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Visualizing Lake Ontario through the Installations of Bonnie Devine and Nicole Clouston

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Article abstract

This article explores the efficacy and physicality of Lake Ontario through its lack of a border vista, a physical feature in much of the rest of the country that contributes to the geographic imaginary of Canada. Within this context, the article discusses two art installations—*Battle for the Woodlands* (2014-2015) by Bonnie Devine and *A Portrait of Lake Ontario* (2017) by Nicole Clouston—both of which engage with the integrated, material, and lively watershed of Lake Ontario. “Vital materiality” and decolonial literatures are also engaged with to show how the installations reaffirm the efficacy and physicality of Lake Ontario and the ways in which it stands as a resistant space in relation to the colonial nation-state of Canada with its arbitrary borders.

Visualizing Lake Ontario through the Installations of Bonnie Devine and Nicole Clouston¹

GWEN MACGREGOR

INTRODUCTION

The 49th parallel is both a longitudinal coordinate that marks much of the Canadian-US border and part of a national geographical imaginary. In Western Canada the border follows the 49th parallel, but once it approaches the Great Lakes it makes several turns before it reaches the Atlantic. Beyond its geographic location, its invocation in different eras has contributed to an ongoing nation-building project to bolster a notion of Canadian identity and citizenship as well as resistance to American domination.²

92 The section of the border that cuts through the Great Lakes (except for Lake Michigan) divides them between Canadian and American territories, creating border cities on Lake Ontario, such as Rochester and Toronto. The shore of Lake Ontario in Toronto, however, is not a primary border-crossing site and does not have typical

¹ I would like to acknowledge the tireless work and support of my advisor, Professor Emily Gilbert (University of Toronto, Geography and Planning and Canadian Studies) in helping me to navigate the multiple issues presented in this article. I am also deeply grateful for the input by Professor Gerald McMaster (curator, writer, and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Visual Culture and Cultural Practice at OCADU).

² Gerald McMaster, "Being and Becoming, From the Faraway and Nearby," in *The Faraway Nearby*, Denise Birkhofer and Gerald McMaster (eds.), London, Black Dog Publishing, 2017, p. 19–35; Lee Rodney, *Looking beyond Borderlines, North America's Frontier Imagination*, New York, Routledge, 2017; John J. Bukowczyk et al., *Permeable Border, The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1650–1990*, Calgary, Alberta, University of Calgary Press, 2005; Roger Gibbons, "Meaning and Significance of the Canadian-American Border," in Paul Ganster et al. (eds.), *Borders and Border Regions in Europe and North America*, San Diego, California, San Diego State University Press/Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, 1997, p. 315–371.

indicators such as border-security booths or duty-free shops. A set of complex interconnected factors explain why this is the case; including the changing relationship to the lake as a transportation corridor as well as the considerable physical power of the lake itself. This offers a context for the discussion that follows in this article of the artworks *Battle of the Woodlands* by Bonnie Devine (2014-2015) and *A Portrait of Lake Ontario* by Nicole Clouston (2017) who both engage with the integrated, material, and lively watershed of Lake Ontario. Their work offers an opportunity to root an understanding and perception of the lake in the cultural relevance and specificity of place that predates European contact, as well as the visceral experience of negotiating the shores of a formidable body of water. To parse this out, I engage with the academic literature of vital materiality to show how the installations by the two artists reaffirm the efficacy and physicality of Lake Ontario, which stands as a resistant space in relation to the colonial nation-state of Canada with its arbitrary borders.³ I will also reference the Anishinaabe cosmology, but it is important to acknowledge that I am not an Indigenous knowledge keeper and must tread carefully and respectfully. The aim is also to contribute to border and borderland⁴ studies by working to discursively decentre the border itself and reimagine Lake Ontario in its entirety.⁵

THE CANADA-US BORDER

93 In Canada, the concept of the 49th parallel has been used in different eras to bolster a notion of Canadian identity and citizenship differentiated from those of the

³ John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty*, Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

⁴ Both “borderlands” and “borderscapes” have been used in the literature and there is an ongoing debate on their usage. I make an important distinction between the two: borderlands is used in reference to the physical place, while borderscapes denotes representation (as in landscape painting). The word “landscape” is frequently used in reference to the actual land as well as to its representation. This is a colonial slippage as landscape is a term inherently imbricated in hierarchical politics of representation of land and land ownership in European painting.

⁵ Victor Konrad, “Borders, Bordered Lands and Borderlands: Geographical States of Insecurity between Canada and the United States and the Impacts of Security Primacy,” in Elisabeth Vallet (ed.), *Borders, Fences and Walls, State of Insecurity?*, London, Routledge, 2014, p. 85–104; Joe Sheridan and Ronhiakewen “He Clears the Sky” Dan Longboat, “The Haudenosaunee Imagination and Ecology of the Sacred,” *Space and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2005, p. 365–381.

Americans to the south.⁶ For US politicians, the northern border of their country continues to be more about American strategic and continental interests rather than constituting an inwardly looking national narrative. For both countries the border has been employed to make a clear distinction between what is national and what is foreign, attempting to territorialize the land into sovereign spaces and classify everything within that context.⁷ It attempts to solidify a closed loop of belonging and ownership: the citizens belong to the state and in turn the land belongs to them. This attempts to negate any possibility of ambiguity or overlap of identity, authority, or capital and requires the removal of existing “outsiders” to erase any previous relations to the land.⁸ From the very beginning, delineation of the Canada-US border by governments on both sides of the 49th parallel was deeply imbricated in the control and ultimate dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their territory for the purpose of the capitalization of the land to be valued, parcelled out, and sold to European settlers.⁹ It completely ignored the long history of north-south trade that Indigenous peoples established thousands of years before European contact and disrupted the stories, spatial histories, and identities of Indigenous peoples.¹⁰ Moreover, it

⁶ McMaster, 2017; Rodney, 2017; Claudia Sadowski-Smith, *Border Fictions, Globalization, Empire and Writing at the Boundaries of the United States*, Charlottesville, Virginia, University of Virginia Press, 2008; Bukowczyk *et al.*, 2005.

⁷ Heather N. Nicol, *The Fence and the Bridge: Geopolitics and Identity along the Canada-US Border*, Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015; David Stirrup, “Bridging the Third Bank,” in Gillian Roberts and David Stirrup (eds.), *Parallel Encounters*, Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013, p. 163–186; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, transl. by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

⁸ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Been: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2017; Étienne Balibar, “Europe as Borderland,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2009, p. 190–215.

⁹ Arthur Manuel and Grand Chief Ronald M. Derrickson, *Unsettling Canada. A National Wake-Up Call*, Toronto, Between the Lines, 2015; Simpson, 2017; Bukowczyk *et al.*, 2005.

¹⁰ Joshua Maniowabi, unpublished research paper *Final Research Paper*, presented at the Decolonisation Conference, CIARS/OISE, University of Toronto, 4–7 November 2018; Rodney, 2017; Nicol, 2015; Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, *Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy, Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, Baltimore, Maryland, John Hopkins University Press, 2013; Eileen Luna-Firebaugh, “The Border Crossed Us: Border Crossing Issues of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas,” *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2002, p. 159–181.

established colonial states that attempted, unsuccessfully, to reset the historical narrative to zero, and began creating two separate national storylines that started with the arrival of the Europeans.¹¹ As a young country in 1925, Canada needed to distinguish itself from the United States and it used visual representation to reinforce locally what was being mandated nationally.¹² This narrative for the new European settlers on both sides of the border was distinctly “Anglo-Saxon” and did not include Indigenous, Black, or Asian peoples, regardless of their presence and contribution.¹³

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In the Great Lakes region of Eastern Canada, long before European contact, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples had complex trading systems that centred on Lake Ontario—the lake acted as a hub of a wheel, with the rivers and streams feeding into the lake like connecting spokes¹⁴—and the region was governed by the Dish with One Spoon Treaty between all the Onkwehon:we (original) peoples to peacefully share resources.¹⁵ There was contact with Europeans, primarily the French, through the 1600s as they tried to dominate the fur trade, plunging the Wendat and other peoples into armed conflict and exposure to smallpox and measles. The details of this era are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, but what can be stated is that the Europeans’ increasingly aggressive push to control the Great Lakes region had devastating effects on the Indigenous peoples and their agreements of shared resources.¹⁶ The defeat of the French by the British in 1763 and the creation of The Treaty of Paris the same year put an end to any further attempts for control

¹¹ Sheridan and “He Clears the Sky” Longboat, 2005; Thomas King, *One Good Story, That One*, Toronto, HarperCollins, 1993, p. 129–46.

¹² Rodney, 2017; Karin Dean, “Spaces, Territorialities and Ethnography on the Thai-, Sino- and Indo-Myanmar Boundaries,” in Doris Wastl-Walter (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, Bern, Switzerland, University of Bern, 2011, p. 219–241; Anssi Paasi, “A Border Theory, an Unattainable Dream or a Realistic Aim for Border Scholars,” in Wastl-Walter (ed.), 2011, p. 11–33.

¹³ Nicol, 2015; Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*, Toronto, Insomnias Press, 2003, p. 118.

¹⁴ Thomas King, “Introduction,” in Thomas King, Cheryl Calver, and Helen Hoy (eds.), *The Native in Literature*, Toronto, ECW Press, 1987, p. 7–14; Benjamin Louis Ford, *Lake Ontario Maritime Cultural Landscape*, PhD diss., Texas and A&M University, 2009, p. 348.

¹⁵ See “Dish with One Spoon,” *Indian Time*, 5 August 2010, <https://www.indiantime.net/story/2010/08/05/cultural-corner/the-dish-with-one-spoon/7510.html> (accessed 19 January 2020).

¹⁶ Bukowczyk et al., 2005, p. 18; Ford, 2009; Karl Hele, *Lines Drawn upon the Aater: First Nations and the Great Lakes and Borderlands*, Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008, p. 222.

of the region by the French, created a borderline between American and British territories, and demarcated the “Indian Lands” west of the Mississippi River.¹⁷ This reinforced the arbitrary nature of the border for British Loyalists and Indigenous groups who had to move north of the international border for their own safety¹⁸ — including the Cayunga, Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, Tuscarora, and most Onondaga who were offered land by the British government in 1784 on the shores of the Grand River.¹⁹ With the decimation of the Wendat people, the Anishinabek moved from the west into the area that is now Toronto, and in 1787 representatives of the British government negotiated a land purchase with the Mississaugas of the Credit. This contract was problematic from the beginning, as the representatives of the Crown were not negotiating in good faith, and was only finally settled in 2010.²⁰

¶5 Even after 1763, and well into the nineteenth century, the border remained relatively porous as a huge number of European settlers on both sides of the border in the Great Lakes region, still used the lakes as a central transportation corridor, which had become interwoven in the economic and social fabric of life. After the War of 1812 between the Americans and the British, the political importance of the Canadian-US border grew, but due to the introduction of the steamship, transportation corridors flourished across the lakes—keeping the idea of a border as somewhat abstract for the people living in the region.

¹⁷ Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus. Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2014; Bukowczyk et al., 2005, p. 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁹ In 1784, under the Haldimand Treaty, Haudenosaunee Six Nations were promised by the British King 950,000 acres along the Grand River in what is now Ontario. They currently only have approximately 45,500 of the original land, the rest was sold to settlers by questionable or illegal means. “Six Nations of the Grand River: Land Rights, Financial Justice, Resolutions,” *Six Nations*, <http://www.sixnations.ca/SNLands&ResourcesBooklet2015Final.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2020).

²⁰ The deed for the land purchase was blank and signing marks from the three chiefs had been attached on a separate piece of paper. It was renegotiated in 1805, but the Crown included a far greater amount of land than the first agreement, including the Toronto Islands. The Mississaugas always claimed that the islands had never been included, but gave up rights to them to settle the dispute. The negotiations were finally settled in 2010. Victoria Freeman, “Toronto Has No History. Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and Historical Memory in Canada’s Largest City,” *Urban History Review*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2010, p. 21–35, <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/uhr/2010-v38-n2-uhr3707/039672ar/abstract/> (accessed 20 January 2020).

96 In the second half of the nineteenth century the relationship to the lake as a transportation corridor changed, as steamboats were made obsolete by the development of the land-based infrastructure of railways and roads with stagecoaches. Unlike the lakes system, these had the advantage of being available throughout the winter²¹ and established the east-west transportation routes with increased use of land-border crossings at either end of Lake Ontario. In the same time period Indigenous peoples were increasingly pressured and forcibly removed into smaller pieces of land away from the lakes to accommodate the exploding settler population.²² Despite this, Indigenous community connections remained and continue to be strong across the international border of Lake Ontario and the other Great Lakes waterways.²³

BORDERLANDS AND ARTWORKS

97 Currently the experience of the border on the north shore of Lake Ontario is not homogenous across its shores or to all community members. In Toronto, where I live, it is possible to look across Lake Ontario southeast to the American shore without seeing anticipatory signs of the imminent border or the very specific channelling of traffic, lineups of trucks, duty-free stops, highway signage, and various levels of anxiety-inducing procedures including short- and long-term waiting and interaction with border guards.²⁴ This is due to the fact that the most commonly used official border crossings on Lake Ontario are across bridges at either the west or east end of the lake, as contemporary evidence and reinforcement of the land are privileging transportation routes established in the nineteenth century. Much of

²¹ Ford, 2009, p. 172.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 185.

²³ Simpson, 2014.

²⁴ Rodney, 2017; Konrad, 2014; Sarah Francesca Green, "Lines, Traces and Tidemarks: Further Reflections on Forms of Border," in Olga Demetriou and Rozita Dimova (eds.), *The Political Materialities of Border: New Theoretical Directions*, Manchester, UK, University of Manchester Press, 2018; Michel Agier, *Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2013; Anna Pratt, "Between a Hunch and a Hard Place: Making Suspicion Reasonable at the Canadian Border," *Social and Legal Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2010, p. 461–480.

Lake Ontario itself is now “peripheral” in terms of border trade²⁵ leaving a city like Toronto without the physicality of the border and its accompanying concerns and costs.

98 This is not to suggest, however, that there is no border in Toronto, but rather that it is dispersed within the city and unevenly enforced depending on individual identities. In a 2019 Ontario Human Rights Commission Report, it was found that the Black community was “grossly overrepresented” in Special Investigations Unit (SIU) cases of Toronto police using force.²⁶ Immigrants also experience disproportionate surveillance in their daily lives and homes by child welfare agents or at sites for service provision such as healthcare centres and hospitals.²⁷ Borderland studies are helpful in making visible this dispersal of border infrastructure within urban spaces as well as recognizing hybridized cultures that are formed, exist, and cannot be contained by a border. Less effective, however, is borderland studies’ engagement with the conception of the physicality of the Great Lakes, reinforcing an abstract conceptualization of the lake as two halves on either side of a border and inadvertently undermining the efficacy of the lake itself.

99 Through an effective engagement with the representation of Lake Ontario, two contemporary art installations actively help to reconsider our relationship to the lake, not only as an historical fact, but through a current reimagining. Contemporary artists Bonnie Devine and Nicole Clouston centre Lake Ontario in its geographic entirety, through the cultural importance for the Anishinabek and the visceral experience of being on the shore and digging up the mud. For this reason, the works of Devine and Clouston offer a more expansive and intact understanding of Lake Ontario than borderland studies can offer by refusing a conceptualization that cuts the lake into two parts and discursively centres much older, visceral, and holistic understandings and experiences of the lake.

²⁵ McMaster, 2017; Randy William Widdis, “Crossing an Intellectual and Geographic Border: The Importance of Migration in Shaping the Canadian-American Borderlands at the Turn of the 20th Century,” *Social Science History* vol. 34, no. 4, 2010, p. 445–497.

²⁶ Wendy Gillis and Jim Rankin, “Breaking Down the Disturbing Data in Toronto Police Racial Profiling Report,” *Toronto Star*, 10 December 2018, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/12/10/breaking-down-the-disturbing-data-in-toronto-police-racial-profiling-report.html> (accessed 15 January 2020).

²⁷ Mitra Fakhrahrasti, Jessica P. Kirk, and Emily Gilbertm, “Sanctuary Inter/rupted: Borders, Illegalization and Unbelonging,” *The Canadian Geographer / Le géographe canadien*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2019, p. 88. This article offers an extensive bibliography of borderland studies literature.

BONNIE DEVINE

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Anishinaabe artist Bonnie Devine's installation *Battle for the Woodlands* (2014-2015) (see Fig. 1) presented at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) from 2014 to 2018 challenges the divided understanding of the Great Lakes and affirms the space as both holistic and deeply imbedded within Anishinaabe cosmology. She reworks, on the walls of the Canadian wing of the gallery, an existing colonial map, a reproduction of W.H. Barlett's map from his publication *Canadian Scenery, Illustrated from Drawings* published in 1842.²⁸ Before Devine's modification, Bartlett's map showed most of Upper and Lower Canada as they existed in 1825, centred on the town of Kingston. Devine extends the painted map to include the Atlantic Ocean in the east, Lake Superior in the west and Lake Michigan to the south. The Great Lakes are transformed into animal forms: Lake Ontario as a rabbit; Lake Michigan, an Otter; Georgian Bay, a Turtle; Superior, a Bison; and Lake Erie, as Mishipeshu, an Anishinaabe mythological water being that has great power and is visualized as a lynx or water panther with horns and a spiny back.²⁹



Fig. 1. Bonnie Devine, *Battle of the Woodlands*, 2014–2015, detail, acrylic and mixed media mural with felt, brass and nickel beads, deer hide, moose hide and buffalo hide, gathered twigs and sea grass. © Photography: Bonnie Devine.

²⁸ Georgina Uhlyarik, personal correspondence, 13 November 2015.

²⁹ Bonnie Devine, personal interview at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2015. In discussion with Bonnie Devine, she confirmed that it was appropriate to mention Mishipeshu as I am not retelling a specific story that I do not have permission to retell. For the Anishinaabe and many Indigenous peoples stories are not in the public domain and are held and told by specific knowledge keepers.

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While standing in front of the work I can identify the elements of the animate watershed, one that makes visible the connectivity between the lakes and the waterways, such as the St. Lawrence River, within an Anishinaabe cosmology. As a non-Indigenous viewer I feel a connection between the lakes and the animals being represented, but I am also aware that I am looking at a cosmology I do not entirely understand. My white, historically European positionality as an outsider is reaffirmed as I look to the eastern part of the map on the right-hand wall and see European sailing ships floating on the white surface, disconnected from the waterways—they seem small, isolated, and unrelated (see Fig. 2). On the left wall, travelling west, a herd of bison stampedes towards the Great Plains. I am seeing a landmass with interconnected waterways, layered with a complex and violent history, but within an Indigenous cosmology, rooted with an Anishinaabe geographic imaginary of Turtle Island.



Fig. 2. Bonnie Devine, *Battle of the Woodlands*, 2014-2015, detail, acrylic and mixed media mural with felt, brass and nickel beads, deer hide, moose hide and buffalo hide, gathered twigs and sea grass. © Photography: Bonnie Devine.

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Devine's installation does represent one historical border, from the Royal Proclamation in 1763, that delineated the thirteen colonies from what was "Indian

Territory” by demarcating the land south of the Great Lakes from the colonies to the east and west to the Mississippi River.³⁰ Devine emphasizes The Dish with One Spoon Treaty with a black and red braid, by including two lines of brass and nickel beads. These represent the Kaswhenta or Two Row Wampum, a wampum created around 1615, to represent the agreement between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch. The wampum is a visualization of a treaty between the two peoples in which each would go forward in their own boat, in the same direction, but with mutual respect—its existence reminds us of a long-broken promise and agreement.³¹ Devine’s invocation of that one border without any other, centres the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee histories and experiences of the region and minimizes, by its absence, the current Canada-US border. This moves the viewer away from the Eurocentric cartography, both in form and content, and into a space that is animate, present, and fully Anishinaabe.

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Hanging on the left wall are three cloaks for Pontiac, Crazy Horse, and Tecumseh—all Indigenous leaders and warriors who in their own times took a stand for their peoples and the land against the European invaders. Tecumseh and Pontiac led their people in the Great Lakes region, whereas Crazy Horse was a Lakota leader in what is now Wyoming.³² After the War of 1812 the Lakota territory was permanently divided at the 49th parallel, but Lakota leaders including Crazy Horse continued to fight for their autonomy.³³ Devine’s inclusion of Crazy Horse in the installation acknowledges and reinforces the interconnectivity of Indigenous communities over time and across the Canada-US border throughout North America. According to Devine, the cloaks for the leaders are hung in such a way so that they could be quickly removed, in case the warriors return and need them.³⁴ The

³⁰ Devine, personal interview, 2015.

³¹ Rick Hill, “Wampum: Language and Symbol,” *Conversations About Indigenous Culture*, OCAD University, February 8th, 2014; Simpson, 2014.

³² Kingsley M. Bray, *Crazy Horse, A Lakota Life*, Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.

³³ See the website of the Whitecap Dakota First Nation: <https://whitecapdakota.com/history-culture/> (accessed 14 February 2019).

³⁴ Devine, personal interview, 2015.

cloaks speak not only of the present and future possibilities of change, but challenge the linearity of colonial time.³⁵

914 Standing in front of the map, on the floor of the gallery are three woven figures entitled “Anishinaabitude.” They are made with natural materials from Devine’s home community of Genaabaajing (also known as Serpent River) as well as with grass from Walpole Island First Nation and the Don River Valley in Toronto. She sees these figures as contemporary and present on the land—physically enacting a territorial claim on the gallery space. The physical materiality of the artworks with the full force of the Anishinaabe cosmology within them act as advocates to establish an Indigenous space within a deeply colonial institution. Devine means this as a very real and physical transformation, not just a metaphor.³⁶ I could imagine the Anishinaabitude claiming the rest of the AGO, infusing contemporary Anishinaabe moments within other parts of the curatorial space, and thus challenging political, curatorial, and discursive borders within the institution.³⁷ The figures reinforce that as viewers we are not just looking at a configuration of the Great Lakes that centres Anishinaabe cosmology, but also a recognition of political and social borders that are being traversed and negotiated by Indigenous peoples presently within the colonial state of Canada, including within institutions like the AGO.³⁸

NICOLE CLOUSTON

915 The second artwork that I want to discuss is a sculpture called *A Portrait of Lake Ontario* (2017) by Nicole Clouston, a white-settler artist from Toronto (see Fig. 3). This installation encourages the viewer to think of Lake Ontario’s holistic watershed through the living microbes in mud that Clouston gathered in buckets

³⁵ Dolleen Tisawii’ashii Manning, “Mnidoo-Worlding, Merleau-Ponty and Anishinaabe Philosophical Translations,” PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2017, <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5171> (accessed 15 January 2020).

³⁶ Devine, personal interview, 2015.

³⁷ Since the presentation of Devine’s installation at the AGO, Wanda Nanibush has been hired as the first Curator of Canadian and Indigenous Art. She is working to disrupt and transform colonial structures throughout the institution.

³⁸ Manitowabi, 2018; Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research, Theory, Methodology, and Methods*, New York, Routledge, 2015.

from fifteen different sites around Lake Ontario.³⁹ The mud from each location has been placed in its own six-foot-tall transparent acrylic container with space at the top. This allows for a differentiated environment where microbes that need oxygen thrive near the top and those that prefer a less oxygenated environment develop at the bottom. They are presented side by side without any labelling as to their source location, it is impossible to know which are “Canadian” and which are “American.”⁴⁰ What becomes quickly apparent on inspection is the array of organisms not only distributed within each acrylic box, but the range and variety between the boxes—mud is not just mud, it is a complex, lively host for living microbes. Clouston expected that in the closed environments the diversity would diminish over time, but instead she is finding that there is a symbiosis, a delicate balance that is maintained and that allows the diversity to thrive. Clouston developed this work from her interest in microbes, and it functions at different scales and registers. The physical presence of the mud is important, as it makes the liveliness of mud visible, but it also encourages the viewers to consider our own relationship to the lake. It highlights the shores of Lake Ontario as a living integrated watershed that needs to be thought of holistically without its border. The containers can also function as stand-ins for everything and everyone living in the Lake Ontario watershed and our interconnected relationships—the health of the lake is directly connected to our health.

³⁹ Mud was gathered from the following sites (from west to east on the lake’s north shore and east to west on the south shore): Humber Bay Park West, Toronto, Ontario; Darlington Provincial Park, Bowmanville, Ontario; Cobourg Beach, Cobourg, Ontario; East Bayshore Park, Belleville, Ontario; Breakwater Park, Kingston, Ontario; Grass Point, Alexandria Bay, New York; Westcott Beach State Park, Adams, New York; Mexico Point, Mexico, New York; Lake Shore Marshes, North Rose, New York; Manitou Beach, Hilton, New York; Golder Hill State Park, Baker, New York; Joseph Davis State Park, Youngstown, New York; Ryerson Park, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario; Charles Daley Park, St. Catharines, Ontario.

⁴⁰ Nicole Clouston, *Lake Ontario Portrait*, 2017, http://files.cargocollective.com/284817/Lake-Ontario-Portrait_Final.2.pdf (accessed 14 February 2019).



Fig. 3. Nicole Clouston, *A Portrait of Lake Ontario*, 2017, wall relief, acrylic prisms and mud, 36 x 73 inches. © Photography: Nicole Clouston.

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The artwork makes me reconsider Toronto's current relationship to the lake and the relatively recent disconnect to the south shore. Up until the 1950s, individual Torontonians had direct access to the American side of Lake Ontario through the Ontario Car Ferry Company that connected Toronto and Cobourg to Rochester with connections to railways.⁴¹ For a brief time in 2005 and 2006 a ferry between Rochester and Toronto was resurrected, but went bankrupt after two years.⁴² In contrast, the number of people who currently traverse the lake is small – mostly those who own small water craft. Since the border cannot be physically marked on the water, boats are required to use sailing charts or GPS to keep track of their movements and call in to the Coast Guard when they cross. If they dock on land they have to

⁴¹ See the website Cobourg History, "Waterfront History Part I," <https://cobourghistory.com/harbour/waterfront-history> (accessed 14 February 2019).

⁴² See "U.S. Puts Machine-Guns on Great Lakes Coast Guard Vessels," CBC News, 15 March 2006, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/u-s-puts-machine-guns-on-great-lakes-coast-guard-vessels-1.622621> (accessed 14 February 2019).

report in at one of the designated boating clubs dispersed across both shores of the lake.⁴³ I do not however want to give the impression that there is no border patrol. There have been patrol boats on Lake Ontario since the 1920s by the US Coast Guard, trying to stop the “rum running” or smuggling of alcohol into the United States from Canada during the Prohibition.⁴⁴ Up until 2012, US Coast Guards and RCMP officers patrolled only on their side of the border and had no jurisdiction once a boat crossed over.⁴⁵ Since then, through the Shiprider program, as part of the Integrated Cross-Border Law Enforcement Operations Act, several officers from each country are posted on each others’ boats, rendering the borderline less important and moving towards the entire lake becoming a jointly patrolled border space.⁴⁶ This joint initiative should raise alarm bells and should be monitored to see if the current small number of officers continues to be scaled up.⁴⁷ Currently, however, most of the Lake Ontario border is secured with conventional patrols and the interaction with boats depends on whether they are suspected of smuggling or are a leisure craft – the latter is assumed to be what geographer Emily Gilbert describes as “citizen heroes.” These are ‘desirable’ citizens that are considered more worthy of privileged mobility than someone who might be trying to move goods across the border or trying to cross as an asylum seeker.⁴⁸

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The border on Lake Ontario is an example of how borderlands operate on different scales.⁴⁹ The enforcement of the border is mandated by national governments, but the reality on the water is complicated by the complex use of the

⁴³ See the website Great Lakes Sailing, “What Canadians Need to Know Crossing the Canada US Border,” https://www.great-lakes-sailing.com/canada_us_border.html (accessed 14 February 2019).

⁴⁴ For a detailed account of Rum Running, see Ford, 2009, p. 197. Most of this activity was related to the east and west ends of Lake Ontario where small boats could come into shore more easily without being detected.

⁴⁵ See the Great Lakes Sailing website.

⁴⁶ Pratt, 2010; Emily Gilbert, “Elasticity at the Canada–US border: Jurisdiction, Rights, Accountability,” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2019, p. 424–441.

⁴⁷ This includes the control of goods passing through Indigenous territories such as Akwesasne. This is outside the perimeters of this paper as this territory is on the St. Lawrence River, but it is an important factor in the larger Cross-Border Law Enforcement Operations Act and the history of the Haudenosaunee people and the Jay Treaty. See Simpson, 2014.

⁴⁸ Gilbert, 2019.

⁴⁹ Agnew, 2009.

space, as well as the materiality of the lake itself. With its formidable physical characteristics, the lake acts as a deterrent to crossing the border across open water. Even for asylum seekers desperate to leave the United States there are far easier and safer unofficial spots to cross (Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, 50 km south of Montreal, for example) than trying to get across the middle of the lake.⁵⁰

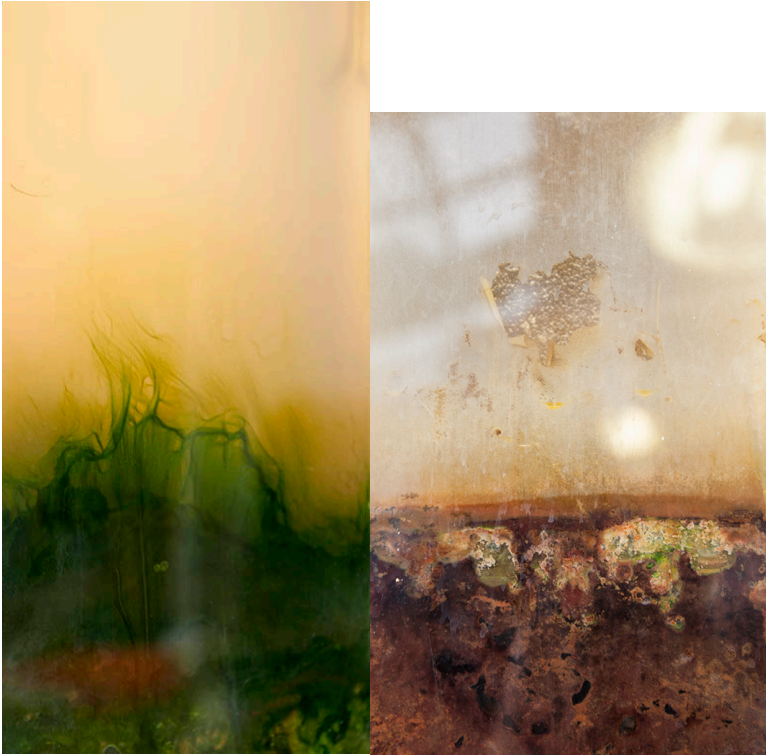


Fig. 4. Nicole Clouston, *A Portrait of Lake Ontario*, 2017, detail, wall relief, acrylic prisms and mud, 36 x 73 inches. © Photography: Nicole Clouston.

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In the process of making her work, Clouston had to cross the border a number of times as she travelled around the lake by car. When she crossed from Canada to the United States at Grassy Points with buckets of mud in her trunk she had to report to the agricultural team that was part of border security. They were mostly concerned

⁵⁰ Wilson Ring, "A Back Road to Hope, Immigrants Flood into Canada on Foot at Unofficial Crossings," *Globe and Mail*, 9 August 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/a-back-road-to-hope-immigrants-flood-into-canada-from-us-at-unofficial-crossings/article35919983/> (accessed 14 February 2019).

about her transporting seeds, but did also search the buckets to make sure she was not hiding anything. They also Googled the places she had gathered the mud from, noticing it was in parks, and she was informed that if they had been from American parks she might have been arrested. On her return trip to Canada the work was in a more finished form with the mud in their acrylic containers and she removed all of the labels identifying the specific sites. The only concern raised by the border agents on her return to Canada was whether the mud and the containers had any value.⁵¹ She also acknowledges that being white helped prevent making her border crossing more problematic.

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Clouston negotiated the divided lake to gather her materials, but in her artwork she rejects any reference to the border and its current security issues. *A Portrait of Lake Ontario* celebrates the efficacy of the watershed through the beauty of all its varied microbial life found in the mud on the shores. There are both literal and discursive micropolitics at work that subtly question the categorization of the lake on two sides of an international border and instead offers a holistic portrait. From the micro to the macro, I start to imagine Lake Ontario once again as a hub of a wheel in a complex watershed—the possibility of a decolonial relationship with the entire watershed that is not suspect or illegal.

VITAL MATERIAL

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The artworks of both Devine and Clouston stand on their own as aesthetic pieces of art and do the important work that political theorist William E. Connolly refers to as “making the fragility of things more visible.”⁵² This is a vital materiality strategy that acknowledges the political ecology of things that have the potential to disrupt models of power through the creative process.⁵³ This emphasises not only the object, but more importantly the relationships, the assemblages that keep things lively and recognizes that matter is not inert, but an active “entangled agential becoming.”⁵⁴ Specifically in terms of creative production, vital materiality acknowledges that the

⁵¹ Nicole Clouston, personal interview, 2018.

⁵² William Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

⁵³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matters. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2010.

⁵⁴ Noela Davis, *New Materialism and Feminism's Anti-Biologism: A Response to Sara Ahmed*, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2009, p. 67–80.

act of making art is potentially political without having to explicitly be declared as such, and the very act of artmaking is a form of possible resistance to being coopted by neoliberal forces. Furthermore, the created art objects have political agency not just aesthetic value, even when the artist does not overtly state their political value. In fact, it is in their existence without overt statements that they have the potential to resist and subvert capitalism. In this case the artworks reorient the questions around the borderlands through their subtle refusal to acknowledge the bounded nation-state and through their celebration of the resilience of the watershed of Lake Ontario, both as an animate cultural entity and a physical space.

921 In Clouston's work, the act of gathering the mud and lack of acknowledgement of the border, understood through a vital materiality lens, is political without having to state it as such. For her part, Devine does not use or need the vital materiality framing, as the knowledge system she articulates predates it by many hundreds of years. The artwork is compatible with vital materiality, however, as her visualization of the Great Lakes pushes back against the efficacy of the colonial state as a political system and literally makes an Anishinaabe space within an inherently colonial cultural institution. This is in sync with an understanding of "the political ecology of things" and is a helpful framing for those viewers who are not able to access or identify with the Anishinaabe cosmology. At the same time, I do not want to imply that Devine's invocation of Anishinaabe knowledge systems and cosmology needs to be legitimated by vital materiality. Instead the hope is that I am offering a recognition of a shared ethos and values where both show the productive work that contemporary art can do to push back against colonial structures.

922 An important consideration, however, is the limitation of vital materiality literature as it has been critiqued by Indigenous scholars.⁵⁵ They have pointed out that there is nothing new about the efficacy of the material world decentred from humans, as described in vital materiality. Indigenous cosmologies and knowledge systems have always understood that knowledge, land, politics, and creativity are completely interlinked, animate places. Moreover, within many Indigenous cosmologies, objects that I might consider inert hold specific power that needs to be

⁵⁵ Tisawii'ashii Manning, 2017; Tuck and McKenzie, 2015; Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European Road Tour!)," *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, p. 20–34.

respected.⁵⁶ As stated by education scholar Joe Sheridan and indigenous scholar Dan Roronhiake:wen Longboat, “everything is connected to everything else, the encounter with imagination is a living communication within a sentient landscape.”⁵⁷ Moreover, there continues to be lack of citation of Indigenous scholars within scholarly papers on vitality materiality, perpetuating an erasure of Indigenous knowledge within the academic literature in this field.

CONCLUSION

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The practicality, necessary understanding of the Canada-US border varies widely depending on the region and individual actors. In Toronto the lack of physical border crossings opens up a discursive space to think through the possibility of an undivided relationship with the lake. To further this endeavour, both vital materiality scholarship and an engagement with Anishinaabe cosmology work to critique the history of the colonial state more generally and specifically our present relationship to the watershed of Lake Ontario. These understandings, when brought into discussion with Devine’s and Clouston’s artworks, offer a holistic understanding of the land and get the viewer “off the map” and its territorial divisions. Devine centres on an Anishinaabe worldview across time and recognizes the Great Lakes as a physical and cosmological animate place, whereas Clouston investigates the physicality of the shores of a vibrant and substantial body of water. Thought of in conversation with each other, through the knowledge systems of vital materiality and Anishinaabe cosmology, they deeply imbricate everyone in a multilayered, multiple-scaled understanding of the Lake Ontario watershed, not as an historic artifact or a divided space, but as a present vital entity.

⁵⁶ This is an example of where I need to be careful to not speak on behalf of an Indigenous knowledge keeper. Some of my very limited understanding comes from *Manidoominensagemin Toronto* [We Are Beading in Toronto], a beading symposium at The Textile Museum in 2019. It included a session led by Alexandra Nahwegahbow, Anishinaabe and Kanien'kehá:ka, a member of Whitefish River First Nation, and Associate Curator of Historical Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada. Participants viewed beaded bags and other objects from the Textile Museum collection and it was explained that some are inanimate and others are animate and need to be cared for in a way that includes an ongoing relationship.

⁵⁷ Sheridan and “He Clears the Sky” Longboat, 2005, p. 369.

Visualizing Lake Ontario through the Installations of Bonnie Devine and Nicole Clouston

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the efficacy and physicality of Lake Ontario through its lack of a border vista, a physical feature in much of the rest of the country that contributes to the geographic imaginary of Canada. Within this context, the article discusses two art installations—*Battle for the Woodlands* (2014-2015) by Bonnie Devine and *A Portrait of Lake Ontario* (2017) by Nicole Clouston—both of which engage with the integrated, material, and lively watershed of Lake Ontario. “Vital materiality” and decolonial literatures are also engaged with to show how the installations reaffirm the efficacy and physicality of Lake Ontario and the ways in which it stands as a resistant space in relation to the colonial nation-state of Canada with its arbitrary borders.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore l'efficacité du lac Ontario malgré l'absence de vue sur sa frontière. Cette absence n'est pas seulement une caractéristique physique d'une grande partie du reste du pays; elle contribue aussi à l'imaginaire géographique du Canada. Dans ce contexte, cet article aborde deux installations artistiques, *Battle for the Woodlands* (2014-2015) de Bonnie Devine et *A Portrait of Lake Ontario* (2017) de Nicole Clouston, qui s'intéressent toutes deux au bassin versant, matériel et vivant, du lac Ontario. La « matérialité vitale » et les littératures décoloniales sont également mises à contribution pour montrer comment les installations réaffirment l'efficacité et la matérialité du lac Ontario, et la manière dont il se présente comme un espace résistant par rapport à l'État-nation colonial du Canada et à ses frontières arbitraires.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gwen MacGregor is a visual artist and cultural geographer working across the disciplines of installation, video, photography, drawing, and geographic scholarship. She is represented by MKG127 gallery in Toronto, and her artworks are part of the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Oakville Galleries, and the Royal Bank Collection. MacGregor is a PhD Candidate in Geography at the University of Toronto with a SSHRC doctoral scholarship. Her dissertation explores the

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