

*Exogenous Others  
and the  
Decolonization  
of “The Great  
Canadian  
Outdoorsman”*

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*Cet essai porte sur An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada, une performance ainsi qu’une installation photographique mettant en scène des personnes sud-asiatiques vêtues de costumes traditionnels escaladant les terres des Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (la Nation Squamish), afin de remettre en question le mythe blanc du « grand amateur de plein air canadien ». Combinant la recherche artistique avec la théorie décoloniale et la théorie critique de la race, cet article explore la manière dont les colons racialisés naviguent entre complicité et résistance au sein de la culture coloniale du plein air. En mettant l’accent sur l’incarnation racialisée et la terre en tant que participantes actives, le projet bouscule les mythologies nationales exclusives et dévoile les liens coloniaux entre race, loisirs et nature, tout en réimaginant les activités de plein air comme un lieu de possibilités décoloniales.*

## INTRODUCTION

In October 2022, I (Shabana Ali) organized a public art intervention—a performance and its subsequent photo installation—as part of a project for my master’s degree at the University of British Columbia. The project, entitled *An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada*, took place in what is colonially named Stawamus Chief Provincial Park and involved ten climbers of South Asian descent creating a visionary space in outdoor recreation by rock climbing in traditional dress on the Lands<sup>1</sup> of the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation). This performance was enacted in the presence of other climbers and hikers who were in the area and was documented through a series of staged and candid photographs. A grouping of South Asian climbers is not a sight that is typically seen between the thick woody trunks of cedar and hemlock that characterize this popular rock-climbing region. Yet, among the brown bodies swathed in colourful silks and cotton, a regular but unnamed actor *is* present<sup>2</sup>—the Land itself—which is all-too-often constructed as *thingly* and politically neutral, rather than a sentient being with whom we are always in relation.<sup>3</sup> As stated by National Geographic Award winner and Shinnecock landscape photographer Camille Seaman, “there is no such thing as separation from us and nature...we are all literally related.”<sup>4</sup> The forest appears in the photos as a living participant, then, in the form of rugged granite carpeted in glowing green moss, brush needles of Western Hemlock, and even the dusty forest floor. However, the Land is likely relegated to “background” for those who view the world through a Western lens<sup>5</sup>—including many South Asian settlers who have come to see and experience the outdoors through a Western worldview. The current and historical context of this Land is one site where racialized settlers and Indigenous interests come into tension. Uninterrogated outdoor practices and experiences of, for example, mountain biking,<sup>6</sup> hiking,<sup>7</sup> canoeing<sup>8</sup> and, rock climbing,<sup>9</sup> are all instances of what could be called “recreational colonialism,”<sup>10</sup> through which a deep and affective sense of settler entitlement to, and belonging on, the Land is continuously forged and reformed. As such, one needs to critically interrogate “how the racial and colonial are enmeshed.”<sup>11</sup> A nuanced analysis of this sort means that we must simultaneously recognize how South Asians have historically been, and continue to be, positioned as exogenous Others to the White fantasies of settler Canada, while also attending to the complex ways in which they may be complicit in ongoing processes of settler colonialism in the present context.

## PERFORMANCE AND PHOTOS

As “The Great Outdoors” is a part of Canada’s national mythology, those who are excluded from its occupancy—whether physically or in the national imagination—are excluded, in large part, from the ideals of nationhood itself.<sup>12</sup> While White settler fantasies of the Canadian landscape continue to shape outdoor recreation in the contemporary context—as seen through industry-standard climbing media, which often depicts the lone, typically White, performance

climber<sup>13</sup> – *An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada's* photos offer an alternative narrative. In this imagined elsewhere, community and cultural affinity are foregrounded, as articulated through multiple brown bodies and the brightly coloured saris and salwar kameezes (traditional South Asian dress) worn by some of these climbers. While this sight was very likely disorienting for some, it proved to be empowering and exhilarating for those not used to seeing representations of themselves in the outdoors. Whether provoking discomfort or inciting a deep affective yearning for more, such visceral reactions both expose the historical and ongoing erasures that constitute the sport of outdoor climbing, while also revealing the possibilities for doing the sport and outdoor recreation otherwise.

As part of the performance of *An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada*, the ten climbers of South Asian descent, whose various ancestries trace back to the nations of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma and India, engaged in the discipline of rock climbing known as bouldering – quite literally, to climb a boulder. Diverse genders and one climber with a disability were represented in the group, some of whom had little to no outdoor climbing experience, while others, who acted as guides, were highly experienced outdoor climbers, having climbed for ten to twenty years. This event provided an opportunity for cultural connection and a somewhat safer space for racialized beginners to learn, through guidance from mentors who shared a similar identity and understanding.

The photos for the series of the same name were taken by Tandem Photography, who had done some outdoor photographic work of dark-skinned mountain bikers for the outdoor initiative *Colour the Trails*. I gave the South Asian climbers the option of wearing traditional dress for the photoshoot, to outwardly announce pride in cultural affinity and as a way to resist the dominant narratives of Canadian “multiculturalism” that continues to centre Whiteness.<sup>14</sup> Such attire sharply contrasts with normative climbing apparel, which leaves little room for individual expressions of cultural diversity. The intent in making traditional South Asian dress available was also to deliberately unsettle the history of settler landscape art by centring the diverse histories of those who have occupied these Lands and, in so doing, revealing that the Great Outdoors have never been as White as settler fantasies have imagined.

In the hopes of attaining greater reach, the performance was carried out in two stages, firstly through the on-site performance itself, and secondly through an enduring amplification of this joyfully resistant act, by way of a photo installation, situated in a public space relevant to the climbing lives of the performers – a Vancouver climbing gym. Both stages served as a way to reimagine the condition of South Asian climbers and to (re)consider the

1 In this paper we capitalize Land to draw attention to and respect other ontologies of land.

2 *Colonial Racial Capitalism*, ed. Susan Koshy, Lisa Marie Cacho, Jodi A. Byrd, and Brian Jordan Jefferson (Duke University Press, 2022), 12.

3 Joe Sheridan and Rononhiakewen “He Clears the Sky” Dan Longboat, “The Haudenosaunee Imagination and the Ecology of the Sacred,” *Space and Culture* 9, no. 4 (2006): 365–81.

4 Matt Payne, “An Indigenous Perspective on Landscape Photography,” presented and produced by Matt Payne: Fine Art Landscape and Nature Photography Blog, *F-Stop Collaborate and Listen*, June 2, 2021, Podcast, 6:34, <https://www.mattpaynephotography.com/gallery/camille-seaman-conversation-indigenous-perspective>.

5 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1–25.

6 John Reid-Hresko and Jeff R. Warren, “A Lot of What We Ride is Their Land”: White Settler Canadian Understandings of Mountain Biking, Indigeneity, and Recreational Colonialism,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 39, no. 1 (2022): 108–17.

7 Jason Laurendeau, *Sport, Physical Activity, and Anti-Colonial Autoethnography: Stories and Ways of Being* (Routledge, 2023).

8 Bruce Erickson, *Canoe Nation: Nature, Race, and the Making of a Canadian Icon* (UBC Press, 2013).

9 Jennifer Wigglesworth, “The Cultural Politics of Naming Outdoor Rock Climbing Routes,” *Annals of Leisure Research* 25, no. 5 (2022): 597–620.

10 Reid-Hresko and Warren, “A Lot of What We Ride is Their Land,” 108–117.

11 Koshy et al., *Colonial Racial Capitalism*.

12 Emily Gilbert, “Beyond Survival? Wilderness and Canadian National Identity into the Twenty-First Century,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 21, no. 1 (2008): 63–88.

13 Jason Laurendeau, Tiffany Higham, and Danielle Peers, “Mountain Equipment Co-Op, ‘Diversity Work,’ and the ‘Inclusive’ Politics of Erasure,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3, no. 2, (2021): 120–30.

14 Eva Mackey, “Settling Differences: Managing and Representing People and Land in the Canadian National Project,” in *Colonialism and Racism in Canada: Historical Traces and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Maria A. Wallis, Lina Sunseri, and Grace-Edward Galabuzi (Nelson Education, 2010), 17–37.



/fig. 1/ Shabana Ali, photo documentation by Tandem Photography, *An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada no. 2*, 2022. Digital photograph.

way folks occupy outdoor spaces in settler Canada, as well as to materialize the very elsewhere the participants were imagining. To better understand the context in which South Asians climb on Lands claimed by Canada, I made note of any comments, gestures or facial expressions made by onlookers of the performance at the crowded performance/climbing site. Equally, beside the photo installation, I affixed a QR code to an online questionnaire, inviting those in the climbing community to offer their thoughts on the installation and the notions that it presented.

One inspiration for the project came from the works of Korean-Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon, whose work *Souvenirs of Self* (1991) attend to the themes of nationhood, “race,” and place. Yoon explores these sociopolitical dimensions through photographing her racialized body within landscapes linked to national identity—where this identity is commonly understood to be rooted in Whiteness.<sup>15</sup> Equally, Yoon’s work *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996), resists the idyllic construction of the pristine and “unpeopled” Canadian West Coast,<sup>16</sup> a myth that denies the histories of racialized peoples in the colonial expansion of Canada, thereby also denying them the ideals of full (settler) citizenship. By effectively populating this landscape—represented through the paintings of West Coast artists Emily Carr and Lawren Harris—with photo portraits of sixty-seven Korean Canadians from the Vancouver community, Yoon draws attention to how the absence of representation of racialized bodies perpetuates exclusionary racial logics. In the words of Phil Kinsman, when speaking on the similarly themed photographic works of British-Guyanese artist Ingrid Pollard, “if a group is excluded from landscapes of national identity, then they are excluded to a large degree from the nation itself.”<sup>17</sup>

In *An Imagined Elsewhere*, Yoon’s figurations of resistance are taken up by the South Asian climbers through the plurality of their brown bodies in a parallel space of iconic Canadian scenery, bodies which equally work to disrupt the Romantic narrative of the “uninhabited” Canadian wild, still venerated in popular outdoor climbing media today.<sup>18</sup> This Romantic narrative draws on the problematic settler-colonial logic that claims belonging and citizenship through access to Land, as these claims are premised on settler belonging on contested Indigenous Lands.<sup>19</sup> Although *An Imagined Elsewhere* is not explicitly about Indigenous representations of Land, the project does, in the words of critical race and political economy scholar Iyko Day, “animate the contradictions, exclusions, and violent elimination of settler colonialism that the landscape, as aesthetic object, fetishizes and naturalizes,”<sup>20</sup> by attempting to pry open the assumed naturalness of Western constructions of landscape photography. On the part of the South Asian climbers, a detrimental effect of seeking inclusion in White-dominant settler society through their performance is the possible legitimization—even if unintentionally so—of the claims made by this society, including violent claims to the ownership and governance of Land and territory.<sup>21</sup> A racial politics that aims to seek inclusion within the normative Whiteness of outdoor climbing without disrupting the impacts of ongoing settlement can be problematic because, as Rinaldo Walcott reminds us, it results in a situation where the recognition, belonging, and inclusion of racialized peoples is achieved at the expense of the further dispossession and erasure of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>22</sup>

15 Gilbert, “Beyond Survival?”

16 Gilbert, “Beyond Survival?”

17 Phil Kinsman, “Landscape, Race and National Identity: The Photography of Ingrid Pollard,” *Area (London 1969)* 27, no. 4 (1995): 304.

18 Laurendeau, Higham, and Peers, “‘Mountain Equipment Co-Op, ‘Diversity Work,’ and the ‘Inclusive’ Politics of Erasure.”

19 Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* (Fernwood Publishing, 2015).

20 Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016); Lynda Jessup, “Landscapes of Sport, Landscapes of Exclusion: The ‘Sportsman’s Paradise’ in Late-Nineteenth-Century Canadian Painting” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2006): 114.

21 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

22 Rinaldo Walcott, “The End of Diversity,” *Public Culture* 31, no. 2 (2019): 393–408.



/fig. 2/ Shabana Ali, photo documentation by Tandem Photography, *An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada* no. 8, 11, 12, 17, 22, 23, 2022. Digital photographs.

Indeed, while for some, *An Imagined Elsewhere* may seem to elide mentions of Indigeneity, inspiration for the photos was taken from Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore, particularly from her performance pieces in Canadian National Parks and reserve sites that invoke an Indigenous worldview in which Land is not an inert backdrop but a living entity that listens and responds. In particular, the works *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomamowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991), a large-scale wooden megaphone which beckoned participants to speak directly to the Land, and *Wave Sound* (2017), a set of four giant listening horns installed at different coastal sites, which invited visitors to listen to the Land, engage with the idea that the Land listens, has a voice and communicates, emphasizing an ongoing relationship between the human and the natural world. Importantly, these sculptural performance pieces bespeak a belief in animism that redefines what is meant by *relation*, “by establishing a sociality between humans and the living but nonhuman bodies of the environment.”<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, images from *An Imagined Elsewhere* reveal an interplay between all the performers—racialized settler climbers and the Land—where the Land shelters, supports, and educates as mother, friend, and teacher. While the Land as actor is featured in every photo, *An Imagined Elsewhere no. 2*, in particular, teases the viewer to question who is the focus of the piece: is it the South Asian settler climber, draped in a vibrant turquoise and yellow embroidered sari? Or is it the impressively rugged granite boulder that she climbs? Or is it both, as they are one and the same and of the same spiritual, intellectual, and physical materiality?

More recent inspirations for the *An Imagined Elsewhere* came from the Instagram account of Divya Maiya, an outdoor enthusiast from the South Asian diaspora who has used South Asian dress as a means to communicate and symbolize representation, identity and pride in outdoor leisure, specifically through the act of skiing in Minnesota. The inspiration found in Maiya’s short video performances was deepened through a collaborative effort with Maria Hawkins, a snowboarder from the Chippewa Cree nation of Rocky Boy Reservation in Montana, who sought out Maiya, so that the pair could ski and snowboarded down the snowy hills of Bozeman, Montana in solidarity, while wearing their respective cultural dress of sari and ribbon skirt.<sup>24</sup> We also considered social media a relevant source for inspiration, as Instagram accounts such as @NativeOutdoors and @melaninbasecamp hold space for discourse around Indigenous and non-White imperatives in the outdoors, in an effort to provide alternatives to dominant narratives. While *An Imagined Elsewhere* does not feature Indigenous climbers per se, the event asked the South Asian performers to reflect on the ways that the violence of European colonialism is felt by both South Asians and Indigenous Peoples, and pointedly, the continued violence that is enacted through settlement on Indigenous Lands generally, and S̄kw̄xw̄ú7mesh Lands more specifically. Moreover, the subtext of Land dispossession and whose Lands the performance took place on was messaged through the title of the photo installation, displayed just beside, where the words “so-called” point to the nation-state of Canada as a settler-colonial construction.

### DISRUPTING A GEOGRAPHY OF EXCLUSION AND DISPOSSESSION: THE “AUTHENTIC” CANADIAN CLIMBER

Following the photo performance, the South Asian climbers were asked to participate in a discussion around their experiences in the sport and culture of

23 Iris Sandjette Blake, “Decolonial Echoes: Voicing and Listening in Rebecca Belmore’s Sound Performance,” *Performance Matters* 6, no. 2 (2020): 8–25.

24 Renée Lilley, “Friends Hit the Slopes in Ribbon Skirt and Saree to Inspire BIPOC Youth in Sport,” *CBC News*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/skiing-snowboarding-ribbon-skirt-saree-1.6382098>.



/fig. 3/ Maria Hawkins, *Hawkins and Maiya together on the slopes of Montana*, 2022, Video still. Courtesy of Maria Hawkins.

climbing. As the performance, discussion, and questionnaire around the photo installation took place as part of an academic study through the University of British Columbia, the names of all participants have been replaced with pseudonyms. This section examines a few excerpts taken from the discussion, with a specific focus on a figuration of the modern Canadian outdoorsman—the Canadian climber.

When I was the only brown person in a climbing space when I was a child, I felt a need to appear more White—like not to share my experiences. I think that was partially to show I did fit into those spaces and to prove that by presenting more White.

In the excerpt above, Priya, a South Asian climber featured in the performance, explained her desire to hide her corporeality and authentic self from the White-dominant rock-climbing culture for fear that her “race” would be equated to a marker of inauthenticity in a climbing space. While some might suggest that Priya’s feelings are particular to her and stem from internal self-doubt, the words of postcolonial critical theorist Frantz Fanon can help us make sense of her perspective. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon famously theorized a broader pattern of insecurity experienced by racialized peoples: “If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race.”<sup>25</sup>

Brown bodies are often associated with a foreignness that is incongruent with the settler imaginary of the Canadian wild.<sup>26</sup> However, in order for outdoor spaces to be understood as White, as they are by Priya and many other racialized people,<sup>27</sup> multiple and overlapping discursive and non-discursive processes must materialize it as such. With Jin-me Yoon’s work *Souvenirs of Self* in mind, Emily Gilbert writes, “it is not simply that categories of inclusion need to be expanded, but rather that the ways that identities are territorialised needs to be unsettled.”<sup>28</sup> One such identity, linked steadfastly to Canadianhood, is that of the “authentic,” masculine outdoorsman—and his descendent, the outdoor climber. Nilam, who is featured in the performance, highlighted who benefits from the patriarchal and White supremacist construction of the climber:

White men think that they are the climbers and that everybody else is just fucking around. There’s such a sense of entitlement. They think, “I am actually the real climber and I have greater ownership over this space than you do.”

Nilam spotlighted the culpability of White male climbers in creating, upholding, and benefitting from the oppression of climbers of colour through embodying a sense of White settler entitlement, belonging and ownership. In a climbing context, this could look like feelings of entitlement to a certain climb or climbing space,<sup>29</sup> vocalizing a nostalgia for times when crags were less crowded,<sup>30</sup> policing brown bodies,<sup>31</sup> or undermining the outdoor knowledge or skill of someone who is not White.<sup>32</sup>

25 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967), 74.

26 Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2007).

27 Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

28 Gilbert, “Beyond Survival?,” 83.

29 Shabana Ali, “South Asians in ‘The Great Outdoors’: Navigating Racialized Experiences Rock Climbing in So-Called Canada” (Master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 2023).

30 Danielle Williams, “The Miseducation Of Leave No Trace: Policing Black And Brown Bodies In The Outdoors,” *Melanin Base Camp*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/trip-reports/2019/3/26/the-miseducation-of-leave-no-trace-policing-black-and-brown-bodies-in-the-outdoors>.

31 Williams, “The Miseducation Of Leave No Trace.”

32 Ali, “South Asians in ‘The Great Outdoors.’”

Nilam makes visible sites for potential resistance and disruption, specifically unmarked systems of Whiteness that privilege White identity. At play here are White settler "possessive logics"<sup>33</sup> entrenched through reiterative acts of embodied occupation, including through outdoor recreational practices that naturalize White settler entitlement and belonging. With the ideological frameworks of White-core multiculturalism,<sup>34</sup> the model minority, and White normativity in mind, Nilam's vocalizations would likely create an unease rarely felt by White male climbers. Critical race, queer, and postcolonial scholar Sara Ahmed posits that White people are largely comfortable with a certain amount of strangeness, such as brown bodies that adhere to White dominance and White structures.<sup>35</sup> What White people are less comfortable with is the "stranger stranger," such as an unfamiliar critical mass of brown bodies openly challenging White supremacy in spaces of recreational engagement that are culturally coded as White and transpiring on Lands assumed to be long since settled. More specifically, for White climbers, this unfamiliarity can stir up an uneasy awareness of the existence of their own racial identities, their advantages, and the resulting impacts of these privileges on marginalized climbers.

Interestingly, a comment made by a Black male climber on the online questionnaire linked to the photo installation stated "Seeing climbers outdoors and enjoying their time is joyful."<sup>36</sup> This statement seems to point to the imagined elsewhere that the performers are in search of—where their joy is excessive, spilling over and defying those constructs that try and hold them in place. Notably, this comment excludes race, culture, and gender as descriptors. This reading could equally be interpreted as resistant, then, as it further deepens a claim to being simply "climber" by these mostly female-presenting climbers of South Asian descent—to an identity that has been territorialized by the White cis-gendered heterosexual able-bodied man. While scholars such as Donnelly<sup>37</sup> and Wigglesworth<sup>38</sup> point to the (hetero)patriarchal sociopolitical structure that orders outdoor climbing, Wigglesworth also raises the interrelatedness of differing sites of oppression when she characterizes the culture of outdoor climbing as one of normalized masculinity, Whiteness, and the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, though, focusing on a single axis of oppression, such as race or gender, is an ineffective means of advocating for social justice for a single subjectivity, as "attempts to change one system while leaving the others intact leaves in place the structure of domination made up of interlocking hierarchies."<sup>40</sup> This results in the ongoing subjugation for *all* marginalized groups. Therefore, to interrupt systems of personal oppression, one has to recognize how they are complicit in systems that oppress others. To give one relevant example, if we consider the relationship of the South Asian model minority to the Indigenous Other, manifestations of respectability politics—such as internalized racism, subscribing to White supremacy and aspirations of assimilation—serve to uphold settler-colonialism, a system that has dispossessed and continues to dispossess both groups.<sup>41</sup>

### COLONIAL RACIAL CAPITALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE "AUTHENTIC CANADIAN OUTDOORSMAN"

We now ask, how have the logics of settler colonialism served to render the authentic Canadian outdoorsman and, by extension, the Canadian climber, as

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

34 Mackey, "Settling Differences," 17–37.

35 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2000).

36 Ali, "South Asians in 'The Great Outdoors,'" 119.

37 Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young, "Rock Climbers and Rugby Players: Identity Construction and Confirmation," in *Inside Sports*,

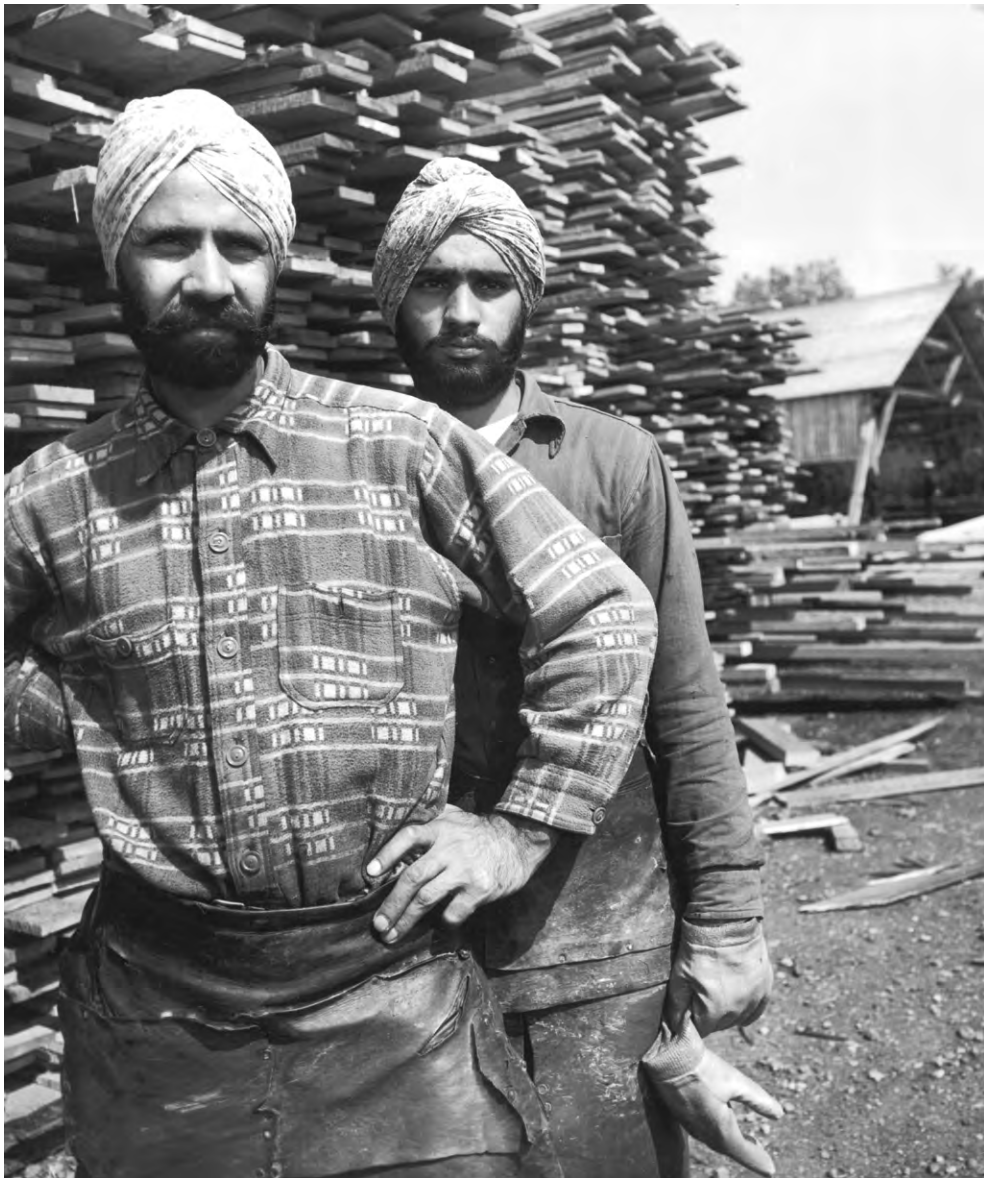
ed. Jay Coakley and Peter Donnelly (Routledge, 1999), 75–84.

38 Wigglesworth, "Naming Outdoor Rock Climbing Routes."

39 Wigglesworth, "Naming Outdoor Rock Climbing Routes," 616.

40 Mary Louise Fellow and Sherene Razack, "The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women," *The Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* 1 (1997): 335.

41 Rinaldo Walcott, "The End of Diversity."



/fig. 4/ Yousuf Karsh, Lumber Mill, Vancouver, 1953. Archival photograph. Estate of Yousuf Karsh.

White and male? What intentional and calculated steps were and are undertaken to construct and maintain this mythology? Whose identities and histories are being continuously erased and elided?

The lesser-known narratives of Sikh lumberjacks, who worked and lived on S̱kw̱x̱w̱ú7mesh territory and, one can safely assume, crossed paths with the first rock climbers of American or European descent, are an overlooked part of the history of outdoor culture in the area—albeit one of labour instead of leisure.<sup>42</sup> The coopting of the Lands of the S̱kw̱x̱w̱ú7mesh Úxwumixw into sites for settler recreation occurred around 1910, with ever-increasing territorialization in the following decades.<sup>43</sup> Around the same period (1905–1908), roughly 5,000 South Asians (predominantly male Punjabi Sikhs) arrived in British Columbia. Their labour in the railroad, mining, and lumber industries was crucial to settlement in the area.<sup>44</sup> Rather than being allied with the storied White outdoorsman (i.e., the pioneer, the frontiersmen) whose labour is a celebrated part of Canadian nation-building mythology,<sup>45</sup> the brown bodies of Sikh lumberjacks were instead associated with the anti-Romantic ideologies of the day, specifically urban industrial expansion.<sup>46</sup> This way of framing racialized labour was rooted in Romantic ideals of the natural world as separate and distinct from the human world, which led to the assumption that nature needed to be protected from human interference, especially the ravages of modern industrial capitalism.<sup>47</sup> While the ideologies of Romanticism seem to exist in opposition to the processes and doctrines of capitalism and industrialization, in fact, the Romantic precepts of rugged individualism are central to the capitalist ethos that drives industrialization. Indeed, the binary construction of nature as distinct from culture is mapped onto a number of other binary oppositions, including the opposition between outdoor leisure and labour. These decidedly Western worldviews stand in contrast to many Indigenous worldviews, as Indigenous and Canadian Studies scholar Eva Mackey writes:

[The wilderness] was not distinctly and conceptually separated from urban life, rural farmland, and human “civilisation.” It was not, as it is now, a site marked out for leisure, a space of untouched nature in which to recuperate from one’s “real” life. Aboriginal people lived and worked in that so-called emptiness.<sup>48</sup>

Cleaving the natural environment into a set of tidy binaries served the interests of White settler society. On the one hand, wealthy White urban men engaging in leisurely practices of hunting and fishing were understood to be seeking what were thought to be the therapeutic effects of the wilderness in countering the degenerative impacts of modern urban life.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the Land-based hunting and fishing ways of life of the S̱kw̱x̱w̱ú7mesh Úxwumixw were deemed “uncivilized” and harmful to conservation ideals.<sup>50</sup> The former was associated with the respectable qualities of a leisurely pastime, while the latter was associated with the degeneracy of labour in that it was a way of life that was not a choice, but a matter of survival. Notwithstanding binary constructions that cleaved work from play, labour and leisure were always profoundly entangled, whether in terms of coveted “authentic” Indigenous guides involved in White commercial outdoor tourism or Sikh lumberjacks re-making Indigenous Lands into settler spaces, recreational or otherwise.

42 Tavleen Purewal, “Holding it Together: Indigeneity, (Settler-) Post-colonialism, and M. NourbeSe Philip,” *Ariel* 51, no. 2 (2020): 95–123.

43 Kevin McLane and Andrew Boyd, *Squamish Rockclimbs: The Climbers Guide to Squamish* (High Col Press, 2018).

44 Kelly Tran, Jennifer Kaddatz, and Paul Allard, “South Asians in Canada: Unity through Diversity,” *Canadian Social Trends* no. 78 (2005): 20–25.

45 Adam J. Barker, *Making and Breaking Settler Space: Five Centuries of Colonization in North America* (UBC Press, 2021).

46 Day, *Alien Capital*; Jessup, “Landscapes of Sport, Landscapes of Exclusion.”

47 Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (UBC Press, 2005).

48 Mackey, “Settling Differences,” 57.

49 Jessup, “Landscapes of Sport, Landscapes of Exclusion.”

50 For an analysis of Banff National Park, see Courtney Wade Mason, *Spirits of the Rockies: Reasserting an Indigenous Presence in Banff National Park* (University of Toronto Press, 2014).

Yoon's work *Group of Sixty-Seven* equally evokes themes of exclusion of Asian immigrant labour, particularly Chinese labour, as Lawren Harris's *Maligne Lake* (1924) – the quintessential Canadian landscape painting featured in the work – was completed a year after the prohibitive 1923 Chinese Immigration Act was instituted. This exclusion serves to uphold the settler-colonial narrative that the body of the Asian alien is the unnatural antithesis of these aestheticized landscapes.<sup>51</sup> *An Imagined Elsewhere* borrows from Yoon's concept, by emphasizing – rather than diminishing – this White construction of Asian unnaturalness to the landscape, through the brightly coloured South Asian garments worn during the performance and featured in its subsequent photo installation. Moreover, a troubling feature of erased and manufactured histories is that these South Asian climbers – and those who witnessed their performance – likely held the perception that they were some of the first of their kind to engage with these spaces. Likely unaware of the South Asian lumberjacks who occupied and laboured on these same Indigenous territories in the late 1800s, these South Asians were consequently deprived of the opportunity to cultivate a deeper understanding of the Land and their own positionality within it, through building on this knowledge and sense of place in history.

Still today, South Asian bodies are often read as alien, despite multi-generation histories on Lands claimed by Canada.<sup>52</sup> They are certainly not seen as contributing to the overall settler development of the West Coast through their knowledge of outdoors spaces. This framing was partly formed through racist Canadian policies designed to discourage South Asian settlement, such as the denial of the first Sikh immigrants, who were mostly men, the right to own stolen Indigenous Land, to bring their wives to Canada or to marry White women.<sup>53</sup> In this way, Canada was able to reap much-needed labour for capitalist gain, while simultaneously maintaining John A. MacDonald's vision of an Aryan nation,<sup>54</sup> and help those who fit within this vision to prosper. In 1908, to circumvent British law that automatically granted South Asians Canadian citizenship as official citizens of the British Empire, the Continuous Journey Regulation was imposed.<sup>55</sup> This order stipulated that seafaring passengers who had made a stop during their journey to Canada from their country of origin were not permitted to land. This served the desires of White settlers in governance, as, at the time, direct sea routes existed from Western Europe to Canada but not between India and Canada. Soon after, the Immigration Act of 1910 effectively halted all South Asian migration for the next forty years, as it granted Canadian officials the power to deny entry to any racialized group on any basis, including "climate unsuitability."<sup>56</sup> This enabled easy exclusion of those from the Global South on the spurious claims that they were unsuited to the cold climates of Canada, despite evidence to the contrary, such as South Asians who make their life in the snowy mountainous regions of northern Nepal. This historic trace of strategic legislation paints a picture of how Canada was designed, constructed, and presented as a White (dominant) nation.

These nativist ideals for a White settler-colonial Canada live on today in vitriolic online debates around keeping outdoor rock climbing "apolitical," meaning a return to centering White cisgendered heterosexual able-bodied male imperatives and culture.<sup>57</sup> In Canadian climbing communities, this nativist nostalgia doubles as thinly veiled racism that laments a time when crags were less crowded, particularly with novice climbers – of which climbers

51 Day, *Alien Capital*.

52 Thobani, *Exalted Subjects*.

53 Enakshi Dua, "Exclusion Through Inclusion: Female Asian Migration in the Making of Canada as a White Settler Nation," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 14, no. 4 (2007): 445–466.

54 Dua, "Exclusion Through Inclusion."

55 Dua, "Exclusion Through Inclusion."

56 Mackey, "Settling Differences," 17–37.

57 Nadia Mercado, "Shut Up and Climb," *Melanin Base Camp*, Jul. 13, 2018, <https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/trip-reports/2018/7/12/shut-up-and-climb>.

of colour now appear in more highly visible numbers.<sup>58</sup> These lamentations conveniently forget that during those “good ‘ol days,” racial oppression was officially written into Canadian policy, restricting the rights and movements of South Asians, Indigenous and other people of colour, and effectively keeping those spaces less populated for White climbers, or as the Squamish Access Society has described them, “a few outcasts and oddballs searching for alternatives to the status-quo.”<sup>59</sup>

### OUTDOOR ROCK CLIMBING, LAND, AND INDIGENEITY

Sport and recreation have been, and continue to be, crucial cultural sites for historic and ongoing processes of settler fantasies and structures of invasion,<sup>60</sup> key to opening up new settler frontiers in previously unsettled territories.<sup>61</sup> The official designation in 1997 of Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw Lands surrounding the rocky monolith of Siy’ám’ Smánit (colonially named the Chief) as a provincial park was motivated by White settler recreational desires against extractive settler-colonial systems, systems that made leisure pursuits in the area possible. In the 1990s, the Squamish Rock-climbers Association – now the Squamish Access Society (SAS) – petitioned the proposed development of a gravel quarry at the base of Siy’ám’ Smánit, which had long been a popular climbing feature. As the area was thought to have little profitability in the timber it offered, it was not overly arduous for the British Columbia government to process and preserve the area as a provincial park. However, as stated on the SAS website,

Not all members of the community were pleased. Pekultn Siyam / Dale Harry (1 of the 16 Hereditary Chiefs of the Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw) commented that “it’s like somebody came to your home and drew a chalk line across your backyard and suddenly told you that the area was going to become a park,” adding that “Even the white guys agree that this piece of rock has always played an important role in our culture. It’s part of who we are.”<sup>62</sup>

These early sport and recreational endeavours laid the foundation, so to speak, for the more formalized settler structures that came later and, as others have pointed out, everyday, localized sport and recreation continue to naturalize settler presence in Indigenous spaces in a material sense as well as in symbolic and affective ways. It is exactly this naturalization that we believe Belmore was reacting to with her sound installations; in particular, the forcible removal (legal disappearance) of the Stoney Nakoda people from what is now known as Banff National Park, for the enjoyment of the People of Canada, as stated by the Rocky Mountain Park Act of 1887. Through works like *Speaking to Their Mother* and *Sound Wave*, Belmore looked to highlight the animistic beliefs of many Indigenous worldviews and our relationship with our non-human mothers and teachers.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in *An Imagined Elsewhere*, human and non-human relations are foregrounded in how one is in relation with, learns from and responds to a sentient environment.

Another part of this naturalization can be attributed to how the history and development of rock climbing and alpinism more broadly has largely been presented as a Euro-American pursuit.<sup>64</sup> This of course ignores the histories and mythologies of Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh warriors, who were known

58 Danielle Williams, “The Melanin Base Camp Guide To Outdoor Allyship,” *Melanin Base Camp*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/trip-reports/2019/7/7/mbc-guide-to-outdoor-allyship>.

59 “Who We Are: Our Story,” Squamish Access Society (SAS), accessed June 10, 2024, <https://squamishaccess.ca/our-story>.

60 Janice Forsyth et al., “Ways of Knowing: Sport, Colonialism, and Decolonization,” in *Decolonizing Sport*, ed. Janice Forsyth et al. (Fernwood Publishing, 2023), 1–20.

61 John Reid, “Canoe Races to Fishing Guides: Sport and Settler Colonialism in Mi’kma’ki,” in *Decolonizing Sport*, ed. Janice Forsyth et al. (Fernwood Publishing, 2023), 134–47; Jessup, “Landscapes of Sport, Landscapes of Exclusion”; Mason, *Spirits of the Rockies*.

62 “Who We Are: Our Story,” Squamish Access Society (SAS).

63 Blake, “Belmore’s Sound Performance.”

64 Laurendeau, Higham, and Peers, “Mountain Equipment Co-Op, ‘Diversity Work,’ and the ‘Inclusive’ Politics of Erasure.”

to have trained by scaling Siyám Smánit, and the story of Xwechtáal, who chased the two-headed serpent, Sínuhka, up its rocky face, in an area now delimited by British Columbia as Stawamus Chief Provincial Park.<sup>65</sup> A Western territorialization of the history of climbing and the body of climber also leaves unacknowledged the many South Asian mountaineers in Nepal who summited Sagarmatha (colonially named Mount Everest) and guided many White mountaineers to perform the same feats.<sup>66</sup>

### CONCLUSION

White settler fantasies of the Canadian landscape continue to shape outdoor recreation in the contemporary context, including in colonially named Stawamus Chief Provincial Park. Drawing inspiration from the work of Yoon, Belmore, and Maiya, these fantasies were confronted head-on by engaging the unceded landscapes of the Sḵw̓xwú7mesh Úxwumixw, using a performance and photo series foregrounding a group of South Asian climbers. In the recognition that Canada's outdoors, and the recreational engagements practiced on them, are not found realities, but are continuously becoming at the intersection of multiple sets of interlocking power relations, the work *An Imagined Elsewhere in So-Called Canada* exposed and disrupted the historical and ongoing exclusions and dispossessions that construct outdoor climbing as a space of Whiteness. Moreover, and somewhat more transgressively, the performance and photo series allowed us as researchers to *intervene* in the constitutive conditions of both the sport and the outdoors itself as a means of conjuring this imagined elsewhere.

This paper has also highlighted that the Canadian outdoors have never been as White as national mythologies imagine, a myth belied by the ongoing presence of Indigenous Peoples and racialized outdoor labourers on the Land. Far from the dominant national mythology that holds the Great Outdoors to be synonymous with Whiteness, the Romantic constructions of the outdoors often efface the history of labour that has always been part of the settler nation-state, through Romantic ideals that construct nature as separate from culture. These logics premised on Western philosophies deny Indigenous ontologies as the ongoing conditions of settler entitlement and belonging. These culturally mediated machinations of the Canadian landscape mythologies then worked to obscure these racial and colonial violences that underpinned such idyllic wilderness scenes.

Thinking the racial and colonial as profoundly entangled and co-evolving processes enabled a consideration and disruption of a number of other binary constructions that serve to foreclose a nuanced interrogation of race, Indigeneity, sport, and the outdoors. More specifically, settler-colonial critiques that reduce analyses to the White settler-Indigenous dyad by examining the ambivalent position of the exogenous, racialized Other—in this case, the South Asian recreationalist. However, the work is only beginning, and many more questions remain. Importantly, how might acts of embodied occupation of Land by racialized settlers be done differently and in a manner that is relationally accountable to the Land and the Sḵw̓xwú7mesh People? These lines of questioning are critical to transforming the sport of climbing and outdoor recreation more broadly.

65 C. August Elliot, "Searching For Xwechtáal: Re-Freeing A Big Wall Classic – Squamish's Infamous 'Black Dyke,'" last modified April 2, 2018, <https://www.mountainlifemedia.ca/2018/04/searching-for-xwechtaal-re-freeing-a-Big-wall-classic-squamishs-infamous-black-dyke>; and Drew Copeland, "Siyám Smánit: Stories of the Chief. The Squamish Chief," last modified September 24, 2015, <https://www.squamishchief.com/local-arts/siyam-smanit-stories-of-the-chief-3344213>.

66 *14 Peaks: Nothing Is Impossible*, directed by Torquil Jones (London, UK: Noah Media Group, 2021), Netflix.