

Unsettling the Last Best West: Restorying Settler Imaginaries

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Unsettling the Last Best West: Restorying Settler Imaginaries

As a practice-based researcher working site responsively in media, installation, performance, and dialogic practice, I combine theoretical inquiry with contemporary intermedia art through all these forms. My current project investigates how art was used in the promotion and dissemination of colonial ideologies and the recruitment of settlers to Canada in the early twentieth century. It engages the potential for creative practice to activate strategies of reimagining and restorying. I develop this work from my settler descendent perspective, primarily for a settler audience.

My focus is the study of immigration advertising, specifically under Clifford Sifton, Canada's Minister of the Interior from 1896 to 1905. As the Canadian government sought to populate the prairie west, Sifton's innovative methods recruited immigrants: white people from Britain, the US, and northern Europe. The successful ideological campaigns employed an array of tactics, including travelling exhibits, installations, film, and the innovative design and distribution of printed materials. My visual and material engagements are shaped to echo Sifton's multi-faceted strategies across a range of media. I engage critically and creatively with this rich and varied source material to reactive, reframe, and restory. Through this process I aim to build and enact creative strategies of decolonization.

I am currently shaping three bodies of this work. My animated video *Leaf Forever* is made from still images found in a 1903 promotional brochure titled *Canada: The Granary of the World*.¹ By reactivating and reframing this material over one hundred years after it was made, I interrogate and tease how colonial ideologies slip into the present. The soundtrack to my video is a



An audience sing-along video animation that appropriates and subverts still images from early colonial Canadian immigration advertising.

1910 recording of *The Maple Leaf Forever*;² viewers are invited to sing along by following a bouncing ball. This invitation to embodied viewership disrupts the everyday, possibly unconscious, cultural performance of contemporary settler colonialism.

Unmapping Assiniboia, currently in process, is a series of cartographic pieces that focus on structures of colonial claiming. Working from archival settlement maps, I draw, reproduce, and then erase the colonial tracks, digging out the grid, the railways, and the names. This is a process, a ritual of undoing. The pieces show the scars, the detritus of removal, but present a possible decolonized land.



Unmapping Assiniboia: Without Words, digital sketch detail, 2014



Unmapping Assiniboia: Erasure, digital sketch detail, 2014



Video still, *Leaf Forever*, 4'38" 2012

Also in process is my performance work, *Unsettling*, based on the vermillion-coloured horse-drawn exhibition wagons used by Canadian land agents working farm to farm and door to door, recruiting settlers one at a time. A vermillion costume containing and displaying static and time-based media, *Unsettling* appropriates the capital in the personal touch. Colonial recruiters worked face to face and I do too, as I invite viewers to hunt through my clothing for small video projections and various other samples of colonial booty. This offers a close physical relationship between the viewer, the source material, and the appropriator/subverter/maker/performer—me. The small and intimate operation of *Unsettling* is crafted to assert that it is not only possible, but also *necessary*, to imagine decolonization in personal, tiny, but doable ways.

Settler recruitment campaigns convincingly demonstrate that people are moved through creative strategies, through words and pictures, inducements and appeals. It took these diverse approaches to construct settler imaginaries, and it requires wide-ranging and creative strategies to disrupt them. Practice-based research creation is ideally suited to engage this ground.



Unmapping Assiniboia: Without Words, digital sketch detail, 2014

Notes

- ¹ *Canada, the Granary of the World*, Toronto: Eastern & Western Land Corporation, 1903.
- ² Words and music by Alexander Muir, 1836.