

2. Contemporary Indigenous Remix: Poets Matthew James Weigel and Jordan Abel Sampling from Settler Colonial Archives

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Abstract

This chapter discusses two poetry books by Canada's Indigenous writers, *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me* (2020) by Dënësūliné and Métis Matthew James Weigel and *Injun* (2016) by Nisga'a Jordan Abel, as different examples of textual remix. Each of them, albeit in different ways, responds to and exploits the contemporary accessibility and materiality of language, which results from its availability in the digital space and on the Internet, and which, in turn, inspires a series of appropriative procedures (such as copying-pasting, sharing, and remixing, for example) to which language – seen as matter – is then subjected. Critics have referred to contemporary culture, which is dominated by new media technologies, as 'remix' culture (Manovich, 2015; O'Neil, 2006; Navas, 2012; Goldsmith, 2010; Dworkin, 2010), in which every Internet user re/produces cultural content, even if they often do so mechanically and uncritically. The poets discussed in this chapter engage in reflective and critical dialogues with the textual material they select, appropriate, and transform—that is, remix, often radically and provocatively—for their own works. Both Weigel and Abel sample from settler colonial archives rather than Indigenous sources, revisiting versions of the past as constructed by colonial sources. However,

How to cite this book chapter:

Aurylaitė, K. (2023). Contemporary Indigenous Remix: Poets Matthew James Weigel and Jordan Abel Sampling from Settler Colonial Archives. In: Bédard-Goulet, S. & Premat, C. (eds.), *Nordic and Baltic Perspectives in Canadian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Northern Spaces Narratives*, pp. 47–100. Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bci.c>. License: CC BY-NC.

they do not engage in revisionist rewritings of the sources or their messages. Instead, both poets undertake a series of what Walter Mignolo (2014) theorize as ‘decolonial gestures.’ Their poems foreground investigation of and dialogue with the sources as processes to open the source texts for unlimited re-readings and allow them to arrange and articulate their own space within the formulas and structures of settler colonialism, whose ongoing effects on Indigenous land and being both seek to expose and address.

Keywords

Settler colonialism, Indigenous poetry, remix, conceptual writing.

Introduction

‘I have acquired and used this photograph without permission. / It has been digitally altered to suit my needs,’ writes Dënësųliné and Métis poet Matthew James Weigel (b.1985) about the photograph of the throne room at Windsor castle in England, which was taken in 1867 by André Adolfe Eugène Disdéri and subsequently acquired by Queen Victoria (Weigel, 2020, p. 9). These lines conclude an early poem of Weigel’s collection *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me* (2020). Weigel titles the poem ‘1870: Queen Victoria acquires *ad nauseum*,’ and the same verb ‘acquire’ provokes a comparison between the British Empire’s colonial appropriations and Weigel’s creative practices, driven by decolonial principles. Weigel begins the poem with a digitally remastered reproduction of the photograph and a description of the luxurious throne and the room in which it is located (Weigel, 2020, pp. 9–10). The modified photograph and the lines quoted above foreground several motifs that are central to Weigel’s book, namely, colonial appropriations, archival documents, access to them as well as appropriation and then remastering of appropriated material, through which past and present become linked and these linkages examined.

Weigel is not Canada’s only contemporary Indigenous poet or artist to have engaged in such processes of working with pre-existing material, which establish connections between past and present. Others include, for instance, Nisga’a poet Jordan

Abel, Oji-Cree poet and writer Joshua Whitehead, Cree poet and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt, Cree visual artist and performer Kent Monkman, Deshkaan Ziibing Anishinaabeg visual artist Jay Soule, Wolastoqiyik performer and composer Jeremy Dutcher, Wuikinuxv and Klahoose multimedia artist Bracken Hanuse Corlett, multimedia collective Skookum Sound System, to name a few. This chapter discusses two poetry books, the aforementioned *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me* by Matthew James Weigel and the Griffin Poetry Prize winning *Injun* (2016) by Jordan Abel (b. 1984). Abel's work is already well-known and recognized for experimentations with form and method, strongly relying on various appropriative procedures, facilitated or even inspired by digital technologies and digital media, which he uses to explore the various workings of settler colonialism and their impact on Indigenous being. Weigel has just recently published his first full length poetry collection *Whitemud Walking* (2022), which includes poems from and develops his brief collection *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me*, discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, Weigel's chapbook, too, offers a thought-provoking, albeit much less radical example of using found texts to uncover the ways in which colonial institutions and documents did and continue to exert their power over Indigenous land and peoples. My focus in this chapter is the ways these two poets engage in reflexive and critical dialogues with pre-existing textual material which they select, appropriate, and transform – that is, remix, sometimes radically and provocatively. In these books, both Weigel and Abel sample from settler colonial archives rather than Indigenous sources. Thus, instead of foregrounding cultural continuity, they choose to revisit versions of the past as constructed by colonial sources – a strategy that could compel an Indigenous writer to construct narratives countering those of the original sources. However, neither Weigel, nor Abel engages in revisionist rewritings. Instead, both poets foreground investigation of and dialogue with their sources. I examine how these processes open selected source texts for unlimited re-readings and allow the poets to arrange and articulate their own space within the formulas and structures of settler colonialism, whose ongoing effects on Indigenous land and being they both seek to expose and address.

Settler colonialism and the erasure of the Indigenous presence

Settler colonialism is driven by what Patrick Wolfe terms ‘the logic of elimination’: this form of colonialism ‘destroys to replace,’ to create a new social and spatial structure in the invaded and gradually appropriated territory (Wolfe, 2006, pp. 387–388, p. 390, pp. 392–393). In this project, the Indigenous presence is an obstacle impeding the appropriation and exploitation of the land, and, therefore, ‘Indigenous people must be erased, must be made into ghosts’ (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). Complete elimination of the Indigenous presence is the ultimate end point of settler colonialism, which seeks to ‘extinguish’ the relation between settlers and the settler colonized in order to proceed as a nation state, undisturbed by internal tensions over Indigenous rights (Veracini, 2011a, p. 3, p. 7). Erasure does not necessarily have to be enacted only through physical elimination, such as killing or displacement and confinement to specially designated spaces, such as reserves. Wolfe shows that biocultural and social assimilation – what Glen Coulthard labels as ‘social engineering,’ achieved, for example, through education or intermarriage (Coulthard, 2014, p. 184) – as well as discursive practices, such as renaming or stereotyping, are effectively part of the same project and foreground the adaptability of settler colonialism to changing circumstances and ideological climate (Wolfe, 2006, pp. 402–403).

Discursive erasures are also at work in settler colonial archives, the target of both Matthew Weigel’s and Jordan Abel’s poetic projects. In their discussion of Canadian state archives, Crystal Fraser and Zoe Todd maintain that ‘it is essential that we continue to recognise archival spaces, especially state archives, for their original intent: to create national narratives that seek to legitimise the nation state by excluding Indigenous voices, bodies, economies, histories, and socio-political structures’; thus, when included into historical records, Indigenous people are consistently denied agency and relegated to passive roles (Frazer & Todd, 2016, p. 39, p. 37; Hodes, 2020, p. 63). Melissa Adams-Campbell et al. point out that settler archives have to contend with the fact that Indigenous communities are always ‘internal to the nation-state,’

and thus the information about their disposessions, removals, and deprivations needs to be ‘*subsumed* within the story of the state’; however, they argue, such information tends to be ‘obscured through collecting practices that prioritize settler history and belonging’ in order to gloss over or disguise the non-righteousness and violence of settler colonial dealings with Indigenous peoples (Adams-Campbell et al. 2015, p. 110; original emphasis). Such obscuring can take several forms: preferencing documents produced by non-Indigenous people (Frazer & Todd, 2016, p. 35); ‘generically lumping together all Native knowledge as “Indian” and casting this knowledge in the past, for example the “Vanishing Indian” narrative’; and presenting ‘discussion of Indian heritage and difference [...] as “cultural,” rather than legal,’ which ‘simultaneously acknowledges Native existence even as it denies Native peoples’ sovereignty and rights to land’ (Adams-Campbell et al., 2015, p. 111). Moreover, as shown by various scholars, the very access to archival material related to Indigenous people can often be complicated and restricted, sometimes deliberately, even today; among the most frequent factors are, for instance, bureaucratic procedures at work in the archives, the distances at which archives can be located from certain communities, the lack of clear organization or digitalization of archival material, or even unwillingness of authorities to provide access (Adams-Campbell et al., 2015, pp. 112–113; Frazer & Todd, 2016, pp. 34–35; see also Hodes, 2020, pp. 159–160 and Griffith, 2019, pp. 3–4 on difficulties accessing archival material necessary for legal proceedings involving Indigenous people).

These practices of archival violence are consistent with other forms of elimination of Indigenous presence and can be seen as manifestations of what Lorenzo Veracini describes as a settler colonial ‘non-encounter,’ defined as ‘a circumstance fundamentally shaped by a recurring need to disavow the presence of indigenous “others”,’ even when actual contacts do take place (Veracini, 2011a, p. 2; Veracini, 2011b, pp. 5–6). In the settler state of mind, thus, not even a negative relationship with Indigenous people is conceived as possible, and no mutual future can be imagined. As a result, ‘everything indigenous can be reduced to reminiscence (a conceptual move that restricts actually existing presences to pockets of past surrounded by

future, the narrative equivalent of territorial indigenous reserves)' (Veracini 2011b, p. 6). What is also important in this concept of non-encounter is Veracini's emphasis on how the need to construct Indigenous people as no longer present in the settler space is recurrent and persistent. In this he echoes Wolfe's foregrounding that settler colonialism is not an isolated 'event' rooted in history, but a 'structure,' whose 'history does not stop' but develops continuously, adapting to changing circumstances and remains 'relatively impervious to regime change,' even that of the liberal democracies of contemporary settler countries, such as Canada (Wolfe, 2006, p. 392, p. 399, p. 402; Wolfe, 1999, p. 163; Coulthard, 2014, p. 139; Mignolo, 2014). As Taiaiake Alfred contends, settler colonial structures shape-shift, turning into a 'fluid confluence of politics, economics, psychology and culture,' to pervade and affect all aspects of human existence (Alfred, 2005, p. 30; cited by Coulthard 2014, pp. 455–456; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, pp. 597–598).

Under such regime, Indigenous survival and persistence are 'the weapons' of the settler colonized as they prevent the ultimate triumph of settler colonialism by 'keep[ing] the settler-indigenous relationship ongoing' (Veracini, 2011a, pp. 3–4) and thereby complicating the attempts of contemporary politics of recognition and reconciliation to 'manage and neutralise indigenous difference,' which are just another way of denying Indigenous people participation on their own terms (Veracini, 2011a, p. 8, see also Coulthard, 2014). 'I'm an Nishnaabekwe and so everything I do is political,' states Canada's Nishnaabeg writer, performer, scholar, and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in an interview (Simpson, quoted in Winder, 2014). She voices the same idea that an Indigenous person's insistence on their distinct status in a settler state exposes such state's colonial nature grounded in the impulse to extinguish Indigenous presence and disturbs the rhetoric of successfully implemented multiculturalism which marks contemporary settler states. Indigenous art, too, in its various manifestations, works to underscore the persistent vitality of Indigenous cultures: as Jarret Martineau and Eric Ritskes maintain, 'Indigenous art is inherently political,' as it works to 'break the vow of silence and invisibility demanded of Indigenous Peoples by settler society' and 'marks the space of a returned and enduring presence' (Martineau & Ritskes, 2014, p. 1, p. 3). In their poetry books

discussed in this chapter, Matthew James Weigel and Jordan Abel also make contemporary Indigenous presence manifest on their own terms. Moreover, they seek to reassert Indigenous presence in the settler colonial ‘non-encounters’ of the past as described and enacted by settler colonial sources, namely, Canadian governmental documents from between 1870 and 1921 (Weigel) and old American Westerns (Abel). Weigel composes his chapbook as a collage of digitalized archival images, quotations sampled from old governmental records, and his own lyrics and diagrams. Placing them next to and in contact with one another, Weigel invites a dialogue between them, allowing each piece to speak for itself but also in connection to one another, across time. Abel’s book offers a more radical reworking of the source material. He uses a collection of ninety-one novels of the Western genre, digitalized and accessible on Project Gutenberg, whose texts he copy-pastes into a Word file and isolates sentences containing the word ‘injun,’ used for the title of his book. He then cuts up these sentences and recombines the cut-ups to construct a series of individual poems of various formats and saying very different things than the original sentences and novels. Thus, selecting, sampling from, repurposing, and reworking – that is, remixing, albeit in different ways, – archival documents and old Westerns, both poets insist on the importance of revisiting the past. Doing this, they do not undertake revisionist projects, which, when practiced by Indigenous or postcolonial writers, usually seek to ‘undermine the legitimacy of white settlement and assert Other(ed) versions of history’ (Gilbert, 1998, p. 53; see also Huggan, 2008). As will be shown in the later sections of this chapter, Weigel’s and Abel’s excavations of old texts and engagements with them effectively foreground how the past continues to affect the present in the form of encounters, dealings, relationships, and, notably, erasures.

Remix as a practice and a discourse

The links to the past established and exploited by such poets as Weigel and Abel, their engagements with pre-existing material have a quality differentiating these engagements from more familiar techniques which rely on borrowing, such as intertextuality, pastiche, or parody. Their poetry, albeit in different ways, is

informed, directly influenced, or even made possible by digital information technologies, which have transformed language into material substance – quantifiable, movable, pliable, and mutable, – and valued not only for what it says but also – or even rather – for what it ‘does’: as poet and critic Kenneth Goldsmith puts it, ‘[w]ords very well might be written not to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated’ (Goldsmith, 2010, p. xxi, p. xviii, p. xix; see also Dworkin, 2010, p. xxxvi, p. xlii); poets Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman similarly suggest that words are to be seen as ‘objects’ and treated as such (Place & Fitterman, 2009, p. 16). Notably, the newfound materiality of language invites an approach that entails essentially physical acts when engaging with pre-existing texts; Goldsmith calls these acts ‘re-gestures,’ such as re-sharing, re-blogging, re-tweeting, or re-posting, but also, and more importantly, re-formatting and re-arranging the material accessed and obtained online (Goldsmith, 2010, p. xix, p. xviii; Dworkin, 2010, p. xlii).

The term that has become central in describing the various appropriative procedures undertaken in the digital environment is ‘remix.’ As a practice, remix consists of selecting, sampling from, and reworking pre-existing material, undertaken using digital tools in order to ‘create particular aesthetic, semantic, and/or bodily effects’ (Manovich, 2015, p. 142). Differently from the more familiar intertexts or collages, contemporary remixes thrive on the unprecedented availability of material in the digital form, which has replaced retyping with copying and pasting, facilitating the act of textual appropriation (Goldsmith, 2010, p. xix). The question then is to what ‘re-gesture/s’ to subject the material appropriated this way: merely to re-post or re-share it, or to engage with it in ways that involve critical scrutiny and transformation, which is what the writers discussed in this chapter undertake.

The concept of remix is, of course, much broader than describing computer-inspired writing techniques rooted in appropriation and is closely linked to the recent advancements in technologies of mechanical reproduction (Navas, Gallagher, & Burrough, 2015, p. 1; Navas 2012, p. 4, pp. 17–27). In fact, it is precisely when it comes to literature that such practices, because they unsettle

deep-seated ideas about originality and authorship, can still be viewed with suspicion as ‘controversial’ or ‘unacceptable,’ despite being well established in the field of arts and music, from which they stem (Dworkin, 2010, pp. xl–xli). The origins of remix are usually traced back to the New York City disco and hip hop music communities of the 1970s, specifically DJ producers’ experiments on the turntable, which soon spread to major cities worldwide; starting with the late 1990s, remix practices developed into ‘an organic international movement,’ linked to the Internet and, later, to Web 2.0 and social media, with their emphasis on user-generated content and collaboration (Navas, Gallagher, & Burrough, 2015, p. 1, p. 2; see also Navas 2012, p. 4, p. 20, pp. 35–63; Manovich, 2015, p. 138). Of importance here is the emphasis on the increasingly active role of the Internet and media user, who becomes crucial in ‘activating the material’ online by incessantly filtering, sampling, and re-sharing it (Navas, 2012, p. 75). Lev Manovich similarly notes that new media has replaced the traditional pattern of cultural communication according to which information moved ‘in one direction,’ from a source to a receiver, with a more fluid one, in which the reception point has become ‘just a temporary station on information’s path’ before it is further re-shared (Manovich, 2015, p. 145). This change foregrounds new forms of interactivity and collaboration in communication, with recipients of information vigorously rejecting the finiteness of messages delivered to them. At the same time, these tools have also engendered new behavioural patterns and social norms, such as those of ‘constantly staying connected’ as well as compulsively sampling and re-sharing content (Navas, 2012, p. 75, pp. 124–125; see also Manovich, 2015).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, remix has become a term to describe many ‘cultural trends in digital media’ (O’Neil, 2006, p. 19) but also various effects that digital technologies and the Internet have ‘upon how culture is made’ (Lessig, 2005, p. 7). Eduardo Navas sees remix as an attitude, an aesthetic, and a discourse, rather than merely a practice:

Once a specific technology is introduced it eventually develops a discourse that helps to shape cultural anxieties. Remix has done and is currently doing this to concepts of appropriation. Remix

has changed how we look at the production of material in terms of combinations. This is what enables Remix to become an aesthetic, a discourse that, like a virus, can move through any cultural area and be progressive and regressive depending on the intentions of the people implementing its principles (Navas, 2012, p. 126).

Hence, while the mechanism of reworking pre-existing material to create something different is not an invention of the late 1990s or the early 21st century, it is during this period that its application becomes ubiquitous and is no longer limited to artistic practices (e.g. Dada, Conceptual art, Pop art, etc) or those controlled by economic elites (e.g. media or advertising). As a discourse, remix foregrounds how naturalized and mechanical various appropriation, recombination, editing, and modification practices have become, altering our perception of the issues of legality (see Lessig, 2008; Manovich, 2015) and originality (O'Neil, 2006; Navas, 2012; Greaney, 2014), but also our sense and experience of self as well as our engagement with the material, the digital, and the social (Biederman & Callaghan, 2006, p. 6; Manovich, 2015).

Many users yield to the technological seductions of networked culture without much contemplation; in this case, remix is an obedient response to what technologies entice us to do and is thus, to use Navas's phrasing, 'regressive' and 'parasitical,' merely ensuring a constantly 'regenerated' data flow (Navas, 2012, p. 73), without users' critically scrutinizing the information received and re-shared. However, remix also opens space for more critical and creative reflection on source material but also on the practice of remix itself. Navas calls such instances 'reflexive' and 'regenerative' remix. Reflexive remix seeks to challenge the original by reworking it through various methods, for instance, deleting certain elements or adding other material, but allowing it to remain recognizable (Navas, 2012, p. 66). Taken even further, in a more advanced form, when it undertakes a more fundamental transformation, sometimes rendering the original recognizable or even present only in the form of citation, and simultaneously generating a new product, remix can be 'regenerative,' at which point it is no longer merely a practice, but a manifestation of a set of principles and a discourse (Navas, 2012, p. 67). Jamie O'Neil also foregrounds 'a radical transformation of identity' of the pre-existing

entity in remix, but, notably, one that is not conclusive and does not aim at constructing a finite new identity; rather, remix is its 'single enunciation' (O'Neil, 2006, p. 20, p. 23), potentially inviting its audiences to imagine other possible ways of reworking the source material. In each case, Navas emphasizes the allegorical nature, that is, the meta-level of remix and its dependence on the 'authority' of the source material in order to foreground that

the originality of the remix is non-existent, therefore it must acknowledge its source of validation self-reflexively. [...] The material must be recognized, otherwise it could be misunderstood as something new, and it would become plagiarism (Navas, 2012, p. 67).

Remix cannot be read on its own, but always in relation to its sources, and it is this relationship that creates the two levels which characterize allegory: in remix, samples are placed in new contexts and combinations, and, as a result, can be endowed with new meanings, quite different from and unintended by the originals. Yet, these new meanings are persistently haunted by those of the original sources, and it is these connections and tensions that remix thrives on. Through remix, thus, one insists on a palimpsestal effect as any remix always establishes itself in relation to the source and deliberately so. As O'Neil puts it, the source 'is not lost, there is a co-presence of the past and the present in this embodiment, which mediates between the past and the future via a new vector of the eternally changing' (O'Neil, 2006, p. 20). Crucial here thus is not only the end-product, but the process of engaging with and challenging the source: selecting it as well as devising and implementing procedures to transform it but also to acknowledge it, thereby also making manifest the remixer's relationship to and stance on the material referenced in this way.

Remix has been mainly discussed in the context of culture, media, music, and art, not literature (see *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* edited by Navas, Gallagher, and Burroughs for a survey of the field (2015)). Nonetheless, contemporary conceptual writing, based on the use – and, notably, 'strategic misuse' – of pre-existing texts (Dworkin, 2003, p. 5), offers examples of precisely reflexive and regenerative remix.

A conceptual writer's engagement with the source texts is typically organized by an appropriative procedure such as erasure, 'transcription, citation, "writing-through," recycling, reframing, grafting, mistranslating, and mashing' (Perloff, 2012, § 15), frequently inspired, facilitated, or driven by digital technologies. The procedure does not 'substitute for the writing,' but works to coordinate it: the procedure a writer selects is determined by an underlying idea, the concept for a conceptual text (Dworkin, 2010, p. xxxvii). The procedure challenges the finiteness of the source texts as it reworks and transforms them, often radically. Navas, too, argues that when remix is regenerative, 'its principles are at play as conceptual strategies' (Navas, 2012, p. 67). They govern the relationship between the source and its new enunciation as well as the shape in which that relationship will become manifest. For Navas, 'Remix finds its real power in the realm of ideas. This is the space in which the regenerative remix is best at play, as it combines material according to specific needs' (Navas, 2012, p. 85). In some cases, the focus on the idea and the procedure behind conceptual texts can overshadow the textual product itself: Place and Fitterman call such instances 'pure conceptualism' and contend that 'one does not need to 'read' the work as much as think about the idea of the work' (Place & Fitterman, 2009, p. 27).

This form of conceptualism, which prioritizes the idea and the procedure over the product but also over the source material, has caused several controversies, specifically involving work by Goldsmith and Place. Goldsmith's remix of Michael Brown's autopsy report (2015) and Place's sampling from African American characters' lines from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (2015) provoked angry criticism about the two artists reenacting their white privilege and reinstating racist hierarchies in their appropriations of the material related to African Americans: a victim of police violence Brown and black slaves in Mitchell's novel, widely seen as racist (for a detailed discussion, see Calder, 2015, and a frequently reposted analysis by Keene, 2015). Even earlier, Kay Rozynski (2014) pointed out that focusing exclusively on the materiality of language in its digital

form and various ‘uncreative’ and mechanical ways to ‘manage’ it, such theorizing of conceptualism tends to discount the writer’s subjectivity in relation to the sources. She argued that conceptualism needs to be seen as ‘the material, embodied event of composition,’ attentive to the context as well as the subject position of the writer and the source material, whose potential ‘to speak back’ should not be disregarded (Rozynski, 2014, p. 102, pp. 105–106). Thus, even if conceptual texts and remixes can be deliberately unreadable in the traditional sense, the reader is enticed to examine the mechanics and aesthetics of the procedure selected and explore how it has strategically transformed the sources (Dworkin, 2010, p. xxxvii). At this point, the writer’s subjectivity and position in relation to the source material become foregrounded because it is they that guide his/her ‘re-gesturing’ of the text and the procedure on the whole: as Dworkin points out, ‘impersonal procedures tend to magnify subjective choices’ (Dworkin, 2010, p. xxxix).

Remix entails a form of physical contact, engagement with, and reshaping the selected material, through which the remixer articulates his/her own subjectivity: as O’Neil puts it, remix ‘inherently’ presupposes ‘a form of critical dialogue with the ‘original’ or overarching context’ (O’Neil, 2006, p. 22). In his earlier book *The Place of Scraps*, which also uses appropriated material, Abel says in a similar vein, ‘[c]ontact is precisely the investigation’ (Abel, 2013, p. 171). Relying on appropriative procedures and ‘re-gestures’ to repurpose and remix the settler colonial material they have sampled from, Weigel and Abel initiate precisely such contact – as an investigation and critical dialogue with the settler colonial sources – to counter the dynamics of settler colonial ‘non-encounter,’ as theorized by Veracini (2011a, 2011b), and its insistence on denying Indigenous people participation. Their ‘re-gestures,’ discussed in the subsequent sections, are thus decidedly decolonial, akin to what Walter Mignolo describes as ‘decolonial gestures,’ that is, bodily moves and movements which ‘carr[y] a decolonial sentiment or decolonial intention’ and which make decolonial ‘attitudes, options, and turns’ directly perceivable (Mignolo, 2014, n.p.).

Matthew James Weigel's *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me*: Indigenous treaties, procedural writing, and quotational practices

Matthew James Weigel's poetry chapbook *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me* (2020) is constructed as a combination of his own lyrics and samples from archival documents, piecing together the personal and a selection of the found. Archival samples, in the form of textual quotations and digitalized images, are a way Weigel chooses to speak about the past: his chapbook traces the history of acquisition by the Confederation of Canada of Rupert's Land, then controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company, and the subsequent Numbered Treaties, eleven in total, signed between the British Crown and the Indigenous peoples of the territories between 1871 and 1921. Indigenous treaties in Canada are constitutionally recognized agreements which detail exchanges between Indigenous peoples and the Crown. By way of these agreements, the former consent to 'cede' and 'surrender' some of their rights to their ancestral lands in return for various compensations (Hall, 2011). Through the Numbered Treaties, the Canadian government sought to legitimize the appropriation of the land it needed for the newly arriving settlers as well as agricultural and industrial development, but also for such federal projects as the construction of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway (McIntosh & Smith, 2019; Filice, 2016; Dickason, 1992, pp. 273–290). For the Indigenous peoples of these territories, the treaties, just like other federal Indian policies implemented at the time, were products of encounters with settler colonialism as a structure, markedly different from the previous encounters with explorers, individual settlers, or traders of the Hudson's Bay Company: Veracini foregrounds that settler colonialism supersedes previous colonial orders, usually characterized by more mutual relationships, in which Indigenous people have and can assert more agency (Veracini, 2011b, p. 5). The settler colonial regime's 'logic of elimination' (Wolfe, 2006, pp. 387–388) seeks to remove both that power and Indigenous presence altogether: among the provisions of the treaties were the creation of reserves, which effectively excluded Indigenous people from the settler space and became spaces of confinement, as well as

provisions about education and encouragement of settled agricultural practices to accelerate the assimilation of Indigenous people into colonial culture and thus their disappearance as distinct nations and cultures (Filice, 2016; Krasowski, 2019; Hall, 2011; Dickason, 1992, pp. 273–290).

Weigel's focus in his chapbook is precisely the workings of settler colonialism in what is now Canada's North-West and their lasting effects on Indigenous land and being. These effects are explored through the autobiographical first-person voice of the contemporary Indigenous speaker, who is rooted in the territory, now fundamentally transformed, and who is haunted by the past: one poem begins, 'I wake up at 6am to a weight on my chest. / I massage it until it says the word treaty' (Weigel, 2020, p. 15). The physical sensation of a burden, which translates into a legal term, referring to the signing of the treaties, but also glossing over the complexities and tensions of settler-Indigenous relationships, speaks of the need to revisit the past. This motif further implies that certain actions and events cannot be isolated in it: the relationships and other structures they produce can continue to affect those that are involved, generations after the event, as suggested by Weigel's poem. Elsewhere, his speaker says, addressing an Indigenous signatory of a treaty, 'did you know that when you wrote this down/ the river would remember it?' (Weigel, 2020, p. 11). Again, the question speaks of the enduring impact produced by the act of signing, even if the impact itself is not specified. Moreover, the question underscores how profoundly this act has affected not only humans but also the place whose reordering the treaty legitimated. The place is evoked synecdochically, through the image of the river, which implies flow, movement, and change; yet, in Weigel's poem, even the river, like the human body in the previous quotation, is said to be carrying traces and records of the past, more than a century old. This reiterates the same refusal to understand events as frozen in time, and the two quotations thus link the body and the place. This motif punctuates Weigel's book to foreground Indigenous people's rootedness in and relationship to the land: 'so clearly does the land, in fact, own me,' says the speaker in another poem, and continues, 'I am a flesh bound manuscript of what this place might say' (Weigel, 2020,

p. 10), foregrounding the transgenerational aspect of memory but also how large-scale processes, such as those launched by settler colonialism, are always experienced and lived through by individual human beings. It is also implied that not all experiences are acknowledged, recorded, or deemed worthy of consideration.

Neither the speaker nor the place reveals much in Weigel's chapbook, echoing the erasures of Indigenous versions of the past in official records. Despite its very physically felt presence, the past in Weigel's book is typically evoked by relying on more technical language as well as on *déjà dit*, which clash with the metaphorical passages of the first-person speaker. As Weigel says in an interview, 'with a background in science I have a fondness for figures and diagrams that can be quite poetic in how complex ideas are explained elegantly and succinctly. It's important to tell these stories in ways that resist "conventional" methods and poetics, it's a form of resistance in its own way' (Weigel, quoted in McLennan, 2021). Thus, the opening poem of his book, titled 'Acts Respecting Violence to the North-West,' begins with what looks like a chart, devoid of the subjectivity of the lyrical voice and quite similar, for instance, to an archival database index, or to the chart Michelle Filice provides in her article 'Numbered Treaties' for *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Filice, 2016): the first stanza of the poem consists of the list of dates and the numbers of the Numbered Treaties, thereby providing a summary of the settler colonial takeover of the territory:

1870	Rupert's Land Transfer
1871	Treaty No. 1
1871	Treaty No. 2
1873	Treaty No. 3
1874	Treaty No. 4
1875	Treaty No. 5
1876	Treaty No. 6
1877	Treaty No. 7
1899	Treaty No. 8
1905	Treaty No. 9
1906	Treaty No. 10
1921	Treaty No. 11 (Weigel, 2020, p. 6)

The stanza is compact and minimalist. There are no details uncovering and exposing the violence which is unambiguously referenced in the title, only the dates and document numbers, separated from one another by spaces and arranged in neat columns and lines. They gloss over the many particulars surrounding the treaty signing process, such as the territories on the agenda; the preparations, including the survey and mapping of the land; the participants in the negotiations and the signing; the sometimes lengthy negotiation processes and the Indigenous ceremonies accompanying them; the stipulations negotiated and agreed as well as the differing interests of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants (for specific details regarding the Numbered Treaties, see Dickason, 1992, pp. 273–290; for a detailed account of signing Treaties 1–7, see Krasowski, 2019). The list that forms Weigel’s stanza and the spaces between each date and document title create regular cadence, which evens out the differences in how much time passed between the signing of each document and creates an impression of a smooth and unproblematic but unrelenting process, which developed very consistently over five decades and affected, as estimated by Olive Dickason, ‘a little more than half’ of Canada’s Indigenous population (Dickason, 1992, p. 273). Coincidentally, several treaty numbers repeat the last digit of the year when they were signed, and the repetition creates internal rhyming in some lines when read out loud:

1871	Treaty No. 1 [...]
1873	Treaty No. 3
1874	Treaty No. 4
1875	Treaty No. 5
1876	Treaty No. 6
1877	Treaty No. 7 (Weigel, 2020, p. 6)

The rhymed syllables of the treaty numbers, which end each line, further enhance the energetic rhythm of the iambics in the right column, which slows only in the last, conclusive, line, identifying Treaty Eleven. Therefore, were it not for the title of the poem, which speaks of violences behind the list, the stanza and its chronological sequencing could be read as foregrounding the vigorous

progression and achievements of the settler colonial project, accomplished through legal measures: Anthony J. Hall explains that, '[h]istorically, non-Indigenous treaty negotiators believed treaties were inexpensive and convenient ways to strip Aboriginal title (i.e., ownership) from most of the lands in Canada so that resources could be used by settlers,' an interpretation that persists in contemporary times, when treaties are seen as finished 'real estate deals' (Hall, 2011, § 6). Such interpretation centers the settler regime of private property, which sought to and did supersede Indigenous spatial and social organizations. However, as emphasized by Nick Blomley, 'the establishment or redefinition of regimes of property is often predicated upon the mobilization of violence,' both corporeal and discursive, and legitimated by state apparatuses and documents (Blomley, 2003, p. 126). And it is precisely the violence of the transformation of Canada's North-West through dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their lands to replace their spatial and social structures with those of the settlers that Weigel refers to with the phrase 'Acts Respecting Violence to the North-West' as the poem's title. The way the stanza quoted above excludes any details of this violence works to underscore how the damage to as well as grievances of the Indigenous peoples were – and sometimes continue to be – dismissed or obscured in the descriptions of the treaties when interpreted from within the settler colonial mindset, governed by the 'logic of elimination,' to use Wolfe's phrase, and its 'foundational disavowal' of Indigenous people, as Veracini puts it (2011b, p. 5; 2011a, p. 2).

But there is more to the list of years and document numbers. The numbering of the treaties, which eventually came to be known as the Numbered Treaties, points to their repetitiveness as well as the cumulative effects of the repetition. In his detailed account of the signing of Treaties One to Seven, Sheldon Krasowski points out that the text of a specific treaty was typically modelled upon a 'template,' already used for earlier ones; this also includes the text of Treaty One, based on the Manitoulin Island Treaty (1862) and Robinson Huron and Superior Treaties (1850), signed earlier in other territories, although significant changes were made for Treaty One (Krasowski, 2019, p. 25, p. 70, p. 118, p. 162, p. 169, p. 225). He indicates how, for instance, the text of Treaty Three is 'very

similar' to that of Treaty One and Two, with many clauses 'identical' to the clauses formulated in the text of Treaty One provisions (Krasowski, 2019, p. 118). Changes and additions would sometimes be made after the negotiations with the Indigenous groups, usually on the insistence of the latter, resulting also in templates for subsequent treaties becoming more detailed, but unchanged in their fundamentals: thus, to negotiate Treaty Six, the treaty commissioners brought 'a template with blank spaces left for dates of the negotiations, land descriptions, the size of reserves, the amounts of the one-time present and annuity, as well as the value of ammunition and twine' (Krasowski, 2019, p. 225). However, progressively, the negotiations were subdued; for instance, the commissioner appointed to sign Treaty No. 11 was given instructions from the government officials to follow 'the terms set forth [in the treaty] and...no outside promises should be made by you to the Indians' (quoted in Tesar, 2016, § 13). The repetitions of the keywords and formulations thus reveal the consistency of the settler colonial project in its dealings with the Indigenous groups, adhering to the same established procedures in order to achieve the same result, the clearance of the land. Moreover, these repetitions also show how the treaty texts themselves are manifestations of procedural writing, relying on appropriative procedures of recycling pre-existing texts and patterns, but also on erasures and eliminations. Krasowski's account of the treaty signing processes reveals discrepancies between agreements made during the oral negotiations and the formulations in treaty texts: he maintains that, on the part of treaty commissioners, '[t]he main strategy was to discuss only the benefits of treaty and to ignore the liabilities,' although the latter would nonetheless be included into the treaty text, written in English (Krasowski, 2019, p. 2). Notably, it is the written – and then printed – text that will be subsequently relied on as proof of the agreements, sometimes disregarding statements and promises made orally (Krasowski, 2019, p. 2, pp. 8–9; see also Tesar, 2016). Bilingual, the negotiations relied on the services of translators, and Krasowski argues that treaty commissioners selected translators supportive of the government's project, who then consistently 'softened,' obscured, or did not mention the surrender clause, the gist of all the treaties, which required

the Indigenous people to ‘cede’ and ‘surrender’ the land completely (2019, p. 272, p. 224, p. 236, p. 275). He also cites distrust on the part of some Indigenous chiefs of the translators, the treaty commissioners, and the treaty texts, as evidenced by some chiefs’ demanding copies of the treaty documents (Krasowski, 2019, p. 225, p. 228, p. 261). Krasowski’s examination of the eyewitness testimonies seeks to counter the established narrative of cultural differences which sees Indigenous people as incapable of understanding the Western concepts of land ownership. He maintains that the elimination of the surrender clause from the negotiations ‘casts doubt on the validity of the complete surrender of Indigenous Lands’ (Krasowski, 2019, p. 2, p. 272, p. 276).

Because of these repetitively employed methods, such as reliance on the templates, recycling of the same phrases, consistent obscuring and omissions, the treaties can be seen as instances of language organized procedurally, – as any legal document is, but also not unlike conceptual writing, guided by appropriative procedures (Perloff, 2012, n.p.), – and employed to enact power. The strategies described by Krasowski reveal how the Indigenous people were consistently erased from the negotiation processes, transforming these processes into settler-colonial ‘non-encounters,’ as theorized by Veracini (2011b, p. 5; 2011a, p. 2). The way Weigel calls the treaties ‘acts respecting violence’ in the title of his poem is thus not only to underscore how the diplomatic principles of nation-to-nation agreements were defied and subsequently violated, but also to foreground the performative aspect of the treaties, not only as individual acts, but also highlighting the cumulative effects of the appropriative procedures which the treaties both relied on and set off.

In the rest of his chapbook, Weigel resorts to a series of appropriative acts of his own: he samples lines and images from the treaties and other archival documents to allow the samples to speak for themselves, but delinked from their original contexts and structures. Instead, they are placed in relation to one another and to the first-person lyrics of the contemporary Indigenous voice, constructing a palimpsestal structure made through a combination of different material. Weigel’s strategy thus follows the principle of remix as discussed by Navas, which ‘thrives on the relentless combination of all things possible’ (Navas, 2012, p. 6).

In his chapbook, Weigel combines his own text with textual quotations and digital images, thereby regenerating and re-actualizing the data in the samples as they are placed in a different environment and in a potential dialogue with it and with one another. The samples do not have to be numerous to generate this effect: as argued by Navas, on the level of discourse, remix operates ‘in the realm of ideas,’ as a conceptual strategy, organizing the sampled material according to the agenda of the remixer (Navas, 2012, p. 85, p. 67). The dialogue Weigel’s chapbook initiates is meant to traverse time: the archival samples offer an opportunity to revisit and explore specific moments of the past, including those of signing the treaties, in order to address their lasting effects on a contemporary Indigenous person.

The second stanza of ‘Acts Respecting Violence to the North-West’ is a diagram, elaborating a little on the earlier list of years and treaty numbers. This stanza consists of five rectangles of different size, each representing an event from the previous timeline and accompanied with a caption, such as ‘In which The Company sells/ land it does not own,’ referring to Rupert Land’s Transfer of 1870 (Weigel, 2020, p. 7). This was the transaction whereby the territory was sold to the Canadian government by the Hudson’s Bay Company, which subsequently necessitated the signing of the treaties (see McIntosh & Smith, 2019; Dickason, 1992, pp. 267–270), and Weigel’s caption points out the unfairness of the deal. The last two of the captions in this section are quotations: one from Treaty No. 6 and another from a report of the Commissioner for the final Treaty No. 11; the sources are indicated immediately after each quotation. The first quotation is part of the surrender clause, which captures the main goal the Canadian government pursued by initiating the treaties and metonymically evokes its source:

... surrender and yield up to the
Government of the Dominion of Canada,
for Her Majesty the Queen and Her
successors forever...

– *Treaty No. 6*

(Weigel, 2020, p. 7)

Weigel refers to a specific treaty as his source, although the surrender clause was included in the previous treaties and by the time of signing Treaty No. 6 had become formulaic. Weigel thus repeats it once again without modifications, except that he does not quote it in full, which is emphasized by the ellipses. He omits the first two verbs in the series, ‘cede’ and ‘release,’ which reiterate the same idea as the others. More importantly, he also omits both the subject of the clause, the Indigenous peoples of specific territories, and the direct object of the surrender, ‘all rights, titles and privileges to their hunting grounds’ (quoted in Krasowski, 2019, p. 69, p. 72, p. 99, p. 224, p. 266). However, he retains the indirect object, which identifies the recipients and beneficiaries of the surrender, and the emphasis on its permanence, the word ‘forever.’ Weigel’s omissions coincide with and thereby highlight settler colonial erasures of Indigeneity, legitimated through the treaty: in the new settler spatial order, which is meant to stay ‘forever,’ Indigenous people are constructed as intruders to be rejected. Veracini similarly cites ‘the recurring perception that sees indigenous peoples *entering* the settler space (when obviously and historically the opposite is the case)’ (Veracini, 2011b, p. 6; emphasis added).

Moreover, the omission of the subject of the clause is also suggestive of silencing the Indigenous negotiators and signatories, reducing them to a non-entity in this encounter. The next quotation, which concludes the poem, reinforces this effect. The text is from forty-five years later and from a document accompanying the final of the Numbered Treaties:

...whether they took treaty or not, they were
subject to the laws of the Dominion.

– *Report of the Commissioner for*

Treaty No. 11

(Weigel, 2020, p. 7)

The quotation does not contain a full sentence, either, and its source is not the text of Treaty No. 11, in which the main formulas would be repeated, including the surrender clause, but some terms are ‘vaguer than others, particularly in relation to agriculture and education’ (Tesar, 2016). In this case, the quotation is from

a source which would be unknown to the Indigenous signatories. Omitted from the quotation could be a phrase identifying a speech act undertaken by the commissioner, such as ‘I explained,’ but what is quoted is enough to imply complications during the negotiations. In his account of the signing of Treaty No. 11, Alex Tesar notes that several Indigenous chiefs were initially ‘hesitant’ or even ‘dismissive’ of it, aware of the grievances of Indigenous communities which had signed treaties earlier (Tesar, 2016, § 14, § 20). The quotation Weigel uses exposes the disregard for Indigenous people’s positions as well as how completely settler colonial procedures had overridden and superseded Indigenous voices over the course of fifty years, and how the treaties were progressively reduced to a mere formality. Placed one after another, these samples expose what Veracini describes as settler colonialism’s ‘foundational disavowal’ of Indigenous presence (2011b, p. 5; 2011a, p. 2). A treaty presupposes the presence of and agreement between several parties, and Indigenous nations did and continue to interpret the treaties signed with representatives of Canada’s government on behalf of the British Crown as nation-to-nation agreements (Hall, 2011). However, the procedures enacted by the treaties, as exposed by Weigel through his choice of the quotations, consistently stage a settler colonial ‘non-encounter,’ to use Veracini’s phrase (2011b, p. 5; 2011a, p. 2).

Notably, there is no commentary to the quotations in Weigel’s chapbook. He merely displays them and allows them to speak for themselves and to each other, and it is the combination in which they are placed, together with the omissions Weigel introduces, that helps elicit the meaning bestowed by the poem’s title, ‘acts respecting violence,’ not recognized in the original documents at the moment of their signing. In his discussion of quotational practices in literature and arts, Patrick Greaney argues that ‘[q]uotation’s transformation of its sources is allegorical. It takes away and endows meaning as it places texts in new contexts’ (Greaney, 2014, p. 3). Navas similarly emphasizes allegory in remix, its meta-level, whereby the remixed version challenges the original through the reworkings performed on it, but simultaneously always acknowledges the original and exists in relation to it and its meaning (Navas, 2007, pp. 66–67). Weigel’s chapbook exploits

precisely this doubling of meaning – treaties turned ‘acts respecting violence’ – which the quotations generate and which allows him to foreground the ongoing grasp the past acts and deeds have on the present. His careful documentation of the sources of his quotations also suggests how complicated extricating from the structures which these documents created to last ‘forever’ would be.

The pattern of refraining from commentary and allowing the quotations to speak for themselves is used with all the archival samples which Weigel includes, except for the two photographs, which are followed up with lengthy descriptions. He does not integrate the quotations into the text of his own poems, either, setting them off through formatting and thereby establishing distance between the voices from the past and the first-person voice in the poems. Notably, too, the textual quotations all are from the colonial sources, further highlighting the silencing of Indigenous voices in archival documents. As a preface to the poem ‘pêhonân,’ he quotes the treaty commissioner Alexander Morris promising to make a copy of the Treaty No. 6 to the Indigenous signatories (Weigel, 2020, p. 11). The source of two remaining quotations is Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada’s first Prime Minister (1867–73, 1878–91), ‘the nation builder,’ and the one orchestrating Canada’s settler colonial expansion into the North-West (see Johnson, 2013). These quotations are related to the Pacific Scandal of 1872–1873, when Macdonald and several members of his cabinet were accused of accepting money from a shipping magnate in exchange for the contract to build the Canadian Pacific Railway, which was one of the reasons the government needed to appropriate the Indigenous land (Johnson, 2013, § 14; McIntosh et al., 2006). Weigel quotes the telegram in which Macdonald demands another payment as well as his evasive and rather incoherent explanation of the demand when he testified in front of the parliamentary committee, which deposed him from the office, the post he resumed five years later (Weigel, 2020, p. 11, p. 12, p. 13). Selecting and singling out these quotations, which are given a separate page each and introduced by titles and brief contextualizing introductions, Weigel reduces the figure of ‘the nation builder’ Macdonald to his corrupt dealings, erasing even his role as Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1878 to 1887. The quotations are not arranged

chronologically: Treaty No. 6 was signed after the scandal and when Macdonald was not the prime minister, but this arrangement only highlights that settler colonialism as a structure is not dependent on individual figures, deeds, or incidents.

Each of these three quotations foregrounds an act performed through language: a promise by Morris, a demand, and an obfuscation of facts by Macdonald. Morris's promise to deliver the Indigenous chiefs a copy of the treaty, which could be seen as a benevolent act, was not fulfilled, as Weigel explains in his earlier chapbook, citing personal communication with L. Quirk (Weigel, 2019, p. 5). In *It Was Treaty/ It was Me*, he quotes only the promise, but the subsequent quotations of Macdonald's words, revealing the government's machinations, and the context which the previous quotations have built, are enough to imply the breaking of the promise and point out another form of erasure, that of the Indigenous community being denied access to the document which fundamentally transformed their lives. With each quotation, Weigel revisits the past, having chosen to speak about it in the words of settler colonial officials rather than in the voices of Indigenous participants in the events. This is suggestive of the fact that their words were not always recorded in writing, except reported in the accounts by treaty commissioners and other officials; thus, they are not always possible to retrace, as argued by, for instance, Adams-Campbell et al. (2015, p. 110), Frazer and Todd (2016, p. 35, p. 37, p. 39), or Hodes (2020, p. 63). Weigel does not attempt to recreate the voices of the Indigenous people in order to counter this form of archival violence, not even in the poems which speak about Indigenous participants in the events or to them, as, for instance in the following lines, in which he imagines an Indigenous signatory during the negotiations and signing:

*touch the pencil
make your mark
negotiate*

agree (Weigel, 2020, p. 11; original emphasis)

Touching the pen of the clerk, who would then put an X on the document, or making a mark on the parchment or chapter were the ways Indigenous Chiefs signed treaty documents: these

replaced the earlier practice of drawing their totems or seals (Krasowski, 2019, p. 70, p. 75, p. 268, p. 269; Tesar, 2016). Krasowski argues that touching the pen was Canada's usual negotiating strategy 'to distance the Chiefs and headmen from the written version of the treaty,' another move suggestive of sequestering information and denying Indigenous people equal participation, but also erase their presence from the manuscripts of the treaties (Krasowski, 2019, p. 9).

Nonetheless, it is signatures that are Weigel's way of marking Indigenous presence. Two poems, '1876: Treaty No. 6' and '1921: Treaty No. 11' are preceded by digitalized images of signatures copied from the treaty documents; each image is placed in the middle of the page preceding the relevant poem and identified as signatures of 'my uncle' and 'Grandfather' (Weigel, 2020, p. 15, p. 17). In the first case, the signature is that of James McKay, a Métis politician, fur trader, and guide, who had also worked for the Hudson's Bay Company; he was a commissioner for Treaties No. 1, 2, and 5, and assisted with negotiating and interpreting Treaties No. 4 and 6 (Krasowski, 2019, p. 221, especially pp. 175–227 on MacKay's role in the signing of Treaty No. 6). Another signature is by Métis J. A. R. Balsillie, who signed Treaty No. 11 as a witness, as Weigel explains in an earlier poem (Weigel, 2019, p. 3). In both poems, Weigel describes the act of signing very briefly. '1921: Treaty No. 11' begins:

my lungs are full of spruce trees
but otherwise I am empty,
I am here to witness:

1921 and Grandfather working for the Company in Fort Providence
it is June and that far north the sun would not set on the British Empire
he signs the treaty with a heavy ink (Weigel, 2020, p. 17).

The lines offer only external focalization on Grandfather, but merely on the act of signing. There are deliberately no attempts to imagine the moment from his perspective and include his thoughts or emotions of signing the treaty. The contemporary speaker acknowledges being able to assume only the role of a witness. Nonetheless, the description and particularly the signature

itself, albeit silent, assert a very real presence of Balsillie in that moment, as they do in the case of McKay (Weigel, 2020, pp. 14–15). That Weigel centers two Métis witnesses rather than signatories is suggestive of how diverse and complex the participation of Métis and Indigenous peoples in the dealings with settler colonial structures was. Neither McKay nor Balsillie was a member of the Indigenous communities whose territories were covered by the respective treaties, yet the first-person speaker's reference to the family lineage as well as the absence of signatures by the Indigenous negotiators place the focus on the two men. Weigel's emphasis in selecting the archival samples seems to be specifically on the physical marks left by the people themselves: their own words or, like in this case, signatures; he does not resort to listing, for instance, the names of the Indigenous signatories, which were written down by the clerks. He seeks to uncover traces of very real physical presence to undo the numerous erasures of Indigenous presence during the process.

To enhance this effect, on the next page, Weigel also includes a family photograph of the Balsillies, digitally remastered as is the photograph of Queen Victoria's throne room on an earlier page (Weigel, 2020, p. 8, p. 18). The two photographs are different precisely in how they mark human presence. The photograph of the throne room is devoid of people and the focus is on the luxury of the objects in it, which Weigel's digital alterations obscure, erasing the details and generating the effect of an abstract picture; Queen Victoria, in whose name the majority of the Numbered Treaties were signed, is evoked metonymically, through the image of the throne. By contrast, the photograph of Balsillie's family asserts the very physical presence of the persons, two adults and four children, whom it portrays, although very similar digital alterations which Weigel executes defy the curious gaze of the outsider. But even if their presence is reasserted, Weigel writes on the next page: 'I've never seen the photo. Neither has my father or anyone else in my family. I found it online. The image has an item number and subject taxonomy links to "Family and personal life" and "Aboriginal Peoples." / I assume it sits in a box on a shelf' (Weigel, 2020, p. 19). Thus, although the inclusion of the photograph emphasizes the continuity of the family line, Weigel points out another act of erasure, echoing that of not delivering a copy

of Treaty No. 6 to the signatories and showcasing how Indigenous people are deprived even of items of personal history. The lines about the photograph also recall a previous poem, which recounts the speaker seeing the original parchment of Treaty No. 6; like the family photograph, this document is also in the possession of the archives of the University of Alberta:

Dreamt I was in a library again,
 walking down the stairs into the basement
 walking down the stairs into the earth.
 I see the treaty parchment on a wooden table,
 it comes as no surprise the land herself holds this knowledge.
 (Weigel, 2020, p. 15)

In both cases, Weigel foregrounds the restricting of the items to the archival holdings and complicating access to them in their physical form. He also shows how the labelling and classifying of items in archival database indexes reiterate the casting Indigenous difference as cultural and generic – ‘Aboriginal Peoples’ – obscuring individual stories and experiences, but also their legal rights, as Adams-Campbell et al. emphasize (2015, p. 111). These forms of depersonalized and depersonalizing archival violence are contrasted with the speaker’s father’s visceral reaction to its effects when shown the photograph: ‘he got quiet, tears in his eyes and with his hand held to his face’; the same contrast is also implied by the speaker’s recurrent dreams of being in the library which contains these archival documents (Weigel, 2020, p. 15, p. 17, p. 19).

Greaney argues that ‘quotational works reveal more than the repeatability of this or that text or image; they also indicate the repeatability of the moment of emergence of the original, the moment of the original’s origination’; in other words, ‘[q]otation reopens cases that seemed closed’ (Greaney, 2014, p. 6, p. 7). Assembling and combining the archival samples related to the history of signing the Numbered Treaties, Weigel, too, seeks to reopen the deals between Canada and Indigenous nations, which are frequently seen as finished but whose effects are ongoing and disquieting: they are metaphorized in Weigel’s poems as physical discomfort, which needs to be addressed. However, quotation prevents revisioning and restricts one from launching into speculative scenarios of alternative pasts. Weigel does not attempt that. The

principle of remix followed in his book, that of ‘combination of all things possible,’ to use Navas’ phrase (2012, p. 6), allows Weigel to reassemble some of the participants of the treaty processes in the space of the book, observed also by a contemporary figure as a witness. This assembly is neither full nor conclusive: remix is never finite, and a specific configuration that is produced is but a ‘single enunciation’ of how the sources might be sampled and arranged (O’Neil, 2006, p. 20, p. 23). Weigel’s chapbook, too, does not propose any resolution. Instead, it initiates an uncovering what settler colonial structures – officials and archives – have obscured, erased, or glossed over, and gestures towards the need, now, to fill in the gaps.

Jordan Abel’s *Injun*: DJing with pulp fiction

Jordan Abel’s poetry book *Injun* (2016), a reworking of a collection of American Westerns, also navigates the space encroached upon by settler colonialism, but the title presupposes centering the racialized Indigenous figure. The setting in this book is not as specific as the one constructed in Weigel’s *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me*, in which he carefully documents dates and, implicitly, places. In Abel’s *Injun*, sparsely used placenames, namely Nevada and Yuma, link the poems to the western parts of the American Southwest (Abel, 2016, p. 8, p. 27). Together with such words as ‘discovery’ or the reiterated ‘frontier’ (Abel, 2016, p. 3, p. 8, p. 26, p. 32, p. 38), these placenames metonymically evoke the white settlement of the territories west of the Mississippi River after the American Civil War, when the white settlers, aided by the US cavalry, subdued the Indigenous people and appropriated their lands (Britannica). The poem labeled f) in the first section of Abel’s *Injun*, closes with these lines, focused on unidentified ‘them’:

if they had dreamed of nights
if they had eyes over fists

no free knotted nevada
in the pockets of soldiers

or grubbed up injuns
in the glean of discovery⁸ (Abel, 2016, p. 8)

z)

as tea mham mer
p lay of p rinci ples
a n d p weariness
an
interc our se
of title²⁷ and po
ssess i o n²⁸
th at br eaks
th e fingers
o f the riv er
and lea ves m e
wild ey ed and
d e rat e xasp
d
by the mu d
sp ru ng sh or e

Figure 1. visualization of the poem of Abel (Abel, 2016, p. 28; image reproduced courtesy of the writer).

Despite the negative determiner ‘no’ at the beginning of the third line, the imagery in the stanzas evokes the history of the territory: its discovery and appropriation – its ‘pocketing.’ The binary of soldiers and ‘injuns’ is suggestive of a violent clash between a state sanctioned military force and civilians and recalls the history of Plain Wars. The motif of violence is further developed in the last couplet, which speaks of physical removal – digging up – of ‘injuns’ from the earth like leftovers after the harvest, in this case, that of discovery, which is emphasized by superscribing the word with an endnote mark: ‘discovery’.⁸ Differently from the title of the book, the poem – like many others in the section – uses the plural form ‘injuns,’ which implies the repetition of violent acts rather than a single story and reiterates the same motif of the compulsion to eliminate the Indigenous presence that drives settler colonialism.

The final poem labeled z) in the same section, – turned upside down by Abel, as are several other poems, – reinforces the motif of the appropriation of the land, the ultimate goal of settler colonialism (see Figure 1). The poem speaks unambiguously about

violence inflicted on the land: the image of ‘break[ing]/ the fingers/ of the river,’ enhanced by words themselves broken up in ways that defy familiar structures such as syllables, is suggestive of torture. The river is personified to foreground its vulnerability, contrasting it with the opening image of a steam hammer, which implies crushing force, but also industrial processes, mechanical, depersonalized, and repetitive. Through the parallel structure used in the first two stanzas of Abel’s poem, the image of the steam hammer is also linked to ‘an intercourse/ of title²⁷ and possession’²⁸ and the violence they visit on the river. That the two nouns, ‘title’ and ‘possession,’ are superscribed with endnote marks further highlights their status as keywords in the poem. The poem thus underscores how the property regime and law work together and persistently to rearrange the land that has been appropriated. These are the same motifs Weigel focuses on in his exploration of the Indigenous treaties and the legal procedures accompanying them. In Abel’s poem, too, the image of the steam hammer metaphorizes the workings of the settler colonial machine, its ‘play of principles’ and its relentless procedures, which leave the first-person speaker-witness, ‘wild eyed and/ exasperated,’ unable to interfere. This is the final poem in the sequence, and it does not gesture towards a possible way of halting or countering them.

Imagist and metaphorical, Abel’s poems are also much more explicit about the acts of violence performed onto Indigenous land and body than Weigel’s poems, in which the latter exposes the various obfuscations undertaken by settler colonial structures to cover up their dishonesties and violent acts. But Abel’s descriptions, too, are restricted by the material he uses: all poems in *Injun*, including the two discussed above, are, in their entirety, composed of found language: their vocabulary is from the source material Abel appropriates and ‘repurposes,’ to borrow Dworkin’s phrasing (Dworkin, 2010, p. xliii). While Weigel works with samples from legal and governmental documents, Abel selects his data from a different type of archive, a literary database. Like in his previous book *Un/Inhabited* (2014), in *Injun*, Abel reworks the same collection of ninety-one popular novels of the Western genre, accessible on Project Gutenberg, which he data-mines and

then subjects the findings to a series of cut-ups and mash-ups, or, put otherwise, textual remixes. *Un/Inhabited* explores the processes of the settler take-over of Indigenous lands (for a more detailed discussion of the book, see e.g. Ritter, 2014; Aurylaite, 2017), and Abel uses rather mechanical procedures of erasure to expose the violences behind the creation of what is now North American space. In *Injun*, on the other hand, Abel relies on methods which allow for more attention to textual details and specific experiences navigating the transformed space. For *Injun*, as Abel explains in the section of the book ‘Process,’ he copy-pasted the texts of the novels into a single file to come up with a bulk of text, obliterating the borders between individual works, and then used Ctrl+F to isolate the sentences containing the racial slur ‘injun.’ It is these sentences sampled from the novels that are the material – both textual and physical – out of which Abel shaped *Injun*: he copy-pasted the sentences into a separate file, printed the resulting twenty-six pages, and then cut them up in various ways, and moved separate words, phrases, or letters around, arranging them into particular combinations to construct twenty-six lyrics as well as the section ‘Notes’ to them and ‘Appendix’ (Abel, 2016, p. 83). In this transformation of multiple prose narratives into poems, Abel thus can be seen as DJing with the samples from the source texts – isolating them and physically moving them to recombine into lines and stanzas according to a series of poetic conventions as well as his own ideas. The result is a remix of the sources, so radical that the poems he composed could be read as completely original texts were it not for the sections ‘Sources’ and ‘Process’ in his book (Abel, 2016, pp. 79–82, p. 83).

The main part of the book is a poem sequence with the same title, ‘Injun,’ which consists of a series of twenty-six individual lyrics. While Weigel’s book is punctuated with dates, linking present experiences to moments of the past, Abel labels each poem with a letter instead of a title, arranging them alphabetically, from a) to z), and seemingly imposing an order onto the poems which is more fixed than Weigel’s narrative present continuously interrupted by flashbacks into the past. The alphabetical order chosen by Abel has ideological implications: as Jacquelyn Ardam notes in her analysis of the ways the alphabet is used in conceptual writing,

‘[i]n almost all literary texts, the [alphabetical] sequence functions as a metaphor for order or power, the symbolic register, or even for civilization itself’ (Ardam, 2014, p. 138, p. 139). Employed in Abel’s ‘Injun,’ the English alphabetical sequence could be expected to expose its familiar metaphorical load, particularly since the Westerns, out of whose samples ‘Injun’ is composed, celebrate the advancement of settler colonial culture and establishment of its structures (Mardsen, 1978; McMahon & Csaki, 2010). These included language, along with its categories of thought: under the settler colonial regime, English was imposed upon Indigenous peoples through a series of assimilationist policies, glossed as the ‘civilizing mission’ (see e.g. Dickason, 1992). On the other hand, the a) to z) labels seemingly entice the reader to fall for the promise of the ABCs to explain the basics of the subject matter at hand, the ‘Injun.’ However, this is a tease: although labelled alphabetically, the lyrics do not yield to the familiar metaphorical meanings of the sequence. Unlike popular Western novels, the sequence does not develop a traceable storyline, which would include a resolution of conflicts and tensions, nor does it construct a recognizable character or characters, whose development could be followed, and a culmination or resolution identified. There is not even a consistent narrator as the speaking voice shifts from the third to first person. Moreover, due to Abel’s methods of rearranging his samples, some lyrics are not even readable in the traditional sense, composed merely of separate letters or their clusters which are impossible to arrange into readable sequences (Abel, 2016, pp. 18–21). As a result, the alphabetical structure is imposed upon a series of texts which defy conventional coherence as well as refuse to provide a transparent and unproblematic description, thereby escaping the grasp of the alphabet’s metaphorical ordering.

Nonetheless, there is a structure to Abel’s sequence of lyrics, but it is not linked to the alphabet, which is deprived of its power to set hierarchies and mark progression and is reduced to merely labelling the lyrics. The sequence is thus alphabetized, but not alphabetical, and the function of the alphabet is metonymical, that of ‘pure form’ devoid of hierarchical structures, to use Ardham’s phrasing: ‘Z isn’t worth more than A is. It’s just further along’ (Ardam, 2014, p. 139).

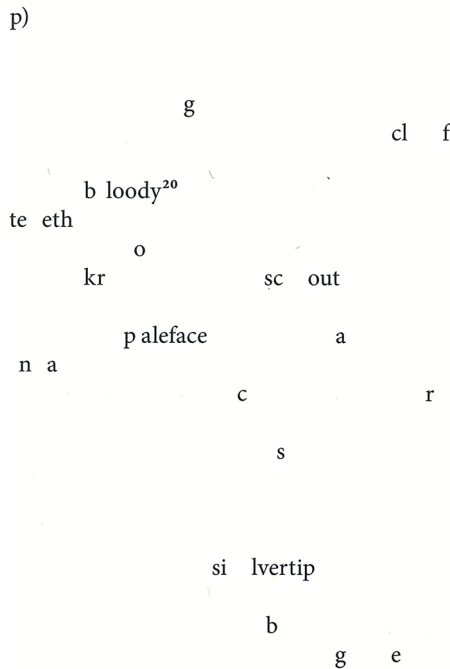


Figure 2. visualization of the poem of Abel (Abel, 2016, p. 18; image reproduced courtesy of the writer).

The structure that Abel creates in his sequence is, too, the most evident in the forms and shapes of the poems, ranging from compact and conventional stanzas to letters dispersed all over a page, when the text itself falls apart. The sequence opens with several poems made of five neat couplets each, often employing parallel structures and rather regular rhythm (e.g. the poem f) discussed earlier), and focusing on the nameless 'he.' It is only with the poem g) that Abel starts playing with format by indenting some lines and introducing spaces within them, or later adding more lines to stanzas; with the poem m), some words start breaking up into arbitrary clusters of letters – not syllables, – and with n), the poems turn into concrete poetry, with words broken apart into clusters of or mere letters, which are dispersed on pages, as for instance in the poem p) (see Figure 2).

Sometimes, not a single word can be pieced together in an entire poem as, for instance, in the poem q) (Abel, 2016, p. 19). Thus, while the alphabetical sequence progresses, the poems increasingly

disintegrate until they are reduced to bare sounds and become completely unreadable. Moreover, starting with the poem r), that is, almost two thirds of the way into the sequence, the reader has to turn the book upside down, as some lines, and then entire poems are printed upside down. Notably, for these inverted poems, the letter labels are placed below the text, where they are reduced to the status of follow-ups rather than guiding signs. Notably, too, despite the inversion, starting with the poem t), the letters and syllables in the remaining poems can be connected back to words, and thus read, although individual words remain broken up into clusters of letters. More importantly, it is in this inverted part of the sequence that the third person voice, describing the nameless ‘he,’ ‘them,’ and ‘injuns,’ gives way to the first-person speaker: instead of remaining an object of description, as is typically the case in the Western, the ‘injun’ acquires a voice: ‘*he* heard snatches of comment / going up from the river bank’ turns into ‘black hair frontier / *i* hear your / dead heroes’ (Abel, 2016, p. 4, p. 26; emphasis added). With this move, the shapes of the poems also start clinging back, and the layout of the final poem z), albeit with spaces within lines and printed upside down, once again resembles that a poem, composed as it is of six stanzas. Nonetheless, the poem itself, describing ‘a steam hammer/ play of principles,’ discussed earlier in this section, does not offer any resolution or conclusion. The letter labels given to the individual lyrics prove not to be suggestive of or responsive to these changes in shape and form, and thereby devoid of their organizational power, reduced to an arbitrary marker: the alphabetization fails to deliver the ABCs of the title subject.

Simultaneously, Abel implies that his is but one way of reconfiguring the samples from the novels: as is always the case with remixes of appropriated material, neither the images in, nor the formatting of his poems is necessarily finite: the sampled sentences can be further rearranged into new combinations or subjected to still other methods, including by Abel himself. In ‘Process,’ he himself acknowledges the arbitrariness behind his compositions:

Sometimes I would cut up a page into three- to five-word clusters. Sometimes I would cut up a page without looking. Sometimes I would rearrange the pieces until something sounded right.

Sometimes I would just write down how the pieces fell together (Abel, 2016, p. 83).

Abel chooses to ‘repurpose’ the language that is not his own, extricating it from its familiar structures – a popular narrative genre – which seem finite and fixed when printed on a page, but which can become suddenly malleable when taken apart. Doing this, he opens the source texts for new re-readings, but deliberately limits what he might say by choosing to be a re-arranger, a DJ, and thus restricted by the amount of the source material as well as by the methods used, instead of undertaking a free improvisation on the motifs the genre hosts and perpetuates. Abel’s thus is a much more radical reworking and repurposing of the sources than Weigel’s, who sets out, identifies, and documents each borrowed sample, making the structure of the combination of items in his book clearly visible. Abel’s poems are composed out of sampled sentences which have been reduced to textual matter, which in turn, has invited a series of physical and rather violent gestures and manipulations in dealing with it, akin to what practitioners and theorists of conceptual writing such as Goldsmith and Dworkin espouse (Goldsmith, 2010, p. xxi, p. xviii, p. xix; Dworkin, 2010, p. xxxvi, p. xlii). As a result of these manipulations, not only are the sampled sentences divorced from their contexts, meanings, and authors, but also completely transformed, reduced to words and phrases, sometimes mere letters.

Because Abel formats many of these poems in rather conventional ways and because many are readable in the traditional sense, it is rather easy to yield to the pleasures and frustrations of close reading them as individual – and original – texts. However, recognizing the source is essential in remix, and the rearranged texts need to be read through a palimpsestal presence of their source(s) in order to expose linkages and tensions between them, implicitly or explicitly suggestive of the remixer’s agenda (O’Neil, 2006, p. 20; Navas, 2012, p. 67). Abel, too, dutifully lists the sources, all the novels used for the project, as well as the sampled sentences, a compilation of which is included as an ‘Appendix’ in his book (Abel, 2016, pp. 61–78). Notably, he works with a body of source texts rather than focusing on a specific novel, which

allows him to foreground how genres are driven by patterns and repetitions. Steve Neale famously states: ‘genres are instances of repetition and difference’ (Neale, 2021, p. 61). However, the way Abel reduces the appropriated novels to textual matter disregards the aspect of difference. He searches for reiterations, those of the word ‘injun’ as well as of some other words, such as ‘frontier,’ ‘discovery,’ ‘scalped,’ ‘squaw’ or ‘West,’ which he highlights with endnote marks in the poems and whose concordance lines, also sampled from the same novels, he collects in the section ‘Notes’ to foreground the contexts in which they appear (Abel, 2016, pp. 29–58). Moreover, Abel frequently uses more than one novel by the same writer, sometimes even more than ten, as is the case with B. M. Bower’s and Zane Grey’s texts. This way, not unlike Weigel in *It Was Treaty/ It Was Me*, who uncovers the repetitive procedures of legal writing, Abel, too, foregrounds repetition, over time: the novels he uses were published over the period between the last decades of the 19th and the middle of the 20th centuries, when the genre’s popularity in the format of the novel was at its peak (Abel, 2016, pp. 79–82; Britannica). Abel’s emphasis is thus on the genre as a repository of serialized and patterned stories, types, words, and images – a literary archive, which can be data-mined in very technical ways and the found data can then be subjected to various analyses and rearrangements.

In her discussion of genres, Wai Chee Dimock notes how genres amass and recycle: she foregrounds ‘the activity here as cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory. The field is profoundly unoriginal in this cumulative sense’ (Dimock, 2007, p. 1380). Abel’s tracking of specific vocabulary in the texts published over almost a century points out exactly that, underscoring how such reiterations and repetitions solidify into recognizable and congealed phrases, images, and representations. Moreover, as argued by John Frow, through repetitions and accumulations, as repositories of images, motifs, and storylines, genres ‘actively generate and shape the knowledge of the world’ (Frow, 2007, p. 2). Frow sees genre as ‘a form of symbolic action: the generic organization of language, images, gestures, and sounds makes things happen by actively shaping the way we understand the world’ (Frow, 2007, p. 2). Addressing the Western specifically,

Michael T. Mardsen underscores precisely the fantasy which the genre constructed and has perpetuated: in the Western, the West is shown 'not as it was won, but as it should have been won'; he also emphasizes persistent repetitions within and of the genre narratives when he speaks about 'the ritualistic retelling of the winning of the West' in order to bolster the foundational narrative of the settler colonial country (Mardsen, 1978, p. 203). Operating within the frame of the settler colonial culture, the Western produced, as Jennifer L. McMahon and B. Steve Csaki highlight, 'a polemical representation of the changing landscape of American political life,' a representation, which, 'captivat[ing] the popular imagination,' encouraged and fueled the settlement ideologically (McMahon & Csaki, 2010, p. 7) and was 'instrumental in nullifying guilt related to [Indigenous] genocide,' as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues about the genre's predecessors, James Fenimore Cooper's novels (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. 107). In the world constructed by the Western, the focus is on the emerging and developing settler society, and 'the final outcome is never in question, only the means to reach the outcome are,' as Mardsen puts it (1978, p. 205). This world is shaped by and perpetuates the structure of the settler colonial 'non-encounter,' to use Veracini's term, in which the Indigenous figure is an unwanted intruder in the settler space or already 'reduced to reminiscence' (Veracini, 2011a, p. 2; Veracini, 2011b, pp. 5–6). The Western is thus another 'story of America that depends upon vanishing the Indian as part of its denouement,' a story in which the central role is assumed by settlers and various subsequent arrivals (Byrd, 2014, p. 55).

Abel's *Injun* undertakes to counter such reductions and erasures, centering the Indigenous figure, whom settler colonialism seeks to eliminate and whom the conventional Western, accordingly, subjects to 'purely formulaic treatment,' as Mardsen puts it, again underscoring the repetitiveness of the representations and noting that, in these texts, the Indigenous figure is 'both maligned and beatified but not understood' (Mardsen, 1978, p. 212, p. 213). Abel's book seeks to contest these representations in the Westerns, but his strategy is not to engage in a revisionist rewriting of them or propose alternatives. In his analysis of *Injun*, Alois Sieben (2021) makes a similar point about Abel refusing to

produce any new representations of Indigeneity for the settler-colonial gaze; Sieben argues that, instead, Abel's book engages in a mediation between Indigenous and settler 'modes of vision' as it is constructed out of colonial sources but refuses both to yield to their logic and to uncover the Indigeneity that settler colonial fabrications, manifest in the Westerns, concealed and worked to erase (Sieben, 2021, n.p.).

Defying the expectations of the readers enticed by the alphabetization of the poem sequence, seemingly promising the ABCs of the subject matter, the 'Injun' of its title, Abel sets out to destabilize the formulas surrounding the Indigenous figure, perpetuated by the genre of the Western. This becomes clear with the very first poem a) of the sequence, which opens with the motif of the 'imaginary Indian,' which Westerns participated in constructing and popularizing:

he played injun in gods country
where boys proved themselves clean

dumb beasts who could cut fire
out of the whitest¹ sand

he played english across the trail
where girls turned plum wild

garlic and strained words
through the window of night

he spoke through numb lips and
breathed frontier² (Abel, 2016, p. 3)

The poem focuses on the nameless 'he' and centers the contrast between the acts of 'play[ing] injun' and 'play[ing] english.' This underscores how the former phrase is a strong collocation and conjures up a set of familiar stereotypical images, whereas the latter combination of words, grammatically identical, is neither habitual nor informative on its own, assembled by Abel precisely to expose the constructedness of both. 'Playing Indian' is a performance undertaken by non-Indigenous persons (on the concept and practice of 'playing Indian,' see Deloria, 1998; Francis, 1992). For his poem, Abel took the phrase 'played injun' directly from one of the

sentences he had sourced, easily traceable in the 'Appendix,' which contains all sampled sentences, with the word 'Injun' erased, retaining the gap. The first instance of the phrase in the Appendix, likely to have been used for this first poem of the sequence, also focuses on a non-Indigenous person: 'He talked to the horses; he sang songs; he *played* ; and that Christmas was a merry one, for the debt was paid and our little widow had beef to throw to the dogs' (quoted in Abel, 2016, p. 61; emphasis added). The sentence creates the atmosphere of simple but 'merry' domesticity in a settler space cleansed of the disturbing Indigenous presence, which is now safely reduced to a child's play. In Abel's poem, however, the nameless 'he,' who remains unidentified in the poem sequence, performs both 'injun' and 'english' with apparent ease, disturbing the conventional understanding of the concept, for the poem does not focus on a non-Indigenous character. Moreover, the performance disturbs the racialized binary opposition, also perpetuated in the Westerns, which construes the two categories, Indigeneity and Europeanness, as incompatible in the space of settler colonialism: this split is also shown through the image of the trail across which the poem's 'he' assumes a different role. Moreover, by juxtaposing the racial category 'injun' and the nationality 'english,' the poem also foregrounds how the former itself is a fabrication created by settler colonialism: a slurred alteration of 'Indian,' it derives from a misnomer attributed to Columbus, manifesting the refusal to acknowledge differences between and thus the existence of distinct Indigenous nations and cultures as well as their rootedness in specific places (see e.g. Younging, 2018, p. 61). As such, the label is a manifestation of discursive violence, an erasure of individual differences and denial of Indigenous nationhood. By contrast, creating their own national identity is one of the goals settler societies pursue. It is also against this label of the 'Indian' that the settler society consolidates and defines itself, and therefore insists on reinstating the binary structure (Wolfe, 1999, p. 179). Notably, in addition to persisting in colloquial usage in contemporary North American societies, the label 'Indian' has also been used in Canadian federal government's legal documents, such as the Indian Act, which is still in force today, under the same name (see e.g. Younging, 2018, p. 61).

‘In fact, there may well be no such thing as an Indian,’ as Daniel Francis aptly puts it, arguing that the ‘Indian’ is a projection of settler ‘hopes, fears, and prejudices’ (Francis, 1992, p. 4, p. 5). Francis’ discussion of the ‘Indian’ as a fantasy is in line with what Patrick Wolfe terms ‘repressive authenticity,’ defined as a form of romantic stereotyping of Indigeneity, transposing it to the pre-contact past, which renders real ‘historical Indigenous people who do not embody the construction’ as *inauthentic* (Wolfe, 1999, p. 179). The way the nameless ‘he’ in Abel’s poem performs both ‘injun’ and ‘english’ can be indicative of the two modes settler colonialism allows Indigenous people to inhabit, that of the ‘Indian’ as a spectacle, which extends to contemporary practices of commodifying Indigenous imagery, as Alois Sieben points out (Sieben, 2021, n.p.), and that of assimilation into settler society. However, both modes are ‘play’ for Abel’s character, which suggests that the ‘he’ cannot be contained by either category or construct. Indeed, other images in the poem foreground physicality: ‘boys proved themselves clean’; ‘girls turned plum wild’; ‘he spoke through numb lips/ and breathed frontier’ (Abel, 2016, p. 3). Just like ‘he played english,’ most words in these lines do not collocate, and the phrases are deliberately opaque, yet they target familiar imagery: for instance, the girls turn ‘plum wild,’ disturbing the stereotypical linking of Indigeneity and savagery, which would reign beyond the frontier; the nameless ‘he’ breathes the latter, which, rather ambiguously, can suggest both taking in its air and the impression of it that the ‘he’ gives. It is this image of the frontier, another recurrent image in the Western, that disturbs the potentially empowering reading of the motif of playing as a refusal to be contained by the categories of settler colonial thought. The reference to the frontier evokes the clash between Indigeneity and settler colonial advancement, and the physical violence accompanying the process. The endnote number added to the word – ‘frontier’ – leads the reader to the ‘Notes’ section, in which Abel lists eighteen concordance lines sampled from the sourced sentences; most lines comprise only fragments of sentences, but each contains the word ‘frontier,’ highlighted and centered to form a column on the page (see Figure 3).

2)

age. San Antonio at this time was a **frontier** village, with a mixed popu
 s and asked none in return. In this **frontier** village at a late hour one ni
 passing glance. Interesting as this **frontier** life was to the young man,
 the work before them. There was a **frontier** on the south and west of ov
 edit due for guarding this western **frontier** against the Indians and ma
 ie soil, as a boy the guardian of the **frontier** was expert in the use of fir
 ids. In the use of that arbiter of the **frontier**, the six-shooter, they were :
 near to hear him. His years on the **frontier** were rich in experience, th
 ave it to the stronger republic. This **frontier** on the south has undergone
 unties in Texas while it was yet the **frontier**, and by industry and econo
 n the early days usually graced the **frontier** towns with their presence.
 sinner said that he had been on the **frontier** some little time, and that t
 at the Ford was quite a pretentious **frontier** village of the squatter type
 lassify him at a passing glance as a **frontier** gambler. As we turned awa
 ern trail. On coming opposite that **frontier** village, Parent and I took t
 another trail drover. Sutton was a **frontier** advocate, alike popular wi
 d had grown into manhood on the **frontier**. Sponsilier was likewise ple
 ad herd. It was a unique posse. Old **frontiersmen**, with patriarchal bea

Figure 3. visualization of the poem of Abel (Abel, 2016, p. 32; image reproduced courtesy of the writer).

In this way, the endnote mark used in the poem guides the reader to the contexts in which the target word operates in the original sources. Formulated from the perspective of settlers, most speak about the temporariness of the frontier, implying the inevitable settler take-over, as in ‘San Antonio at this time was a **frontier** village, with a mixed popu’ or ‘in Texas while it was a **frontier**, and by industry and.’ Some, however, speak directly about the clash with Indigenous people, perceived as a threat, for instance: ‘due for guarding this western frontier against the Indians and ma’ (Abel, 2016, p. 32; original emphasis). In these contexts, the poem’s last line ‘he breathed frontier,’ preceded by such phrases as ‘strained words’ and ‘numb lips,’ suggestive of tension and physical discomfort, complicates the earlier ‘play.’ The frontier is construed as a lived physical experience, disquieting, dangerous, and exhausting due to its precarious state, rather than romanticized, as is typical in the Western (Mardsen, 1978, p. 204).

The motif of the play is reiterated in several other poems, with explicitly darker connotations. For instance, poem 1) concludes:

*you can see it for yourself
lets play injun*

*and clean ourselves
off the land*

*same old gun handed business¹⁶
served up*

*on the hunt tracks
of strangers*

(Abel, 2016, p. 14; original emphasis)

Here, in the words of the unidentified speaker, ‘play[ing] injun’ is directly linked to physical removal rather than an exoticized performance. The violence of the act is further enhanced in the last stanza, in which ‘same old gun handed business’ foregrounds the repetitiveness of the practice, which construes the Indigenous body as a target ‘served up/ on the hunt tracks,’ exposed to hostility. In an even earlier poem, ‘playing injun’ is very directly turned into a deadly practice: ‘dirty tenderness⁴ / that stiffened into / that low-brow ice / that dead injun game’ (Abel, 2016, p. 5).

Images of violence abound in Abel’s sequence of poems, often very disturbing, as in the lines ‘a partial injun tongue/ steady in an old mans fingers,’ where the focus is on details, and the act itself almost personal (Abel, 2016, p. 10). Elsewhere, the procedures are depersonalized and mechanical, as in the ‘steam hammer / play of principles’ (Abel, 2016, p. 28). Sometimes, Abel allows for a degree of ambiguity, opening the poem 0) as follows:

injun s mu st hang

*straigh t
bl ck arrows*

*o ff their
sh oulders (Abel, 2016, p. 17)*

Here, the double syntax resulting from the lineation allows to undo the incitement to kill formulated in the first line. Yet, even though the later lines speak about the weapons belonging to and thus empowering the ‘injuns’ themselves, the first line, spaced out to make it more prominent, retains its own separate violent message. Even when a nameless speaker is overheard saying, ‘*all of them injuns is people first / and besides for this buckskin / why we even shoot at them*’ (Abel, 2016, p. 4; original emphasis), the questioning of the rationale does not halt the shooting, but drowns in the chorus of other, more disquieting comments: ‘*and time to pedal their eyes/ to lean out and say the truth³/ all you injuns is just white keys*’ (Abel, 2016, p. 4; original emphasis).

In her study of homophobic violence, Gail Mason proposes to define violence as ‘a way of looking’ at individual subjects rather than merely a practice inflicted upon them: she speaks of ‘the capacity of violence to shape the ways that we see, and thereby come to know, certain things. In this way, the act of violence itself is a spectacle. This is not so much because violence is something that we observe, but, more, because violence is a mechanism through which we distinguish and observe other things.’ (Mason, 2002, p. 11) The context Abel construes in his poems foregrounds just that: having exposed the constructedness of the figure of the ‘injun,’ he proceeds to show how the construction guides the settlers to view Indigenous people and, as a result, subject them to the acts the poems describe. By the sixth poem in the sequence, the nameless ‘he’ from the opening poem is replaced with plural pronouns and the plural form ‘injuns,’ which highlights the repetitiveness of these acts so that they turn into a pattern, as implied by ‘*why we even shoot at them*’ (Abel, 2016, p. 4; original emphasis). Even halfway through the sequence, where some poems are composed of separate letters, which seldom cohere into readable phrases, the words that can be pieced together do signal racialized binary opposition and the violence it begets, as, for instance, ‘bloody,’ ‘teeth,’ ‘scout,’ ‘paleface,’ ‘silvertip’ (Abel, 2016, p. 18) or ‘scalped,’ ‘fort,’ ‘injun,’ ‘colonel’ (Abel, 2016, p. 22). These words, again, inevitably remind the reader of the palimpsestal presence of the sourced material, the Western novels, out of which Abel constructed his poems and which perpetuate the

wit h my w inter confiden ce
 boi ling the ambush fa ith²⁶
 i nto the hollow r ampage
 i n the o the flagstaff br each

Figure 4. visualization of the poem of Abel (Abel, 2016, p. 27; image reproduced courtesy of the writer).

motif of extinguishing Indigenous presence from the newly created settler space. Nonetheless Abel does not close his poem sequence with a scattering of these words, but proceeds to cohere clusters of letters into phrases and stanzas. Even more importantly, in the last several poems, he gives voice to the first-person speaker, which is suggestive of survival, confidence, and endurance (see Figure 4).

Having uncovered and exposed a significant amount of racist and violent imagery in the samples from his source texts, Abel's poem sequence does not offer any optimistic resolution to the settler colonial violences enacted upon Indigenous land and being that the poems describe. Abel does not seek to revise the messages formulated by the genre of the Western, nor can he do that, having chosen to remix rather than rewrite the sources. As a rearranger, he is dependent on and restricted by the material available to him, although there are almost endless possibilities for what specific combinations can be constructed. This also implies that any representation constructed this way would inevitably be arbitrary and provisional, rather than fixed or finite. Abel thus does not aim to construct a new revised image of the Indigenous figure, reclaimed from the familiar formulas; his point is precisely their undoing, which he enacts very literally, in a series of gestures akin to what Mignolo describes as 'decolonial gestures' of 'epistemic disobedience,' defined as acts of disentangling from Western 'categories of thought' and thus from the pervasive logic of the colonial 'matrix' (Mignolo, 2011, p. 45, pp. 47–48). Simply put, the claims of the colonized are not to be articulated in the jargon of the colonizer. Mignolo and Vazquez propose a close analysis of the various concepts and terms behind Western categories of thought to reveal how they have worked 'to erase, silence, denigrate other ways of understanding and relating to the world': the decolonial option lies precisely in 'opening to' and recovering these erased

and discredited ways (Mignolo & Vazquez, 2013; Mignolo, 2011, p. 45, pp. 47–48; Mignolo, 2014). Abel undertakes to open up several such categories: the genre of the Western, the construct of the ‘Injun,’ and the English alphabet, its letters being the material out of which the former two are made.

For this undertaking, the procedures to which Abel subjects his sources and the processes of their execution are no less important than the resulting texts. His poems thus both reveal settler colonial violence and inflict a series of violent acts – real and physical – upon a settler colonial literary archive. Thus, through the remix that it engages in, Abel’s book can be seen as a process comprised of a series of decolonial gestures, as well as a site in which this specific textual arranging takes place and shape, and in which the reader is to participate in related processes of piecing cut-ups together or turning the book upside down to proceed. However, unlike Weigel, who creates his book as a site for a potential dialogue between his samples and his own lyrics, Abel is not interested in his sources interacting between themselves or with his own words. Instead of constructing Indigenous characters to counter the fiction of the ‘Injun,’ Abel employs the very language that created this figure, subjects it to scrutiny, and remixes it, making it say things the original authors did not intend and expose acts that the novels may obfuscate, thereby destabilizing the fixed formulas and mobilizing a self-reflexive relationship between the originals and his remix. Notably, the destabilization is achieved both textually, by assembling new texts out of the words from the sampled sentences, and physically, by literally cutting the sentences up and breaking them apart – an act of violence, which Abel describes as ‘something very satisfying’ in an interview (quoted in Borsuk & Dowling, 2019), and which further enhances the violence exposed in his poems. This strategy also underscores the defiance of any expectations readers might have about the ‘Injun.’

In a final gesture, Abel undertakes a very different action: in ‘Appendix,’ he collects all the five hundred and nine sampled sentences that he had cut up, broken up, mashed-up, and rearranged, thereby destabilizing their contents and subjecting them to scrutiny (Abel, 2016, pp. 61–78). In ‘Appendix,’ these sentences thus seem to be arranged back to their original structures, except for the fact

The boys from the other herds—good men, too—kept shooting them into the water, and inside fifteen minutes’ time we were in the big Territory. Early the next morning I sent one of my boys out on the highest sand dune to around and see what they were doing. As we passed out George turned back and apologized to the girls, saying, ‘He’s a good . He proved himself clean strain that night, the whitest little on the reservation. I had a little experience over east here, on the cut off from the Chisholm trail, a few years ago, that gave me all the I want for some time to come. Well, that Texan wasn’t looking for any particular that day to give six of his own dear horses to. Mr. came up to the fire and professed to be very friendly, shook hands, and spoke quite a number of words in English. The letter concluded with the ction, in case we met any one, to conceal the ownership of the herd and its destination. He talked to the horses; he sang songs; he played ; and that Christmas was a merry one, for the debt was paid and our little widow had beef to throw to the dogs. The message was from Mike Sutton, stating that a fourth member of the ring had arrived during the forenoon, accompanied by a United States marshal from the federal court at Omaha; that the officer was armed with an order of ctive relief; that he had deputized thirty men whom Tolleston had gathered, and proposed taking possession of the two herds in question that afternoon. I was pained to hear that you and Tom have both gone plum hog-wild, drinking out of cowtracks and living on wild garlic and land-terrapin, just like s. But when the hearing came up, Sutton placed Jim Reed and me in the witness-box, taking the stand later himself, and we showed that federal court that it had been buncoed out of an order of ctive relief, in favor of the biggest set of ringsters that ever missed stretching hemp. “-bit,” “Man-afraid-of-his-horses,” were some of the terms applied to us,—yet the practical plainsman knew enough to take warning from his dumb beast. Order was soon restored, when we proceeded, and shortly met the young German coming back up the road, who merely remarked on meeting us, “Dem s shot at me.” I’m going back to God’s country,—back where there

Figure 5. visualization of the poem of Abel (Abel, 2016, p. 61; image reproduced courtesy of the artist).

that Abel erases the word ‘injun’ from each, along with completely different words that share the same root, such as ‘injunction’ and ‘injunctive.’ The erasures are marked by the gaps (see Figure 5). Placed one after another in prose format, they form a substantial mass of text, undisturbed by other kinds of formatting. However, the lack of coherence between the sentences, the disjointedness

and rather jarring moves from one to another, uncharacteristic of texts labeled as popular literature, such as the Western, as well as the ruptures from within by the blank spaces from which the word 'injun' is erased disturb the unity and prevent the sentences, seemingly restored, from getting the final say, the danger of which Patrick Greaney warns: '[i]n fact, quoting another author may reinforce that quoted author's authority' (Greaney, 2014, p. 3). This does not happen, but 'Appendix' reminds the reader that Abel's remix subverts but does not replace the sources, and foregrounds how the structures and categories of thought implemented by settler colonialism continue to persist, adapting to the new circumstances and making Mignolo and Vazquez's (2013) urge to look for ways of disentanglement from them very pertinent. Nonetheless, the way Abel erases all instances of the word 'injun' leaves the sampled sentences gaping: the settler colonial impulse to erase the 'injun' is achieved, but the textual structures collapse.

Conclusion

Constructed out of pre-existing sources, remix is a dual undertaking, both a return to the past, a form of remembering, and an attempt to open that past for new meanings and possibilities through various interventions on the part of the remixer. In their different projects, Indigenous poets Matthew James Weigel and Jordan Abel select their source material from settler colonial archives: their aim is not to stress cultural continuity against the erasures of settler colonialism, but to uncover the ways colonial texts worked to inform and shape attitudes to and relationships between the settlers and the Indigenous peoples. Relying on formulas and repetitions, both governmental documents and genre Westerns produced a vocabulary as well as sets of images and storylines perpetuating the motif of the settler colonial 'non-encounter' (Veracini, 2011a; Veracini, 2011b), which continues to inform the settler state's contemporary relationships with its Indigenous peoples. My analysis of the ways Weigel and Abel remix these texts foregrounds their attempts to unsettle settler colonial formulas and structures because merely exposing injustices and voicing grievances is not enough. Both poets make their

appropriations of these texts explicit and unambiguous, rather than indulging in a play with allusions, which would demand that the reader recognize the references. Both are engaged in investigations rather than creative rewritings or revisions of their sources, and their projects demonstrate little optimism or relief, albeit temporary, offered by the practices such as revisionist parody or speculative alternative histories.

Reactualizing the settler colonial sources in their remixes, Weigel and Abel uncover the principles at work behind legal and genre writing, and simultaneously subject these texts to a series of similar procedures: delinking from original context, omissions and erasures, lumping individual texts into one amalgam of textual matter as well as radical and violent gestures of cutting up and mashing up to radically repurpose the sources and produce a completely new structure. These procedures purposely echo settler colonialism's 'logical of elimination,' which 'destroys to replace' (Wolfe, 2006, pp. 387–388), and the poets thus undertake a series of decolonial gestures by remixing their sources this way. Nonetheless, they respond to Mignolo's call not to rely on the jargon of the colonizer (Mignolo, 2011, p. 45, pp. 47–48) in a different way: instead of rejecting it, they appropriate and repurpose that jargon to destabilize the formulas it engenders. Theirs thus are attempts to 'hack the system' from within, targeting its two manifestations, legal and genre writing. Considering that remix is never conclusive but invites endless ways of reworking and regenerating the sources, Weigel's and Abel's projects gesture towards the potential for destabilizing even the most rigid structures – over time and through repetitive attempts – and opening cracks in them for new configurations.

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