

Carla Taunton, PhD

## wake: Leah Decter, Campbell River Art Gallery, 2017

### “In the wake: unsettling settler colonialism”

In the current climate of Canada’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of confederation, and in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final reports and calls to action, the multidisciplinary and performance based work of white-settler artist Leah Decter brings forward urgent commentary, as well as questions about, Indigenous and settler relations. This exhibition ultimately troubles the celebratory tones of the sesquicentennial in order to explore notions of settler responsibility and accountability, and to make visible the often invisible mechanisms of settler colonialism in our contemporary moment. *wake* puts forward compelling and challenging questions, such as whose Canada are we celebrating? Who is celebrating? And, which histories are remembered and which are forgotten? Canada is arguably a project of colonial amnesia - of the erasure of violent acts of genocide, ethnocide, and land dispossession from national imagination and narratives. Canada, as a settler-nation, urgently needs to listen to Indigenous perspectives, to learn about the historic and contemporary apparatus of colonialism, and to recognize that the foundations of this country are colonial. Ultimately Canadians need to come to terms with the different ways non-Indigenous, specifically white-settler Canadians, benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. In “Unsettling Settler Colonialism,” Corntassel, Dhamoon and Snelgrove write:

[...]‘to settle’ involves both subject formation and governance. Settlers have to be made and power relations between and among settlers and Indigenous peoples have to be reproduced in order for settler colonialism to extend temporally and spatially. Part of this subject formation involves disavowal of the processes of dispossession and disavowal of Indigenous governance structures.”<sup>1</sup>

While it is imperative to create greater understanding of Canada’s colonial histories, such as the Indian Act (1876) and Indian Residential Schools, it is also essential to foreground Indigenous survivance, resistance, and self-determination throughout colonial contact. In this way, the works in this exhibition also allude to the ongoing acts of resistance and negotiations of Indigenous sovereignty by the peoples of this land, and to the potential of productive and peaceful co-existence and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In many ways *wake* creates a contemplative space for remembrance - arguably a strategy of decolonization in that it combats colonial amnesia and generates the opportunity for critical self-reflexivity about what it means to live in a country that has been established and settled on the lands and territories of Indigenous nations. To do this, Decter draws on recognizable imagery, such as the canoe, to

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<sup>1</sup> Corey Snelgrove, Jeff Corntassel, and Rita Dhamoon, "Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations," in *Decolonization: Indigenization, Education, and Society*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2014), 5.

generate questions and critique of the processes of settler colonialism, and also to engender pathways for viewers to encounter and consider their own positionality in relation to the colonial nation building project that is Canada. Previous works and series created by Decter have utilized the image of the beaver and the blanket, for example, to explore the entangled histories of Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism and at the same time to reveal haunting realities of colonial violence as well as stories of hope, love, and strength.

As a white-settler born on unceded Coast Salish territory and currently living in Mi'kma'ki, the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaw Nation, I am especially drawn to Decter's aesthetic strategies and her commitment to building critical settler methodologies/practices that critique and unsettle colonial power relationships. I first met Decter at a symposium on reconciliation and histories of Indian Residential Schools in Sault-Saint Marie, Ontario (2012). It was here that our conversations began due to our shared commitment to building ethical practices towards decolonization. As we discussed in our collaborative essay in *FUSE* magazine in 2013, "Addressing the Settler Problem," Decter and I share a commitment to thinking through what it means to be beneficiaries of colonialism, and how we, as white-settlers, can contribute to social justice initiatives that create greater awareness about settler colonialism without encroachment, appropriation or cooption of Indigenous spaces, stories, and knowledges. We began our conversation with the following:

As white settler women we are beneficiaries of colonialism and as such we recognize our privileged identities in Canada. Through our artistic, academic and writing practices we both pursue personal and professional decolonizing processes, actively working in alliance with Indigenous decolonization. Drawing on Paulette Regan's calls for settlers to take responsibility for their decolonizing work, beginning with transformative actions that interrupt colonial forms on the individual level, we put forward the urgency for creative and critical settler-driven interventions. We are wary of the space that settler decolonization has and could potentially claim, and are aware of the potential risks of becoming another colonizing discourse and aesthetic. With this in mind, our conversations are framed by the following question: How can the practice of decolonizing settler colonialism work in productive ways that do not co-opt or de-centre Indigenous decolonization and political and cultural sovereignty?<sup>2</sup>

Decter's arts-based practice explores how settler colonialism impacts all those living within the borders of Canada, and, I would argue, unsettles the settler imagination that has created myths about Canada and the peoples who inhabit the land. These are seen in the stereotypical representations in visual and popular culture of Indigenous cultures and the tropes of *terra nullius* and the vanishing race, which aimed to justify the expansion of settlement on Indigenous sovereign territories as well as the massive collection of Indigenous material culture into museums and other settler-cultural institutions. In uncovering and learning about truths of settler colonialism or difficult knowledges, many experience discomfort and trauma in coming to know Canada in a new, more complex way. In *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Paulette Regan examines "the foundational myth of

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<sup>2</sup> Leah Decter and Carla Taunton, "Addressing the Settler Problem: Strategies of Settler Decolonization and Responsibility," *FUSE* vol. 36 no. 4, 32.

the benevolent peacemaker" in Canada which, she argues, conditions settler colonial "forms of denial, guilt, and empathy [to] act as barriers to transformative socio-political change."<sup>3</sup> Decter's practice activates a space for personal learning and unlearning about how colonialism has impacted our daily and familial lives as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Moreover it showcases potential ways for white-settlers to move beyond passive apathy, white guilt or shame to activate settler responsibility and personal exploration. What I find most powerful in the selected works of *wake* is the strategic incorporation of the artist's body in the video and performance art pieces so as to clearly implicate herself in the critique of settler colonialism and white-settler privilege. By implicating herself as a beneficiary of colonialism, this series of performance-based works brings forward a very important component of *unsettling the settler within*, the personal story. Decolonizing white-settler privilege on a personal level, and settler colonial institutions and systems on the broader societal level, is an ongoing process that requires white-settlers to commit to taking responsibility in dismantling settler colonialism. Decter's embodiment of decolonial action, illustrated by her laborious performative acts (dismantling a canoe for example), gesture towards the ongoing and arduous systems that support settler colonial order, as well as the ongoing acts necessary to unsettle, to decolonize, to unlearn and relearn and to take responsibility. In *Fouling, Founder, Memoriation #2*, and *unbecoming*, Decter: paddles the canoe; drills holes in the canoe; paints the canoe; bails in the canoe; sinks the canoe; drags the canoe; dismantles the canoe; and gilds the canoe in gold...These are embodied decolonizing acts.

The canoe continues to bear significant national meaning as an *icon* of Canadian identity and history, and, at the same time the canoe has always been an important technology of Indigenous Nations across what is now known as Canada. The canoe was an integral tool for colonial expansion and for the development of relationships and treaties between Indigenous nations and settler communities. The canoe also embodies histories of Indigenous presence on, and care of, the land since time immemorial. As a vessel it carries Indigenous knowledges, teachings, stories, and cultural practices. Decter explains,

The canoe is one such iconic figure, harnessed in these works as a metaphoric colonial body. The canoe, as a Canadian icon assimilated firmly into Canadian life, is indicative of the colonial habits of appropriation, erasure and settler dominance. It recalls early Canadian nation-building through associations with 'exploration' and the fur trade, while perpetuating colonial values and beliefs in the present through connections to contemporary leisure pursuits and tourism. The canoe resonates with Indigenous knowledge while evoking a proprietary link between wilderness and Canadian identity that works to emplace the white settler on Indigenous land.

Decter's employment of the imagery of the canoe, or the literal Sportspal canoe in these video works and performances, points to an ongoing tactic of settler colonialism: cultural appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and material culture into the fabric of Canadian national identity. In absorbing Indigenous cultural productions, such as the canoe as 'Canadian,' this process aims to

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<sup>3</sup> Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within, Unsettling the Settler Within*, (University of British Columbia: 2010), 11.

erase specific technologies and knowledges as indigenous and claim them as naturalized icons of the settler-nation state. Or put another way, because settler-colonizers come to stay on lands that are not originally theirs, settler society requires the creation of founding myths and the perpetuation of national stories that connect non-Indigenous peoples, specifically white-settlers, to the land as the rightful and just owners. This is evident in the Canadian national anthem, "Our home and Native land." As Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson argue, settler colonialism dispossesses Indigenous peoples and lands by forcefully transforming *forms of life* into *forms of property*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Eve Tuck and C. Ree argue that in settler colonialism, the settler's memories and ideologies become the history and foundations upon which a country, such as Canada, is established.<sup>5</sup> In establishing Canadian history and national icons, much has been systemically erased or publically forgotten, such as in the case of recent debate about monuments and the naming practices of streets and schools after colonial figures such as Sir. John A. Macdonald and Edward Cornwallis. Macdonald and Cornwallis have been acknowledged by settler society as founding fathers, whereas a decolonized perspective brings forward the reconciled truth of these colonial leaders and their deliberate roles in establishing legislated ethnocide, assimilation, and dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

In the video *Fouling* (2017) and the performance *Memoration #2* (2015) in particular, Decter draws from national myths and narratives that have been galvanized - as key aspects of the settler imagination - into Canada's story of itself. In *Memoration #2*, myths of peaceful benevolence are troubled when Decter drags the canoe from Queen's University library, and then dismantles it in front of the Kingston, Ontario Macdonald statue during the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of his birth. In some cases such acts create discomfort and a longing for the familiar. When Decter saws the pieces of the canoe apart, many meanings come to mind, such as an intervention in monolithic history that requires dismantling and redressing in order to create space for a more nuanced telling. In this case, Decter's performance, as part of Erin Sutherland's curated performance series, *Talkin Back to Johnny Mac*, the canoe as metaphorical colonial body is dismantled to show the pieces or apparatus that have maintained, and continue to maintain, colonial relations in Canada. This includes, for example, the foundational role played by Canada's first Prime Minister Macdonald in establishing the apartheid system of the Indian Act and the assimilationist project of residential schools. Taking up myths of wilderness that tie concepts of mythologized "empty land" to Canadian identity, *Fouling* draws from the iconic story of Tom Thomson's impact on Canadian landscape painting traditions and the influence he had on the development of the nationally celebrated Group of Seven. Thomson and the Group of Seven's landscapes portrayed the Canadian wilderness as wild and empty of inhabitants and industrialization, which actualized the erasure of Indigenous presence and the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* on the very territories the artists were painting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Fouling* also gestures towards historical re-enactment, in this case a subversive re-count of the mysterious disappearance of Thomson on Canoe Lake in Algonquin

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<sup>4</sup> Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 'Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity', *American Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2016), p. 251.

<sup>5</sup> Eve Tuck and C. Ree, *A Glossary of Haunting*, ed. by Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Left Coast Press, 2013), p. 642.

Provincial Park, where the video work was performed and filmed. Decter, dressed in plaid shirt and wool cap, similar to those worn by Thomson in historic photographs, drills holes in the bottom of the canoe and ultimately sinks with the vessel till the only remaining remnants are the artist's paintbrushes and supplies, which float above the lake water.

This final act of sinking the canoe is also present in Decter's collaborative video work *Founder* with Cree Métis artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle. However, in this case the canoe is sunk due to Decter's repetitive actions of bailing water into the vessel, while L'Hirondelle powerfully sings her co-written song (with Joseph Naytowhow), *Kitaskihkanaw*, an adaptation of Woody Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land*. The latter foregrounds the understanding of *this land* from a Cree worldview. In writing about *Founder*, Decter poignantly breaks down the term 'bailing out,' writing:

My 'bailing in' gestures towards implicit complicity and wilful subversion. If a small boat is leaking, one 'bails it out.' 'Bailing out' also invokes freeing someone from jail. Both references suggest a reprieve: one from sinking and the other from being locked up while awaiting trial. In the context of my work, one can consider the reprieve in relation to the ways by which dominant Canadian mythologies invoke colonial innocence to absolve the Canadian state and its white settler citizens of responsibility for ongoing inequities.

I see this as a refusal and a rejection of apathy and colonial denial within settler society's consciousness. This work also explores the possibilities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration as a strategic way to envision decolonized and non-colonial forms of relations.

The act of submerging or enveloping the canoe is present in *Founder* and *Fouling*, where the vessel is overcome by the weight of lake water. Decter repeats the process of covering or enveloping the canoe in *unbecoming*, however, in this case the faux birchbark aluminum Sportspal canoe is gilded meticulously in fake gold leaf. Decter describes how she uses the "canoe as a taken-for-granted feature of 'Canadian' life and identity, and draws on the Thousand Islands' reputation as a wilderness playground in the 'Gilded Age' of the 1800s, and its present day status as a National Park, to scratch at the surface of Canadian civility." This multiday durational performance, curated by Tania Willard, took place in Thousand Islands National Park as part of the multi-site and multi-curated Canada 150<sup>th</sup> Landmarks art project. The main result of this recent performance, the gilded canoe, is exhibited alongside the video documentation in the gallery. This work, alongside *Fouling*, both created in a provincial and/or national park, interrupts dominant narratives about the parks' development in relation to Canadian heritage, conversation, and identity. The establishment of national and provincial parks corresponds with tactics of settler colonialism that aimed to displace Indigenous peoples from ancestral territories and to relocate Indigenous life onto government designated lands, such as reserves. Decter overtly implicates herself in these histories of settler colonialism by painting her body gold and placing herself in the gilded canoe. She and the canoe, her metaphorical colonial body, become one, a performative monument of resistance and critique of inequities established and maintained by colonialism.

In these works the canoe stands in for many interconnected histories that have occurred on the lands now known as Canada and which continue to impact all of us who live here. The gestures and

acts with the canoe trouble one-dimensional celebrations of Canada as a benevolent, peaceful, and just society, and instead subtly and overtly reveal Canada as a project of colonial rule that is ultimately aimed at erasing Indigenous presence – sovereignty, autonomy, self-determination, and cultural knowledge - for the benefit of settler society. As the central image or repeating element in all the works of Leah Decter's *wake* exhibition, the canoe invites all of us, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience members, to bear witness to Canada's histories of colonial violence, assimilation, and land occupation, as well as resiliencies, hope, and courage.

Decter's work is situated within a burgeoning field of critical settler practices in the arts and academic contexts, which responds to the injustice of settler colonialism and white dominance and takes action towards cultural decolonization. Métis artist David Garneau states, "Cultural decolonization is the perpetual struggle to make both Indigenous and settler peoples aware of the complexity of our shared colonial condition, and this legacy informs every person and institution in these territories."<sup>6</sup> Decolonization, in the context of settler-nations such as Canada, is a multifaceted and simultaneous social justice project that advances Indigenous cultural, political, and land sovereignty as well as settler accountability. The decolonizing of settler society is an active and ongoing process which aims (among other things) to reveal colonial structures, to combat erasure of colonial histories (amnesia), to unearth and make visible historic and contemporary colonial processes, to activate settler responsibility, to 'clean up colonial debris' without co-opting Indigenous voices, to advance shared accountabilities, and to imagine equitable co-existence. Until recently, the majority of this work has been done by Indigenous educators, artists, knowledge keepers, elders, scholars, and activists, and in the wake of all their labour it is time for white-settlers to contribute and to take responsibility in decolonizing their minds and hearts as well as the institutions, such as classrooms and art galleries, that historically have been vehicles that perpetuated colonial order and white dominance in Canada. The selected works showcased in *wake* highlight the entangled histories of Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism, and the current challenges faced in the context of settler-nations, such as Canada, of untangling and unsettling, and remembering difficult knowledges. In bearing witness to Leah Decter's decolonial acts of drilling, sinking, dragging, dismantling, and gilding the canoe, she invites Canada to wake up from its state of colonialism – of apathy, unawareness, and ambivalence – in order to imagine new decolonized pathways and further collaborative ways of moving forward together as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

## Carla Taunton:

Dr. Carla Taunton is an Associate Professor in the Division of Art History and Contemporary Culture at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University and an Adjunct Associate Professor in Cultural Studies at Queen's University. Taunton's areas of expertise include Indigenous arts and methodologies, contemporary Canadian art, museum and curatorial studies, and theories of decolonization, anti-colonialism and settler responsibility. Her work investigates the writing of Indigenous-specific art histories, recent Indigenous and settler research/arts collaborations, and strategies of creative-based interventions that challenge colonial narratives and settler imagination.

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<sup>6</sup> David Garneau, "Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization," *Fuse Magazine* 36, no. 4 (September 2013)

## Leah Decter

Leah Decter is an inter-media artist and scholar currently based in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 territory. Her work contends with histories and contemporary conditions of settler colonialism through a critical white settler lens. Decter's work has been exhibited, presented and screened in Canada, and internationally in the UK, India, Australia, US, Germany, the Netherlands and Malta. She holds an MFA in New Media from Transart Institute (Berlin) and is in her final year of a PhD in Cultural Studies at Queens University (Kingston, Canada).

## Cheryl L'Hirondelle

Cheryl L'Hirondelle is an Alberta-born, mixed-blood, community-engaged artist, singer, songwriter and media art curator. Since the early 1980s, L'Hirondelle has created, performed and presented work in a variety of artistic disciplines, including music, performance art, theatre, storytelling, installation and new media. Her creative practice investigates a Cree worldview (nêhiyawin) in contemporary time-space.

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