

Indigenous Sovereignty and Settler Amnesia: Robert Houle's *Premises for Self Rule*

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Article abstract

Le modernisme en art est souvent considéré comme un développement spécifiquement occidental. Robert Houle, l'artiste, écrivain et commissaire d'exposition d'origine Saulteaux, a cependant toujours soutenu que sa propre pratique est moderniste et qu'elle suit une filiation esthétique autochtone. Cet article s'intéresse particulièrement à une oeuvre produite par Houle en 1994, *Premises for Self Rule*, dans laquelle l'artiste a juxtaposé des textes de législation coloniale à des panneaux peints en monochrome et des cartes postales trouvées en archives. Il propose qu'à travers cette stratégie de rapprochement, l'artiste fusionne la tradition de la peinture de *parflèche* à l'esthétique moderniste, remettant ainsi en lumière la négociation interculturelle, l'amnésie coloniale, ainsi que les écarts qui séparent les épistémologies et traditions artistiques des peuples autochtones et allochtones.

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In the artist statement for his exhibition *Lost Tribes* (1991), Saulteaux artist, writer, and curator Robert Houle stated that although his work might be viewed as the product of a colonized individual, it was for him a declaration of independence.¹ Art was, and continues to be, his way of affirming his sovereignty in the face of the subjectivity imposed upon him by colonial governments. The result is an oeuvre that defies expectations through the deft navigation and combination of two artistic traditions—Indigenous and Western. By effectively bringing these realms together, his work visually manifests the complex relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples, thereby establishing a strong discursive foundation for the difficult subjects he tackles.² In 1985, Houle turned his attention to the colonial treaties and genocidal legislation that created the Canadian nation-state. In total, he made thirteen works that directly addressed this theme.³ As he revisited these documents and their enduring consequences, he expressed an increasing sense of urgency. The culmination of this inquiry was *Premises for Self Rule* (1994). Through a strategic juxtaposition of legal texts, abstract paintings, and archival postcards, this work brings the tradition of *parfleche* painting to bear on modernist aesthetics as a means of highlighting the tension between Indigenous and settler peoples, as well as the gulf that exists between their respective land epistemologies. His aesthetic choices privilege the Indigenous position, while disrupting settler amnesia, thus causing both parties to confront their respective decolonizing responsibilities.

Houle's desire for what he calls "sovereignty over subjectivity" has been a guiding force in his curatorial and artistic practice since the 1980s.⁴ This phrase first came to him as a possible title for an exhibition focused on the work of mature Indigenous artists based in North America.⁵ He began to research this project during the summer of 1990, the year Kanesatà:ke Mohawks occupied The Pines at Oka, Quebec, for seventy-eight days in protest against the proposed expansion of a golf course onto land that included a sacred burial ground. The standoff reflected, among other things, differing beliefs about land and how it should be used. Racial tensions that already existed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada were inflamed by the blockade, which became a defining moment in Indigenous activism, as well as in the evolving consciousness of the Canadian nation. It was against this backdrop that Houle began to see the artist's studio, and the work made there, as an oasis of sovereignty that defied the subjectivity

1. Robert Houle, "Artist's Statement," in *Lost Tribes: Robert Houle*, exh. cat. (Frederick, MD: Hood College, 1991), 3.

2. Though the term "settler" is helpful in understanding and decolonizing the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, it is not without its shortcomings. There are, for example, many different kinds of non-Indigenous people in Canada. A person born in Canada will have a different relationship with settler identity than a new immigrant. My use of the term "settler" is informed by the work of Emma Battell

imposed on him by colonial authorities. He felt invigorated by the potential of artistic expression to make a difference, and he concluded that “the artist is the site of political and cultural change.”⁶

The visual arts, but painting in particular, have often played a significant role in the expression of sovereignty and the articulation of national identities. In his book, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (1999), anthropologist and historian Nicholas Thomas discusses how encounters and interactions between Indigenous and settler peoples shape the visual arts in colonial nation-states. He argues that the differences between the visual representations made by artists from these two groups stem from their very different perspectives on the emergent nation. In his words, “Settler and indigenous visions alike affirm attachments to land, but in terms that are all but incommensurable”; they thus point “unavoidably to rival attachments to country, and competing imaginings of the nation.”⁷ Modernism in North America was often linked to colonial nation-building efforts, as there is enough space in modernism to address localized subjects.⁸ For example, modernist settler artists, such as Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven, and Emily Carr, focused their attention on the Canadian landscape, while often—although not always—expunging evidence of Indigenous presence.⁹ Although their works drew on modern European artistic styles, they became inextricably linked to the Canadian nation and were often held up as representative of it, both at home and abroad. Indigenous artists in Canada were acutely aware of the power of artistic expression, and, particularly after 1965, they began to explore the potential of modernism as a means of asserting their sovereignty. For artists such as Norval Morrisseau (Anishinaabe), Alex Janvier (Dene Suline and Saulteaux), and Bill Reid (Haida), the precepts of modernism were tools among others that could be used to express Indigenous culture and presence in a rapidly changing world. There was a modernism that reflected their needs and experiences. T. J. Clark argues that modernism is the aesthetic response to modernity; in his words, it is “the art of these new circumstances. It can revel in the contingency or mourn in the destitute.”¹⁰ This explanation makes obvious modernism’s breadth of potential, despite its discourse’s tendency to overemphasize Western culture.

In his discussion of modernism in a globalized world, Andreas Huyssen parses out the differences between European and colonial modernisms. He states:

The antagonistic ethos of European modernism ... took on very different political shadings in the colony, which in turn required literary and representational strategies in tune with the experiences and subjectivity created by colonization. The crisis of subjectivity at the core of European modernism played out very differently in a colonial and postcolonial modernity.¹¹

The resulting “geographies of modernism” are distinct from one another in their aesthetics and temporal appearance, because the differing particularities of each geography in the globalized world. They may share the basic principles of modernism, such as striving for truth and freedom, but what they mean, when they emerge, and how they play out are influenced by the historical and contemporary circumstances of each locality. Moreover, modernity effects Indigenous and settler populations of the same geography in markedly

Lowman and Adam J. Barker. They argue that the term refers to a system of oppression and helps us to understand our relationship to that structure. Identifying as a settler Canadian means taking responsibility for the colonial violence that brought this country into existence, and that continues to this day through the systems and institutions that shape our daily lives. In claiming this identity, a non-Indigenous person takes the first step toward decolonization. See Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2015).

3. These works include *Constitution Act* (1985), *B.N.A. Act 1867* (1985), *Royal Proclamation* (1985), *Indian Act* (1985), *Visual Premises for Self Rule* (1985), *Numbers* (1988), *Aboriginal Title* (1989–1990), *Shield for Self Rule* (1990), and *Premises for Self Rule* (1994).

4. Robert Houle, “Sovereignty Over Subjectivity,” *C Magazine*, 30 (Summer 1991): 30.

5. This title would eventually be used for a 1999 solo exhibition of Houle’s work organized by the Winnipeg Art Gallery and curated by Shirley Madill.

6. Houle, “Sovereignty Over Subjectivity,” 35.

7. Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 2009), 14.

8. See *ibid.*; and W. Jackson Rushing, *Native North American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

9. In order for the settler nation to be made, Indigenous presence had to be removed from the land. In Canada, this was done through the visual arts as well as through legislation. In addition to Thomas, *Possessions*, see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1, 1 (2012): 1–40.

10. T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 18.

11. Andreas Huyssen, “Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World,” *New German Critique*, 34, 1 (Winter 2007): 190.

different ways, and their respective modernisms reflect this difference. While settler modernisms in Canada were used to visualize a unified nation-state, Indigenous modernisms often seek liberation from colonial subjectivity and the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty. To label these Indigenous modernisms “postmodern” is to deny Indigenous artists their artistic agency. Though heterogeneous in their aesthetic qualities, one of the key distinguishing features of Indigenous modernisms in Canada—and even worldwide—is the drive for emancipation from colonial rule.¹² Indigenous modernisms thus share an overarching concern with sovereignty, nationalism, and decolonization—precisely the concerns of Houle’s *Premises for Self Rule* (1994).

This work consists of a series of five tableaux, each made up of a large, colour-field painting on canvas paired with a vinyl text stencilled directly on the gallery wall. The latter is overlaid with a small phototransfer of a historical postcard also mounted on canvas. Many of Houle’s aesthetic and political concerns coalesce in these five works, but issues related to land are particularly relevant. While researching his groundbreaking exhibition *New Work by a New Generation* (1985), Houle realized that land was a central aspect of First Nations art, because the constant struggle to keep it was central to Indigenous lives.¹³ Moreover, land is integral to Indigenous culture and identity and affects everything from food and clothing to medicine and spirituality.¹⁴ The colonial project sought to take land from Indigenous people and fundamentally change their relationship with it.

In either direct or indirect ways, land is at the heart of Houle’s art practice. In *The Place Where God Lives* (1989) and *Coming Home* (1995), for example, Houle paints places of spiritual importance; in *Kanata* (1992) and *Lost Tribes* (1990–1991), he portrays historical struggles over the land; and in *Paris/Ojibwa* (2010), he repatriates the sprits of a Mississauga dance troop from Paris to Turtle Island. Anishinaabe concepts of sovereignty, explains Michi Saagiig Nishnaaneg scholar Leanne Simpson, are based on concepts of relationship and responsibility, but particularly the responsibility to protect the land.¹⁵ It is through his portrayals of the land that Houle expresses this sense of responsibility and maintains his sovereignty.

A member of the first generation of Indigenous artists to attend a Western art school, Houle drew inspiration from both Indigenous and Western visual cultures. For him, learning the precepts of Western European art was akin to learning a language that would enable him to communicate with a broader audience.¹⁶ He maintains, however, that the aesthetic lineage that defines his modernism is Indigenous.¹⁷ Coming from the Prairie Region, Houle’s artistic ancestry includes the rich tradition of abstraction seen on First Nations and Metis clothing, tipis, blankets, and storage containers, which were elaborately decorated with geometric motifs.¹⁸ Houle identifies these arts as the “antiquity of Aboriginal expression” created by those he calls “the ancient ones”—the first people to arrive on this land some 20,000 years ago.¹⁹ In Houle’s words, this cultural inheritance is a tool “with which to affirm one’s being and one’s place in the scheme of things.”²⁰ His “bi-cultural approach” thus brings together the quillwork of Anishinaabe women, the hatchwork of Jasper Johns, the painting traditions of Woodlands and Plains peoples, the grid of Piet Mondrian, the brilliant colour palette of Arthur Shilling, and

12. Susan Friedman, “Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies,” *Modernism/Modernity* 13, 3 (2006): 427.

13. Houle, “Sovereignty Over Subjectivity,” 30.

14. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Our Land/Ourself: American Indian Contemporary Artists*, exh. cat., University Art Gallery (Albany: State University of New York at Albany, 1991), v–vi.

15. Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2001), 89–90.

16. Robert Houle in “Art: Learning the European Language,” video interview, National Gallery of Canada.

17. Robert Houle, “Artist’s Statement,” in *Robert Houle: Troubling Abstraction*, exh. cat., ed. Carol Podedworny, McMaster Museum of Art (Hamilton: MMA, 2007), 16–17.

18. Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (1st ed. 1991; Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 108–114.

19. Robert Houle, “The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones,” in *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at The National Gallery of Canada*, exh. cat., eds. Diana Nimeroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa: NGC, 1992), 44–73.

20. *Ibid.*, 45.

the spirituality of Barnett Newman.²¹ By combining these traditions, Houle helped create an indigenized modernism that actively defied Western expectations of what Indigenous art could look like, while also infusing his practice with a dynamic of dialogue. Abstraction was particularly appealing to Houle, as it gave him the opportunity to visually express debate. In his words, “It creates a work in contention, in progress.”²²

In 1985, Houle produced four abstract, acrylic paintings on paper that demonstrated his emerging bi-cultural modernism. These were also his first works to address colonial legislation. *Constitution Act, B.N.A. Act 1867, Royal Proclamation*, and *Indian Act* each combine expressive, gestural brushwork with allusions to the elongated *parfleche* container made by the Indigenous peoples of the Prairie Region. Made of sturdy rawhide, painted *parfleches* were essential to the nomadic lifestyle of the Plains peoples, who used them to carry all sorts of things, including food, clothing, and medicines. While there were great stylistic differences between *parfleche* painters, most of whom were women, traditionally their designs featured lines, triangles, diamonds, and rectangles contained within a painted border. Some of the natural colour of the hide was always left visible.²³ While working at the National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of History), Houle spent time sketching artefacts in display cases. On his last day he drew five objects and vowed to liberate them from the confines of their cases by “[breathing] life into them, to show that they still [mattered].”²⁴ Houle brought these objects into his aesthetic language. *Parfleches*, in particular, became embedded in Houle’s visual lexicon as both a formal object and as a way of asserting his Saulteaux identity.²⁵

Curator and artist Gerald McMaster (Plains Cree and Blackfoot) once observed that Houle’s use of the *parfleche* was the ground upon which all of his art unfolded.²⁶ This is certainly the case in his early paper works. Though Houle focuses on settler pieces of legislation, the inclusion of *parfleches* reminds the viewer that the laws creating settler nations do so by negating pre-existing Indigenous ones. In *Constitution Act*, | fig. 1 | the *parfleche* is demarcated using gold paint on a white background. The rectangular space of the *parfleche* is filled with overlapping blue and white, creating tonal modulation. Four of Houle’s hallmark squiggle markings extend vertically along the *parfleche*, while the words “CONSTITUTION ACT,” contained within another rectangular space, stretch across the upper portion of the work. *Indian Act* employs the same compositional strategy, but this time a deep red field provides the background for a *parfleche* form rendered in dark blue. The inner space of the *parfleche* is blue and white, but the colours are more intense, and lines of red paint run in a vertical direction. The bottom border of this *parfleche* shape undulates, as does the text reading “INDIAN ACT” that sits on the edge. While the cool whites and blues used in *Constitution Act* have a ghost-like quality—which echoes, perhaps, the lack of meaningful dialogue with Indigenous people when the 1985 act was being drawn up—the deeply saturated and symbolic colours used in *Indian Act* make the work more obviously didactic. It is aggressive because the legislation it represents is aggressive. In both works, the *parfleche* forms delineate space within a larger field, further suggesting that these expressive boxes function as metaphors for the various ways the legislation “boxes in” Indigenous peoples.

21. Robert Houle, “Robert Houle in Conversation with Barry Ace” (public event, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, February 25, 2016).

22. Houle, “Artist’s Statement,” 15.

23. Gaylord Torrence, *The Indian Parfleche: A Tradition of Abstract Painting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press & Des Moines Art Center, 1994), 77–78.

24. Robert Houle, in conversation with Clara Hargittay, “The Struggle Against Cultural Apartheid,” The CCAA Canadian Art Database, <http://ccca.concordia.ca> (December 1, 2013).

25. The *parfleche* appears in various forms throughout Houle’s oeuvre. See, for example, *Untitled (Parfleche)* (1981), *Parfleches for the Last Supper* (1983); *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians From A to Z* (1985); *Innu Parfleche* (1990); *Parfleches for Sydney* (1996), *Parfleche for Norvel Morrisseau* (1999), and *Parfleche for Edna Manitowabi* (1999).

26. Gerald McMaster, “The Symbolic Field,” in *Troubling Abstraction*, 84.

Figure 1. Robert Houle, Constitution Act, 1985, acrylic on paper, 106 x 75 cm. Collection of the Aboriginal Art Centre. Reproduced with the permission of the artist and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. Photo: Lawrence Cook.



One of the most striking differences between these earlier works and *Premises for Self Rule* (1994) is the shift from two-dimensional drawings to a tangible, three-dimensional modernist *parfleche*. Each work is comprised of two rectangles of the same size, which mimic the front flaps of the envelope-style *parfleche*. This is an important development that directly contributes to the success of *Premises for Self Rule*. In *Encoded Knowledge: Memory and Objects in Contemporary Native American Art* (2012), Sherry Farrell Racette (Metis) considers how objects sometimes function as sites of continuity between past and present. She explains that when Indigenous artists take up forms, media, and techniques that were stolen from their peoples by the colonial authority, they retrieve history. She highlights the importance of evoking the object, particularly in three-dimensional form: “Narrative power and memory is triggered by the shock of recognition. But this is not an exercise in visual literacy. The objects are claimed and stories enacted with subtle revisions and additions... Meanings are complicated and new stories are added.”²⁷ When speaking of the *parfleche*, Houle stresses he is most interested in its role as a carrier of medicines.²⁸ By creating a recognizable, three-dimensional *parfleche* using a new visual language and contemporary materials, Houle reminds viewers of its traditional function as a container for things that heal, while simultaneously evoking the ongoing tensions between Indigenous and settler peoples. As Farrell Racette notes, “Artists who recreate encoded objects seek to repatriate their knowledge or bring their power to bear on critical contemporary situations.”²⁹

Houle’s *parfleches* are decidedly contemporary without sacrificing their integrity as traditional objects. An important aspect of *parfleche* painting is the use of repeating motifs to create a sense of ordered balance. This is particularly the case with the envelope *parfleche*, whose front flaps were usually painted the same. Houle brings the sense of balance fundamental to *parfleche* painting to *Premises for Self Rule* by repeating the rectangular shape. While the adjacent areas were traditionally painted with a pure, flat colour, Houle has juxtaposed an expressive monochrome painting with a field of text. The abstract panels draw upon abstract expressionism and colour-field painting, while the text recalls the work of conceptual artists—all forms of art associated with modernism. The cultural significance and sense of balance so important to *parfleche* painting are thus conveyed in both an expressionist and conceptual manner.

Balance is, however, not the only sensibility behind the work. Keeping in mind Houle’s bi-cultural approach to modernism, one must also consider the grid as an organizational strategy. In her 1979 essay “Grids,” Rosalind Krauss argued that the grid epitomized modern art both temporally, as a form not seen in the art of previous eras, and spatially, as the demarcation of an autonomous realm of art.³⁰ Flattened, organized, and regimented, the grid was, for Krauss, a space of pure aesthetics. It was also a central concern of Western modern artists, such as Piet Mondrian; the latter had an early, but ultimately fleeting influence on Houle. Mondrian was interested in expressing universal order, and the grid was a central strategy to achieve that goal. After working his way through Mondrian, Houle concluded that the Dutch artist’s exclusive use of right angles, as well as his avoidance of green, was incompatible with his own experience of the natural world.³¹ As an artist interested in the polemics of modern art, Houle was still attracted to the grid,

27. Sherry Farrell Racette, “Encoded Knowledge: Memory and Objects in Contemporary Native American Art” in *Manifestations: New Native Art Criticism*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Santa Fe: Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2012), 49.

28. Robert Houle, “Robert Houle,” directed by Derreck Roemer (Ottawa and Toronto: Canada Council for the Arts and Charles Street Video, 2015), video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNdig-mKB75o.

29. Ferrell Racette, *Encoded Knowledge*, 52.

30. Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (Summer, 1979), 50.

31. Houle, “Robert Houle in Conversation with Barry Ace.”

but it had to be modified to fit with his worldview.³² Unlike Mondrian, who used the grid to move away from references to the physical world, Houle uses this structure in *Premises for Self Rule* to make visible the concrete relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples. In his tableaux, the abstract paintings and wall text represent two different perspectives—one Western and the other Indigenous. Together they imagine the Canadian nation and the land it encompasses from different vantages. Rather than an exercise in aesthetics, the grid is thus used to establish a narrative. At the foundation of the compositions, there is interplay between the balance of repeated forms from the *parfleche* and the tension of the grid. Both of these perhaps contradictory sensibilities must be present for Houle to show two different land epistemologies and the complexities that exist between them.

To expedite the process of claiming land, settler nations create legal structures that displace prior Indigenous laws and epistemologies,³³ essentially making Indigenous peoples disappear. Together with national myths, such as those forwarded in Canadian landscape painting, such laws facilitate a particular type of collective amnesia: settler amnesia. If social amnesia occurs when memories are driven from the collective consciousness by social and economic dynamics,³⁴ settler amnesia, by comparison, relates to the specifics of the colonial situation, and involves forgetting the prior claims of Indigenous people and the violence and dishonesty that shapes a colonial nation-state. This type of amnesia is key in building settler states, since remembering such history raises uncomfortable questions.³⁵ The excerpts Houle has used from the Royal Proclamation (1763), the British North American Act (1867), Treaty No. 1 (1871), the Indian Act (1876), and the Constitution Act (1982) specifically reference a Euro-Canadian concept of land and nation created through legislation.

The fields of colour are less easily identified as Western or non-Western. Although many modernist artists favoured abstraction for its perceived universality, Houle was influenced by Barnett Newman, who regarded abstraction as a spiritual mode of expression.³⁶ Similar to Western colour-field painters, Houle was interested in the medium specificity of paint. He applies colours with various intensities, ranging from opaque to translucent, and his canvases are animated through the application of paint in disparate directions and areas of splatter. Houle personalizes his work through gestural brushwork and colour choices. The squiggle markings seen in each of the five canvases are his way of identifying himself.³⁷ The same gesture appears repeatedly throughout his oeuvre, including the important work *The Place Where God Lives* (1989), which depicts the Narrows of Lake Manitoba, a place Sauteaux people travel to for spiritual renewal.³⁸ Houle has treated his abstract panels in *Premises for Self Rule* with the same expressive qualities.

Houle's colour choices—two shades of red, blue, yellow, and green—are those most often seen in *parfleche* painting. This choice reiterates a connection with the ancient ones, reminding viewers that the sovereignty Houle articulates in these works begins with the land and his ancestors and, despite active colonization, persists to the present day. Though he is open to Canadian culture, Houle is clear that his relationship and obligations are with the land and not with the government.³⁹ The colour paired with each text was strategically chosen. The Royal Proclamation and the British North American

32. Robert Houle, "The Emergence of a New Aesthetic Tradition," in *New Work by a New Generation*, exh. cat., Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery (Regina: MAG, 1982).

33. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," 6.

34. Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A critique of conformist psychology from Adler to Laing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 4.

35. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang bring the concept of historical amnesia into their discussion of decolonization, and note how the historical record can be shaped to silence Indigenous people and facilitate settler goals. See Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." Paulette Regan puts forth a similar concept, which she refers to as "Settler mythological amnesia," wherein myths based on denial are built into the foundation of Canada. See Paulette Regan, "Unsettling the Settler Within: Canada's Peacemaker Myth, Reconciliation, and Transformative Pathways to Decolonization," PhD diss., University of Victoria, 2006.

36. Barnett Newman was, of course, not alone in this belief. Mondrian followed Theosophy and thus believed that painting could express the spiritual realm. Newman is singled out here because of the importance Houle places on the artist as a mentor figure and source of inspiration. See Mark Cheetham, *Abstract Art Against Anonymity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 136.

37. Robert Houle, interviewed by author, February 27, 2016.

38. Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," 62.

39. Robert Houle, quoted by Michael Bell, *KANATA Robert Houle's HISTORIES*, exh. cat., Carleton University Art Gallery (Ottawa: CUAG, 1993), 19.

Act—agreements between the Crown and the emerging nation of Canada—are partnered with iridescent blue and red respectively, while Treaty No. 1, the Indian Act, and the Constitution Act—legislation associated with the Canadian nation-state—are matched with more natural hues of green, red oxide, and ochre. Taken together, these colour choices and repeated gestural markings enable Houle to express his position, thereby suggesting that the abstract panels represent an Indigenous perspective. His use of text and expressive colour brings two differing viewpoints into close proximity, thus indicating to viewers that there are two vastly different imaginings of land and sovereignty at play.

From a settler-Canadian perspective, the Royal Proclamation is significant, because it is the foundational document of the Canadian nation-state. It put in place a legal process for acquiring territory for Britain at the end of the Seven Years War. From an Indigenous perspective, it translated the existence of Indigenous title into language colonial governments understood. It is the first document to state that Indigenous sovereignty exists over lands that have not been ceded or purchased by the colonial government through treaties.⁴⁰ Clauses in the Royal Proclamation insist on a balanced nation-to-nation relationship between colonial governments and Indigenous nations.⁴¹ In practice, however, the actual degree of balance in this relationship is dubious. On the occasion of its 250th anniversary, former Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Shawn A-in-chut Atleo (Nuu’chah’nulth) observed that the Royal Proclamation was the result of mutual respect and partnership, but it had not been observed in the same spirit. In his words, “These principles [of respect and partnership] have been denied for too long, usurped by federal laws and policies that are paternalistic at best and assimilationist at worst.”⁴² In this context, Houle’s inclusion of both balance and tension in his compositions is not incongruous, but rather reflects the ever-present, contradictory dynamics that mark the relationship between colonial governments and Indigenous peoples.

While settler Canadians cannot leave Canada, it is still possible to decolonize the nation-state and the people who live there. Metis scholar and artist David Garneau argues that decolonization in Canada is a cultural project that involves making those who live north of the 49th parallel aware of, and responsible for, the inherent complexities and contradictions at the foundation of their society. This complexity is reflected in *Premises for Self Rule* through Houle’s placement of the two panels. In Garneau’s words, cultural decolonization is “about First Nations, Inuit, and Metis restoring and strengthening [their] different ways of knowing and being, and requiring [their] guests to unlearn and disengage from their colonial habits.”⁴³ Houle establishes the relationship between these two perspectives through the juxtaposition of abstract paintings and text, thus setting the overall tone of the work. It is, however, the final element—the phototransfers of historical postcards—that strengthens the Indigenous position and calls for cultural decolonization.

Postcards with images of Indigenous people were so popular in the early twentieth century that nearly every major postcard manufacturer in the United States and Europe published at least one set of them.⁴⁴ These images circulated widely, and contributed to the myth of Indigenous peoples as frozen in a historical past. Houle contends this type of imagery created stereotypes, which were then used to justify the “wholesale dispossession” of

40. J. R. Miller, *The Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (1st ed. 1989; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 87–88.

41. *Ibid.*, 88. See also, Dale Turner, *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 18.

42. Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, “The Royal Proclamation and the Way Forward for First Nations,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 13, 2013.

43. David Garneau, “Extra-Rational Aesthetic Action and Cultural Decolonization,” *FUSE* 36, 4 (2013): 15.

Indigenous lands. In his words, such postcards “present a litany of annihilation, marginalization, misrepresentation, and invisibility.”⁴⁵ By appropriating this imagery, Houle breathes new life into it in a way that recalls his use of the *parfleche*. Sherry Farrell Racette asserts that contemporary Indigenous artworks that recreate Indigenous-made objects can revive those objects’ power. Similarly, Houle’s reappropriation of the postcards highlights the power and agency of the individuals they depict and brings it into his works. By placing the images directly on the panels of text, Houle positions them as a force of change within his works.

The postcards Houle uses are part of a ten-image set called, “Largest Indian Gathering in the Northwest, At Fort MacLeod Alberta,” which was published by A.Y. & Co. in August 1907.⁴⁶ The “gathering” is most likely a fair held at Fort MacLeod. A comparison between The *Sioux Dance* postcard used in *Premises for Self Rule: Constitution Act, 1982* (1994) | fig. 2 | and a historical image of the Fort MacLeod courthouse | fig. 3 | locates the gathering at the spot where the fair was regularly held. During the late nineteenth century, communities throughout Western Canada began to hold fairs, horse races, and rodeos. These were important events that provided entertainment and helped build a sense of community identity. The appeal of these events was such that Indigenous people in Alberta began holding similar celebrations on treaty days. Much to the frustration of local Indian Affairs officials, these Indigenous fairs were popular with settlers, and began attracting large audiences.⁴⁷ By the early twentieth century, settler business owners realized the value of including Indigenous people in their own fairs, and began inviting them to participate as early as 1905. The fairs thus became important “contact zones” in which complex power relations and interactions between Indigenous and settler people unfolded.⁴⁸ In a letter discussing the 1907 Fort MacLeod Fair, the local Indian Agent R. N. Wilson reported that “the Indian show was practically the whole thing. The ordinary fair features of white people were quite insignificant.”⁴⁹

Local Kainai were encouraged to attend the Fort MacLeod fairs dressed in traditional regalia. Prizes of cash or food were awarded for the best attire.⁵⁰ The fairs were important to Niitsitapi⁵¹ people, not just because of these prizes, but because they were places to practice their culture at a time when the right to do so was under attack. Participation in the fairs thus allowed dances to be taught, clothing and horse trappings to be made, and ceremony rituals to be passed on. Moreover, participants were celebrated at these events, and their presence ensured the financial success of many fairs.⁵² While fairs and postcards did serve to romanticize Indigenous people, removing them from their time and place, they also demonstrate how First Nations navigated colonial modernity in the early twentieth century.

While such agency may have attracted Houle, he chose to downplay the postcards’ status as commodities in order to make the individuals they depicted visible again. When the postcards were first printed, each one included a caption presenting Indigenous peoples as stereotypes. Houle removed these captions and thus a significant part of the commodity context. In *Premises for Self Rule*, he used postcards captioned “The Sioux Dance,” “Medicine Lodge, Blackfoot Indians,” “Blackfoot Indian Braves,” “Chief Running Wolf and Party of Blackfoot Braves,” and “Horn Society of Alberta Indians.”

44. Patricia C. Albers, “Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards,” in *Symbols, Souvenirs, and Sentiments: Postcard Imagery of Plains Indians 1898–1819*, eds. Christraud M. Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 66.

45. Houle, “Sovereignty Over Subjectivity,” 31.

46. Peggy Gale, “Robert Houle: Recording,” in *Robert Houle: Sovereignty over Subjectivity*, exh. cat., Winnipeg Art Gallery (Winnipeg: WAG, 1999), 22.

47. Mary-Ellen Kelm, *A Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 26.

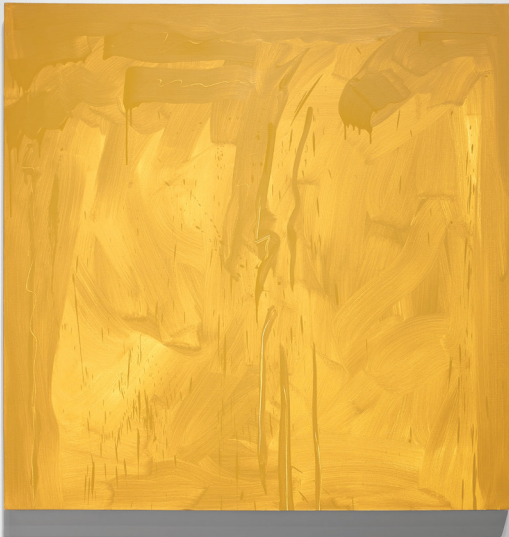
48. *Ibid.*

49. R. N. Wilson to J.A. Marckle, Indian inspector, May 3, 1908, Blood Agency Fonds, M-1788, box 3, file-21, Glenbow Museum Archives, Calgary.

50. Kelm, *A Wilder West*, 34.

51. The Niitsitapi include the Kainai, Siksika, Apatohsippiikani, and Ammskaapiikani peoples.

Figure 2. Robert Houle, *Premises for Self Rule: Constitution Act, 1982*, 1994, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, and laser cut vinyl, 152.4 × 152.4 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, purchased with funds from the Estate of Mary Eileen Ash. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



An Act to give effect to a request by the Senate and House of Commons of Canada.... WHEREAS CANADA has requested and consented to the enactment of an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom to give effect to the provisions hereinafter set forth and the Senate and the House of Commons of Canada in Parliament assembled have so requested Her Majesty requesting that Her Majesty do please to cause a Bill to be enacted in the Parliament of the United Kingdom to give effect to the *Constitution Act, 1982* set out hereinafter and that it is hereby enacted for and shall have effect in Canada and shall come into force as provided in that Act....2. No Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom passed after the *Constitution Act, 1982* comes into force shall extend to Canada as part of its law.... This Act may be cited as the *Canada Act 1982*.... PART I. CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS....25. The guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any aboriginal, treaty or other rights or freedoms that pertain to the aboriginal peoples of Canada including (a) any rights or freedoms that have been recognized by the Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763; and (b) any rights or freedoms that may be acquired



Without the titles, these images are less easily consumed and their meanings become fluid. In Houle's compositions, the viewer must actively consider what the images are meant to signify, rather than being told what to think. This creates a space of productive ambiguity, which makes it possible for Houle to create different associations for the images. He thereby reaches a broader audience and elicits a variety of reactions and actions from viewers. Are the men depicted about to begin a Sun Dance? Is this a performance for a settler audience, or perhaps a visiting dignitary? Is this a delegation in a treaty negotiation or signing? Their clothing locates them, broadly, as being from the Plains, although they cannot be located precisely without the caption. Since Houle uses text from Treaty No. 1, it suggests that they are from the southern Manitoba area, yet he has also used texts that effect Indigenous peoples from coast to coast. What does remain obvious is the way Houle draws out connections between texts and people. While these colonial documents shape daily life in Canada, they are not something the majority of its citizens think about everyday. It becomes easy to forget that these documents have real, tangible effects—to forget they were intended to destroy Indigenous ways of life. By pairing images of Indigenous people with these texts, Houle reminds viewers of that connection.

Since Houle often remarks on the importance of history to his practice, it is important to take into account the historical aspects of the postcards, regardless of its availability. Houle has used these postcards repeatedly in his work, but usually the captions remain with the images. In this respect, some viewers may already have this information when viewing the series.⁵³ In *Premises for Self Rule: Treaty No. 1, 1871* (1994), Houle uses the “Horn Society of Alberta Indians” postcard, which depicts ten members of the Iitskinaiksi, the Siksika word for Horn Society. The men stand shoulder to shoulder and wear shirts and pants

52. Kelm, *A Wilder West*, 35–36.

53. For example, *Coming Home* (1995), *Parfleches for Sydney* (1996), and *Medicine Lodge* (1997).



Figure 3. Sir Wilfred Laurier's visit to Fort MacLeod, with Court House in the Background, c. 1913. Reproduced with the permission of the Fort MacLeod Historical Association FMP.80.6.3.

embellished with beading or quillwork, as well as moccasins and headdresses; many hold trade blankets, while two also wear wide-brimmed, European-style hats. Considering the prizes awarded at fairs, it makes sense that these men would have worn their finest regalia. That they also wore trade goods is indicative of their active engagement with modernity and settler culture.

litskinaiksi is a closed Siksika spiritual society. There are a number of Siksika societies, but the litskinaiksi is the most important.⁵⁴ A Blackfoot person progresses through each society as they age, and in them members learn the Niitsitapi way of life. The litskinaiksi (for men) and the Maoto'kiiksi (Buffalo Women's Society) are the final sacred societies.⁵⁵ Members of the litskinaiksi would have been instrumental in keeping the Sun Dance going in the face of aggressive assimilationist policies. Houle's inclusion of this group thus brings that adversity and struggle into his work. Moreover, since the 1990s, various Niitsutapi nations have been actively seeking the repatriation of sacred bundles from museums around the world.⁵⁶ This image thus represents both historical and contemporary resistance, which are embedded in the fabric of Houle's compositions.

In placing the phototransfer inside the rectangular space, Houle breaks the integrity of that space—it cannot be a coincidence that the text panel, rather than the painterly canvas, is sacrificed.⁵⁷ The overall balance of each composition is destroyed and tension becomes the prevailing sensibility. This positioning cancels out a connection with the land based in settler law and instead privileges a relation of spiritual partnership consonant with Indigenous presence and ways of being with the land. With this choice, Houle enacts a cultural decolonization and issues a call to change the relationship the Canadian nation and settler Canadians have with the land and with Indigenous peoples. Houle's 1985 treaty works were important, because they showed an Indigenous perspective; *Premises for Self Rule* raises the stakes and demands change.

Finally, the placement of the postcards suggests that Houle is speaking to Indigenous viewers, reminding them that their ancestors were active participants in the drawing up of some of these statutes—however unequal those negotiations were.⁵⁸ As a child, Houle's grandfather repeatedly reminded him, "When this country was named, native people were present and native people signed treaties."⁵⁹ Treaty No. 1, for example, was drafted at the behest of the various First Nations of southern Manitoba and Winnipeg, among them Houle's *Saulteaux* nation. The chiefs were concerned with the influx of settlers and they saw the treaty as a means of protecting their land.⁶⁰ While many of the demands the chiefs made were ignored, they actively participated in the negotiation process. The people depicted in the postcards convey a similar sense of active participation—they stare directly at the viewer, defiantly turn their backs, or pose proudly.

Houle brings things together to create power.⁶¹ The *parfleche* as a carrier of medicines is thus his primary concern. Traditionally, these medicines would have been plants, but the modernist *parfleches* that comprise *Premise for Self Rule* carry a different type of medicine. Painterly expression, text, and historical images are brought together to remind viewers that there are two very different land epistemologies involved in shaping the place now called Canada.

54. George First Rider, interviewed by J.C. Hellson, March 25, 1969, disc 54, transcript, Provincial Museum and Archives of Alberta, <http://ourspace.uregina.ca/bitstream/handle/10294/567/1/HA-077.pdf?sequence=1> (March 21, 2016).

55. Frank Weasel Head, "Repatriation Experiences of the Kainai," in *We are Coming Home: Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence*, ed. Gerald T. Conaty (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2015), 172.

56. A sacred bundle is a wrapped collection of sacred objects that is cared for by an individual. The contents of a particular bundle depend on the maker and its purpose. See Conaty, *We are Coming Home*.

57. Clara Hargittay argues that the postcards function as a trace or scar in the Derridian sense. See Hargittay "Robert Houle: Identity and Multiplicity," in *Real Fictions: Four Canadian Artists*, exh. cat., Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney: MCA, 1996).

58. Miller, *The Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*.

59. Houle, quoted in *KANATA: Robert Houle's HISTORIES*, 19.

60. Olivia Patricia Dickenson and William Newbigging, *A Concise History of Canada's First Nations* (1st ed. 2006; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 188–192.

61. Houle, quoted in *KANATA: Robert Houle's HISTORIES*, 15.

These largely incompatible perspectives are a source of tension between settler and Indigenous peoples. On one level, Houle presents viewers with the opportunity to see another way of knowing, yet he also makes his position clear by privileging the Indigenous perspective. Houle reminds non-Indigenous viewers of an enduring Indigenous presence, thereby demanding them to work towards a relationship with the land based on spirituality and responsibility. On another level, he asks Indigenous viewers to harness the agency that is embedded in his works.

The creation of the Canadian nation-state is a product of modernization and colonization. While modernism helped construct Canadian national identity, Houle turns it into a means of cultural decolonization. He thus seeks to remind people of the injustices that were committed through colonization—to wake settlers from their collective amnesia. The goal of cultural decolonization is to Indigenize non-Indigenous Canadians and the structures that maintain the nation-state, so that a peaceful coexistence can emerge. This includes the relationship settlers Canadians have with the land. The lingering question is: When faced with the knowledge of this truth, will one have the courage to act? Decolonization requires humility, courage, and compassion. Houle's *Premise for Self Rule* provides his viewers with an opportunity to rise to the challenge—this is the medicine he offers. ¶

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