

*Contested
Landscapes:
Wilderness Parks
and Shifting
Narratives*

*/Stéphanie
Hornstein and
Georgia
Phillips-Amos/*

Stéphanie Hornstein recently completed a doctorate in Art History at Concordia University. She is currently pursuing a Master's in Library and Information Sciences at l'Université de Montréal.

–stephanie.hornstein@umontreal.ca

Georgia Phillips-Amos is a writer and researcher who holds a Ph.D. in Art History from Concordia University. She is currently teaching Art Criticism at the University of Toronto.

–gljpamos@gmail.com

A park, of any kind, is a circumscribed space. This is land set aside for a designated purpose: an industrial park, an amusement park, a dog park, a trailer park, a wilderness park. Today, the term “park” is most closely associated with communal spaces of leisure, as in a municipal park, but the word’s etymology is steeped in notions of private property. In English and French, “park” derives from a Germanic root that signifies “pen” or “enclosure” and that originally denoted royal game reserves. Following the Norman invasion of England in the eleventh century, large forested grounds, heaths, and meadows were claimed by the crown, who introduced and maintained animal populations within these parks so that the aristocracy could indulge in sport hunting. From the start, the demarcation of boundaries around these sites guided, and, in many cases, severed pre-existing public relationships with the land. These origins surface some of the paradoxes inherent to contemporary manifestations of the North American wilderness park. Like their precursors, these private or state-run lands present a mediated—one might even say curated—vision of the natural world. Notions of “wilderness” are, as Ian S. MacLaren has written, always “cultured,” meaning they are shaped not only by physical human intervention, but also—and perhaps most meaningfully—by the human imagination.¹

The stated ethos of the wilderness park is its protected status. We speak of nature *reserves*, of marine *conservation* areas, of bird *sanctuaries*, of *safe* habitat corridors. But from what, exactly, these spaces are being protected and for whom is not always clear. Safeguarding biodiversity against the onslaught of ecological devastation is a relatively recent concept. In the late nineteenth century, when the first national park was established in the lands commonly referred to as Canada, John A. Macdonald’s government aimed to protect the Banff Springs area from one industry, mining, in favour of another, tourism. The Rocky Mountains Park Act of 1887 described the creation of “a public park and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of Canada.”² This piece of legislature, however, did not outright prevent the establishment of mines within the park; it simply meant that the displeasing evidence of industrial activity had to be kept out of sight so as not to “impair the usefulness of the park for the purpose of public enjoyment and recreation.”³ As such, the thrust of early parks discourse in Canada was fundamentally an aesthetic concern: “beauty spots” had to be rendered accessible to as many visitors as possible—although park administrators never disguised the fact that they sought to attract the most wealthy members of Canadian society. Nakoda peoples were displaced and prohibited from hunting in the Banff area, for fear that they would deplete the game stock reserved for tourists, effectively negating ancestral lifeways and Indigenous custodianship of the land.⁴ The 1887 Parliamentary Sessional Papers are telling in this respect, advising that “exceptions of no kind whatever” should be made in favour of Indigenous communities within park grounds.⁵ In 1930, in a gesture that speaks volumes about the influence of industry on these supposedly natural places, the borderlines of the park were extended and the site was renamed Banff, after Banffshire, a coastal county in Scotland, where George Stephen and Donald Smith, co-founders of the Canadian Pacific Railway, were born.⁶ Understood this way, conservation and dispossession are co-constitutive, and central to the function of parks. That such displacements were framed by picturesque notions of Nature raises important questions for art historians as well as for artists. Central among them: how has visual culture participated in or resisted the rhetoric of the scenic vista, the pristine forest, the unpeopled land?

This special issue understands wilderness parks as contested landscapes. We employ the term “landscape” to acknowledge the influence that pictorial traditions have exerted on the delineation and preservation of these environments. In this respect, one need only think of Tom Thomson’s paintings of Algonquin Park, often hailed as masterworks of Canadian art, and

art deco posters designed by railway companies in the early twentieth century to promote iconic destinations. More recently, the National Film Board's reprise of stills from Bill Mason's highly popular 1980s documentaries for their "stream Canadian" campaign demonstrates the enduring appeal of the footage that Mason shot in various conservation areas along the shores of Lake Superior.⁷ Even the cartoon character of Smokey Bear, transposed from his American context by the Canadian Forestry Agency in 1956, can be said to have had a major effect on the management of forested parks.⁸

Another non-negligible source of visual culture associated with wilderness parks comes from the parks themselves. As the commodification of vast parcels of land ramped up in the twentieth century, parks administrators seized upon the importance of marketing imagery, producing a slew of magazine advertisements, brochures, postcards, promotional films, and, eventually, web-based media. From these heterogeneous materials emerged a distinct iconography that cast parks as natural wonderlands and reified the figure of the, predominantly white, outdoor enthusiast as the legitimate consumer of these places.⁹ This trope is common to the ways in which "wilderness" is conceived in settler-colonial societies, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, among others. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes about the naturalization of white entitlement to wilderness spaces in her native Australia: "The production of the beach as a white possession is both fantasy and reality within the Australian imagination and is tied to a beach culture encompassing pleasure, leisure, and national pride."¹⁰ Pleasure, leisure, and national pride coalesce in the act, and the representation, of certain people performing leisure in panoramic settings.

Also evident in parks imagery is a tendency to muddle Indigenous cultures. The Jasper totem pole is a case in point. This 45-foot Haida symbol was first erected in the Rockies, a place in which it has no traditional grounding, by the Grand Trunk Railway company in 1907 to promote their service to the West Coast. That a corporate giant should engage in such blatant "pan-Indigeneity" in its quest to maximize its dominion across the country may come as no surprise. But Parks Canada's decision to replace the aging totem pole by commissioning a new one in 2011, despite opposition from local Nakoda and Cree communities, is, at the very least, perplexing.¹¹

Our choice to describe wilderness parks as "contested" is an effort to underline the high stakes involved in questions of access to and representation of "wilderness." Indeed, parks are eminently symbolic locations. In the context of Canada, they have long been viewed as a cornerstone of national identity, both domestically and abroad. As former Minister of the Environment Tom MacMillan wrote in a 1987 history of Canada's national

1 Ian S. MacLaren, "Cultured Wilderness in Jasper National Park," *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes* 34, no. 3 (August 1999): 7–58.

2 "An Act Respecting the Rocky Mountains Park of Canada," *Acts of the Parliament of the Dominion of Canada, first session of the sixth Parliament* (Ottawa: Brown Chamberlain, 1887), vol. 1, chap. 32, 120.

3 "An Act Respecting the Rocky Mountains Park of Canada," vol. 1, chap. 32, 120.

4 Theodore Binnema and Melanie Niemi, "Let the Line Be Drawn Now: Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada," *Environmental History* 11, no. 4 (October 2006): 724–50.

5 Thomas White, "Sessional Papers, Volume 6. First Session of the Sixth Parliament of the Dominion of Canada," vol. XX (Ottawa: Maclean, Roget & Co. Parliamentary Printers, 1885), 92.

6 See The National Parks Act Statutes of Canada, 20–21 George V, Chap. 33, Assented to May 30, 1930; Sheila Robinson, *The Natural and Human History of Banff National Park* (Banff: Parks Canada, 1976), 26. Note that place names in the region remain in dispute, see "Alberta First Nation Lobbies

for Indigenous Name for Tunnel Mountain," *CBC News*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/stoney-nakoda-name-change-tunnel-mountain-1.3790530>.

7 National Film Board of Canada, "Stream Canadian on nfb.ca," <https://mediaspace.nfb.ca/comm/stream-canadian-on-nfb/>.

8 Kyle Wyatt, "Smokes Person," *Literary Review of Canada* (July–August 2023), <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2023/07/smokes-person/>.

9 On this subject, see J. Keri Cronin, *Manufacturing National Park Nature: Photography, Ecology, and the Wilderness Industry of Jasper* (UBC Press, 2011).

10 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 46.

11 Jason W. Johnston and Courtney Mason, "The Struggle for Indigenous Representation in Canadian National Parks: The Case of the Haida Totem Poles in Jasper," *Journal of Indigenous Research* 8 (March 2020): 1–14. See also "Jasper Totem Pole Provokes First Nations Concerns," *CBC News*, July 15, 2011, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/jasper-totem-pole-provokes-first-nations-concerns-1.1086266>.

parks: “Parks are not a frill, peripheral to the Canadian experience. They are its very marrow.”¹² Since 2012, the Institute for Canadian Citizenship offers newly minted citizens free admission to all sites managed by Parks Canada for a full year, encouraging newcomers to “celebrate your arrival in Canada or your citizenship with great Canadian experiences.”¹³ National pride in Canada’s great outdoors abounds. But the fact that many of these parks were created under the aegis of the Department of the Interior—the same federal agency that managed natural resource extraction, displaced Indigenous peoples into reservations, and encouraged westward settlement—is often elided.¹⁴ Nature reserves across Canada have repeatedly been the site of mass expropriations and territorial struggles, most often between Indigenous communities and governmental authorities, but also between those same authorities and other farming and fishing communities.¹⁵ In Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, for example, several Acadian villages were cleared to make way for national parks from the 1930s to the 1970s.¹⁶ This “big state vs. the people” story should not, however, obscure the fact, as John Sandlos has argued, that such expropriations were often undertaken in consultation with local nature conservation groups and tourist businesses that had their own political interests at heart.¹⁷ Though today’s wilderness parks position themselves as natural spaces open to all, access to these sites remains dependent on state or private permission. What one may do within these parcels of land, in terms of hunting, fishing, harvesting, gathering, or camping, is subject to regulations. Simultaneously, the adverse impact of overtourism in ecological destinations has become a bone of contention as provincial and federal parks race to extend wi-fi and cellphone coverage, enlarge parking lots and install evermore amenities for visitors.

When we first began thinking about wilderness parks together, for a panel we convened at the University Arts Association of Canada in Quebec City in 2019, we were struck by Parks Canada’s claim to offer “450,000 square km of memories.” This tagline begs the question: whose memories? The line implies a collective subject and what Michel Rolph Touillot might call “a storage model of memory-history,”¹⁸ in which each square foot of this managed land holds a trace and a record of what it has witnessed. But, as we all know from experience, memories are not discrete and fixed. They are subjective, inherited, swayed and shaped by the pictures we take and the narratives we tell. Not incidentally, Parks Canada has since rebranded—they now offer “450,000 square km of stories.” Stories are more humble in their relationship to history, more aware of their own construction, yet the question remains: whose stories?

However fraught the endeavour of picturing wilderness parks may be, it can also represent an effective way to address the inadequacies of nationalist myths. This is a strategy that several artists have adopted over the years—sometimes covertly, sometimes in partnership with park authorities. Among them, two signal pieces stand out. Coincidentally produced in the same place and in the same year, 1991, Rebecca Belmore’s *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother* and Jin-Me Yoon’s *Souvenirs of the Self*

12 Tom McMillan, “Foreword,” *A Brief History of Canada’s National Parks* (Minister of the Environment and Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1987), 5.

13 Parks Canada, “Free Admission for Newcomers to Canada and New Canadian Citizens,” <https://parks.canada.ca/voyage-travel/admission/cultur>.

14 For a historical overview, see Claire Elizabeth Campbell, “Governing a Kingdom: Parks Canada, 1911–2011,” in *A Century of Parks Canada, 1911–2011*, ed. Claire Elizabeth Campbell (University of Calgary Press, 2011), 1–19.

15 In addition to Binnema and Niemi, op. cit., see John Sandlos, “Not Wanted in the Boundary: The Expulsion of the Keeseekoowenin Ojibway Band from Riding Mountain National Park,” *The Canadian*

Historical Review 89, no. 2 (June 2008): 189–221.

16 Catriona Sandilands, “Cap Rouge Remembered? Whiteness, Scenery, and Memory in Cape Breton Highlands National Park,” in *Rethinking the Great White North: Race, Nature, and the Historical Geographies of Whiteness in Canada*, ed. Andrew Baldwin, Laura Cameron, Audrey Kobayashi (UBC Press, 2011), 62–82; Ronald Rudin, *Kouchibouguac: Removal, Resistance, and Remembrance at a Canadian National Park* (University of Toronto Press, 2016).

17 John Sandlos, “Federal Spaces, Local Conflicts: National Parks and the Exclusionary Politics of the Conservation Movement in Ontario, 1900–1935,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 16, no. 1 (2005): 293–317.

18 Michel Rolph-Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Beacon Press, 2015), 14.

utilized the setting of Banff National Park to elaborate a critique of entrenched settler narratives. Belmore's work—a response to the Kanasatake Resistance, also known as the Oka Crisis—invited Indigenous communities across Canada to engage in direct conversation with the land by speaking into a large portable megaphone made of wood and hide.¹⁹ With *Speaking to their Mother* Belmore's megaphone amplifies ongoing conversations between communities and the land, and makes clear that these exceed all imposed borderlines. As Belmore's frequent collaborator, the artist and curator Wanda Nanibush writes, in relation to Palestinian artists creating work directly on their lands, "All structures and modes of containing humanity are challenged when thinking of the human in relation to the land."²⁰ Jin-Me Yoon's intervention took the shape of a series of six postcards that picture the artist herself in the park's recognizable scenery. By placing her body in front of the scenic view, obstructing it, Yoon adroitly "interrogates the limits of multicultural inclusion, while calling to mind the history of exploited Asian (Chinese) labor which built the Canadian Pacific Railway and was thus integral in the construction of settler colonial vistas."²¹ In the work of both artists, connections between people, history, and the land are made explicit and emphasized through repetition. More recently, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Canada's Confederation, the charitable organization Partners in Art commissioned twelve artists, including both Belmore and Yoon, to make new work at sites currently managed by Parks Canada. These commissions consider the question posed by curator Candice Hopkins as: "What does it mean to consider a nation, not only through its official narratives, but through its unofficial ones as well?"²² Helped along by such initiatives, the last few decades have seen a definite shift in the official presentation of wilderness parks from pristine reserves to cultural landscapes.²³ Moreover, there has been increased support for Indigenous-led conservation efforts that have, in many cases, resulted in the formation of protected areas.²⁴ This fledgling, but welcome, reorientation in the conversation around wilderness parks leaves the door wide open to increased social and artistic intervention within these outdoor spaces so that a broader spectrum of voices might be heard.

When we first circulated a call for papers for this issue in 2023, we could not have anticipated the substantial response that we would receive. The result is a significant collection of thought, with nine articles, three practice pieces and two interviews. Elizabeth Cavaliere and Siobhan Angus's articles tackle the entwined histories of conservation and resource extraction by respectively focusing on postcards of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and David Milne's paintings of mineshafts in Temagami, Ontario. Their attention to these visual artifacts address how efforts to circumscribe wilderness parks in the early twentieth century went hand in hand with capitalist development. Joëlle Dubé extends this observation in her interpretation of Nicolas Renaud and Brian Virostek's 2023

19 For more on Rebecca Belmore's *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomamawoman: Speaking to their Mother* and its 2017 companion pieces *Wave Sound*, see Georgia Phillips-Amos, "Attunement to the Great Near with Rebecca Belmore's *Wave Sound*," *The Drama Review* 68, no. 3 (Fall 2024): 178–94.

20 Wanda Nanibush, "About Land: Colonization, whether in Canada or Palestine, marks a before and an after where identity is radically altered by loss," *Canadian Art* (Fall 2016), 106.

21 May Chew and Jessica Jacobson-Konefall, "Settler Imbroglios and Affective-Ecological Entanglements in the Work of Peter von Tiesenhausen, Kara Springer, and Jin-me Yoon," in *Speculative Affect: Objects and Emotions*, ed. Charmaine Eddy (Palgrave Macmillan and Springer, 2025), 178.

22 Candice Hopkins, "Introduction," in *LandMarks2017/Repères2017: Art + Places + Perspectives* (Toronto: The Magenta Foundation and Partners in Art, 2018), 13.

23 The year 1984 marked a watershed moment in conservation management in Canada with the creation of Ivvavik National

Park in the Yukon, the first national park managed in partnership with native communities. In 2024, following consultation with Indigenous representatives, the federal parks agency implemented an Indigenous Stewardship policy, which recognizes past harms and aims to "better support Indigenous stewardship at places Parks Canada plays a role in administering." Parks Canada, "Indigenous Stewardship Policy," Government of Canada, <https://parks.canada.ca/agence-agency/aa-ia/politique-policy>.

24 Justine Townsend and Robin Roth, "Indigenous and Decolonial Futures: Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas as Potential Pathways of Reconciliation," *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 5 (2023): 1–17; and Tanya C. Tran, Douglas Neasloss, Kitasoo/Xai'xais Stewardship Authority, Jonaki Bhattacharyya, and Natalie C. Ban, "Borders Don't Protect Areas, People Do: Insights from the Development of an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area in Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation Territory," *FACETS* 5, no. 1 (January 2020): 922–41.

video *Holiday Native Land*, which remixes advertisements from the 1920s to the 1970s that promote various Canadian parks. Underlying these materials, Dubé argues, is an insatiable colonial appetite that is best apprehended through the idea of the Windigo – a mythical cannibalistic creature that is common to numerous Indigenous cultural traditions. In their shared article, Carmen Levy-Milne and Jacqueline Morrisseau-Addison show the international impact of the Canadian wilderness park through an analysis of Rehab Nazzal's *Canada Park* (2015). With this film, the Palestinian-Canadian artist documents the export of the wilderness park model as an effective means to displace Indigenous populations and claim land for scenic leisure, from Canada to the West Bank.

Tammer El-Sheikh and Drew Lyness are both interested in how Parks Canada has positioned itself as the defender of ecological integrity and cultural heritage. El-Sheikh contrasts this official rhetoric with the ethical stances of two contemporary artists, Zinnia Naqvi and David Kaarsemaker, whose self-aware subjectivity compels a more ambivalent response to the natural worlds they move through. Lyness, for his part, examines artistic responses to Parks Canada's management of the Klondike Historic Site in the Northwest Territories.

In their joint article, Shabana Ali and Moss Norman examine *An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada* (2022), a public performance staged by Ali in which ten climbers of South Asian descent were photographed wearing brightly coloured *saris* and *salwar kameezes* while climbing on Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw land, in what is known as Stawamus Chief Provincial Park. Ali and Moss consider this displacement of white-settler entitlement to parklands and outdoor sports, while also offering a nuanced critique of the role diasporic communities play in upholding a settler society. Hughes Lefebvre Morasse's article on gay campgrounds in Quebec, as well as Desiree Valadares's conversation with Lorri Millan and Shana Dempsey on their Lesbian National Parks and Services project likewise explore the possibilities and tensions of queer subjects inhabiting "wilderness" spaces.

In their shared performance practice, Dempsey and Millan assume the role of park rangers. Similarly, Tania Willard, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, and Camille Turner discussed with us their own use of park infrastructure to reconsider collective relationships to Native land. In the case of *Freedom Tours*, the artists utilize a boat tour and a walking tour through Thousand Islands and Rouge National Urban Park to share narratives that are attentive to more-than-humans, histories of Black diaspora, and Indigenous relationships to these lands and waters. Also concerned with waterscapes, MJ Thompson considers the role of another labourer, the lifesaver, in the twin acts of looking at and representing landscape. Thompson extends our focus on "wilderness parks" south of the border, focusing on a series of postcards depicting the work of lifesavers along the Cape Cod National Sea Shore, dated between 1905 and 1907.

Our three practice pieces, by Andreas Rutkauskas, Alexandre Campeau-Vallée, and Nyssa Komorowski, consider human entanglement with and responsibility to the ecosystems in which we live. Rutkauskas considers the urgent need for knowledge transfer and co-management of fire within forested lands in the face of climate crises. Campeau-Vallée addresses the framing of "wilderness" by tourist amenities at Niagara Falls. Komorowski writes about the "co-created" nature of urban parks, with a focus on the unusual case of Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto.

In her recent book, *Theory of Water*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson suggests that we follow the logic of water in facing the social and environmental crises of the present. "Human worlds that are fractal, adaptive, non-linear and iterative, resilient and transformative, interdependent,

decentralized, all move towards more possibilities for life,” she writes.²⁵ Despite the delineated and guarded quality of the park lands which form our collective subject, a sense of co-dependence persists across this special issue. If the land keeps its own stories, as Parks Canada implies, it is urgent to remember that these remain beyond the conservation abilities of the institutions that guard them. A point made by none other than David Suzuki when he stated, in 2009, that “it’s a common misconception that environmental salvation can be had by simply putting dotted lines around tiny areas on a map where humans aren’t allowed to run amok.”²⁶ Contested and increasingly threatened by climate change, the stories these lands hold are non-linear, decentralized, and in flux. They have also been made visual, as seen through the following essays on painting, photography, performance, film, and postcards. Though shaped by their continued relationships to capitalism and settler entitlement, these designated “wilderness” lands pre-exist and promise to outlast the infrastructures that presently maintain them.

25 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Theory of Water* (Haymarket Books, 2025), 188.

26 David Suzuki and Dave Robert Taylor, *The Big Picture: Reflections on Science, Humanity, and a Quickly Changing Planet* (Greystone Books, 2009), 73.