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What Place Takes Place in Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*?

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Summary

Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps* (2013) addresses the interrogations faced by those who grew up deprived of the language, beliefs and memories of their ancestors as a result of the cultural genocide perpetrated against the Indigenous peoples of North America to whom his first collection of poems is dedicated. Because Abel's primary material comprises texts and images that have been widely circulated as first-hand knowledge about the Pacific Northwest, his compositions expose the discursive layers that inform Euro-Canadian representations of aboriginal places, particularly the enduring fascination for the totem pole's interlacing of lineage, spirituality and territory in the place it indicates.

Résumé

Jordan Abel est un jeune poète canadien contemporain, auteur de poèmes qui mêlent texte et compositions graphiques. Son tout premier recueil, *The Place of Scraps* (2013), rassemble des poèmes et des photomontages fabriqués à partir de textes et d'images provenant pour la plupart de *Totem Poles*, ouvrage en deux tomes du grand anthropologue canadien Marius Barbeau, aujourd'hui tombé dans le domaine public. *The Place of Scraps* s'inscrit donc dans une démarche politique : c'est une œuvre qui demande réparation mais offre aussi une forme de remédiation à travers l'esthétique du vide et du plein qui s'y déploie et le lieu qui s'y inscrit en creux.

Méfions-nous des mots qui accompagnent l'exposition de nos peuples. (Didi-Huberman 2012, 20)

Jordan Abel, a Nisga'a poet and visual artist from Vancouver, identifies publicly as "both an intergenerational survivor of residential schools and an urban Indigenous person."¹ The removal of Indigenous children from their families was an essential component of the assimilation policies implemented in Canada after the colony obtained its independence from Great Britain, with after-effects that can still be felt nowadays.² Abel's *The Place of Scraps* (2013) addresses the interrogations faced by those who grew up deprived of the language, beliefs and memories of their ancestors as a result of the cultural genocide perpetrated against the Indigenous peoples of North America to whom his first collection of poems is dedicated, as well as the two others he has published since, *Un/Inhabited* (2014) and *Injun* (2016). For lack of a direct transmission line or informant, Abel diverted for his own poetic use the ethnographic writings of Marius Barbeau (1883-1969), the founder of Canadian anthropology. Barbeau is remembered today as a pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology: his likeness in bronze is on display at the National Gallery in Ottawa, his papers are held in the Canadian Museum of History, and his name has been bequeathed to various schools and museums.³ In addition to the numerous studies he devoted as a folklorist to the songs and tunes of his native Quebec, his far-ranging interest in the cultures of Canada's Indigenous peoples led him to write extensively on the subject of Northwest Coast totem poles and the myths attached to them in the two volumes of *Totem Poles* first published in 1950. Abel's poems digitally

reproduce, shred, erase and mix texts and photographs from Barbeau's *Totem Poles*. These textual and visual fragments are combined with entries from the poet's personal diary as well as original photomontages in a book that interrogates the place that has traditionally been allotted to the display of Canada's Indigenous peoples, their arts and cultures.

The federating theme chosen for the present volume encourages us to leave aside what took place, no matter how worthy of attention this event may be, to consider the process of taking place. The gerund phrase expresses a dynamism that belies our intuition of place as the static, bounded whole where births and battles have their coordinates, anchoring the passing of time in a stable dimension – an apt receptacle for memory (Casey 1987, Nora 1996). Such assumptions explain why place has commonly been coded as female in contradistinction with the gendering of time as the masculine realm of action, the vector of change, progress and history (Massey 1994, 6).

The process of taking place, however, supposes that place is plastic, changeable, and dynamic. More than the faculty to accommodate the event as it takes place, the gerund expresses how place coheres around the event when place gathers shape as the focal point from which space extends as *spatium*, the expanse lying between here, the place where something happened, and over there, the place towards which the subject exists ahead of her/himself (Maldiney 2007, 168). In "La rencontre et le lieu," Henri Maldiney reviews the words signifying "place" in several European languages and retains the German "Ort," also used by Heidegger in "Building Dwelling Thinking," for his own examination. "Ort," Maldiney explains, originally referred to the tip of a spearhead and, even before that, to the triangular point of the human shoulder blade. In these early usages, the word marks a place that is not localized in a pre-existent space; rather it designates the momentary protruding out of which space deploys itself. Maldiney's analysis of place as a phenomenon therefore contradicts notions that would objectify place as a mere portion of space. In phenomenological terms, place pre-exists space in contrast to what Cartesian common sense suggests.⁴ Place is indeed constitutive of space through the tensions it brings into play between close and far, between here and over there, these variable intervals opening the distance into which an existence deploys itself, always ahead of itself (Maldiney 2007, 165). This detour through Maldiney's analysis of place as an existential⁵ was necessary to introduce the hypothesis I propose to discuss in this essay, namely that the place which takes place in *The Place of Scraps* is not of an objective but of a tensile, relational nature. Through his exploration of place as a *tension* instead of a mere *location*, Jordan Abel writes from the position of those who have experienced colonization in terms of spatial confiscation and relegation, those who have no proper place to write from, except perhaps in the English language. Growing up in multicultural Vancouver, in the 1990s, the son of a Chinese mother and an estranged Nisga'a father, Jordan Abel had no Indigenous culture, language, or even tradition to write or speak from.⁶ His father was unable to share with him the alternative story which may have complemented or contradicted the representations of the "Indian" circulated in mainstream culture, sold by the tourist industry, disseminated through schools or museums, and legitimized in the scientific discourse of anthropology. This absence of relation sets Jordan Abel quite apart from the prolific generation of contemporary Indigenous artists who grew up within imperilled communities where roundabout forms of transmission nevertheless occurred. They inspired Lee Maracle, Tomson Highway, Eden Robinson, Richard van Camp or even, closer to us, Katherena Vermette with vibrant tales of resilience. With *The Place of Scraps*, however, Jordan Abel demonstrates that a void is not a vacuum, and that the tension between nothing and something can be a productive place to start from for those who grew up disconnected from their origins, the language of their forebears, their culture, and ancestral places.

Vanishing

In 2016, there were 1,673,785 Aboriginal people in Canada, accounting for 4.9% of the total population. This was up from 3.8% in 2006 and 2.8% in 1996.

Since 2006, the Aboriginal population has grown by 42.5%—more than four times the growth rate of the non-Aboriginal population over the same period. (“Aboriginal Peoples in Canada” n.p.)

All the totem poles, house posts and frontals and the stately grave pillars of British Columbia and Alaska have been included in this monograph, as far as the author knows. The only exception is the important lot studied and published in his *Totem Poles of the Gitskan, Upper Skeena River, British Columbia* (Bulletin N°61, National Museum of Canada, 1929, pp. 275; illustrations 33), now out of print. (Barbeau, vol. 1, xi)

There is an ironical symmetry between the two quotations above when envisioned in their respective historical contexts. On the one hand Canada is witnessing today the demographic renaissance of a population the nineteenth-century once imagined to be “vanishing,” but whose demands for social justice can no longer be met by ignorance, as evinced by the recent publication of the reports by the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the launch of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in December 2015.⁷ On the other hand, one could provokingly argue that Barbeau’s exhaustive ethnographic studies have presently entered extinction. The original (French) version of *Totem Poles* is now out of print, and an electronic copy of its English translation can be downloaded from the website of the Canadian Museum of History. The digital archive is currently accessible as a documentary source on the developments of early Canadian anthropology and the vision the proponents of salvage ethnography had of Canada’s First Peoples.

By using the translation of Barbeau’s monograph as his primary source of information, Abel reverses the customary relationship between European ethnographer and Indigenous informant in a gesture that also turns the tide of cultural appropriation and creates some turbulence in the flow of information. Short excerpts from *Totem Poles* are reproduced in *The Place of Scraps*, along with their bibliographical references and the occasional footnote, as in the first of the eight excerpts from *Totem Poles*⁸ Abel selected as his material (*Scraps* 5):

“*A feud over this pole.* Old chief Mountain or Sakau’wan, some time before his death in 1928, gave an account of the rivalry between the Eagle-raven clan and the Killer-Whales or Gispewudwades of Nass River, over the size of their new totems.¹ In summary here it is.

The Killer-Whale chief, Sispagut, who headed the faction of the earlier occupants on the river, announced his determination to put up the tallest pole ever seen in the country. Its name was to be Fin-of-the-Killer-Whale. However, instead of selecting for its carver Hladerh whose right it was to do the work, he chose Oyai of the canyon. Hladerh naturally felt slighted and confided his grudge to Sakau’wan, chief of the Eagles, and his friend. From then on the Eagles and the Wolves of their own day were to be closely allied, as the ancestors of both had moved in from Alaska and at one time had been allies.

¹For a fuller account see *Alaska Beckons* by Marius Barbeau. The Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho and the Macmillan Company of Canada, 1947, pp. 127-136.

Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, vol. 1 (1950), p. 29.

Because only the odd-numbered pages are printed, whiteness gradually encroaches upon the text to expose the underlying logic of scientific appropriation that cements “the bonds between curation and colonization,” to borrow a fine phrase from Susan Holbrook.⁹ The patterns that lay dormant in the full text come out in the pared-down version, much like knots and growth rings under the carver’s chisel. The removal of excess material opens gaps into the original, but it also disrupts its unfolding by bringing together words that did not coexist in the complete text. The re-lining prompts fresh associations, a new syntax in which the desire for exhaustivity, knowledge, and control becomes only too visible once Barbeau’s tale of discovery has been shorn of its ethnographic detail and rhetorical *copia*. The first series comes to a head with a two-line poem that paradoxically reconciles completion with exhaustion on page 15:

With some series, the carving process is so radical that almost all of the verbal material is chipped away. As a result, only a few words haloed with punctuation marks subsist on the page (*Scraps* 71). In some other instances, the exhaustion process runs its full course when all

of Barbeau's sentences have been etched out, save for their punctuation. In these visual poems, the punctuation signs index the political operations language unobtrusively performs when it connects, subordinates, sets aside or concedes. Such is the case with the indigenous words set in parentheses on page 49, a preliminary to their vanishing in the next poem where the remaining parentheses enclose pockets of nothing (*Scraps* 51). On the silenced page, the punctuation nevertheless lets a trace subsist of the voice that ghosts the text, the intonation without which an utterance loses most, if not all, of its signification (*Scraps* 69).

Tampering with Trace

When viewed in relation to the mass atrocities that marked the past few centuries, *The Place of Scraps* is likely to evoke other paradoxical art forms that have turned erasure against itself to engage with what subtraction leaves behind, no matter how infinitesimal this may be.

Claudio Parmigianni's *Carte Nere*, W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, and Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* interrogate the productivity of trace in the face of disaster, the Shoah for the first two and the slave trade for the latter. Likewise Abel's *Place of Scraps* testifies that something always remains after everything else has vanished. But the analogy, by virtue of its historical limitations, also reveals what makes Jordan Abel's art of subtraction quite distinct in its diversion of the carver's craft. Even when his compositions strongly assert the agency of the artist by subverting the very medium, text or image, that displayed his Indigenous ancestors as the specimens of a vanishing race, the process of remediation never fully exhausts its primary material.¹⁰ The most discreet inscription – be it a dot, a comma or a swarm of pulverized letters – continues to inscribe intention on the page where the letters of the alphabet endure, even after the last cluster of words has been dynamited.

Some photomontages shift the scene to the present, imparting that the confiscation and relocation of indigenous artefacts continues in the contemporary period. One of Abel's pictures shows an upside-down view of the totem pole that greets the contemporary visitors crowding at the entrance of Stanley Park in the city of Vancouver (*Scraps* n.p.). Built on unceded land, the traditional territory of the Musqueam, the Squamish and the Tseil-Waututh First Nations, the capital of British Columbia prides itself on the urban park it created in 1888 to preserve a thousand acres of the original rainforest where the coastal populations of the Northwest used to find the staples necessary to their daily lives. The red cedar, in particular, gave them fibres out of which they wove baskets, hats, waterproof capes, as well as wood for their ceremonial masks. Cedar also meant fuel and timber. Burial chests and huge feasting dishes were carved out of the largest blocks. The tallest, straightest and most robust trunks were carved and painted into totems recording ancestral migrations, the history of the clan and its spiritual union with the animal world. Those totems thus commemorated lineage, the legendary deeds of individuals or their clan, but also the entanglement of nature and culture in the very place where the pole that was once a tree was erected, holding its story up to the sky for all to see and remember.

Even as it explodes Barbeau's scholarly sum into smithereens, Abel's *Place of Scraps* also underlines the perpetuation of forms of exclusion in which preservation continues to serve as an alibi for confiscation,¹¹ as made plain by the ten unpaginated photomontages that conclude the collection. In an age when Canada is taking public steps to move beyond its colonial past,¹² *The Place of Scraps* shows evidence that cultural spoliation remains a daily reality. Black and white photomontages assert this claim visually by submitting past and present photographs to similar alterations that blur distinctions between the bygone era of ethnographic documentation and today's "Beautiful BC" where Indigenous heritage has become a pillar of the provincial tourist industry, and many ancestral places have either disappeared or been turned into restricted areas. Like his digital repurposing of Barbeau's prose, Abel's photomontages tamper with the anteriority, the integrity and the authority of the

archive by altering it digitally, injecting print into it, turning the picture upside-down, sideways, or reverting to negative prints in which light suffuses the sensitive plate and a ghostly effulgence irradiates from dark hollows.

In *The Place of Scraps*, digital editing is akin to trespassing. It challenges copyright, but also the boundaries between text and image: paragraphs dissolve with the turning of the page, print morphs into illegible, textual matter, lines overlap, merge and flow into shoals of words (*Scraps* 27, 117, 135). But the reverse is also true of photographs in which the introduction of print troubles the immediacy of the visual impression: insect-like letters buzz in foregrounds, curtains of tiny script screen backgrounds, elsewhere small, compact paragraphs are inserted like wedges into the photograph, disrupting the silent, black-and-white composition. Such additions textualise the image and question its visual immediacy. Pasted alphabetical letters, snatches of writing trouble the apparent transparency of ethnographic photography, a medium in which the documented reality is rarely allowed to exceed the one-line caption. Contrary to Barbeau's photographs, Abel's photomontages do not assert knowledge about their object through the taxonomic inscription that organizes and catalogues ethnic diversity, the externality of the ethnographer's point of view offering a warrant of scientific authority.¹³ Instead his photomontages undermine the authority of ethnographic knowledge by making the caption part of the image. Swathes of blabbering words fill the background of group pictures in which rows of kerchiefed women, children bundled in shawls, and men wearing button blankets stare at the camera, their gaze as impenetrable as the dark pupils of the animal world on the totems towering above them (*Scraps* 106, 168, 182). In these various instances, the inserted script explains little if anything. Its signification seems to lie elsewhere, in the visual impact of the written word that striates the field of vision, obscures the distance in thin vertical strings, or compact horizontal stripes. These geometrical patterns make the photograph's original composition explicit by enhancing the visual syntax that lines people up according to size, age and gender, so that a multiplicity may be ordered into a predictable, intelligible display.

The digital alterations made to Barbeau's material fulfil a twofold contradictory purpose: as successive textual layers are erased, the ethnographic study sloughs off its illustrative, demonstrative, and scientific value. Lacunae open where painstakingly collected and translated information was first listed with a view to exhaustivity. Conversely, the pasting of text into the photographs adds discursive elements where Barbeau initially stripped the Salmon-Eater myths of their superfluous imagery to expose the "capital story" attached to each of the catalogued poles (Barbeau, vol. 1, 58). A tension between full and empty thus plays itself out in the collection, which also comes to the fore with Abel's use of blanks in the poems, and of contrast in the black-and-white photomontages. Out of this rhythmic tension there results a dynamic circulation that shall presently be discussed.

From Place-of-Scalps to *The Place of Scraps*

Barbeau recalls his astonishment back in 1927, during a fieldwork expedition in the Naas valley where he first sighted the extraordinary totem pole erected in the former village of Gitiks by the Alaskan border (Barbeau vol. 1, 21). The 81-foot pole featured no less than fifteen figures that combined the emblems from two distinct clans of the Nisga'a nation, commemorating the southward migration of the Eagles and their adoption of a member of the Wolf clan. The crests and the column's exceptional size made it unique among all the totems the ethnographer had so far recorded on the north Pacific coast. The thrill of discovery was, however, mingled with dismay at the gigantic sculpture's poor condition: it was leaning precariously on two props in a deserted village soon to be reclaimed by the rainforest (Barbeau vol. 1, 32). In a move typical of salvage anthropology, Barbeau approached the

owner of the totem pole, an old chief named Sakau'wan (Mountain) who was by then residing in the mission village of Kincolith – a Nisga'a name signifying "Place-of-Scalps." The old man turned down Barbeau's offer to purchase the pole on behalf of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), but not before making him a counterproposal. Sakau'wan was ready to give the totem away in exchange for the tombstone of Sir James Douglas, the first Governor of British Columbia (1858-1864), a transaction that would have compensated the loss of the totem for his clan in terms of prestige and commemorative value (Barbeau vol. 1, 33). For the ethnographer, however, the negotiation's preposterous turn was proof enough of the old man's addled brain. Barbeau did not acknowledge the principle of the gift informing Sakau'wan's offer. Neither did he consider the memorial reciprocation in which the nation would have been involved, had it been agreed that the tombstone of British Columbia's first Governor could replace the totem erected to the memory of Sakau'wan's great uncles.¹⁴ The following year the old chief died, and his heirs turned out to be more amenable to a financial deal that would settle all further obligations: "The same summer, I purchased the totem from his nephews. It stands now in a better place for its preservation. Lost to all notice in the northern jungle, it would soon have tumbled to the ground and decayed, whereas it is now on display for everyone to see and may last forever" (Barbeau vol. 1, 33). It took an additional six years for the transportation of the carved post to be organised from the Nass valley to the freshly built extension of the ROM in Toronto. Because of its formidable size, the sculpture had to be cut into three sections that were floated down the river to the Pacific coast, where they were shipped eastwards by rail to the financial and economic centre of the Dominion. The Nisga'a totem pole now stands with three other poles from the Pacific Northwest in the stairways flanking the East Wing of the ROM. The museum information on site contains a picture of the construction of the building showing that the sheer size of the totem pole made it necessary to assemble its sections before the massive marble stairwell encasing it could be completed. Through this architectural gesture, the museum continues to impress today's visitors with the power of the nation to lay its foundations on the remains of prior civilizations. The East Wing extension was indeed built on foundations that were dug below the level of the main floor to accommodate the size of the Nisga'a pole, the tallest of the four. Barbeau describes with great excitement the moment when the top section was added to the pole,:

Would [the Eagle] break through the roof or would it sit patiently under its shelter? It did. And there was a sigh of relief all round, though the margin was only six inches! Six inches were enough for the sparrows that had taken shelter in the building during construction to build a nest on the head of the eagle – the highest sparrows' nest known to university ornithologists (Barbeau vol. 1, 35).

The tremendous efforts he had invested in this scheme rendered the ethnographer quite immune to the irony of seeing the great Thunderbird of Nisga'a mythology colonised by house sparrows, another invasive species that arrived in the Great Lakes region around 1875 (Riley 142).

Barbeau's account of the pole's transfer to the ROM provides Abel with the textual material for the second series of erasures. Out of the scraps arranged on page 25, Abel retrieves an alternative story in which blanks demarcate zones of silence in the epic journey of the pole from sea to sea, *a mari usque ad mare*.¹⁵

remove
thousands of

Indians
Successfully

without feeling a tremor

Taken together, the poem's scraps read like an injunction, a reminder of the successive government policies that implemented relocation, both in the USA and in Canada, to boost the acculturation of their Indigenous populations.¹⁶ Removal is thus both the poem's subject matter and its law of composition. Content and form merge in the several kinds of displacements that inform *The Place of Scraps*, from the migration of the Salmon-Eater clan commemorated in Sakau'wan's pole to the desertion of the ancestral village of Gitiks, from the pole's removal to Ontario to Abel's own journeying towards the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum:

13.07.92.

The poet, deep in a docile state of youth, is transported to Toronto by his mother. Simultaneously, the correct stimuli and trajectory of thought trigger formations of memory—rattling, fluorescent subway cars; bleached sky over Bloor Street; hinged glass doors opening into the Royal Ontario Museum. The poet is mapped onto a web of stimulation populated by artefact and orchestration. The poet obeys the rules (contemplative lingering, artificial glimmers of insight) as though a violation would be severely punished. The poet endures—level one, stairwell; level two, stairwell; level three, stairwell; level four, stairwell. But the poet is incapable of converting the contents of the stairwell into memory; the poet does not identify the totem pole in the stairwell as the pole erected by Sakau'wan, the same pole that was removed from the Nass River valley in three pieces by Marius Barbeau. (*Scraps* 59)

As of the first sentence, the past participle “transported” identifies a common attribute in the passivity the poet shares with the pole. The choice of the third person contradicts the conventions of autobiography and curtails empathy with the poet's persona by maintaining a distanced perspective throughout the description. Likewise, the scientific vocabulary and the robotic segmentation of the syntax reinforce the dispassionate tone of the voice that lists memorial traces deprived of emotional salience in spite of their vividness. Flashes of sensations are carefully recorded along with disconnected impressions blunted by boredom. With hindsight, the experience is viewed as a dismal failure, perhaps on account of the boy's young age and the pressure to behave according to museum etiquette. But the distance resulting from the third-person utterance suggests another interpretation. As the boy slowly ascends to the fourth floor, there is no mention of the coiling current of energy that made the sculpture's composition so striking when Barbeau first set eyes on it (Barbeau vol. 1, 32). What remains of the disassembled-reassembled pole is an inert assemblage, “the contents of the stairwell” filling a space where nothing takes place. Aesthetic failure is compounded by a symbolic breakdown. Both find their inception in the removal from the rainforest where the pole fulfilled the role of a commemorative device. With its relocation in one of Canada's most prominent *lieux de mémoire*,¹⁷ memory changed hands and destination. The totem pole's tribal signification became subsumed under a new collective dimension made most obvious in the curatorial choice to couple the Nisga'a sculpture with a shorter Haida pole. The backs of the two sculptures were sawn off so their fronts could be bolted together and form a central wooden column around which the visitors circulate, as they walk up and down the staircase where they can view the two profiles of a composite creation with no internal cohesion. It is only when the visitor reaches the museum's fourth floor that the top part of Nisga'a pole appears in its singularity.

A decade later, a second encounter takes place that brings the poet and the pole face to face:

05.08.2011

Of his own volition, the poet returns to Toronto, confident that he will be reunited with the totem pole removed from the Nass River valley by Marius Barbeau. The poet confronts the admissions staff member at the ROM, explains that he refuses to pay to see a totem pole that was taken from his ancestral village. The staff member initiates a lethargic request to allow admission under special circumstances but is unable to contact any of his superiors. The staff member shrugs, verbalizes his apathy, and allows the poet into the museum. The pole towers through the staircase; the poet circles up to the top. The pole is here; the poet is here. (*Scraps* 143)

The location is the same, and so are the self-detachment and periphrastic tone that create distance from the event. Yet everything else differs in the posture adopted by the poet's persona who no longer acts as a visitor. A newfound agency and political assertiveness alter his response to the museum space where the relation between content and container has changed. The architecture now gives him access to the verticality of the pole instead of crushing it, a difference also perceptible in his use of the word "staircase" instead of "stairwell," the shaft into which the visitor's perception of the pole had first dissolved. The isocolon and the phonetic closeness between the two monosyllables unite pole and poet in a shared sense of the other's presence: "The pole is here; the poet is here." The copula's declarative strength undoes the elucidations of ethnographical discourse, the systematic extraction of meaning out of the traces of a people's past. In the presence of the pole, the poet acknowledges the unique capacity of the work of art to configure space and time in the rhythmic flow of its emerging form (Maldiney 2012, 185).¹⁸

What happened between the poet's successive visits to the ROM that may throw light on this moment of co-presence? Two additional entries, respectively on pages 97 and 105, recall Abel's move to Edmonton and his subsequent 2008 return to Vancouver, where "the poet arranges a meeting with the former friends of his parents who [...] give [him] a wooden spoon that his absent father carved. The poet initiates the suitable gestures for thankfulness and rotates the spoon over and over in his palms" (*Scraps* 97). The gesture is described in a tone that leaves little room for emotional display or superfluous explanations. Let it suffice to point out that if the nature of the gift hints at the symbolical restoration of a filial bond,¹⁹ the acceptance of the carved spoon also called for a form of reciprocation. And Jordan Abel did reciprocate. His poems and photomontages return to the Nisga'a nation the material native informants had transmitted to Barbeau. To this material, however, Abel gives a poetical and political articulation that concerns all readers, whether they come from inside or outside an Indigenous community, insofar as it addresses the erasures of Canadian history and the perpetuation of colonial forms of oppression. But this is not enough. As a counter-gift, *The Place of Scraps* also contains elements that remain in excess of the primary source used as its substrate. It is to this additional production that the essay shall now be turning before heading towards its conclusion.

Clearings

In addition to the eight series derived from Barbeau's monograph, *The Place of Scraps* contains four unreferenced passages whose dubious origin deserves attention. Their italicised first lines ("The anthropologist humbled by beauty and the sleepless moon" 43; "the silhouette of a pole on the shore of Nass River" 55; "The Tale of the Blacked-out Sky at Noon" 93; "The place of scraps" 163) follow the typography adopted to introduce the different sections of *Totem Poles*. They share referential elements with Barbeau's study – names, settings, and a fair amount of insects –, yet they have no prior existence in a primary source which they supplement by highlighting aspects that remain undocumented in

Barbeau's fieldwork, such as landscape,²⁰ night watches, or a forest hike. Each descriptive passage subsequently yields a series of erasures, in the same manner as with Barbeau's original text, with one notable exception. The fourth and last series inverts the process of de-creation / re-creation, insofar as it finds its inception in a blank, the punctuation clearing a space for silence:

“
.”

(*Scraps* 155)

From page 155 to page 163, a composition grows out of the words that surface on the page and come together with each new variant, until a provisional version stabilizes on page 163. With its two paragraphs, the composition is indeed far from final, but morphs into four successive poems between pages 165 and 173, shedding but also aggregating clusters of words through cutting and pasting. The intermediate version on page 163 reads as follows:

The place of scraps. I trudged on behind Barton, barely lifting my feet over the roots that muscled their way out of the forest floor. Barton spoke in Niskae and in endless breath about our destination—the place of scraps—and I translated what I could as we hiked. “Two moons.” Brushed by pine needles. “The shadow of.” Filtered light through the canopy. “His grandson.” Salted air. “At peace with the wind.” A clearing up ahead. “To Sakau’wan.” At long last. “The trail of stars.” The clearing.

I rested against the moss trunk of a great tree. I caught my wind. I gazed at Barton as he ventured into the middle of the barren circle. In English, he said. “There are no poles here.” He knelt and his hand disappeared into the ground. After a moment, he withdrew a fistful of dirt and shavings of wood. He said, “Hold out your hands.” So I did. And he sifted the mulch into my palms. He was silent as the last clumps of dirt left his fingers, and I knew then, standing in that sunstruck clearing, that this was a sacred ritual, that I must remember each detail so that the world could know it too. (*Scraps* 163)

Whoever hides behind the personal pronoun “I” has turned away from the Indigenous sites that obsessed Barbeau to enter the forest. Because the description does not run parallel to the ethnographer's tracks, it reads more like a masquerade than a parody. There is no attempt to contrive a similitude with the English version of *Totem Poles*, either in terms of style or attitude. The tactile perception of a vegetation alive with muscular energy is quite alien to Barbeau's measured appreciation of nature. The narrator has given up the heroic posture of his predecessor and the latter's claims to linguistic and scientific mastery, as he struggles to match the pace of his native guide: “To Sakau’wan” announces both a dedication and a destination.

By following this direction the excursion ventures into another, imaginary dimension. It reaches a place outside the territory surveyed by Barbeau – a place of scraps before *The Place of Scraps*, a clearing in the rainforest where “dirt and shavings of wood” point to long cycles of forest decay, renewal and cultivation. The clearing is a tensile place, its circumference pushing against new growth, its extension maintained by the passage of animals and human activities. *Cultus*, Georges Didi-Huberman explains, stems from the Latin *colere* which used to designate the action of dwelling in a given place as well as the care its maintenance required. Embedded in the word “cult” and its cognates, “cultivation” and “culture,” there is the idea that place is maintained through material, symbolic and imaginary activities. In other words, place only exists insofar as it is “wrought” (or “*oeuvre*”), that is transformed through

the works and the words of those who care for it (Didi-Huberman 1992, 111). This essay opened with the question “what place takes place in *The Place of Scraps*?” The investigation led to a clearing in the British Columbia rainforest, a clearing outside Marius Barbeau’s writing where the poet receives assurance that creation may also proceed out of emptying. Because Abel’s primary material consists of texts and images that have been widely circulated as first-hand knowledge about the Pacific Northwest, his poems and photomontages expose the discursive layers that inform Euro-Canadian representations of aboriginal places, particularly the enduring fascination with the totem pole’s interlacing of lineage, spirituality and territory in the place it indicates. The negative space that spreads across the page as layers of words are shorn off Barbeau’s ethnographic account expands into a book-length stratigraphy of the colonial erasures that have been targeting both Indigenous places and an Indigenous sense of place in Canada. In this sense, Abel’s art of subtraction can also be seen as a gesture clearing a space within the public domain of a shared culture in order to start a critical reflection upon the transformation of Western notions of authenticity and authorship in the digital age.

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¹ This is how Jordan Abel introduced himself to the participants of the fourth TransCanada conference (Mikinaakominis / TransCanadas Literature, Justice, Relation) organized by Smaro Kamboureli and Larissa Lai. It was held at the University of Toronto in May 2017, as

a critical counterpoint to the nationwide celebration of the 150th anniversary of Canada's Independence.

² "Indian residential schools date back to the 1870's. The policy behind the government-funded, church-run schools attempted to 'kill the Indian in the child.' Over 130 residential schools were located across the country, with the last one closing in 1996." *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, <http://www.trc.ca/>, accessed Sept 18, 2018.

³ Roland Viau compiled a bibliography of Barbeau's work that can be partly consulted on the website of the Presses Universitaires de Montréal, <https://books.openedition.org/pum/11384?lang=fr>. See also Renée Landry, "Bibliographie de Marius Barbeau," typescript (National Museum, 1969) and her entry on Barbeau in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/charles-marius-barbeau>, accessed Sept 18, 2018. In the 1960s, Barbeau's work on the Aboriginal populations of the Northwest Coast also inspired Al Purdy a sequence of unpublished poems, "Yehl the Raven and Other Creation Myths of the Haida," which has been rediscovered and recently appraised in an article by Nicholas Bradley. I am grateful to Nicholas Bradley and the colleagues from Victoria University, BC, for sharing with me their insights on Barbeau and the question of cultural appropriation.

⁴ Maldiney is concerned with phenomenology of place much more than with the quantifiable reality studied in physical geography. Phenomenology nevertheless played a decisive role in the evolution of human geography, as evinced by the work of Doreen Massey and Tim Creswell and their ongoing critique of place as a stable, immutable reality.

⁵ Like Heidegger, Maldiney uses the term *existential* as a noun to refer to the structures of existence discussed in *Being and Time*.

⁶ During his plenary address at the Mikinaakominis conference, Abel recounted how the Nisga'a people with whom he got into touch as a young adult, knew immediately that he had grown up outside the community from the way he sounded the central consonant in "Nisga'a."

⁷ <https://www.nwac.ca/national-inquiry-mmiiwg/>. Accessed Sept 18, 2018.

⁸ The first series quotes from "*A feud over this pole*," vol. 1, 29 (qtd in Abel 5); the 2nd series from "*The pole transported to Toronto*," vol. 1, 34 (qtd in Abel 19); the 3rd series from "*Removal of the Sakau'wan pole from Nass River*," vol. 1, 32 (qtd in Abel 31); the 4th series from "*The pole of 'Neesyoq and 'Neeskyinwoet*," vol 2, 442 (qtd in Abel 47); the 5th series from "*The myth of the Dragon-Fly*," vol. 1, 24 (qtd in Abel 67); the 6th series from "*Myth explaining some of the crests*," vol. 1, 52 (qtd in Abel 109); the 7th series from "*Totem poles of Chief Mountain*," vol. 1, 35 (qtd in Abel 123); the 8th series from vol. 1, 33 (qtd in Abel 191).

⁹ Part of Holbrook's editorial review is reproduced in the opening pages of *The Place of Scraps* ("Praise for *The Place of Scraps*," n.p.). It also features on several booksellers' websites promoting Abel's book.

¹⁰ In *Zong!*, NourbeSe Philip diverted "Gregson v. Gilbert," the court claim the owners of the *Zong* made to obtain compensation from the insurance company after the destruction of their human cargo. Even though her poetic gesture is reminiscent of Abel's, the final effect is quite different insofar as *The Place of Scraps* poses the integrity of the archive as a preliminary to its subsequent alterations, as opposed to the disappearance in which *Zong!* originates. I am grateful to Kerry-Jane Wallart for encouraging me to give the parallel some thought.

¹¹ This is evinced by Barbeau's frequent use of the word "shelter" when referring to the ROM, and his insistence that "the permanent loss of a carved column of such magnitude [...] would have been deplorable" (Barbeau vol. 1, 32). It should be noted that, like Barbeau, Canadian painter Emily Carr (1871-1945) has recently been criticized for her representations

of Indigenous art. She was fascinated by First Nations totem poles, about which she wrote at length in her autobiography, *Klee Wyck*, and which feature prominently in many of her paintings. For an informed discussion of the appropriation controversy that raged for a while around Carr, see Lanone 2014.

¹² As with the public apology PM Stephen Harper made on behalf of the Government to Canada's First Nations and the survivors of the residential school system on June 11, 2008.

¹³ The role played by photography in what François Brunet describes as "the relegation and archiving of America's Indian tribes" (2017, 103, my translation) has received detailed attention from historians of photography and researchers in cultural studies (see, for instance, Cronin 2003).

¹⁴ Barbeau was personally acquainted with Marcel Mauss, whom he had met in Paris while studying in Europe (Gordon 36). Abel Jordan lists three works by Mauss in his own sources, among which the anthropologist's seminal essay on the gift (1925).

¹⁵ *A mari usque ad mare* was adopted as the Canadian national motto in 1867 after the colony obtained its Independence from Great Britain. The phrase did not, however, become a reality until 1871, when BC agreed to join Confederation in counterpart for the building of a transcontinental railway that would connect the Westernmost province to Eastern Canada. The Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in 1885.

¹⁶ The prominence of the verb "remove" in this context cannot fail to evoke the Indian Removal Act signed by US president Andrew Jackson in 1830. For a comparative study of US and Canadian relocation policies towards their respective Aboriginal populations, see Walls and Whitbeck 2012.

¹⁷ Museums embody the functional and symbolic aspects of the *lieu de mémoire* defined by Pierre Nora as follows: "a *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (1996, vol.1 xvii).

¹⁸ The two occasions may also be contrasted through the dialectical opposition Walter Benjamin introduced between trace and aura: "The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us" (1999, 447). Upon his first visit, the poet views the totem pole as an ethnographic trace, devoid of the aura he senses when, the second time, the artwork seems to look back and, in Benjamin's words, "lift its gaze" (qtd. and analysed in Hansen 2007, 339; see also Didi-Huberman 2008, 76-88). As one of the early reviewers of this article pointed out, *The Place of Scraps* well deserves an in-depth Benjaminian approach, not only because the scrapbook is a major entry into Benjamin's conception of art, but also because aura and trace both stand in a mutual tension in many of Abel's visual compositions.

¹⁹ Whereas the diary gives prominence to the figure of the absent father, the mother's presence is rarely mentioned. Likewise *The Place of Scraps* does not explicitly refer to the dynamic tension between "empty" and "full" which classical Chinese painting inherited from Daoism (Cheng 1994). This aesthetic tradition nevertheless seems to have played a role in the conception of *The Place of Scraps*, as in the works of the Modernist and Postmodernist poets, from Ezra Pound to Derek Beaulieu and Anne Carson.

²⁰ *Totem Poles* is more concerned with geography than with landscape, except on one notable occasion, when Barbeau's crew has lunch on the bank of the Nass and the ethnographer relies on a profusion of romantic *topoi* to describe the "grandeur" of the mountain scenery (vol. 1, 33-34). It is as if the prospect of removing the pole from its original location triggered a form of romantic compensation through landscape writing.