L’Hirondelle’s tag would be to perceive the land as “ruining” the art, rather than one where the land is in relationship with it. Put otherwise, the decision to keep the work “intact” is guided by a Western perception that understands the changing relationship between land and language as one of detrimental impact.

16. Candice Hopkins in “Fair Trade Heads: A Conversation on Repatriation and Indigenous Peoples with Maria Thereza Alves, Candice Hopkins, and Jolene Rickard,” *South as a State of Mind* 7, *Documenta* 14 #2, 2016, at [www.documenta14.de/en/south/460\\_fair\\_trade\\_heads\\_a\\_conversation\\_on\\_repatriation\\_and\\_indigenous\\_peoples\\_with\\_maria\\_thereza\\_alves\\_candice\\_hopkins\\_and\\_jolene\\_rickard](http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/460_fair_trade_heads_a_conversation_on_repatriation_and_indigenous_peoples_with_maria_thereza_alves_candice_hopkins_and_jolene_rickard), as of November 26, 2016.

17. Author conversation with Mike Dangeli and Mique’l Dangeli, October 1, 2015.



**Ogimaa Mikana, If you want to learn something, first you must learn this, 2016**, Queen St. West and Dufferin St., Toronto, March 2016 (artwork © Ogimaa Mikana; photograph by Susan Blight)

### Speaking to Indigenous and Settler Publics

A different kind of language intervention is effected through the work of Ogimaa Mikana, a collective including the Anishinaabe artist Susan Blight and the Anishinaabe scholar Hayden King. Ogimaa Mikana’s work visually reinscribes sovereignty across Anishinaabe territories by renaming street signs in Toronto with Indigenous place names, by “re-covering” historical plaques with Indigenous histories, and by occupying billboards with untranslated texts. The road-sign and historical-plaque work, in particular, has taken place outside sanctioned protocols of state redresses and artist commission. Overnight, the road formerly known as Davenport becomes Gete-Onigaming, the avenue formerly known as Spadina becomes Ishpaadina, and Indian Road is replaced by Mikana Anishinaabe. In the artists’ words, “We are slowly reclaiming our territories from an alien landscape committed to erasing us while contributing to the growing Indigenous cultural, political, and linguistic revitalization efforts across Turtle Island. In the space between raising up our nations and languages and reminding non-Indigenous people that they are on Indian land, we hope to create dialogue.”<sup>18</sup>

In other ways, the sovereignty of Ogimaa Mikana’s work takes place through a demand for the public to learn, rather than through an offer to teach. The distinction between these is important, given the burden placed on Indigenous

18. Ogimaa Mikana, “Reclaiming/Renaming,” Tumblr page, at <http://ogimaamikana.tumblr.com>, as of November 26, 2016. The page also documents the group’s other work.

peoples across Canada to teach the settler Canadian public their own histories of colonization, of which residential school history is only the most recent focus. Ogimaa Mikana's 2016 billboard on Queen Street West in Toronto makes explicit this request to learn, presenting an image of the Dish with One Spoon wampum belt, with Anishinaabemowin language writ large, below which a "fine print" translation in English notes that "If you want to learn something, first you must learn this." "This" refers to the role of the wampum belt that does not merely refer to law, but acts as treaty. Here in particular, Ogimaa Mikana emphasizes nation-to-nation sovereignty: "The treaty imagines that we, as diverse peoples and nations, can live together peacefully in the same territory if we respect rights to mutual autonomy. But more, that we have obligations of mutual care, to each other and to the land we share. If we are serious about moving forward together in a good way, we must collectively re-learn these obligations. We must start at the beginning."<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, in Ogimaa Mikana's historical-plaque reclamation, the group's language refuses to feed easily consumable knowledge to the public for language that declares: "Welcome to our community. How do you recognize it?" Through this address, readers are asked not whether they recognize Anishinaabe sovereignty and history of the location, but rather how they do. It is an explicit call to perceive place differently. Finally, in the work *Gego ghazaagwenmishken pii wii Anishinaabemyin*, Ogimaa Mikana speaks exclusively to those who can read Anishinaabemowin through the untranslated sign that filled the space of a billboard in Barrie, Ontario, with unadorned black text on a white background. Following Blight and King's decision to direct their address to Anishinaabe readers, I will not translate the sign here, other than to say that it urges its readers to take action and encourages them to move beyond the inherited shame that is part of the intergenerational effects of the linguistic genocide that Indian residential schools attempted to carry out.

### Forms of Writing Sovereignty

Iheq mélgelyithlémtsel.

To conclude, I return to my opening assertion that Indigenous perceptual sovereignty may be rendered inert should it merely be expressed again through the logic of settler-colonial forms of writing, language, and concepts. In 2013 I began to learn Halq'eméylem (le xwel totilt Halq'eméylemql), the language spoken by Stó:lō people, and after two years I began to write short, untranslated pieces in Halq'eméylem in various publications. I was compelled to do this for three reasons. First was the desire to exercise a form of sharing knowledge through a logic and epistemology that expressed ideas particular to upriver people. The second reason for this writing involved, as in the work of Ogimaa Mikana, an affirmation of sovereignty. It is increasingly important to refuse xwelitem hunger, a hunger that drives the production of knowledge in the university setting. This desire and demand to know is driven by a hunger contained in the word people from Coast Salish communities use to describe settlers: xwelitem in upriver Halq'eméylem, or xʷənítəm in downriver hənqəminəm. The word is often used to mean "settler" or "non-native person," but more accurately translates as "starving person." This



**Ogimaa Mikana, *Gego ghazaagwenmishken pii wii Anishinaabemyin*, 2014**, Bayfield Street, Barrie, Ontario, August 2014 (artwork © Ogimaa Mikana; photograph by Susan Blight)

19. Ibid.

naming isn't used merely to be perjorative; it names a mode of perception, a settler mode of perception driven by hunger. At its worst, this hunger perceives knowledge with a voracious appetite that devours without consideration of those who have cultivated, harvested, and prepared the food of thought. In academic contexts of Indigenization, these forms of epistemic hunger—shxwelítemelh totí:lthet—are growing under equity auspices that quantitatively feed the university without challenging the structures of consumption. In this context there is a need to slow the speed of institutional consumption through display strategies of the museum, gallery, and page that challenge how these formats orient the settler colonial palate toward a cornucopia of ethnographic salvage and “informant knowledge.”

Third, and most important, by writing in untranslated Halq'eméylem my voice resounds with listeners other than you who hold this text in the present. My writing speaks to schweli, to my ancestors who are listening. Through this writing, stl'ítsel kws me á:yelexwstexwtset te sqwá:ltset. My ancestors hear my words spoken, in a similar fashion to those who hear the teaching offered by the community artwork *Systems of Sustenance* by the group Collective Echoes. *Systems of Sustenance*, located at Creekside Park in Vancouver, was created by Indigenous youth who embedded the words Huychewxa, Huychxw-a, and Həyčx<sup>w</sup>qa in the pavement to thank the salmon who inhabited the area—marshland—before it was filled in for development. Members of Collective Echoes noted that even though someone looking at the word might have no idea what it says, by the very attempt of reading, thanks is given. Of importance here is that reading is not conceived as a passive action—it does something and has a direct effect on the world. My own writing holds a similar capacity for doing sovereignty by those who read, perhaps against their own intent to do otherwise. But speaking to those who are not physically present does not only include ancestors; a second audience not physically present at the moment of this writing—and perhaps also your reading—is a future public, a public of fluent Halq'eméylem readers. This public is constituted through the demand that our language be read, be heard, be listened to, síwél.

I began by noting that sovereign writing, sovereign artworks, sovereign language cannot exist alone; they must exist alongside síwél: sovereign sense. How we affirm such sovereign sense must be multiple, approached through relationships to where we are from, and through our languages. The relationship of síwél to public art is situated in its relationship to proximate (infra)structures that exert a colonial gaze. The material and physical structures of the museum, public squares, and modern gallery “starchitecture” are structures that apprehend Indigenous belongings with their gaze; shxwelítemelh structures, through their look, continue to “collect” and continue to be hungry. Indigenous writers and artists are exploring forms that are not merely containers for knowledge collection; we are advancing models for reading that inhabit other temporalities. Such sovereign forms of Indigenous reading—shxwelíméxwelh—are a strategic contrast to instrumentalizing forms of settler reading, or what Louise Rosenblatt calls “efferent reading” that takes away particular bits of information. “Here,” Rosenblatt notes, “the reader is not interested in the rhythms of the language or the prose style but is focused on obtaining a piece of information . . . the reader's attention is primarily focused on what will remain as a residue after the reading—

the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out.”<sup>20</sup> This form of reading at its worst instrumentalizes Indigenous knowledge through a model of extractivism that resources Indigenous content. In contrast, Indigenous resurgence is based not only on the forms our works take, but on the ways we perceive form in general. Decolonizing settler perception similarly involves reckoning with the ways in which looking and listening take place in order to move beyond forms of hungry, starving, and extractive perception.

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20. L. M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1978), 23.