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Digital Repositories, Settler Colonialism, and Jordan Abel's Un/inhabited

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Politics of Memory: Digital Repositories, Settler Colonialism, and Jordan Abel's *Un/inhabited*

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> Everyone is free to do their own ebooks their own way.
> *Michael S. Hart*

> Our lives are incarnations of the stories we tell, the stories
> told about us, and the stories we inherit.
> *Daniel Heath Justice*

THE VIOLENT STANDOFF between white supremacists and anti-racist counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 12 August 2017, galvanized a series of debates regarding the removal of Confederate symbols in the United States of America.[1] Ten days later, groups in Canada, Colonialism No More and the Saskatchewan Coalition Against Racism, organized a rally and began circulating a petition for the removal of a statue of Canada's First Prime Minister John A. Mcdonald in Victoria Park in Regina, Saskatchewan. The groups called for its removal on account of Macdonald's role in the colonization of Indigenous lands and his involve-

1 On Saturday, 12 August 2017, white supremacists, ultra-nationalists, and neo-Nazis descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia for a rally they called "Unite the Right." The rally purported to be a protest against the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Lee, a slave owner who commanded the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia during the American Civil War—a

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ment with Canada's egregious residential school system. This petition was quickly followed by support from Vice-Chief of the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations Heather Bear, who similarly called for the removal of Macdonald's name from Ontario public schools that honour his legacy.[2] As in the United States, the discourse around the removal of these names and monuments has been divisive. The violent conflict in Charlottesville highlights a breaking point for a country currently plagued by a popular resurgence of white supremacist vitriol; likewise, in Canada, the divisive discussions over monuments honouring Canada's controversial figures is more than a boiling point for revived conversations around the Canadian nation-state and its ongoing settler colonial legacy. As evidenced by these events, the politics of memory proves to be an inherently complex topic—emotionally charged, conceptually complex, materially dispersed, individual, and collective.

The poetry of Nisga'a writer and scholar Jordan Abel—whose work is composed of digital methods of visualization, machine reading, and algorithmic allocation—is especially relevant to current and ongoing discussions related to the politics of memory. Abel creatively employs these digital tools and methods to produce poetry that reminds us that racist and colonial legacies are not just embedded in civic monuments. White supremacist and settler colonial thinking are also deeply embedded in popular Western literature. In this way, material and digital textual repositories are comparable to the public monument—endowed with a

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war fought over rights to slavery and the self-governed state. The slogans and chants used by the protestors—such as "Blood and Soil," a key phrase used by the Nazi party during World War II—suggest that the rally exceeded the aim of protesting the removal of a national symbol. Instead, a white-supremacist ideology emerged. On that Saturday, the white nationalists were met by anti-racist counter-protesters, including students, activists, clergymen, academics, anarchists, and anti-fascists. The protest turned violent and, at approximately 1:45 p.m., James Alex Fields Jr., who attended in support of the rally, drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors before hitting another car. Tragically, Fields killed thirty-two-year-old counter-protestor and paralegal Heather Heyer. "I've never seen that kind of hatred in its raw form, and I've been alive for a long time," said Cornell West, addressing his classroom at Dartmouth University. The violence and tragedy of Charlottesville motivated debates over the removal of Confederate symbols in the United States—approximately 1,503 according to the Southern Poverty Law Center—which includes school names, highways, statues, monuments, and county and city names.

2 In Ontario, there are numerous public schools named after the former prime minister, including a Sir John A. Macdonald Public School in Markham and in Pickering and the Sir John A. Macdonald Collegiate Institute in Scarborough.

politic that is often overlooked or defended in the name of free speech or a national identity that hardly represents a whole. The issue of these uncontested spaces is especially complicated when dealing with non-state operated online repositories like Project Gutenberg, a site that Abel datamined for his source texts that were manipulated for his book *Un/inhabited* (2014). Project Gutenberg, like other online repositories, is led by utopian principles of acceptance: "Everyone is welcome here at Project Gutenberg," writes founder Michael S. Hart in Project Gutenberg's "Mission Statement." That being said, some content within these textual repositories—much like public monuments dedicated to John A. Macdonald—harbour painful and complex memories of systemic racism and colonial violence. How then do we negotiate the relationship between digital access and textual preservation in online repositories and the violent racist ideologies these texts uphold? Is an online, public repository a truly democratic and utopian space if some persons feel like they cannot belong or participate?

While it may seem that public monuments have greater sanctioned political power to inform a nation's identity than online repositories, Abel's poetry challenges this premise. This article examines Abel's digital poetry as a form of digital activism that intervenes into the problematic relationship between online textual repositories, the politics of memory, and settler colonialism. Abel's poetry seeks a way out of this entanglement amid a world that promises further and deeper integration of the digital into social and political life. In pursuit of this examination, this article will work through three distinctive but interrelated phases: first, I will establish a theoretical framework via Pierre Nora's and Michael Rothberg's salient and complementary theorizations of memory. This framework assists in establishing Abel's poetry as a research-based digital poetic. Second, I examine Abel's poetry with an emphasis on how his poetry intervenes into the logic of settler colonialism by dismantling the fictional genre of the settler colonial novel. This interrogation into the genre leads to the third section of this article, which focuses on the utopian ambition of websites like Project Gutenberg and struggles over the representation of the "public" in online environments. Abel's poetry asks readers to consider: Who is the public that these digital repositories are supposed to represent? What are the ethics of the preservation of fundamentally racist texts? How does the uncontested preservation of these texts contribute to or deter from the quality of life for Indigenous persons? How do the memories embedded within these electronic texts, or e-texts, build toward a decolonized future, if at all? This line of questioning could imply that I am advocating for cen-

sorship, but, to be clear, that is not the case I seek to make. Contesting the validity of these open, online spaces does not constitute a violation of free speech; rather, it is part of an ongoing dialogue toward a better and more inhabitable future for all human beings. In Abel's work, I find significant skepticism of the utopian ambitions that underwrite digital archives that operate in the name of the public, and his poetry offers one means of intervening into these crucial conversations.

The politics of memory and literary appropriation

To begin working through my questions, I first turn to the work of Pierre Nora, who, in "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," articulates a supple definition of memory that informs my understanding of Abel's work. Nora finely recognizes memory as "far from being synonymous" (8) with history, which he describes as an abstract "representation of the past" (8) that displaces memory. Further, he distinguishes memory as "a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present" (8). Memory is, therefore, an active and ever-present phenomenon that "takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects" (9). Memory lives in bodies, but also in monuments, archives, and—presumably—books. Memory, then, is material and corporeal, unlike the abstraction of history. Further, the work of memory occurs along the social plane. Nora writes, "Memory is blind to all groups it binds—which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory by nature is multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual" (9). Nora's definition of memory explains how competing groups can come to the same site of memory—say, a monument dedicated to Sir John A. Macdonald—and be affected in such radically different ways, thus leading some groups to call for removal while others, who might see the same site within the purview of the abstract historical call to defend it. Memory lives and is lived; it binds the community, but it can also position communities against one another as they compete to articulate their vision of that site.

Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* aids us by linking a similar theorization of memory to politics. In concert with Nora, Rothberg understands memory as a bending of linear conceptions of time. Memory is, as he writes, "the past made present" (3), and, in its present-ness, memory arrives with a complex of emotional and psychological charges that imminently play out. Rothberg develops this further; he writes, "memory is a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in

the present," and he characterizes memory as a form of labour and action. He quotes Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, who describe the actions involved in memory as "a set of practices and interventions" (quoted in Rothberg 4). Those "actions and interventions" could be described in a variety of terms, dependent upon the conceptual model of memory we are positing. In the "competitive memory" model, memory is perceived as a "zero-sum game of competition with the memory of other histories" (9). Thus, this form of memory relies upon the action of actively excluding memories in order for one historical narrative to emerge as the authoritative narrative. The competitive model of memory is at work in the examples I cite at the opening of this paper: disparate social groups in the United States and Canada actively sparred (sometimes literally) for the prevalence of one memory over another.

When it comes to comparing narratives of struggle, and the prevalence they hold in public discourse, Rothberg challenges the validity of the competitive memory model. Instead, he offers a more provocative conceptual model. He refers to this as "multidirectional memory," wherein one memory can contribute "to the articulation of other histories" (6). Returning to the examples at the beginning of this article, we see how the conflict in Charlottesville likely initiated a further conversation around commemoration and settler colonialism in Canada. "The emergence of memories into the public often takes place through triggers that may at first seem irrelevant or even unseemly" (17), suggests Rothberg. As a result, for Rothberg, narratives of social and political struggle should not be in competition with one another but, rather, should be seen as working together to bring one another into the discourse. Rothberg uses the example of the Nazi Holocaust as one memory of atrocity that has become so ubiquitous in Western culture that it has assisted in the discursive figuration of other narratives of struggle that have been overlooked or have not yet been sufficiently articulated. This is the critical point that Rothberg seeks to make, but it is not mine. For me, Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory defines the site of remembering as a point through which many stories may flow and upon which many collectives can be formed (but also contested and critiqued). The land upon which I gratefully write this paper, for example, is the site of many memories and stories of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River; the narratives of European settlers, from whom I have descended; and the narratives of immigrants from across the globe. Rothberg highlights the necessary labour—action and intervention—that is required to both preserve these memories (and sites of memory) and challenge the

power of memories that dominate public discourse. Memory, then, is a site of both collective and individual remembering with which a collective or individual may engage in the service of bringing new memories to the fore and reshaping existing memory sites.

Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory assists us in understanding the work of poets who compose research-based poetry and work with memory by using source material. In literary practice, these works have been referred to by using a plethora of names, including found poetry, flarf, plunder verse, collage, conceptual writing, cut-ups, reclaimed prose, and others. This type of work can be understood in various ways. Each of these terms invites a discrete engagement with source material, invoking different constellations of thought grounded in specific aesthetic, political, and social contexts. In essence, these are practices founded in appropriation—the movement of a selection of language into a new context—and have been collected lately collected under the umbrella of conceptual writing.[3] As Michael Nardone points out in his essay "On Settler Conceptualism," texts of this nature are guided by what he refers to as "*repositorial logic,*" by which he means "that the authors are working with specific collections of archival materials from which they intentionally select, edit, and construct their poetic text" (n. pag.). This has become a popular approach to writing for many writers today and is a useful way of challenging a text's authority and assumptions.

The resurgence of literary appropriation is a consequence of our current technological environment and the prominence of digital tools for writing. Partially foregrounding the technological optimism that I will address later in this article, Shane Rhodes suggests that "Technological change, and the rapid digitization of contemporary and archival text, has had a profound impact on what found poetry now plays with and how it plays. Once largely the purview of academics and archivists, access to archival texts and documents has now become simple for anyone with a computer, internet access and time" (n. pag.). Rhodes points out that

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3 Literary appropriation is not necessarily new. There is a long history of appropriative modes of writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Examples of this type of writing precede the rise of personal computing and include examples such as T.S. Eliot's collagist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) or, in the Canadian context, Dorothy Livesay's *The Documentaries* (1968), F.R. Scott's *Trouvailles* (1967), and John Robert Colombo's *The Mackenzie Poems* (1966). More recently, however, there has been a surge of texts that manipulate source texts as key to their composition, including *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip (2008), *Janey's Arcadia* by Rachel Zolf (2014), *Poets and Killers* by Helen Hajnoczky (2010), and *Dead White Men* by Shane Rhodes (2017).

computers, and in particular the possibilities for the storage, retrieval, and access in the current moment, have vastly improved possibilities for access to important texts that have otherwise been inaccessible. Noting these possibilities, Rhodes writes:

> Do you want to see the 1513 text of the Spanish Crown's El *Requirmiento*? No need to go to the Archivo General de Indias in Sevilla, Spain; just Google it and you will have it in 0.22 seconds. Want a searchable copy of the *Phaedra* by Racine? Go to Project Gutenberg. Simultaneously, the rapid digitization of texts has also opened up whole new methods of reading, finding and textual manipulation all with new potential for artistic appropriation. (n. pag.)

Indeed, there is a correlation between digital accessibility and the creative re-employment of language in poetic environments. Texts in digital environments can be moved rapidly and with ease. Poets can use computer functions to distantly read texts with just a few simple keystrokes: "ctrl-f," "ctrl-c," and "ctrl-v."[4] Further, the ubiquity of these keystrokes and a text's easy movability—from one digital context to another—has vastly expanded the potential of poetic appropriation.

For better and sometimes worse, digital accessibility and literary appropriation have not only given poets the opportunity to work closely with the language of texts that were previously less accessible but also offer a means of negotiating the power of these pre-existing texts. While literature is produced for enjoyment and public engagement, literary texts are also sites of memory. Writing is, in part, a storage container for events, persons, and ideas—real and imaginary—that subsequently shape public discourse, personal identities, and communal identities. Abel makes this point clear in an interview with Elena E. Johnson for *Event*, wherein he describes the beginnings for his first award-winning book of poetry, *The Place of Scraps*, which "explore[s] Marius Barbeau's *Totem Poles* in order to better understand the Nisga'a Nation" (n. pag.). Abel initially turned to Barbeau's ethnographic study to develop his "connection to Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies" (n. pag.) and did so by selecting and editing the content of Barbeau's book. Abel's resultant poetry is a critical poetic negotiation of Barbeau's ethnographic writing that has been described by Margaret Christakos as a "post-colonial erasure-recuperative installation poem-text" (n. pag.). Christakos' characterization highlights Abel's sophisticated

4 For more on the concept of distant reading, see Franco Moretti's book *Distant Reading.*

poetic and his poetry as an activist intervention ("recuperative") into the textual site of memory. Abel's poetry represents a powerful employment of research and appropriative methodologies precisely because his poetry uses source texts as a point of access for memory. When Abel treats those source texts (an *action* upon an existing memory), he begins to channel the narratives and affects of those persons marginalized by the historical narratives that those texts represent.[5] In this way, Abel treats the text as a site of multidirectional flows, through which other memories may be articulated and bolstered.

Un/inhabited **and the settler colonial novel**

After *The Place of Scraps,* Abel turned toward digital source texts for *Un/inhabited* to critically engage the genre of the settler colonial novel. At the time that this article was written, ninety-one of these novels were preserved on Project Gutenberg as e-texts (in a variety of formats including EPUB, Kindle, HTML, and Plain Text). These novels are commonly known as Westerns and are built around the romantic portrayal of white settlement on Indigenous lands. Their plots typically pose Indigenous persons as "savages" that threaten the new "civility" that white settlers are supposedly bestowing upon the land. Abel recognizes these texts as part of a "genre that's super problematic, that's super racially charged and colonially charged," and that are "difficult for Indigenous peoples" (Abel quoted in La Rose n. pag.). The Western, in its original form, is a genre whose mass popularity has waned; however, as Abel recognizes, "people feel a real kind of nostalgia for that genre" (Abel quoted in La Rose n. pag.). In Canada, the portrayal of settler colonial identity lives on in culture— the Calgary Stampede, for example, continues to celebrate the image of the cowboy. For another example, one may look toward institutions that re-enact and celebrate pioneer life without accurately acknowledging the reality of Indigenous life as settlers claimed the land as their own. Likewise, problematic representations of Indigenous cultures persist as Westerns, and their stereotypes continue to be reinvented and circulated on film and television.[6]

5 I hope it is clear that I am not suggesting that this is the only way to read Abel's writing as it relates to memory. Furthermore, I do not intend for my critical reading to overshadow Indigenous epistemologies, which would also illuminate the important work of Abel's text. By connecting Abel's poetry with theories developed by Nora and Rothberg, I merely seek to offer one of many possible perspectives on his poetry.

6 For example, Disney's 2013 film *The Lone Ranger* casts Johnny Depp as Tonto, the "noble savage" who accompanies the Lone Ranger in pursuit of outlaw Butch

Un/inhabited examines how racist ideologies are embedded in the genre of the settler colonial novel, with a particular focus on the language of these texts. Abel describes *Un/inhabited* as

> a study in context. The book itself is drawn from ninety-one Western novels that total over 10,000 pages of source text. Each piece in the book was composed by searching the source text for a specific word that related to the social and political aspects of land use, ownership and property. For example, when I searched for the word "uninhabited" in the source text, I found that there were 15 instances of that word appearing across the 10, 000 page source text. I then copied and pasted those 15 sentences that contained the word "uninhabited" and collected them into a discrete unit. The result of this kind of curation is that the context surrounding the word is suddenly visible. (n. pag.)

Abel works through titles such as *The Lone Star Ranger* (1915) by Zane Grey and *Lonesome Land* (1912) by B.M. Bower. Using his computer, Abel systematically searches through these settler colonial texts to find words related to land use and settlement and removes them, resulting in poems such as "settler," which is composed of prosaic fragments that all lack the title word: "Along with this criminal immigration came the sturdy   , the man intent on building a home and establishing fireside" and later, "All the early   s at home grew rich without any effort, but once the cream of the virgin land is gone, look out for a change" (15). His poem "pioneer" is similarly composed: "He also brought with him the fortitude of the   that reclaims the wilderness and meets any emergency that confronts him" (59) and later, "Those were the crude old days; the   s who pushed herds into the far pastures were lawless fellows, ruthless, acquisitive, mastered by the empire-builder's urge for acres and still more acres" (61). Redacting other words related to land-use and settlement (including "extracted," "territory," "indianized," and "treaty") is how the first section of the book, "Pioneering," is composed.

The context of the language found in "Pioneering," as Abel points out, is important. Each poem is a study of the missing word and how the language of colonialism is seemingly innocuous when couched in popular narrative. In response, Abel creates syntactic gaps within the existing text to disrupt the flow of narrative, thereby displacing a reader's investment in a

Cavendish. Depp's claim to Indigenous heritage, however, has been criticized and contested by some Indigenous communities.

tale of perceived good and evil in an unknown land. By using this strategy, Abel's writing corresponds with a tradition of Indigenous writing that Cree poet, editor, and teacher Neal McLeod suggests has a "key function" to "puncture holes in the expectations and understandings of contemporary life" (6), and thereby the oppressive ideologies embedded within it. Abel's puncturing of these sources leaves a hole in the narrative, forcing readers to carefully glean meaning from the remaining language. Readers thus become more active readers in the process. Here, the otherwise passive reader must shift into the position of the critic. As a reader, I face each gap in the text and must remember the missing word that previously occupied that page space. In this way, Abel asks me (and other readers) to recall that word, with its deep archive of meaning. In so doing, he begins to draw up the many histories of the term with all of its physical, psychological, and emotional significance. Abel's puncturing of the source text is a reversal of settler tactics that sought to erase Indigenous persons from the landscape. Abel's erasure of the language of settlement—words such as "settler" and "pioneering"—turns the violence of settlement back upon settlers. Abel's erasure is an act of de-territorializing the textual landscape of the settlers and emphasizes the importance of making space on the page and in language itself. Gesturally, the emptiness left by his erasures becomes a new, potentially habitable space, regardless of its previous occupants.

This concern for notions of settlement and habitability are developed in the next section of the book, entitled "Cartography," which explores notions related to maps and mapping. In this section, Abel creates a series of visual poems from the same ninety-one settler colonial novels. These poems are formed by carefully contrasting black text against the white page to create shapes that resemble sections of geographical maps. To make these poems, it appears as though Abel has superimposed map cut-outs overtop sheets of the source text. Although these poems have distinctive and recognizable shapes—peninsulas, waterways, islands, bays, shorelines, and landmasses—it is difficult to say with certainty if Abel has imitated any specific map or if these are entirely new maps of Abel's imagination. As a result, I find myself flipping back and forth between pages, squinting, trying to find in these images what I remember of the world.

I begin to understand this section by accounting for maps as visual documentation of the shape and composition of the world. They also assist us as we move through and around space. Christina Turner describes the poems in "Cartography" as a representation of the "interstitial meeting point between land and water, absence and presence, past and present" (n. pag.). "Cartography" also gestures toward a word-world relationship that

accounts for how language impacts the shape of the world and the world impacts the shape of language. "Cartography," then, points to these meeting points and highlights a key theme of Abel's book: cultural encounter. The poems represent shorelines upon which colonial forces landed, moved inward, and claimed the land as they advanced. The settler colonial novel was one of the ways that colonizers articulated and shaped their relationship to the land and their memories of it. It is a fictional means of shaping the memories of these events, thereby pushing Indigenous perspectives out of dominant discourse. In effect, settlers have erroneously and egregiously asserted their own narrative as more valid and truthful. Abel's visual poems remind us of the power of this relationship, just like activists in Saskatchewan were reminding Canadians in 2017 of how colonial narratives—and public iconography dedicated to colonialists—shape public discourse. Abel's visual poems are not reclamations of land but, rather, a reminder that the language writers use to describe the material world can significantly impact the world and its cultural and social values, and political systems.

Cherokee writer and critic Daniel Heath Justice's consideration of mapping further illuminates the striking qualities of Abel's "Cartography." Maps are "a set of complex, hybrid texts chronicling both Indigenous suffering and survivance," suggests Justice (195). He points out that "The maps weren't of our own making, imposed as they were by a nation-state hell-bent on our long-term erasure" (195). And this conception of the map is informative for making meaning of Abel's cartographic poems. These maps are of Abel's making; yet, he makes from the language of the settler colonial novel. Thus I see them, in part, as an allegory for how settlers have laid claim to the land through their own stories. Justice further points out, too, that maps are an "imperfect abstraction of the land itself" (197), a comment that resonates with Nora's conception of the problems of history. By using the text of settler colonial novels, Abel reconfigures the map—as an abstract representation of the land—into a concretized site of memory, by highlighting language's relationship to land claim. In doing so, Abel reminds us that the settler's claim to the land is far from abstract but is, rather, the result of a long series of calculated and egregious actions and interventions on the land as a site of memory.

The penultimate section of the book, "Extracted," builds upon the visuality of "Cartography." In this section, Abel returns to the ninety-one settler colonial novels and fills entire pages—margin to margin—with this source material. The text of these pages has been treated: visually scraped, rubbed, lacerated, and scored to create a unique series of palimpsestic

visual poems. Some of these sections look as though Abel has run a rough surface down the face of the page, while other pages have sections of text that are totally effaced in clean-lined columns. As such, these poems are reflective, again, of colonization: the mining of land for resources, the effacement of pre-existing memories. As Kathleen Ritter notes in her essay that concludes *Un/inhabited*, "Extracted" is also a "visual representation of the way he [Abel] searched, collected, and extracted in the initial pages of the book" (xiv). This section is also a moment of self-reflection on the methods of literary appropriation and emphasizes how this creative writing practice inserts ideas and disrupts the authority of a text or genre. In so doing, "Extracted" begins to reshape the discourse around key issues, like Settler-Indigenous relations.

Digital dystopia

In his "Toward an Open Source Poetics: Appropriation, Collaboration, and the Commons," Stephen Voyce suggests that writers who engage in acts of literary appropriation have demonstrated a faith or skepticism in the values of "an open source society." This is a concept Voyce borrows from theorists Michael S. Hardt and Antonio Negri and their book *Commonwealth*. There*,* Hardt and Negri focus on the idea of the commons: the "wealth of the material world—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty … [as well as] those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so on" ("Preface" viii). Voyce extends Hardt and Negri's thinking, and he describes how their ideas can be "Applied to literature":

> [T]he term evocatively brings into focus a number of issues relating to authorship and intertextuality, "intellectual property" and the public domains, poetic license and collective artistic production. One might speak of an *open source poetics* or *commons-based poetics* based on a decentralized and non-proprietary model of shared cultural codes, networks of dissemination, and collaborative authorship. (407)

Grounded in methods of literary appropriation, *Un/inhabited* engages conversations regarding open source society and the control of digital resources. As Turner points out, Abel also chooses to include language from Project Gutenberg*'*s licence agreement in *Un/inhabited* as a "somewhat tongue in cheek exhortation" (n. pag.). Abel includes the full licence agreement, which includes statements like "you may do practically ANY-

THING with public domain eBooks" (n. pag.). Abel pivots the aim of his book from discussions related to the colonization of North America toward the problems of control and manipulation of cultural resources in the public domain, especially those that are preserved online. How can a digital repository be common to all people if these websites digitally safeguard groupings of texts that actively disparage and vilify entire groups of people?

For *Un/inhabited*, Abel seizes upon the offer of seemingly unfettered use that is permitted by e-books on Project Gutenberg to address this issue. Project Gutenberg began in 1971 and was founded by Michael S. Hart, who made it his noble mission—along with volunteer project collaborators—to provide easy access to literature with the hope of decreasing illiteracy rates and providing a body of knowledge to the general public.[7] On one of the sites several FAQs, Hart writes that "We are constantly asked to prepare e-text from out of print editions of esoteric materials, but this does not provide for usage by the audience we have targeted, 99% of the general public" ("The History and Philosophy"). The aim of the site, then, is to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, which they conceive to be the public. I stress that this paper is not a critique of the ethics of Project Gutenberg's mission to replicate and disseminate public domain texts. In fact, it is Project Gutenberg's open policy that makes it a vital site for pleasure, study, and critique. It is their utopian premise that I am investigating here, along with the universalist principles embedded within their idea of the public. Like debates regarding public monuments that opened this paper, I seek to understand how colonial resources in the public domain should be engaged.

The licence provided by Project Gutenberg for many of its e-books, if not all, permits readers unrestricted access and encourages the use of these resources. Readers require only a computer, internet access, and time. The open licence encourages readers to engage the content of their site in *any way* they see fit—to read e-books for pleasure, study, or to use them in creative projects (like *Un/inhabited)*. Not only does the website's minimalist aesthetic, using "Plain Vanilla ASCII" ("The History and Philosophy of Project Gutenberg" n. pag.), ensure easy-to-read e-texts, but it also makes it very easy for poets to pick out and manipulate lan-

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7 It should be noted that online and open source repositories like these rely on free labour by volunteers who lend their expertise to maintaining and developing the content on open source websites. Wikipedia, for example, relies on topic experts to dedicate their time and resources to cultivating thorough entries on any given topic.

guage for new projects, like Abel's. This encouragement, coupled with Hart's claim that Project Gutenberg is a digital space where "Everyone is welcome," finely pronounces the utopian and universalist vision of the site and other sites like it. In this way, Project Gutenberg epitomizes the notion of an open source society since it seeks to provide the public with a body of literature that is common to all. As Abel's poetry points out, however, sites like Project Gutenberg are also sites of memory, and the role of digital textual repositories and their utopic promises of equality must be carefully considered.

Abel's *Un/inhabited* offers a variety of ways for considering the problems posed by the utopic vision of public domain digital repositories by engaging the politics of memory and control over publicly available cultural resources. With such open policies, public domain websites are places wherein people can easily indulge the nostalgia that, according to Abel (as indicated by the quotation above), they have for the Western and immerse themselves within the logic of settler colonialism—critically or not. With the specific example of a racist genre like the Western in mind, the utopian promise of Project Gutenberg seems less promising. For this reason, some critical nuance needs to be developed with optimism and faith in open source society.

Dean Lockwood and Rob Coley's *Cloud Time* helps to articulate some of the skepticism and anxiety around these ideas, especially the perceived crisis of control over the development and management of a digital utopia. For Lockwood and Coley, the promise of a digital future is the promise of dystopia. This is a future wherein computers and their expert designers—often supported by corporations—control the flow and application of information including the storage of our memories and cultural heritage, leaving the preservation of individual and group identities solely to the discretion of a single person or small group of people. Furthermore, these websites and applications structure how we engage one other socially and politically. Twitter and Facebook, for example, utilize a series of algorithms that determine what users like me see in their feeds, which in turn have material and affective ramifications. Lockwood and Coley refer to this as "Soft Tyranny" in which "Network structures perpetuate a new, immanent control, through sets of rules and formulae, codes which pre-format our actions and behaviours" (17). Project Gutenberg ensures that "we have administrators who have no desire for political powers" ("Administrivia"); however, at the heart of Lockwood and Coley's argument rests not just an anxiety founded in the loss of control over the shape and function of our shared data but also the threat of passivity on the part of the users of these

Some critical nuance needs to be developed with optimism and faith in open source society.

digital resources. If users become passive, then powerful individuals and companies take control of cultural information as well as the possibility of changing and shaping the future of that information. Furthermore, if users passively use resources in the public domain, egregious power structures and histories of atrocity rest in these texts and remain uncontested.

As Lockwood and Coley recognize, specialized education in programming (or similar field) is required to manipulate source code and, in the case of publicly available digital archives, there seems to be little work being done to critically engage or preface the material held within them. To make a contribution to the future shape of digitally-based commons projects, one requires time, education, and institutional support that few people have. Working from publicly available source-texts, *Un/inhabited* prompts us to question the value of the commons as a resource. It asks us to be critical of how we inhabit the knowledge contained within these archives and how that knowledge inhabits us. This is especially problematic for websites that passively archive popular print books in the form of e-books (usually a result of volunteer labour from all over the world). The task of preserving public domain books is commendable, and ensuring free and unlimited access to these books is outstanding. However, as the premise of Abel's writing indicates, the passive preservation and use of these texts are problematic. Users need to engage the digital archive and its texts to ensure that settler colonialism, and other atrocities like it, do not go unnoticed.

Should settler colonial novels be removed from online repositories? On the one hand, pulp fictions like *The Lone Star Ranger* are essential documents of a period and perspective on past life in North America. They illustrate how it came to be shaped by white settlers and the mindset that was required to do that shaping. The preservation of these works is important; if nothing more, they serve as reminders of a past and offer readers a guide online how we've arrived at our current moment—a moment wherein problems of borders, repression, and identity embroils conversations online and offline. North America's disturbing colonial history must be remembered; however, as Abel seems to have recognized, the simple preservation of this information is not enough—interventions must be staged. The uncontested preservation of settler colonial texts runs the risk of preserving settler colonial logic.

The logic of settler colonialism is a belief in an imperial project to replace the population of Indigenous lands with a settler society. This is carried out using a variety of possible means, including violent depopulation, assimilation, or the rendering of Indigenous identity through colo-

nial frameworks. The settler colonial novel depicts these campaigns and romanticizes the actions of settlers by depicting them as heroes of the West and defenders of civility. In addition, this logic underpins the enclosure of the commons—air, land, fruits of the soil, and other natural elements—as private property. As settlers arrived, they claimed natural resources that they said belonged to no one: those who "pushed herds into the far pastures were lawless fellows, ruthless, acquisitive, mastered by the empire-builder's urge for acres and still more acres" (*Un/inhabited* 61). While we typically think of the settler colonial novel as a thing of the past, Patrick Wolfe and David Lloyd argue that this type of thinking continues to inform social and political formations today. They argue that "the ongoing history of settler colonialism forms a crucial terrain through which to understand military occupation and the formations and practices of the neoliberal state" (109). The settler colonial novel, therefore, is a reservoir of the logic that continues to inform seemingly distant atrocities, geographically and temporally. As these novels are replicated for digital repositories (without editorial or curatorial intervention), the logic that informs the narrative, which is historically and currently relevant, remains uncontested, leaving open the possibility of less critical readers to consent to the ideology of these texts.

At this point, there can be no single satisfying answer to the problem posed by the relationship between digital access, replication and preservation in online repositories, and the racist ideologies that some texts uphold. As in the case with public monuments dedicated to colonial figures, some critics have argued for their removal from public space, while others have argued that removing such iconography is an erasure of history (and thereby a site of memory) as well as a violation of free speech. The stakes of this debate become more unclear when addressing a digital repository like Project Gutenberg that simultaneously represents no one and everyone. In part, these issues can preliminarily be addressed by providing context for these texts: education and editorial intervention. This is Abel's answer when discussing the ignorance of white audiences who come to his work: "I do honestly believe that education is the key to decolonization" ("Writing so Hard" n. pag.). Abel's poetry, alongside his treatment of the settler colonial novel, confirms the imperative for poets who actively work with digital writing tools and environments to intervene into the textual conditions that support racist thinking and actions, especially narratives that are steeped in racist ideology. In part, projects like these are, as Christakos suggests of Abel's *The Place of Scraps*, "recuperative" (n. pag.). They take back language on behalf of a communal-assemblage

in the service of reclaiming an image or idea. However, producing poetry that appropriates the language of colonization and racist thinking in the service of anti-racist projects also shapes the discourse within which those source texts exist as well as the institutions that preserve them. Texts, like Abel's *Un/inhabited*, are imperative for the public because they provide essential resources for educators, editors, and readers to shape how we engage colonial legacies.

Conclusion

Concern for control informs all the previous sections of this article: control over land and resources, control over digital cultural resources, and control over language. Abel's selection and treatment of *Project Gutenberg*'s repository of settler colonial novels for *Un/inhabited* provides a rich site of engagement with these issues and reshapes the discourse around the work these novels do. The text effectively deconstructs and unsettles the racist tropes of Indigeneity and the logic of settler colonialism embedded within the novel's genre. As Abel's writing reminds us, these issues are pervasive and transcend any one particular context. Abel's dedication for the book makes this clear: "For the Indigenous peoples of North America" (n. pag.), and thus Abel indicates the depiction of white-settlement of Indigenous land is not just a problem in Canada, despite the recent prominence of these issues and debates in Canadian media. Abel's writing, then, reflects a kind of plurality, grounded in solidarity with Indigenous persons whose rights-to-land, resources, and well-being are being contested or have already been effaced. I note, too, that Abel does not identify himself as a Canadian writer on his website. He is a Nisga'a poet who is "writing for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences" (Abel quoted in Whitman). As a writer targeting both audiences, he says that his "intention isn't solely to unsettle but is also to invite in" (Abel quoted in Whitman). As such, Abel's writing is characterized by a complex relationship to borders, heritage, and ideas of the nation-state.

Digital environments, like the public domain digital repository Project Gutenberg, encourage the kind of border crossing that is integral to Abel's work. The settler colonial novels, as sites of memory, pronounce the logic of settler colonialism over and over again and, thanks to the fluidity of e-texts, these ideas quickly move across continents and periods. As readers enjoy these e-texts, the e-texts also become sites of risk. If the racist ideologies of these texts remain uncontested, these texts also reinscribe settler colonial logic and suggest that the exploitation of Indigenous persons and land is fit for entertainment. These problems provide enough

evidence to suggest that we must more carefully consider the replication and distribution of public domain e-texts—not in the form of censorship but by poetic activist intervention. It is, after all, the fluidity of the digital text that also provides the platform from which Abel could construct his intervention and reshape the discourse around settler-Indigenous relations and its representations in literature. Abel's writing, then, reminds us that writing in the digital age is not without repercussions, that online environments are crucial spaces for culture and its resources, and that books and e-books—like public monuments—have tremendous power to shape individual and collective memory.

Abel's *Un/inhabited*, among its many offerings, demonstrates how, through creative work with source texts, discourse around issues related to Indigeneity and Canada's history of settler colonialism can be reshaped. In the wake of his interventionist writing projects, it seems that an increasing number of curators, artists, and academics are motivated by a similar sense of urgency and purpose that drive Abel's poetics. These kinds of actions and interactions with sites of memory are becoming more common. For example, Postdoctoral Fellow Evadne Kelly and Canada Research Chair Carla Rice have worked with archivists at the University of Guelph to develop "a co-created, multimedia and multi-sensory exhibition at the Guelph Civic Museum called *Into the Light: Eugenics and Education in Southern Ontario*" (n. pag.). They ground their interventions in disability and decolonizing curatorial practices to open conversations around the historical teaching of eugenics in Canada in the twentieth century. Similarly, Abel's *Un/inhabited* is one of many vital and indispensable literary projects that demonstrates a vital lesson for artists, poets, curators, and scholars: active and thoughtful engagements with sites of memory—books, archives, monuments, and so on—point toward the multiplicity of cultural, political, and social perspectives that are needed to further develop urgent and ongoing discussions related to settler colonialism and Indigeneity.

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