

*Challenge
of the Yukon:*

*Visual Identity
& Subsurface
Narratives in
the Phantasmagoric
Klondike*

/Drew Lyness/

Drew Lyness is an Associate Professor in the school
of Social Sciences & Humanities at Yukon University
– dlyness@yukonu.ca

La dynamique visuelle et politique propre au Yukon reflète un ensemble de tensions entre les parcs, la nature sauvage, le patrimoine national canadien, la gouvernance autochtone et l'extraction minière. En accordant une attention particulière à la législation minière et aux politiques foncières du territoire, cet essai introduit le concept d'« identité fantasmagorique » dans le but d'explorer les façons dont les collisions entre le contrôle visuel colonial et l'autodétermination autochtone créent activement les conditions propices à la perturbation visuelle et à l'action politique. Alliant les recherches archivistiques à l'analyse des interventions artistiques contemporaines, cette discussion sur la culture visuelle au Yukon démontre comment la marchandisation des lieux façonne les réalités matérielles actuelles tout en donnant naissance à une résistance communautaire créative et à des avenir politiques collaboratifs.

In the Yukon, aesthetic tensions frame competing claims to both the land and the region's cultural expression. The epicentre of these tussles is Dawson City, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in territory, where Parks Canada manages a series of national historic sites actively promoting the Klondike town as the "Paris of the North."¹ Awash with colonial iconography, mining heritage, Gold Rush tourism, and evocations of subarctic wilderness, the built environment and landscape surrounding Dawson is rife with embellished claims to the town's 1898 heyday.² Environmental philosopher Emily Brady understands these kinds of environmental characteristics as those very specific aesthetic elements we notice in one landscape that distinguish it from other landscapes: "Aesthetic character could be said to be an emergent quality from constituent aesthetic qualities, the overall quality that gives a landscape, artwork or person a distinctive look or feel."³ The distinctive visual habits of the Klondike permeate the area and beyond, bleeding into pervasive mass-cultural representations of the Yukon as, above all else, a place for mining. The polyphonic narrative of the Klondike Gold Rush links disparate strands such as wilderness ideation, colonial nostalgia, Indigenous self-governance, extraction politics, and ultimately stewardship of the land itself.

This essay considers how urgent discourses around the politics of land use, extraction, and the identity of the territory take shape within the spaces of visual culture, architecture, and public art. In recent years, dynamic, arts-based negotiations in the Yukon have stood in contrast to the slow-moving governmental processes surrounding land, resources, and mineral legislation. A diverse but uniquely place-based visuality has emerged in the Yukon, informed by a communal desire to shuck off established aesthetics and reclaim the land in terms of place and belonging above all else. Art produced in the Yukon often asks us to contemplate that which is just beneath the surface, hiding in plain sight. One task undertaken by Yukon artists has been to excavate these buried layers, question them, and, in doing so, advance a civic dialogue in this sparsely populated territory regarding identity, as well as the potentials and limits of reconciliation. This essay seeks to address the following questions: how deeply has the territory's aesthetic character in fact been inscribed from the outside? What lies beneath this inscription? And what kinds of creative and democratic potential might come with the gradual erosion of the Yukon's commodified sense of place? Examining case studies of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art in light of the area's historical context, this paper explores an ongoing cross-cultural dialogue in the Yukon.

PARKS, "WILDERNESS," AND INDIGENOUS LAND CLAIMS

Canada's least populated northern territory boasts eight territorial parks, three national parks, and seven Parks Canada-managed national historic sites.⁴ The transnational parks' claim to Yukon mythology starts outside the territory, on the Alaskan side of the Canada-US border, where most of the 100,000 gold-rush stampedeers started their overland trek following the discovery of gold in 1896. Today, the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in Skagway



/fig. 1/ Parks Canada, “Old Buildings - New Ideas: Klondike National Historic Sites,” Parks Canada, n.d., <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/yt/klondike/gestion-management/nouvelles-idees-new-ideas>.



/fig. 2/ “Theme bridge” at the entry to the Yukon Territory at Six Flags Great America theme park in Gurnee, Illinois, ca. 2017. Photograph by Dave Gottwald, CC-BY-NC 4.0.



/fig. 3/ Dredge No. 4 National Historic Site. Photo: Parks Canada, <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/yt/klondike/culture/lhn-nhs-dredge4-dredge4>.

sees a steady stream of cruise ship passengers, making it the most visited National Park site in Alaska. Immediately across the Canadian border, where the Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site occupies a small, disconnected sliver of British Columbia that is only accessible via sightseeing train or multi-day hike, narrative claims are managed by Parks Canada. A few hours to the north is the S.S. Klondike National Historic Site, a restored sternwheeler ship resting beside the Yukon River in the territorial capital of Whitehorse—branded “The Wilderness City.” Going further north still, one finds that Parks Canada is the largest heritage owner in the Klondike region, managing over 100 buildings as part of the Dawson City Historical Complex National Historic Site, with fifteen more structures identified for future use.⁵

Paradoxically, alongside its heavy association with mining, the Yukon has also become synonymous with North American wilderness ideals. Travel Yukon’s current tourism campaign advertises the territory as being “80% wilderness” with “vast natural spaces like nowhere else on earth” for recreational adventurers to experience.⁶ Indeed there are many examples in the Yukon of an investment in the Western notion of “wilderness,” which, as critic Nathan Martin reminds us is “after all...a construct borne of European people’s inability to interact symbiotically with the world around them.”⁷ Similarly, the Yukon stands testimony to the established view that the overriding precondition of wilderness parks as spaces of nature conservation is that of colonial conquest and the forced removal, then narrative erasure, of Indigenous peoples from the land.⁸ Alongside outdoor recreation and Parks Canada’s massive narrative stake in the Klondike, however, mineral extraction remains big business in the Yukon. As of 2023, there were three major hard-rock commercial mining operations in the territory, with numerous other large-scale exploration sites now poised for future production. There were also 146 smaller placer mining operations, collectively garnering upwards of \$143 million in production revenue.⁹ The Dawson Mining District today accounts for the major share of placer mining in the region, a process by which stream beds are mined for gold. Historically, placer mining involved small scale panning, but the modern placer industry involves large machinery especially damaging to sensitive wetland ecosystems.¹⁰ The legislation regulating placer mining in the Yukon has remained largely unchanged since the 1890s.¹¹ In the Klondike region, the Yukon government manages infrastructure, tourism, and ongoing mineral extraction. The Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, a fully self-governing Yukon First Nation, are actively

1 Parks Canada, “Dawson City ‘Paris of the North,’” Klondike National Historic Sites, <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/yt/klondike/activ/dawson>.

2 A recent article by M.J. Kirchoff showed that while agencies such as Parks Canada and Travel Yukon often describe Dawson City during the Klondike Gold Rush as “the Paris of the North,” the phrase was invented in the 1950s to bolster a nascent tourism industry. See M.J. Kirchoff, “Dawson City in 1898 – Searching for the ‘Paris of the North,’” *The Northern Review*, no. 55 (March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.22584/nr55.2024.005>.

3 Emily Brady, “Aesthetic Character and Aesthetic Integrity in Environmental Conservation,” *Environmental Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2002): 78.

4 “Yukon Territorial Parks and Other Conservation Areas,” Yukon Government, accessed June 2024, <https://yukon.ca/en/yukon-territorial-parks-and-other-conservation-areas>.

5 “Old Buildings - New Ideas: Klondike National Historic Sites,” Parks Canada, n.d., <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/yt/klondike/gestion-management/nouvelles-idees-new-ideas>.

6 Travel Yukon, “Discover Yukon”, accessed June 2024, <https://www.travelyukon.com/en/discover-yukon/unique-nature>.

7 Nathan C. Martin, “Where the Wild Things Aren’t: National Parks,” *The Baffler*, no. 31 (June 2016), 51, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/wild-things-national-parks-martin>.

8 Prior to signing Final and Self-Government agreements in 2003, Kluane First Nation submitted a complaint to the Indian Claims Commission in 1996 regarding the formation of the Kluane Game

Sanctuary and the Kluane National Park Reserve in the southwest Yukon. The essence of the First Nation’s complaint is that the creation of the Parks denied the First Nation and its members access to a large portion of their traditional territory, thereby adversely affecting their livelihood. See Indian Claims Commission, Kluane First Nation: Kluane National Park and Kluane Game Sanctuary Inquiry (Ottawa, February 2007); Jonathan Bordo, “Jack Pine: Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape,” *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’Etudes Canadiennes* 27, no. 4 (1992): 98–128; Brenda J. Child, “The Absence of Indigenous Histories in Ken Burns’s *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*,” *The Public Historian* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 24–29; Theodore R. Catton, “Glacier Bay National Monument, the Tlingit, and the Artifice of Wilderness,” *The Northern Review*, no. 11 (Winter 1993), <https://thenorthernreview.ca/index.php/nr/article/view/535/574>.

9 S. Van Loon, “Yukon Placer Mining 2023 Development and Exploration Overview,” in *Yukon Exploration and Geology Overview 2023*, ed. L.H. Weston and Purple Rock, Inc. (Yukon Geological Survey, 2024): 17–27, <https://data.geology.gov.yk.ca/Reference/96029#InfoTab>

10 Kaylee Nitsza and Odette Auger, “Yukon Policy Short on Actual Protection for Wetlands,” *Watershed Sentinel*, May 10, 2023, <https://watershedsentinel.ca/article/wetlands/>.

11 Aldridge + Rosling LLP, “Current Placer Mining Regime,” November 27, 2019, <https://www.arlaw.ca/yukon-placer-regime-changes/>.

involved in both the cultural and environmental management of their territories, including decision and law-making on their settlement lands, and the co-management of resources throughout their traditional territories. The First Nation have also secured the co-management of Tombstone Territorial Park—founded as part of their Land Claims agreement in 1998.¹² Descended from Hän-speaking peoples who have lived along the Yukon River for thousands of years, part of the challenge for Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in cultural autonomy is that it has had to survive under the heavy investment in gold rush aesthetics, nostalgic art, nation-building narratives, and mass-consumer kitsch that colours the Klondike region from afar. Mishuana Goeman has termed this process “colonial spatializing,” stressing the ways in which popular cultural artifacts contribute to “nationalist discourses that ensconce a social and cultural sphere, stake a claim to people, and territorialize the physical landscape.”¹³ It is above all this past commodification of place that continues to shape present-day material realities in the Klondike as the region balances competing visions of wilderness, mining, and Indigenous self-determination.

Contemporary land claims in the Yukon stem from a landmark framework document called The Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA), instigated in 1993 following twenty years of campaigning by Yukon First Nations. Once a First Nation signs, it can then negotiate the individual terms of its specific land claims and of its self-governance. Today the Yukon is home to fourteen First Nations. Eleven are self-governing, having signed treaties within that last thirty-five years. Three have not—each for their own distinct reasons—and therefore remain under the auspices of the Indian Act, as bands legislated from Ottawa.¹⁴ The form of self-governance in the Yukon is often celebrated as a model for Indigenous self-determination in Canada, but it also garners critique, most forcefully from scholars within the Indigenous Resurgence school of political thought.¹⁵ In the Yukon, there is considerable pride around the agreements, but there is also discontent surrounding the way the UFA has been implemented.¹⁶

Land-based tensions often coalesce around mining regulation, consultation, rights, and environmental protection in First Nations territories. Settlement lands in the Yukon are broken down into Category A, which grants the First Nation rights to both the surface of the land as well as what is beneath it, and Category B, which only establishes Indigenous surface rights and gives the Crown mineral rights to the subsurface. The Yukon's longstanding “free entry” mining system allows any individual or company to stake a physical claim to mineral rights beneath the land with “de facto permission” unless the government has withdrawn an area from staking: “Anyone 18 years or older, regardless of Yukon or Canadian residency, can lay claim to minerals in Yukon,

12 “Tombstone Territorial Park,” Mapping the Way, July 29, 2022, <https://www.mappingtheway.ca/our-stories/tombstone-territorial-park>.

13 Mishuana Goeman, “(Re)Mapping Indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2008): 295–302, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068538>.

14 For the perspective from Ross River Dena Council in eastern Yukon, one of the three First Nations that have not signed the Umbrella Agreement, see Josh Barichello and Lianne Charlie, “We Have Our Footsteps Everywhere: The Ross River Dena's Fight to Protect Dena Këyeh/Kaska Country,” *Briarpatch*, January 5, 2022, <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/we-have-our-footsteps-everywhere>.

15 For the Indigenous resurgence view, see Michael Elliott, “Indigenous Resurgence: The Drive for Renewed Engagement and Reciprocity in the Turn Away from the State,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2018): 61–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423917001032>; Leanne Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016): 19–34, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud>; Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

16 For discussion of the “controversial and political” nature of self-governance in the Yukon, see Victoria Castillo, Christine Schreyer, and Tosh Southwick, “Chapter 5 - Yukon Indigenous Peoples and Governance,” in *ECHO: Ethnographic, Cultural, and Historical Overview of the Yukon's First Peoples* (Institute for Community Engaged Research Press, University of British Columbia Okanagan, 2020), https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/echoyukonsfirstpeople/?fbclid=IwAR1qbXXecNGDALmDaG_V6RUAEH0-zXgtGSwSVOHQz0vo7d-KcxhwJaonY. For discussion of how implementation has often resulted in “strained relations between the Indigenous signatories and their government partners,” see Rhiannon Klein, “Reviewing and Redefining Relationships: Intergovernmental Relations and Modern Treaty Implementation in Yukon, 1986–2016” (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2021), 64–133, <https://hdl.handle.net/10388/13636>. For community discussion surrounding the implementation of the UFA, see Victor Mitander, Peter Albert and Barry Stuart, “Umbrella Final Agreement Negotiations,” *Yukon College Perspective Series*, September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEFm1qJGolo>.

so long as the claim is located outside territorial parks, certain settlement or municipal lands...and doesn't overlap with an existing claim."¹⁷ In 2021 alone, there were 4,000 new mining claims staked in the territory.¹⁸ While new mining claims can't overlap with existing ones, established claims *can* overlap with settlement lands and with private property. In recent years, access, easement, and the required maintenance of individual claims can present real environmental challenges, and government has allowed staking to continue in traditional territories despite the failure to implement land use plans promised in the treaties. It is significant that withdrawn areas include parks and certain municipal areas, including the Dawson City Historical Complex. Regardless of agreements with territorial and federal governments therefore, these century-old mining laws heavily impact Yukon First Nations and can trump Indigenous title, especially in regions outside comprehensive land claims. As global attention once again turns to mineral extraction in the north, the Yukon's outdated mining regulations remain the focus of much legal ranking in the territory.¹⁹

PHANTASMS AND CREATIVE COLLABORATION IN THE CANADIAN NORTH

Much has been written within Northern and Circumpolar studies about the "imaginary" Canadian North.²⁰ The construction of the region in culture as a *tabula rasa* has certainly contributed to the wholesale theft of the North via popular image-making. Caroline Rosenthal, a scholar of American Studies, views "the North" as a space rich with Canadian symbolism, one that has very little to do with an actual physical place but more with an imagined one. "The real North," she writes, "is not important for the idea of North, but how this space has been semiotized, narrativized, mythologized, and how it has been used as a spatial meta-narrative for the self-conceptualization of the Canadian nation."²¹ Anthropologist Lisa Cooke has used the term "phantasm" to describe the Canadian North broadly, anchoring this argument through ethnographic work conducted with tourists in the Yukon.²² Writing in *Settler Colonial Studies* in the period leading up to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2015 findings, Cooke viewed a clear delineation between the "phantasm" narratives of nation-building that depend on the concept of "the North," and the presence of "ghosts" which "refuse to disappear or be disappeared."²³ While hauntings and ghosts might be tempting metaphors through which to understand phenomena that disrupt colonialism in the Yukon, this essay argues that such devices elide the unique social and political contexts of the sparsely populated territory in all their contentious and generative complexity. This is not a discussion about ghosts, it is a discussion about a diverse, place-based creative community that is actively working towards its own version of reconciliation that does not always mirror the southern experience. Reducing the North to phantasm/phantom forces an unhelpful "settler/

17 Julien Gignac, "Yukon's Gold Rush-Era System for Staking Mineral Claims, Explained," *The Narwhal*, July 30, 2020, <https://thenarwhal.ca/yukon-gold-rush-free-entry-mine-staking/>.

18 Julien Greene, "2021 Was a Good Year for Mining in The Yukon, Experts Say," *CBC News*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/yukon-mining-round-up-1.6340130>.

19 In 2024 the Ross River Dena Council appealed the Yukon Government and a mining company's proposed mine on their unceded territory. Jackie Hong, "Yukon Appeal Court Hears Case over Approval of Kudz Ze Kayah Mine Project," *CBC News*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/kudz-ze-kayah-kaska-nation-appeal-1.7325121>. Of three large commercial mining operations in the Yukon, one was abruptly abandoned in 2023 when the company went into receivership, leaving the territorial government responsible for substantial environmental remediation on the traditional territory of the Selkirk First Nation. In 2024 an environmental disaster forced the closure of a second large-scale Yukon mine, leaving the First

Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun facing cyanide contamination. See "Government of Yukon Provides Update on Minto Mine," Yukon Government, News, July 27, 2023, <https://yukon.ca/en/news/government-yukon-provides-update-minto-mine>; Caitrin Pilkington, "Yukon's Eagle Mine Failure Comes During 'Disastrous' Salmon Run," *CBC News*, July 18, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/yukon-eagle-mine-cyanide-leak-salmon-1.7265585>.

20 See for example: Julia Breitbart, "They Need to Be Made to Understand in Their Imaginations: An Interview with Sherrill Grace," *Zeitschrift Für Kanada-Studien* 31, no. 1 (2011): 122–30.

21 Caroline Rosenthal, "Locations of North in Canadian Literature and Culture," *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 29, no. 2 (2009): 26.

22 Lisa Cooke, "'North' in Contemporary Canadian National-Cultural Imaginaries: A Haunted Phantasm," *Settler Colonial Studies* 6, no. 3 (2016): 239, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2014.1001307>

23 Cooke, "'North' in Contemporary Canadian National-Cultural Imaginaries, 245–46.

Indigenous”²⁴ binary that many Yukoners, First Nations and settlers alike, might well reject.²⁵ It is, in fact, a shared understanding of the *phantasmagoric* identity of the territory which gives rise to cross-cultural, creative, and community potentials that constitute the political centre of this place.

The Yukon territory is dealing with deep colonial delusions, largely foisted on it from the outside, that can only be combatted, addressed, and reimagined in community. The power of the arts to secure and shape political futures is not a new phenomenon in the Klondike. A respected Yukon historian, the late David Neufeld, wrote of the longstanding pride in collaboration in the region that has seen artists and Indigenous peoples cooperating “in fashioning alternative futures.”²⁶ The pragmatism and generosity displayed by Hän people in the face of sudden and devastating colonialism is also often referenced as a central cultural value for the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in people. As Hähkë (Chief) Darren Taylor said publicly in 2023, “when newcomers came to our lands in search of gold, our people understood that tremendous change was coming. We also knew that we had to help these people survive in this landscape and teach them how to live here in a good way according to *Tr’ëbudë*: our way of life.”²⁷ This sentiment supports the idea that transcultural collaboration has, to a degree, informed life and politics in the region.

THEMATIZING THE YUKON: THE MASS-CONSUMER APPEAL OF KLONDIKE-KITSCH

A significant element of this story is that the visual identity of the Yukon territory has been manufactured from the “Outside.”²⁸ In his book *Hollywood in the Klondike*, Yukon historian Michael Gates devotes chapters to cataloguing the sheer weight of cultural purchase that the gold rush continues to wield on a global scale, consecrated as it is in literature, film, television, music, and all manner of popular art and entertainment.²⁹ To illustrate the extreme mobility of the Yukon’s environmental aesthetics, we could do little better than to look to the attractions of the “Great America” theme parks in Gurnee, Illinois and Santa Clara, California. Opened by the Marriot Corporation in 1976, the parks were divided into distinct areas, each based on a different story of historic America. These areas included “The Yukon Territory” which was “authentically landscaped to resemble the rugged Klondike region during the Gold Rush,”³⁰ and to evoke “the exciting days of exploration along America’s northern frontier.” In Illinois, the “Yukon Territory” theme park remains a popular attraction today, with dining options including the Snowshoe Saloon and Claim Jumpers takeout, as well as a Logger’s Run flume ride and the Wilderness Theatre.³¹ The totem poles were quietly removed from the entrance in 2020, but otherwise the strange phantasm of the Klondike remains close to the original 1970s vision and 2.5 million tourists visit the attraction annually. These parks put us

24 This is a major departure from mainstream academic terminology, but it is important to honour here. In stark contrast to southern academic *lingua franca*, popular terms such as “settler” are often met with resistance in the Yukon, especially from Yukon First Nations elders who have clearly stated they don’t like the term “settled” because it supports the narrative that the place was not already settled. There can also be strong opinions from elders surrounding the recent uptake of the umbrella descriptor “Indigenous,” and the preferred term in-territory tends to be “First Nations” in reference to those rights holders. Tosh Southwick, email message to author, June 13, 2024.

25 In census figures, 25% of the Yukon’s 45,000 inhabitants are “Indigenous.” The percentage of Yukon families with some First Nations or Inuvialuit heritage, it follows, is higher. Some measure of cultural familiarity amongst the broader population is likely higher still, due to various institutional, educational, and societal factors unique to the territory. “Find Out about Yukon First Nations,” Yukon Government, <https://yukon.ca/en/find-out-about-yukon-first-nations>.

26 David Neufeld, “Building Futures Together: Western and Aboriginal Countercultures and the Environment in the Yukon Territory,” in *Canadian Countercultures and the Environment*, ed. Colin M. Coates (University of Calgary Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv64h6rb>. 202.

27 Hähkë Darren Taylor, “Tr’ondëk-Klondike inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site,” *Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Government*, Facebook, September 18, 2023, <https://fb.watch/sHstJ5LHmM/>.

28 For the concept of “Outside” in common Yukon parlance, see Michael Gates, “In the Yukon Outside Has a Special Meaning,” *Yukon News*, February 1, 2013, sec. letters, <https://www.yukon-news.com/letters-opinions/n-the-yukon-outside-has-a-special-meaning-6978052>

29 Michael Gates, *Hollywood in the Klondike: Dawson City’s Great Film Find* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2022).

30 “Batman the Ride’ Big Draw at Six Flags Park in Gurnee,” *The Dispatch*, Moline, Illinois, June 28, 1992, sec. G5 Travel, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/338567604/>.

31 Six Flags Great America in Chicago, *Park Map*, n.d., <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.sixflags.com/website/2023+SFGAm+PM%26G-web.pdf>.

squarely in the realm of Jean Baudrillard's infamous concept of the "simulacra," the power of which resides in the endless repetition of images that are meant to stand in for real places, events, people, and objects.³² The significance of this theory for looking at the visual culture of the Klondike, specifically, is that the more these representations accumulate—in film, literature, art, or architecture—the more it becomes harder to differentiate between the "real" and the "represented" character of a place.

The appropriation of Canada's least populous northern territory by a US theme park might strike us as curious, but it is not entirely surprising. Indeed, as historian William Morrison noted, although the Klondike Gold Rush represents one of the few moments of Canadian history known around the world, its construction in culture is so embellished that the United States has "tended to absorb it into its own frontier experience."³³ Of more interest is the specific aesthetic experience the theme parks aimed to capture. The original concept artwork for these northern gold-rush-esque attractions, as well as their finished built environments, is that of places reduced to a muddle of what architectural critic Michael Sorkin terms bare "minimum negotiable signifiers,"³⁴ including snowy peaks, canvas wall tents, log flumes, and Edwardian-style clapboard architecture. Prominent "onion domes" in the sketched theme park plans conjure the fleeting Russian colonization of southeast Alaska, as well as some generic totem poles gesturing, perhaps unknowingly, towards Tlingit cultural forms. Whilst it may be true that the short-lived historical moment of the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush was an inherently transnational one, these plastic landscapes with all their national, cultural, geographic, and temporal befuddlement, are emblematic of a set of tensions apparent in the visual-political landscape, and the identity of the Yukon territory as one of the quintessential evocations of Canadian wilderness.

All this points towards the type of nebulous placemaking that architectural theorist Michael Sorkin understands to be a specific feature of theme parks' ability to "transcend physical sites; its aura...all-pervasive."³⁵ Sorkin argues that theme parks shape our psyches, and in turn, shape the actual built environments we inhabit. In this analysis, the theme park is deployed concretely, but also metaphorically, to demonstrate the effect that saturation-levels of imagery in popular culture, literature, film, art, ephemera, can have in the destabilizing processes of placemaking. The Yukon territory, and the Klondike especially, are certainly hostage to "ever more elaborate fabrics of simulation"³⁶ which leave the region at constant risk of being collapsed into an endless and empty projection, at odds with the evolving communities who call it home. One epiphenomenon of the outdated mining legislation, for example, is that mineral claims are now being misused, not for physical extraction purposes, but rather *narrative* extraction in the form of reality television that exploits the region's blurry status in US cultural mythology, whilst simultaneously impacting land, Indigenous rights, and wildlife in new and unsanctioned ways.³⁷ In fact, a recent boom in popular shows such as "Gold Rush" and "Yukon Gold" may even have contributed to a new stampede into Dawson.³⁸ At the focal point of this phantasmagoric projection machine, however, are the historic sites managed by Parks Canada and their indelible visual presence on the Yukon landscape.

32 Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation," trans. Sheila Glaser, *The Body in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism* (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

33 William R. Morrison, "Policing the Boom Town," *The Northern Review*, no. 6 (Winter 1990): 96, <https://thenorthernreview.ca/index.php/nr/article/view/399/392>.

34 Michael Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," *Design Quarterly*, no. 154 (Winter 1992): 216, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4091260>.

35 Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," 205–206.

36 Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," 229.

37 Aldridge + Rosling LLP, "Current Placer Mining Regime."

38 Cody Punter, "Gold Rush' Reignites Influx to Dawson City," *Toronto Star*, March 1, 2017, https://www.thestar.com/life/travel/gold-rush-reignites-influx-to-dawson-city/article_c67e9419-d297-5172-b813-a87b1530557d.html.

ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS IN PARKS CANADA'S KLONDIKE

By the 1940s, Dawson's gold rush heyday was fading from memory amidst a shrinking population and eroded economy. Historian Michael Gates notes that after World War II, Dawson's old buildings were viewed by many residents as a "blight on the shrinking community, reminders of the past, and citizens were inclined to demolish them."³⁹ Historian Richard Stuart traces Parks Canada's investment in the Klondike to a moment in the late 1950s when, enabled by a new road connection to Whitehorse, a concerted effort was made in Dawson to harness the appeal of heritage tourism in the form of gold-rush fairs and the subsequent formation of the Klondike Visitors Association.⁴⁰ Once momentum built, Parks Canada stepped in, "acquiring and stabilizing designated structures and artifacts."⁴¹ Stuart outlines the considerable journey that the Klondike region had undergone to be preserved as a site of national historical significance, and the stakes this investment presented for the town: "For Dawson, the price of survival was the loss of autonomy. Paid for and developed from the outside by the Canadian taxpayer, Dawson depended upon external decisions for its future development. The boom town was now well and truly recycled—into a tourist attraction."⁴²

Today, Parks Canada's omnipresence in Dawson centres on the Dawson Historical Complex, which it manages as a National Historic Site, complete with interpretive tours led by guides in period costumes, merchandise, and all-ages attractions embracing the gamut of gold-rush tropes. Some of the crown jewels in the Parks Canada interpretive tour portfolio are a restored paddle-wheeler riverboat named the S.S. Keno, the Historic Dredge N^o. 4, which is advertised as a "gravel-eating 8-storey monster covering two-thirds of a football field,"⁴³ and Ruby's Place, a building "specifically associated with prostitution and a very good illustration of a significant phase of local development."⁴⁴ Ancillary attractions include a geocache treasure hunt in the goldfields near the original 1896 Discovery Claim site, as well as escape rooms where visitors can help catch the "Klondike Killers" in the historic Commissioner's Residence.⁴⁵ The deployment of these devices speak to a set of ongoing contradictions that historian W.R. Morrison observed in 1990: "Much of the gold rush myth is true, of course, which is why it has taken such strong roots in popular mythology...Where the image goes wrong is in its picture of violence. Yukon gold rush history, like so much Canadian culture, has been influenced by the American model."⁴⁶ Morrison lamented a narrative that transformed the Klondike into a "shoot-em-up frontier" where hard-drinking miners came to fight and seek the company of "dance-hall girls" in raucous saloons:

Even Parks Canada has been led astray by the myth. It has spent much time and money studying the history and architecture of "Ruby's Place," a Dawson brothel. Perhaps the federal government considers a brothel the symbol of the gold rush, more so than, say of Winnipeg [...] Since every Canadian city of any size had brothels at that time, the only excuse for commemorating Dawson's must be to inject more colour and general razzmatazz into its history.⁴⁷

39 Gates, *Hollywood in the Klondike*, 201.

40 Richard Stuart, "Recycling Used Boom Towns: Dawson and Tourism," *The Northern Review*, no. 6 (Winter 1990): 108, <https://thenorthernreview.ca/index.php/nr/article/view/245/234>.

41 "Dawson Historical Complex National Historic Site of Canada," Parks Canada History, n.d., <http://parks.canadahistory.com/publications/klondike/factsheet-e-undated.pdf>.

42 Stuart, "Recycling Used Boom Towns," 128.

43 "Klondike Goldfields 'Where It All Began,'" Parks Canada, last modified September 17, 2025, <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/yt/klondike/activ/champs-auriferes-goldfields>.

44 "Ruby's Place," Parks Canada, Directory of Federal Heritage Designations, n.d., https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dffd/page_fhbros_eng.aspx?id=3203.

45 "Dawson City 'Paris of the North.'"

46 Morrison, "Policing the Boom Town," 84.

47 Morrison, "Policing the Boom Town," 84.

Morrison notes that, ironically, Parks Canada's research uncovered that Ruby's Place had merely been a boarding house during the gold rush era, only becoming a brothel decades later.⁴⁸ In much the same way that the façade of Ruby's Place fails to live up to scrutiny, the S.S. Keno riverboat, too, is really a facsimile of the gold rush era, operating somewhere around the "second phase" of representation that Baudrillard suggests in *Simulations*.⁴⁹ Stuart recounts how the boat was sent upriver from Whitehorse in 1960 by the Historic Sites and Monument Board of Canada as a gesture of goodwill. However, the last-ever paddle wheeler to make the trip up the Yukon River in fact had very little historic association with Dawson. It was chosen simply because it was the only one that would fit beneath the newly constructed bridge over the Klondike highway.⁵⁰

In reality, while there are original buildings in the Dawson Historical Complex, some of the most recognizable sites are replicas, simulations, or twice-removed façades. For instance, the Red Feather Saloon was one of the last saloons built and licensed in Dawson City in 1902, in the years following the gold rush. The saloon hasn't poured a drink since it shut in 1915 and was subsequently used as a storage shed. Located on a prominent downtown corner, however, the romance the building evokes has made it a focus of Parks Canada's interpretive program. The original building burned down, and so the Yukon Government, through an agreement with Parks Canada, built a replacement of the saloon in 1990.⁵¹ This phantasmagoric replica of a post-gold-rush drinking establishment was transferred back to the territorial government in 2024, but it remains the focal point of Parks Canada heritage tours in Dawson. Similarly, the Palace Grand Theatre, one of the most historically detailed jewels in the Klondike streetscape, is a complete 1960s replica of the original building, which was also demolished after a fire.⁵²

MAINTAINING THE FAÇADE IN PARKS CANADA'S "HISTORIC CONTROL ZONE"

Crucially, Parks Canada maintains a vested interest in the visual appearance of modern-day Dawson City. Since the 1970s, the federal agency has curated a 103-page document titled *Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson*, which provides a beautifully illustrated repository of a very specific investment in colonial aesthetics.⁵³ The document stipulates all manner of local urban design requirements, including architectural façades, streetscape materials, construction, signage, and maintenance techniques. The stated purpose of these guidelines is to aid Parks Canada in restoration and rehabilitation projects, to inform Dawson residents and developers who wish to make renovations or build new structures, and, most critically, to ensure planning boards can judge whether proposed developments conform with the "architectural and landscape architectural style common in Dawson during and immediately following the 'Gold Rush' of 1898."⁵⁴ Combined with a network of municipal heritage bylaws, the aim of these guidelines is to govern in quite painstaking detail the preferred *affective* experience of people moving through Dawson City's built environment, or, more accurately, within "the historic control zone," as it is officially termed.⁵⁵ As Emily Brady and Jonathan Prior remind us, the classical understanding of aesthetics is one based in "human experiences involving feeling/affect and imagination" as opposed to reckoning with knowledge or the concrete facts of

48 Morrison, "Policing the Boom Town," 96.

49 Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation," 6.

50 Stuart, "Recycling Used Boom Towns," 119.

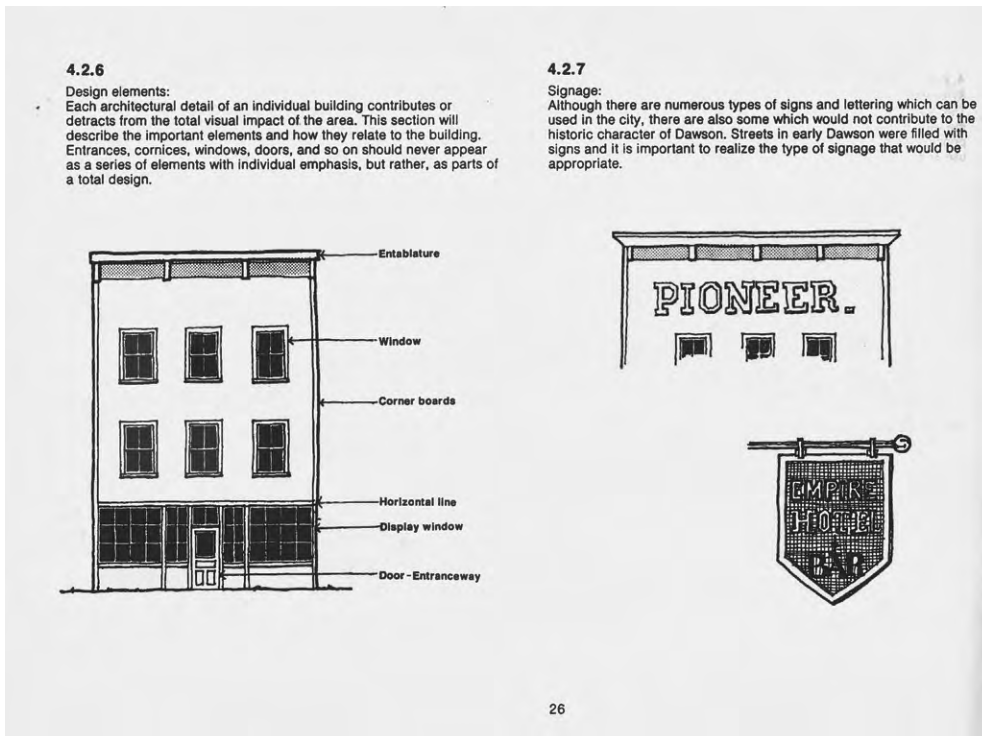
51 Talar Stockton, "Parks Canada Sees Transfer of Saloon, Heritage Building to Yukon Gov't," *Yukon News*, September 5, 2024, <https://www.yukon-news.com/news/parks-canada-sees-transfer-of-saloon-heritage-building-to-yukon-govt-7516765>.

52 "Palace Grand Theatre," Parks Canada, Directory of Federal Heritage Designations, https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_fhbro_eng.aspx?id=13968.

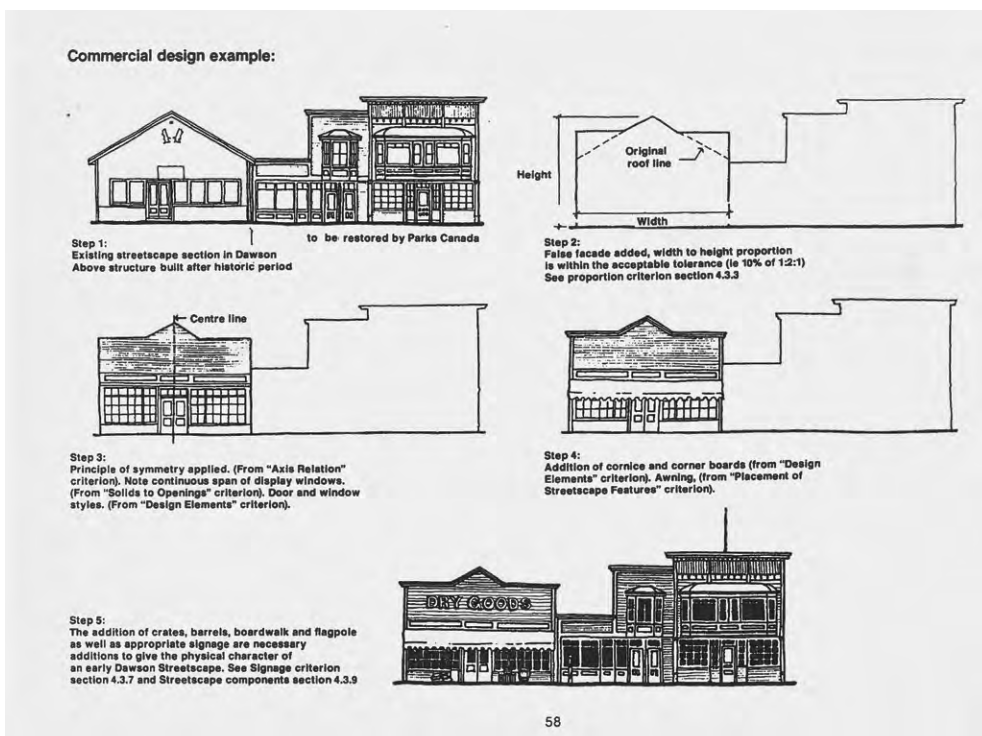
53 "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," *Parks Canada*, n.d., 7, <http://parkscanadahistory.com/publications/klondike/design-guidelines.pdf>.

54 "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," 7.

55 "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," 7.



/ fig. 4 / "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," Parks Canada, n.d., 26, <http://parkscanadahistory.com/publications/klondike/design-guidelines.pdf>.



/ fig. 5 / "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," Parks Canada, n.d., 58, <http://parkscanadahistory.com/publications/klondike/design-guidelines.pdf>.

life.⁵⁶ In the Klondike, aesthetically obfuscating certain aspects of the built environment has long involved maintaining an illusion that, beyond gold rush lore, there isn't much else to be discovered about the land, its peoples, histories, or contemporary political realities.

To protect the simulacral appearance of Dawson City, the preface of the *Design Guidelines* document outlines challenges that contemporary builders in this northern region might face while trying to meet its aesthetic edicts, including high energy costs impeding the utility of large windows, expensive construction materials preventing architectural embellishments, and zoning laws which no longer permit modern buildings to be as tightly spaced. Interestingly, in suggesting ways that developers may get around these modern construction constraints, the document also supplies the reasons they should want to. "It is clear," the guidelines state, "that preservation of the historic character of Dawson is of great interest to many persons and quite possibly of prime importance to the economic survival of the city itself."⁵⁷ That a federal entity would explicitly link such abstractions as aesthetics to the very "survival" of a northern Canadian town is fascinating. In the context of Dawson City, with its jumble of improvised, anachronistic architecture, a year-round population of around 1,500 people, a dynamic arts community, home to a self-governing First Nation, and over a century of concerted federal interest in its founding, policing, politics, land use, and legislative regimes, these guidelines contain some irony. The advice continues:

The visual discrepancy between historic practice and modern by-law provisions with respect to building spacing can often be dealt with relatively inexpensively by: Adding fencing and/or planting in the spaces required between buildings, or by...Various "Cosmetic" Treatments such as:

The empty spaces can be infilled with "false" façades, acting as a fence.

The façade of a modern building that is too wide for historic precedent can be subdivided into two or more sub-façades more compatible in size with historic originals.⁵⁸

At times, even this document struggles to parse its particular vision of Dawson's intentional design "atmosphere," from the functional reality that this remote northern settlement was constructed over time, under boom-and-bust economic conditions, with minimal urban planning, and from whatever materials its builders were able to source. Here resides a thorough inventory of Dawson's streetscapes, followed by fine-grained development criteria intended to "ensure that the modern development can be made compatible with the historic development of an area."⁵⁹ These criteria cover everything from the preferred colours of exterior entablature trim on building façades to the precise dimensions of windows and doors and the "axis of symmetry" that gives buildings a "desirable rhythm."⁶⁰

In a 2018 essay, "Extractive Dynamics: Reflections on Identity in the Yukon Territory," Dawson-born critic Zach McCann-Armitage, a longtime figure in the Yukon's art scene, noted the literal and figurative emptiness that the Yukon's tourist marketing can entail: "The whole townsite of Dawson City becomes a discoverable destination, buildings posed and bending into this expectation of what the place is *supposed* to look like."⁶¹ McCann-Armitage was

56 Emily Brady and Jonathan Prior, "Environmental Aesthetics: A Synthetic Review," *People and Nature* 2, no. 2 (June 2020): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10089>.

57 "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," 7.

58 "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," 7.

59 "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," 24.

60 "Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson," 25.

61 Zach McCann-Armitage, "Extractive Dynamics: Reflections on Identity in the Yukon Territory," *White Wall Review*, September 20, 2018, <https://whitewallreview.com/extractive-dynamics-reflections-on-identity-in-the-yukon-territory/>.

reflecting on the deep parallels between narrative extraction and resource extraction and the costs this fakery presents to local culture. Yukon scholars and artists Aubyn O'Grady and Amy Ball describe a type of "settler permission" operating through the built environment of Dawson, which urges that the land is seen as "mediated through its colonial history, to see the land as something wild and separate from culture and community, to employ site to elevate an idea, and to imagine an audience elsewhere."⁶² O'Grady and Ball note that the local branch of Parks Canada Yukon has responded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by making an effort to work with Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation to incorporate Indigenous narratives in their management of the Klondike National Historic Site. Indeed, as Claire Cambell has discussed on a national level: "Acknowledging aboriginal claims of occupation required Parks Canada to recast parks from wilderness zones to 'cultural landscapes' inhabited by sites of cultural and spiritual significance and adopt new processes of consultation and co-management."⁶³ Nevertheless, O'Grady and Ball stress that, despite these efforts, "the monument of Dawson is still functional; the promotion and upkeep of a specific notion of heritage and history and the enduring colonial narrative of the gold rush influences what can be imagined here, what art is made here."⁶⁴ These local artists understand that the net effect of the visual environment of their town constitutes a blockage with the potential to influence imaginative possibilities, politics, and to impede artistic expression in Dawson City. They also understand the role of art in clearing this blockage.

SPEAKING BACK TO THE KLONDIKE MYTH

Yukon artists present the most direct challenges to the type of rhetoric fostered by Parks Canada, and to the Klondike mythology writ large. Artist Lianne Charlie is Wolf Clan and Tagé Cho Hudän (Northern Tutchone-speaking people of the Yukon). As a political scientist and faculty member at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning in Yellowknife, Charlie's multi-textual work is at the forefront of a political and visual dialogue in the contemporary Canadian North. This dialogue is multiple and simultaneous, taking place within Indigenous communities themselves, as well as between Indigenous peoples, wider society, and the Canadian nation-state. In 2019 Charlie was one of five Yukon artists invited to contribute to an art show titled *To Talk With Others* in Dawson and Whitehorse. The exhibition was the inspiration of artist Valerie Salez who, while working in the heritage department for the Tr'ondëkHwech'in in Dawson, discovered archival minutes from a 1977 meeting between then-Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and five Yukon First Nation leaders regarding the proposed Mackenzie pipeline. Struck by the tone of the meeting and echoes with contemporary discussions between the government of Canada and First Nations regarding pipeline development, Salez asked the Yukon artists to reflect on the minutes in their contributions.⁶⁵

Lianne Charlie contributed *Bull's Eye*, a life-sized, hot pink papier-mâché moose coated with torn-up sections of the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA), the 1990 document that provides a legal framework for the Yukon territory's First Nations land claims agreements.⁶⁶ As writer Corrina Cook noted: "The UFA is, of course, a government document: it's long and boring and hard to read. What Lianne has done as an artist is to build a sculpture that embodies the text as tactile, visual, philosophic, both funny and sobering

62 Aubyn O'Grady and Amy Ball, "Boom, Bust, Steam: A Public Art Response to a Problematic Monument," in *Relate North* #9, ed. Glen Coutts and Timo Jokela (InSEA Publications, 2022), 19, <https://doi.org/10.24981/2022-RN9>.

63 Claire Elizabeth Cambell, "Pragmatism and Poetry: National Parks and the Story of Canada," *RCC Perspectives*, no. 4 (2011): 107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26240322>.

64 O'Grady and Ball, "Boom, Bust, Steam," 19.

65 Genesee Keevil, "To Talk With Others," *Galleries West*, September 8, 2019, <https://www.gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/to-talk-with-others/>.

66 Council of Yukon First Nations, Umbrella Final Agreement, accessed June 2024, <https://cyfn.ca/agreements/umbrella-final-agreement/>.



/ fig. 6 / Lianne Charlie, *Bull's Eye*, 2018. Plywood, Styrofoam, chicken wire, construction adhesive, newsprint, glue, pink paper, wallpaper paste, gold metallic wax, blown glass, Model Magic, and the Umbrella Final Agreement. Installation view at Yukon Arts Centre, Whitehorse. Photo: Michael Thessel.



/ fig. 7 / Kevin Michael Murphy, *Storefronts R11747 - R11750: UTM 17N 572993.87 7101231.18 (Storefronts)*, 2015. Digital Print, 15.5 × 21.75 in., <https://www.kevinmichaelmurphy.ca/one-square-inch-more-or-less>.

in its layers of metaphoric play.⁶⁷ Central to Charlie's art-provocateur sculpture was a trenchant critique of the "cede, release, and surrender" clause written into the UFA, which binds Yukon First Nations signing onto the agreement into surrendering large portions of their traditional lands in return for self-governing rights on a much smaller portion. Whilst the moose's hide is comprised of shredded pages from the modern-day treaty document, page fifteen, which contains the clause, is left intact. Three arrows puncture the clause, which is papered over the moose's vital "kill zones" on its left flank.

For Charlie, one pressing question regards the turn from land-based laws and stories to paper ones: "Can a modern treaty do for us what a real moose was already doing in that ancestral governance model? Can a modern treaty feed, clothe, house us in the way a moose does and did?"⁶⁸ This question is exceptionally pointed when posed in Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in territory—prior to the gold rush of 1898, the location of the Dawson town site was swampy land used by the Hän people as a base camp for hunting moose. In an interview published in *Northern Public Affairs*, Charlie explains that the colonial intention was always to get Indigenous peoples off the land: "The thing that comes up for me is what kind of skills does the next generation need to have? One of them is to understand these agreements, but we also need to have our people on the land...Like it's the paper or the land. It'd be really great if we can say they can do both."⁶⁹ Charlie's bold visual statement is, for some, radical,⁷⁰ painful, and divisive, but it is also intensely cathartic, educational, and effective. Wherever it was installed, the big pink moose in the room was hard to ignore. As well as acting as an urgent political provocation, the moose was a bold visual rebuttal to all kinds of other northern Canadian aesthetic habits and narrative truisms; ones so inexorably entrenched in colonial logics that only a large pink ungulate charging out of the proverbial boreal bush could hope to disrupt. The moose, built together over six weeks by thirty people including youth, also stands for community and cultural resurgence. *Bull's Eye* represents a three-dimensional example of the Yukon's complicated visual-political relationship to land.

Multimedia artist Kevin Michael Murphy's project *One square inch more or less* explores a lesser-known footnote in the Yukon's complicated cultural history through paper-sculpture and photography. In 2015 Murphy added layers to an absurd saga from the 1950s when a breakfast-cereal company headquartered in Chicago, Illinois gave away claims to land in the Klondike region of Canada's least populous northern territory.⁷¹ In the late 1940s Quaker Oats sponsored a hugely popular radio show, *Challenge of the Yukon*, an adventure series focused on Sergeant Frank Preston of the North-West Mounted Police and his lead sled dog, Yukon King, as they fought criminals in the "Northern wilderness" during the Klondike Gold Rush.⁷² *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon* made its television debut in 1954, with filming locations in California and Colorado standing in for the Canadian north. That same year, Quaker Oats approached advertising executive Bruce Baker looking for a new way to market their breakfast cereals.⁷³ In a stroke of ambitious genius, Baker came up with the idea of giving away individual square-inch lots of land in Sergeant Preston's much-mythologized Yukon territory inside specially

67 Corinna Cooke, "Commings of Law and Literature: Thoughts from the Yukon Territory," *PALS*, March 18, 2019, <https://teachingpals.wordpress.com/2019/03/18/commings-of-law-and-literature-thoughts-from-the-yukon-territory/>.

68 Jacob Boon, "Hot Pink Politics," *Up Here/North of Ordinary*, November 2019, <https://www.uphere.ca/articles/hot-pink-politics>.

69 Jessica Simpson, "Lianne Marie Leda Charlie: Hot Pink Bull Moose, Modern Treaties, and Decolonization," *Northern Public Affairs* 6, special issue 2 (December 2019): 11-14, https://modern-treaties.ca/sites/default/files/complete_8.5x11_rs_0.pdf

70 Leanne Simpson, "I Am Not Afraid to Be Radical: Don't Be Fooled by the Slight Shifts in Colonialism's Hold," *Indians*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.indians.com/News/2018/07/17/leanne-betasamosake-simpson-i-am-not-afr.asp>.

71 Kevin Michael Murphy, "One square inch more or less," 2015, <https://www.kevinmichaelmurphy.ca/one-square-inch-more-or-less>.

72 Dick Osgood, *Wyxie Wonderland: An Unauthorized 50-Year Diary of WXYZ Detroit* (Bowling Green University Press, 1981).

73 Bert Bush, "Klondike Big Inch Land Co," *The Wanderling*, n.d. https://the-wanderling.com/big_inch.html.

branded cereal boxes. The “Klondike Big Inch Land Promotion” was born and Baker chartered a plane to Whitehorse, where he met an attorney who advised that the idea was legal. The advertising executive was driven north to Dawson City, where a Mountie arranged for the company to purchase 19.11 acres of government land seven miles upriver from town for the price of \$1,000, *excluding* mineral rights. Over the next decade, 21,000,000 individual inch-sized land deeds were claimed by consumers all over North America, each with their own romantic vision of the Gold Rush.⁷⁴ Quaker Oats never actually registered the claims however, and in 1965 the land was repossessed by the Government of Canada because the company had failed to pay \$37.20 in property taxes. Today the former Klondike Big Inch lots are adjacent to Dawson’s golf course and tourists still wander into Yukon Government offices clutching gold-embossed paper claims and inquiring about their land: one man purchased nearly 11,000 certificates equating to seventy-five feet of land, which he wanted to consolidate into his own scenic property; a child mailed four toothpicks and some twine and asked to build a fence around his land; another man offered to donate three square inches to build “the worlds smallest national park” on the banks of the Yukon River.⁷⁵

In 2015, as part of Dawson’s Riverside Arts Festival, Kevin Murphy constructed tiny architectural models of Parks Canada’s simulacral Gold Rush-era infrastructure out of the paper claims themselves, gathered online over a year. The artist then photographed the sculptures on their corresponding one-inch land parcels, which were located using GPS. The photographs were displayed at the entrance to the ODD gallery, housed at the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture.⁷⁶ For Murphy, the project constituted “a complementary paradox: the imagined space of the deed finally made real by its location and documentation, and the real space of the land made imaginary—transformed into model, picture, and landscape.”⁷⁷ Artistically, the attraction of the “Big Inch Land Promotion” lay in the trickery and fraudulence at play, as well as the way it neatly captures the heightened cultural capital that land can become imbued with due to quite arbitrary symbolic associations. The artist notes that, although “the land was real land, it was never truly intended to exist anywhere except as an idea in the consumer’s mind. This confusion, and the tension between the various parties’ expectations, nicely opens up the complicated relationship between land and landscape—between a physical place and the accumulated human and social lenses through which we view it.”⁷⁸

When challenged by consumers who were unhappy that their claims to the Yukon territory were fake, the Quaker Oats legal department wrote back that “the real value of the deeds was based on the romantic appeal of being a property owner in the Great Yukon Territory rather than on any intrinsic value of a one-inch square of property.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, as if the “Big Inch Land Promotion” metaphor for mass-consumer transnational land entitlement wasn’t powerful enough, in an effort to appease US customers angry that they couldn’t cash in their fraudulent claims, Quaker Oats then came up with the “Prospectors Pouch” promotion, by which holders of a deed could apply to have one ounce of Klondike dirt mailed to them in a baggie for twenty-five cents. This sand was dredged from the bed of the Klondike River, packed into tiny parcels, and then driven overland to Anchorage to avoid

74 Bush, “Klondike Big Inch Land Co.”

75 “Quaker Oats Prize Creates Yukon Land Rush in 1955,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, January 29, 2012, <https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/entertainment/local/2012/01/29/local-history-quaker-oats-prize/10606296007/>.

76 Dan Davidson, “Revisiting the Klondike Big Inch,” *WhatsUpYukon*, September 3, 2015, <https://www.whatsupyukon.com/yukon/communities/revisiting-the-klondike-big-inch/>.

77 Murphy, “One square inch more or less.”

78 Murphy, “One square inch more or less.”

79 Bob Greene, “Give Them an Inch and They’ll Buy Oats,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1987, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/1987/07/07/give-them-an-inch-and-theyll-buy-oats/>.

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The land you'll own is in the famous Klondike Gold Rush Country of the Yukon in northwestern Canada. Here during the Gold Rush men fought the savage climate to wrest fortunes from the bleak hills and freezing rivers. Temperatures on your land go down to 70 and 80 degrees below zero . . . your land gets colder than it ever gets even at the North Pole. If you were on your property in temperatures like this it would be dangerous to take deep breath!



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Nothing is stranger . . . or stronger . . . than the lust men have for gold. In the Gold Rush men fought the wildest country on earth and the most savage of climates to get to the Klondike where your land is. During the winter the only way to the gold fields was by "mushing" for weeks after week. The more fortunes were made by dog teams pulling sleds. No one knows how many brave men died along the frozen Yukon River that runs past your land.

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Stonemighty prospector made precious gold nuggets in remote places like this. Today, after you've got your deed to your Yukon property, look at the package it came in. You'll find how easy it is to get one of these pouches. And imagine this! Inside the pouch you'll get actual land taken from the area of your property and shipped from the Yukon. You'll be able to see the prospector and show your stonemight your land looks like.

B.B.K.M. CO. Sps. Prospector and "Yukon King"

fig. 8 / Newspaper advertisement for The Klondike Big Inch Land Promotion, *The Sunday Press* (Binghamton, New York), April 24, 1955. Photo: Murray Lundberg, https://explorenorth.com/articles/klondike_big_inch-1955.html.

Get PROSPECTOR'S POUCH with 1 oz. of Klondike Land
(TAKEN FROM THE AREA OF YOUR PROPERTY)

ONLY 25c and Quaker Puffed Wheat or Rice Baxtop or Pack-O-Ten "Seal"
(See order blank on other side)

Shipped from the Yukon!

- Prospector's Pouch
- Contains approximately 1 oz. of land taken from your property area
- Leather Drawstrings
- 4 inches high

Land taken from your property area comes in an attractive prospector's pouch . . . an actual replica of the "pouchbook" the early stonemights used to tote their gold and valuables. You'll use your pouch to carry coins, knife, watch, keys, and school supplies . . . or the 101 things you want to protect on hikes and camping trips. You get the valuable pouch plus actual land from your property area for only 25c with this order blank and 1 boxtop from Quaker Puffed Wheat or Rice, or a Pack-O-Ten Guarantee Seal!

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(Allow several weeks for shipment from Yukon)

Mail to: LAND, BOX Q, Chicago 77, Illinois

Please send me my Prospector's Pouch with land from the area of my Klondike property. I enclose 25c in cash with this order blank and a Quaker Puffed Wheat or Rice baxtop or a Guarantee Seal from Quaker Pack-O-Ten. (No stamps please.)

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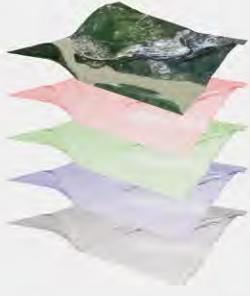
fig. 9 / "Prospectors Pouch," The Klondike Big Inch Land Company, Quaker Oats cereal promotion, 1955. Photo: Murray Lundberg, https://explorenorth.com/articles/klondike_big_inch-1955.html.

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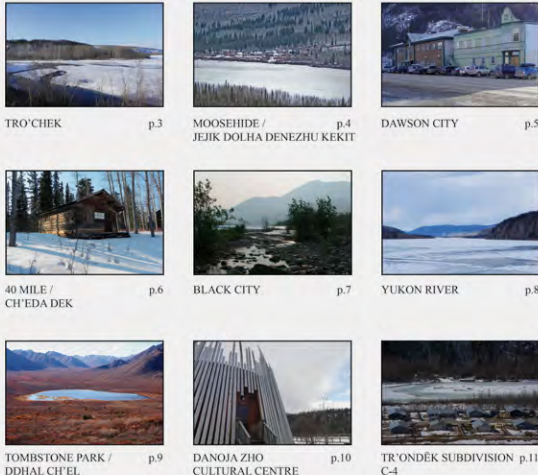
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For the 7th edition of the OVER THE WIRE series, the Yukon School of Visual Arts students collaborated with *The Center for Land Use Interpretation*. Under a guided project by *The Center*, the students specifically looked at the Klondike Region with a focus on Dawson City—home of the Yukon School of Visual Arts (SOVA). In order to carry out the project, SOVA students worked in interpretive teams which explored four overlapping layers of land use in the region by separating them into stratified layers.

First Nations + Mining + Historical Sites + Tourism

Given the task to investigate these four issues and their accompanying geo-physical sites with a neutral voice, the goal was to provide a full spectrum of perspectives on the selected topics to better enter the complicated and persistent conversations between typically polarised viewpoints. Avoiding a direct association between individual and artwork, OTW #07 attempts to synergise focused but fragmented stories of places into a patchwork of collaboration.

INTERPRETIVE LAYER:
FIRST NATIONS



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/ fig. 10 / Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City: Mining the Interpretative Realm of the Klondike*, Over the Wire series, no. 07 (Dawson City: Yukon School of Visual Arts, 2011), 1–2, <https://www.stankieveh.net/projects/over-the-wire/07/>.

Canadian postal complications. Senator Van Roggen, who helped arrange the scheme, remembered that the Alaskan postmark didn't seem to bother consumers eager for their Yukon dirt: "Americans all think that the Klondike is in Alaska, anyway."⁸⁰ Richly symbolic at every turn, here is a colonial epiphenomenon whereby a multinational company was free to actively extract, pack, and ship away the very land that gives life-energy to Yukon Indigenous cultures. That it was a food company and not a mining one only demonstrates further the deeply embedded logics of extraction under which the Canadian North labours.

Buried deep in the substrate of this metaphorical land grab by a breakfast cereal company is a poignant resonance with critiques of the way Indigenous self-governance agreements in the territory have been implemented. Even before the Klondike Big Inch lots were repossessed by the Canadian Government, these tiny, baseless land-claims were safeguarded in a mire of legal jargon underwriting the Quaker Oats marketing ploy: "The deeds excluded mineral rights (which had been reserved in the original grant from the Crown) and provided for a perpetual easement over each square-inch lot for the benefit of surrounding lot owners."⁸¹ In miniature terms then, anybody could effectively access the tiny lots in order to explore their subsurface value. There are subtle reverberations here with the contentious politics surrounding "free entry" claims to mineral rights in the Yukon as well as the arrangement of settlement land, Aboriginal title, and the process by which government consults First Nations regarding mining exploration – as observed in artist Lianne Charlie's critique of the Umbrella Final Agreement's "cede, release, and surrender" stipulations. As a Canadian heritage monument, Dawson's municipal laws ban outright the staking of new mining claims within the city limits, even though rumours abound that the town is sitting on one of the largest gold deposits in the area. When an exploration company pitched the idea of moving the entire town of Dawson City south of its current location so that the ground beneath could be mined, it received a hard refusal.⁸² Conversely, since signing their 1998 final agreement, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in have had to fight numerous legal battles to prevent mining in their traditional territory. Notable examples include: the battle to ban mining in Tombstone Park in the face of pre-existing claims;⁸³ a 2016 attempt by miners to demolish a Tr'ondëk neighbourhood, proposing the eviction of three dozen families;⁸⁴ and the eventual landmark environmental decision by the Supreme Court of Canada in 2017 to protect a 68,000-square-kilometre swath of sub-Arctic ecosystem in the Peel Watershed from mining, following a hard-fought five-year legal battle between the Yukon Government and three First Nations.⁸⁵ In 2025, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in remain frustrated by the Yukon Government's failure to approve a land-use plan which would go some way to ameliorating environmental degradation in its traditional territories.⁸⁶

INTERPRETING THE KLONDIKE AT DAWSON'S SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

The built environment of the Klondike has drawn repeated and sustained artistic intervention. One of the most comprehensive interventions came in

80 "Quaker Oats Strikes Gold in the Klondike," *Whitehorse Star*, August 18, 2000, 217, <https://yukoninfo.com/the-klondike-big-inch/>.

81 Bert Bush, "Klondike Big Inch Land Co."

82 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City: Mining the Interpretative Realm of the Klondike*, Over the Wire series, no. 07 (Dawson City: Yukon School of Visual Arts, 2011), 19, <https://www.stankieveh.net/projects/over-the-wire/07/>.

83 "First Nation Loses Final Court Battle Over Land Rights," *Yukon News*, September 22, 2007, <https://www.yukon-news.com/news/first-nation-loses-final-court-battle-over-land-rights-6968581>.

84 "Yukon Neighbourhood at Stake as Miners Mull New Project Near Dawson City," *Canadian Press*, September 9, 2016, <https://toronto>

citynews.ca/2016/09/09/yukon-neighbourhood-at-stake-as-miners-mull-new-project-near-dawson-city/.

85 James Wilt, "What Does The Peel Watershed Ruling Mean for the Yukon – and Canada?," *The Narwhal*, December 1, 2017, <https://thenarwhal.ca/what-does-today-s-peel-watershed-ruling-mean-yukon-and-canada/>.

86 Sara Connors, "Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation Says Yukon Dragging its Feet Approving Land Use Plan," *aptn news*, August 22, 2024, <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/trondek-hwechin-first-nation-says-yukon-dragging-its-feet-approving-land-use-plan/>.

2011 when students from the Yukon School of Visual Arts (SOVA) proposed a project for an edition of their *Over the Wire* magazine called “Mining the Interpretive Realm of the Klondike.” The students collaborated with the Los Angeles-based Center for Land Use Interpretation to catalogue and interpret the built environment on their doorstep in Dawson City, which they conceptualized as “four overlapping layers of land use:” First Nations, Mining, Historical Sites, and Tourism.⁸⁷ They were then tasked with investigating these claims and their accompanying geo-physical sites “with a neutral voice.”⁸⁸ Despite the intention to maintain an objective tone, the resulting catalogue delivers a sassy, smart, and very insightful look at the Klondike’s visual culture machine in the early 2000s. Of course, the students’ desire to interpret the region already stepped on Parks Canada’s toes, which had staked its own “interpretive” claim. The students were clearly aware of this, commenting dryly on Parks Canada guides at various moments: “When summer comes to Dawson, tourists can get a better understanding of the S.S. Keno by Parks Canada employees that are dressed in Klondike Gold Rush era attire.”⁸⁹ The portfolio also takes great pleasure in pointing out the baselessness of many of Dawson’s tourist attractions, such as the riverboat, which it stresses was “declared a historic site in 1962” by Parks Canada: “When the S.S. Keno was built in 1922 it was not a part of Dawson nor was it used for tourism in any way. Today however, the Keno is seen by tourists in Dawson as a symbol of the Gold Rush despite the fact that the use of sternwheelers came afterwards with industrial mining.”⁹⁰ Politically, the SOVA students also took the chance to comment on the issues of the day:

Tourism provides the drive to maintain Ruby’s Place for its Edwardian design of the turn of the century lodging house and of course for all the stories behind the façade. The irony resides in the maintenance of an empty historic lodging house which stands in direct contrast to Dawson City’s current housing crisis caused by a second Gold Rush boom.⁹¹

Likewise, the disparity between the aesthetically pleasing historical bank and the rather functional contemporary one did not go without editorial comment: “Although the worn down bank by the Yukon River is the building that the tourists will photograph, the current bank is where tourists currently need to stop to withdraw cash from the ATM and keep the tourism industry thriving in Dawson City.”⁹² Finally, in their playfully “neutral” catalogue of Klondike heritage, the artists took aim at the crown jewel of Parks sites in the area, the historic Gold Dredge #4. The magazine points out that the dredge was built in 1912 but sank to the bottom of the river in 1960, salvaged in 1967 for the sole purpose of tourism. *Over the Wire* then describes the dredge as being of “immeasurable importance as a tourist site in Dawson, symbolic of some of the forces that had a profound impact on the region throughout the last decade.”⁹³ As the SOVA students astutely observe, this piece of extraction machinery is primarily symbolic of Yukon tourism or heritage, but it also very literally *shaped* the Dawson City region where the after-effects of mining in the form of huge tailing piles are intractable urban features—so much so that the municipality has attempted to have the cylindrical deposits of mining waste protected as

87 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 1.

88 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 1.

89 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 36.

90 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 36.

91 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 33.

92 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 35.

93 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 39.

SPACE KWÁDÁY DÁN'S YAT'ÁY DREDGE IS BASED OFF OF DREDGE #4 LOCATED IN DAWSON CITY, YT. DREDGES ARE HUGE EXCAVATION MACHINES THAT SCRAPE THE BOTTOM OF CREEKS AND RIVER BEDS, LOOKING FOR VALUABLE MINERALS - LIKE GOLD.



THE THIRD DW ISSUE INTRODUCES NEW WARRIORS, THE DAKHKÁ KHWAAN & LU'ÁN MÁN WARRIORS. THIS WAS INSPIRED BY THE 1973 DOCUMENT "TOGETHER TODAY FOR OUR CHILDREN TOMORROW" THAT YUKON FIRST NATION LEADERS PRESENTED TO CANADA'S PARLIAMENT IN OTTAWA. CHAMPAGNE AND AISHIHIK'S ELIJAH SMITH, HARRY ALLEN AND DAVE JOE WERE LEADERS IN THE YUKON-WIDE LAND CLAIMS NEGOTIATION PROCESS AND ALSO HELPED CREATE THE UMBRELLA FINAL AGREEMENT FOR THE ENTIRE TERRITORY. THE DOCUMENT FINALIZED THE NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YUKON FIRST NATION AND THE GOVERNMENTS OF CANADA AND THE YUKON.



CHIEF RAY JACKSON OF CHAMPAGNE & AISHIHIK SIGNING THE DOCUMENT



CHIEF CHARLIE ABEL SIGNING BEHALF OF OLD CROWN FIRST NATION

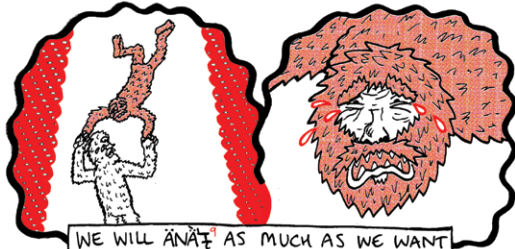


CHIEF SAM JOHNSTON OF TESLIN FIRST NATION SIGNING THE DOCUMENT

TOGETHER, WE WILL ASSIMILATE AND COLONIZE YOUR HOME THEN TO ÁTS'ŪŪŪ OUR MBÁ DÁN!



49. STEAL 49. ARMY 48. STEAL/PANTRY 49. HE(SHE) MAKES



WE WILL ÁNÁŪŪ AS MUCH AS WE WANT

/fig. 11/ Cole Pauls, *Dakwákáda Warriors* (Conundrum Press, 2019), n.p. 112 pages, 6.5 x 10 in., duotone with full-colour insert.

material heritage.⁹⁴ There was one more droll mention of the official Parks Canada interpreters, too:

Today, the tours of Dredge No. 4 are guided by none other than the charismatic Parks Canada Interpreters, who play an important role in enlightening the visitors on the history, operation, functionality and productivity of the Dredge. The tour is made complete with gold spray-painted rocks that can be found glittering in some of the machinery throughout the Dredge, for dramatic effect.⁹⁵

Fake gold nuggets and fabricated drama are fitting symbols through which to deliver this scathing critique of what these artists describe as, their “active town within a historic site.”⁹⁶

A notable alum of Dawson City’s creative community is Cole Pauls, a young Champagne and Aishihik Citizen, as well as a Tahltan comic artist, illustrator, and printmaker from Haines Junction, Yukon. Pauls studied illustration at SOVA as well as at Emily Carr University in Vancouver. In collaboration with elders and language keepers, Pauls developed a series of graphic novels that make the preservation of local Athapaskan languages a priority.⁹⁷ Often working in Northwest Coast formline style, Pauls creates illustrations that combine traditional aesthetics with skate-punk culture. Pauls regards his work as “Indigenous Futurism,” which he describes as “seeing yourself in the future and having comfort knowing your culture and people haven’t died off.”⁹⁸ Perhaps because these comics are intensely place-based – some inspired by Yukon First Nations stories, some autobiographical, others chronicling the love for pizza in the punk scene – they have strong traction with local youth. Pauls describes his overarching project as follows:

By incorporating traditional language in my comics I’m trying to engage the reader in Yukon traditions in an accessible way that anyone can understand, even if they’re not a Yukoner or Indigenous. It’s really important to me to create an authentic representation of Yukon First Nations in media and fight back the tropes and racist stereotypes past comics/media have enforced.⁹⁹

Pauls’ *Dakwākāda Warriors* was published in 2020 and won the Indigenous Voices Awards for Best Work in an Indigenous Language. Written partly in English and partly in Southern Tutchone,¹⁰⁰ the young-adult graphic novel delivers a futuristic sci-fi allegory of colonialism in the Yukon. In the work, protagonists and Indigenous language protectors, Ts’urk’i and Ägay, battle their rivals, Cyber Nāa’i and Space Kwädāy Dän, who threaten Nän (the Earth).¹⁰¹ The work is footnoted so that Southern Tutchone terms and local place names are explained, making these lovingly curated texts multidimensional and collaborative works of living language revival. Throughout his comics, Pauls provides commentary on the politics of “passing” as white and his experiences as an Indigenous student at Emily Carr. He also introduces significant places and people and explains regional cultural forms such as the Arctic and Dene games. Foundational Yukon political documents such as the Umbrella Final

94 Tristin Hopper, “Dawson City Wants to Designate Worm-like Piles of Mine Tailings as Protected Historical Site,” *National Post*, March 7, 2017, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/dawson-city-wants-to-designate-worm-like-piles-of-mine-tailings-as-protected-historical-site>.

95 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 39.

96 Charles Stankieveh et al., *The Center for Land Use Interpretation - Dawson City*, 23.

97 Cole Pauls, “Biography,” Tundra Wizard, n.d., <https://tundrawizard.com/about/>.

98 Alex Dueben, “Q&A: Cole Pauls” *Smash Pages*, July 23, 2020, <https://smashpages.net/2020/07/23/smash-pages-qa-cole-pauls/#:~:text=I%20would%20say%20so.,history%20has%20not%20stopped%20us>.

99 Cole Pauls, “Artist Statement,” Yukon Prize 2023, <https://yukonprize.ca/cole-pauls/>.

100 Southern Tutchone is one of seven Athapaskan languages in the Yukon and is spoken in the southwestern part of the territory. Yukon Native Language Centre, <https://ynlc.ca/about-the-southern-tutchone-language/>.

101 Cole Pauls, *Dakwākāda Warriors* (Conundrum Press, 2019).

Agreement are reflected upon, as well as the territory's enduring obsession with colonial mythologies. The Space Kwädäy Dän invaders, for example, roam through space and time, assimilating Indigenous groups in a sci-fi spacecraft closely modelled on none other than Park Canada's Dredge #4 in Dawson City. The crown jewel of Klondike heritage and the greatest metaphor for extraction, land destruction, mass tourism, and colonial processes, is here repurposed, reimagined, and redeployed as a tool of Indigenous language revival.

CONCLUSION

The next chapter in Yukon visual culture is still being written following the designation, in late 2023, of Tr'ondëk-Klondike as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The successful application suggested that the nomination should place Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's perspective at the centre of the gold rush narrative. This shift has resulted in a designated wider heritage site which stands as a unique example of rapid colonialism and the lasting impact on an Indigenous population forced to respond and adapt.¹⁰² UNESCO states: "There is no other place in the world that tells the story as completely and has the physical and tangible evidence of an Indigenous Peoples' experiences and responses to the expansion and consolidation of colonialism. And most significantly, who continue to inhabit their homeland and practice their traditions and culture."¹⁰³ This Indigenous-led bid to have the region inscribed with UNESCO status is symbolic, but discursively it is also meaningful because it establishes a renewed lens through which the region can be perceived. It also owes some of its success to local artistic vision and a diverse creative community, which has carved space for a fresh narrative of the Klondike. Here begins the story of the region long before the gold rush, treating the period from 1874 to 1907 as the massive disruption it was, but emphasizing the ongoing and continued Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in stewardship of the land despite the devastation of colonialism. Writer Emily Witherow accurately observed that this approach "de-centers the gold rush as the Yukon's epitomizing event and encourages outsiders to reimagine the North not as a barren, empty, and isolated mining frontier, but as a homeland."¹⁰⁴ Subsequently, both Parks Canada and the City of Dawson have held public consultations regarding local heritage and the reviews of management plans and bylaws are ongoing.¹⁰⁵

Aesthetic tensions continue to underpin the political life of the Yukon territory. Artistic interventions seek to reframe the identity of the region as it explores (and criticizes) its own unique forms of governance amidst rapidly changing demographics and economic realities. At present, a longstanding, heavy-handed investment in the visuality of extraction and colonial-era nostalgia is colliding with truth, reconciliation, self-determination, and self-governance in this nascent and delicate era of pluralistic civic cooperation. Going forward, reconciliation efforts in the territory must involve moving far beyond the plasticized, globalized, US-centric gaze that the region has long been subjected to from Outside. Instead, Yukoners together might work to emphasize the land itself in the region's visual expression, as well as engaging in an ongoing civic appraisal regarding which types of heritage and visuality are most important and the kinds of public forums in which these aesthetics can best be negotiated.

102 Cheryl Kawaja, "Tr'ondëk-Klondike Named Yukon's Newest UNESCO Heritage Site," *CBC News*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/trondek-hwechin-klondike-unesco-site-1.6971705>.

103 Tr'ondëk-Klondike Nomination, *UNESCO World Heritage Convention*, 2023, <http://tkwhstatus.ca/the-nomination-2/>.

104 Emily Witherow, "Storying Tr'ondëk-Klondike: Disrupting Settler Colonial Narratives Through UNESCO Designation," *Network in Canadian History & Environment*, November 22, 2023, <https://niche-canada.org/2023/11/22/storying-trondek-klondike-disrupting-settler-colonial-narratives-through-unesco-designation/>.

105 City of Dawson, "Heritage Management Plan and Heritage Bylaw Comprehensive Review," 2025, <https://www.cityofdawson.ca/p/hmp-review>.