A Story of Storytelling: Listening to Narratives of Belonging within the Indigenous Art Centre

By

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Abstract

The Indigenous Art Centre (IAC) is an Indigenous-led federal program that supports “the creation, preservation and promotion of contemporary art produced by Indigenous peoples in Canada.”

Presently, the Indigenous Art Collection, around which the Centre is based, encompasses upwards of 4300 artworks produced by First Nations, Metis and Inuit artists dating from the 1950s to the present. Maintained by the Canadian federal department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC), the Centre is acknowledged by members of the Indigenous arts community as one of the most comprehensive overviews of the contemporary Indigenous art movement in Canada. The Collection is concomitantly endorsed by the federal government as an historically and culturally significant national heritage collection.

The study explores the operational significance of the federal program, in the wake of Canada’s ratification of the United National Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2016, the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Calls to Action in 2015 precipitating in federal policy shifts and the creation of social infrastructure supports. Through personal accounts from facilitators/receivers of the Centre’s programming, the Indigenous-led management of the Collection is explored. The investigation navigates the institutional processes via individual experiences. Imperatives of ethical responsibility and reciprocal engagement are used as guiding markers. The study generates conversation within and recognition for the unique model of collaborative arts management practiced within the Centre.


2 CIRNAC – acronym for Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada will be used in the study for consistency. Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada is the legal name since the dissolution of the Department of Indigenous and Northern Development in March 2017. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) was the applied name from 1970 to 2008. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) was the applied name from 2008 to 2015. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) was the applied name from 2015 to 2017, and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) is the applied name used since 2017.
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Introduction

Maintained by the Canadian federal department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC), the Indigenous Art Centre (IAC) is an Indigenous-led federal program that supports “the creation, preservation and promotion of contemporary art produced by Indigenous peoples in Canada.” Presently, the Indigenous Art Collection around which the Centre is based, encompasses upwards of 4300 artworks produced by First Nations, Metis and Inuit artists dated from the 1950s to the present. Acknowledged by members of the Indigenous arts community as one of the most comprehensive overviews of the contemporary Indigenous art movement in Canada, the Collection is concomitantly endorsed by the federal government as an historically and culturally significant national heritage collection.

This study explores the operational significance of the federal program while considering Canada’s ratification of the United National Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2016 under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Calls to Action in 2015 precipitating in federal policy shifts and the creation of revitalized social supports directed towards reconciling Indigenous-Crown relations.

The Indigenous-led management of the Collection offers a unique opportunity to investigate Indigenous-led programming operating alongside Canadian federal structures. The study aims to discover how Indigenous self-determination is tangibly engaged in the management and operations of the Indigenous Art Centre, and how it manages to Indigenize structures that are born out of non-Indigenous

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initiatives. The Centre facilitates programming that supports a significant public collection of Indigenous art. Consequently, the Collection holds multilateral importance for communities and individuals throughout the country. The institutional processes that facilitate the delivery of these services via individual experiences Mobilized from ethical imperatives of interpersonal responsibility and reciprocal engagement as guiding markers, conversations are generated recognizing the unique model of collaborative arts management practiced within the Centre.

Prior to the formal consolidation of the Centre and establishment of an institutional mandate for collecting contemporary Indigenous art in 1965, the federal government’s acquisition of First Nations, Metis and Inuit art was rolled out in succeeding waves of federal policies directed towards financially supporting isolated Indigenous communities, simultaneously drawing these communities into the national economy through Western valuation of artistic products. Given the lack of publicly accessible documentation, I was unable to ascertain whether the program was designed to provide financial support or promote financial independence through small-scale entrepreneurship. However, the mobilization for the Centre’s creation rested with the Canadian government responding to demands for what Seneca curator Tom Hill identified as “cries of social injustice from the Indian people.”

It is aligned with other activities of the nation-state motivating socioeconomic growth realized through the reinterpretation and ideologically reframing Indigenous art as moveable symbols of Canadian cultural identity tied to rightful inheritance of the land.

5 In “Indian Art in Canada: An Historical Perspective,” Tom Hill discusses how Indigenous art was mobilized as a tool of establishing historical presence and identity in contradistinction to American culture in the 1960s. Attention was given to “Indigenous art” as a symbol of Canadian identity. Marketed through international travelling exhibitions and through sales, the turn to Indigenous cultural products by the art-buying public produced the grounds and leverage that was added to calls from Indigenous artists who had been calling for greater support prior to this time. Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers, edited by Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill (Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), 21.

Some of the works in the Collection are implicated in historical-political processes like the construction of Indigenous material expressions as products of a “vanishing culture.” Ryan Rice writes on this extensively in several publications, and this became a general topic informing all my discussions about the Centre. In fact, the call for these cultural processes to be recognized within a political context permeates the project of collecting Indigenous art within the context of the institution.7

At present, the IAC operates laterally to other federal arts institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of History, and the Canada Council for the Arts Art Bank. These national museums and loaning collections are presently engaged in long-term institutional acquisition processes to expand their contemporary Indigenous art collections with pieces that are increasingly garnering national and international attention. Targeted Indigenous art acquisition processes are not isolated to Canada. In fact, they echo similar processes taken up in art institutions globally, namely the initiatives taken up by Australia and New Zealand’s art sectors, instigating reciprocal exchanges of Indigenous art exhibitions between nations precipitating in cross-cultural dialogues.

The IAC is an enduring anomaly. As a public arts program within a government service agency physically contained within federal offices led by an Indigenous administration, the value of the programming on an institutional level as well as for public engagement has been largely unexplored. The study builds on the sociological method of Institutional Ethnography (IE) to explore the programmatic operations and whether they channel Indigenous self-determination in the institutional framework. Pulling from more recent institutional texts that inform the procedures of the Centre, and also including the UNDRIP and the TRC Calls to Action that recommend Canadian state policies to establish ethical relationships with Indigenous peoples, I reply to the calls for equitable engagement, the recognition of self-determination, and self-governance with my own actions to engage with these processes. The study explores the Centre within the context of this federally aggregated support system for Indigenous art and

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its producers and mediators, constituted of personal narratives told by individuals who negotiate the space.

A series of semi-structured interviews with cultural professionals, and artists who have worked at the IAC, coheres a narrative woven within relational responsibility about how the federal management of Indigenous art has been navigated to support Indigenous self-determination within the federally maintained site.

I created directed questions to narrate the institutional mandate of the Centre through lived experiences. Developed to prompt reflection on who the Centre serves and how services are delivered, the questions also examine how the Centre represents the participants and supports their work as staff, jury members and artists, and how these responsibilities are effected (or not) through the delivery of programs. Exploring the practical negotiation of professional associations predicated on individual’s coordination within their roles, I activate localized knowledge in the process of building relationships with participants. My positionality outside of the institutional context and the cultural community, guided the creation of the questions; asking these particular questions, I sought to inform participants of my intention to honour their stories while working to create a larger story of their shared experiences. What comes to the fore is the adaptive and reflexive ingenuity of the institution as a collection of self-determined and self-defined Indigenous art. The product of successive administrations working within the parameters of federal policy, what is at stake is the negotiation of recognition and self-definition of the client group (ie. Indigenous artists).

This project is tied to a specific challenge I respond to for research that engages Indigenous cultural material and, therefore, Indigenous peoples and ways of knowing and being. Mohawk scholar, Audra Simpson, in her study on her community of Kahnawá:ke reflects on the importance of doing research that originates within community. I take this up at the level of theory and method to look at what a space that stewards Indigenous art specifically, but Indigenous culture generally, does or becomes when individual voices are engaged from the place they speak within the professionalized field of art. How does this engage “Indigenous identity” as another cultural identity within the Canadian multicultural mosaic?
What are the things that matter to individuals who negotiate the space? And concurrently, how can the research be taken up to reflect how this matters not only for community in its totality, but for individuals within community, and for the artists whose works are part of the Collection?

In their roles, participants have been involved in the representation and promotion of contemporary Indigenous art. I bring together an interpersonal narrative, arranged around the impact of the Collection as the product of collectively determined imperatives from its formal consolidation in the 1960s to the present. Inviting participants to reflect on the Centre as it facilitates programming related to the development, maintenance, and promotion of the Collection, recognition of their activities provides recognition for the collaborative model of arts management, mobilized through interpersonal engagement, and responsibility.8 9

Opportunities for how the archive as an active interpersonal, ethically motivated initiative can be shared and collaboratively expanded are explored. Reflection on the emergent realities of individuals’ experiences that confound, expand, and resist a categorical narrative of Indigenous identity facilitated through Indigenous art representation concludes the study.

The concept/idea/activity of adaptive thinking and being underpins the theoretical structure and method informing the study. Walter Mignolo’s explanation of decoloniality as process of “thinking and doing” to delink from institutionalized knowledge production. These systematic methods of thinking are connected to physical possession and epistemological dominion. I draw on this recursive model of thinking and acting to align with requirements called for by Indigenous researchers for fellow researchers engaging with Indigenous communities. Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson, has stated that respect, reciprocity, and relationality should inform the development of these methodologies.10 This informs the epistemology as relationships and commitment to relationships become critical. Finding a way of relating and relaying


through language that is grounded within particular communities is part of this commitment. In the space of ethical knowledge produced within local contexts, self-defined and internally recognized communities, Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana critical theorist, offers discursive, lived theorizing of relationality that transgress “pure” categories of culture is also informative. Theoretically, this suggests an adaptable model of moving within the structurally coded space of the Centre that is deconstructed and rebuilt through conversation.

Proliferating from various sites, the term “decolonization” has evolved in local and global communities, as well as national and international organizations. It often signals a variety of responses and actions linked to shifting the terms of engagement with Indigenous peoples. Depending on the speaker, decolonization signals various actions predicated on addressing historical iniquities between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples through conceptual and physical activities. Either individual, organizational, communal, national, and otherwise, Indigenous peoples’ call for these relationships to be predicated on right relationships, consultation, and self-determination converge on the land.

Geographically and politically bound, decolonization as a process arises from historical contexts where colonial nation-states aimed to dispossess Indigenous nations of their sovereignty through violent seizure of land and bodies. Attempting to eradicate Indigenous identity altogether through assimilationist policies organized at the state level, decolonization begins and ends in an acknowledgement of the land, Indigenous title to land, and one’s place in the latticework of possession. It extends into the recognition of how others occupy and share the same place, and demands that individuals deconstruct, assess, and rework how it is that they navigate these links.


12 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 244-5.

13 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” 12.
Various positions on the meaning, significance, and actions accorded to decolonization abound. However, irrespective of the context and motivations, I believe that the connection between these iterations is a requirement for individuals to acknowledge their physical and personal relationship within the system of possession, and to act with the intent of changing the historical conditions. An extension of ethical responsibilities, from this acknowledgement flows relationally committed actions, upholding, and revealing the responsibility of everyone.

In recent history, Canada, as well as other nation-states including Australia and South Africa, hinged discussions of the state’s relationship with Indigenous peoples to a federal mechanism of reconciliation. Generally, reconciliation follows a prescriptive path beginning with apologies from national leadership for past harms and trespasses committed against Indigenous peoples that are then acknowledged through economic remunerations paid to direct and indirect recipients of these historical (and ongoing) traumas. As a historical record and an economic tool of acknowledgement, reconciliation has, at the level of state rhetoric, recast the relationship between Indigenous nations and the non-Indigenous state as active structural reparation for historical trauma.

In Canada, the political context for the conversation is the implementation of the 94 recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) concluded in 2015. Reinforcing the Calls to Action is the United Nation’s Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Ratified by the Canadian government in 2017, the Declaration predicates the rights of self-determination, sovereignty, and nation-to-nation relationships with Indigenous peoples. In Canada, decolonization is about establishing right relationships. Requiring personal as well as structural actions, these actions must be local and particular to communities.

In this study, I do not directly address the process by which these federal mechanisms appear in the operations of the Centre. As such, there is space for such a study to be undertaken. Indeed, it would be

worthwhile to assess and recommend actions that could be integrated within the Indigenous Art Centre. Instead, this personal study stories an entrance into lived realities of working within the institutionalized space of Indigenous art and animates while challenging the efficacy of these mechanized processes.

Language is important for the way it gestures towards thought processes and determines actions. Reconciliation and decolonization are significant terms in the context of the present historical moment, and in the larger historical processes of Indigenous-settler relations. That said, reconciliation has largely been questioned if not outright rejected by Indigenous scholars, artists, and activists. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson links reconciliation to enduring Canadian state processes that seek to manipulate emotional responses through the guise of responding and addressing previous harm while maintaining control of the terms of meting out acceptable recompenses.15

Of a piece with reconciliation is the underlying movement of multi-lateral and shifting actions that collect within the term decolonization. Decolonization is taken up in this research in response to the refusal of many Indigenous peoples to state-sanctioned mechanisms of redress in favour of Indigenous-led decolonizing actions. Therefore, decolonization appears in my framing of myself both outside and invested within the processes of listening to, responding and acting upon Indigenous peoples’ rights for recognition and long-term investments in establishing rights recognition.16 The decolonizing action I take in this study is listening to and storying the process of establishing right relationships.

To this end, I adapt a model of Institutional Ethnography (IE) as a qualitative research framework where federal mechanisms such as UNDRIP and the TRC documents that address systemic forms of dispossession and Indigenous knowledges contingent upon and requiring personal action, circulate but are ultimately foregone in favour of individual experiences (what Dorothy Smith calls “work knowledge”).17

15 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 46.


17 Dorothy Smith, Institutional Ethnography, 151.
IE supports processes and methods for navigating the discursive and built environment of institutions and the ruling relations which coordinate individuals’ actions within these networked sites as communicated through daily experiences. The space in and around which these conversations revolve occupies both physical and conceptual territory organized around the Centre, and the conversations draw on a historical context that is place-specific and shared as well as individually experienced and varied.

I begin with historical context as a starting point, both in terms of situating the study within the larger narrative while indicating my intentions through the selection of certain resources and specific details. I take up Nehiyaw and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach’s aphorism that, “we know what we know from where we stand. We need to be honest about that.” It is a particular, subjective story I provide to unpack the current sociocultural and political context of the Centre while remaining truthful to my position as an insider-outsider.

Retelling a History of the Indigenous Art Centre

The Indigenous Art Centre – originally designated the Indian Art Centre – was consolidated as a federally funded cultural program in 1965. Collection of contemporary Canadian Indian art began through departmental purchases, acquisitions and selections by the Centre’s managers to support and promote practicing Indian artists. At the same time, anthropologically driven collection of Indian art was underway at the National Museum of Man. Therefore, collecting for the IAC did not rest easily within categories of “art” or “anthropology.” That said, prior to the establishment of a formal collection process, art that became part of the IAC Collection was acquired through unplanned exchanges. Mohawk scholar and former employee, Ryan Rice explains that:

The collection…includes works purchased by Indian and Northern Affairs before 1965. These pre-Indian Art Centre works were selected and purchased by Indian agents and department officials who often visited reserves across Canada. Other works were acquired through gift giving by Indian bands to department officials. The art works were not acquired with the intent of establishing a national Indian Art Collection, but rather to support economic growth in the places the department visited. These

18 Margaret Kovach, Indigenous Methodologies, 7.
works eventually furnished office decoration for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.\textsuperscript{19}

The initial impetus for the government collecting contemporary Indian art was socioeconomic, to support the growth of nonspecific, often remote, Indian reserve economies. Developing from isolated encounters between the Canadian government’s territorial liaisons (e.g. Indian agents) and Indian artists, the current Collection is comprised of artworks that reflect this period of Indigenous-state commodity exchanges. As markers of indexical economic development, Indigenous art and the individuals who created it were reformulated and drawn into the Canadian economy as products and vendors respectively of cultural wares.\textsuperscript{20}

Following the reorganization of the federal department of Citizenship and Immigration in 1966, the Indian Art Centre fell into the care of the Cultural Affairs Sections of the newly created Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND).\textsuperscript{21} Restructuring of the federal department was of a piece with efforts made by the Canadian government, mechanized through public policy, to laterally target socioeconomic development in Indigenous communities. The federal designation of Indigenous art as Canadian Indigenous art was a step towards drawing these communities into the economy while creating the category of Indigenous culture as distinct from but enmeshed within Canadian culture, economically promoting Indigenous peoples as a cultural group within Canada’s diverse market.

As early as the 1950s, Inuit art was collected by the federal government. Initiated within the branch of Inuit Affairs under the Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources, like the Indian Art Centre, the Inuit Art Centre was created to support the development of Inuit arts and crafts. Works were purchased by the Department from the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, the Hudson’s Bay Company,


\textsuperscript{20} Deborah Doxtator,

\textsuperscript{21} Refer to citation from Page 1 for a detailed breakdown of the subsequent federal restructuring and accompanied designation changes to the department.
as well as northern cooperatives. The Inuit Art Centre developed and promoted exhibitions with the Eskimo Arts Council from 1970 to 1985. In response to the increased interest and marketability of Inuit art, marketing organizations developed in the north and art dealers began to express interest in collecting Inuit art from further afield.

Fitted into this epoch is the parallel development of the Indian Art Centre. Following the recommendations of Alex Janvier, hired as a cultural advisor for Indian Affairs in the 1960s, the IAC developed an arts policy for the federal government that drew upon a study of arts and crafts in Eastern Canada. From 1967 to 1996, the Indian Art Centre reflected the work of “Indian” artists, a nominal term derived from the Indian Act. “Indian” became both a status and an identity that delineated the parameters for institutional programming; artworks that could be considered for collection were those produced by First Nations and Metis artists from across Canada. Under this designation, the collection of Indian and then contemporary Canadian Indian art determined what came to constitute the authored material and thus the collective identity of the Collection. Identity determined status and what could and could not be claimed by Indigenous peoples in terms of monetary benefits.

Providing minor economic boosts to localized reserve economies through payments to artists, the collection of contemporary Indigenous art was introduced as a nationalized project of community development, consolidating Indigenous culture as an extension of Canadian culture through social policy. The “cultural shift” is reflected in federal records from 1967. Annual Reports from Indian Affairs sporadically detail the expansion of the Cultural Affairs section, previously a branch within the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, into a department tasked to perform in accordance with a set of comprehensive social policies directed towards the growth of Indigenous communities. The subsequent year, Cultural Affairs assumed the directive of “preserv[ing] and stimulat[ing] the growth

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and expression of Canadian Indian culture through research, documentation, and the promotion of graphic and performing arts.”23

As a result, cultural programming focused on developing Indigenous content was introduced as a priority within the federal department. The following years saw a proliferation of federally endorsed, original Indigenous authored content. Levied through federal grants and programs, arts magazines such as *Tawow*, aimed at producing and developing Indigenous-led art content and writing, became sites for the dissemination of culturally inflected professional development. They gained further prominence and credibility following Expo ‘67.24

The national and international success of the *Indians of Canada Pavilion* featured in Expo ‘67 garnered contemporary Canadian Indian art international attention, subsequently elevating the value of the Centre given that it was one of the only institutions collecting Indian art at that time. The Centre’s first arts policy was created in 1968 followed by the consolidation of an exhibition program.

The IAC formally amalgamated around the Indigenous Art Collection in this year with programs correlated to the diverse operational requirements necessary to retain a permanent art collection. In addition to maintaining, promoting, and collecting further works, the Centre assumed the responsibility of fulfilling the federal policy of preservation and stimulation of Indigenous culture in Canada.

Touring exhibitions were a large proponent of the early operations of the Centre in the 1990s. Produced by curators of the Centre such as Barry Ace, Ryan Rice, July Papatsie, David General, Richard Hill, and Barry Pottle, various exhibitions travelled across Canada and further abroad. These exhibitions represent significant moments for the recognition of Indigenous artists within a national context, but they also signal significant moments of international engagement.


Transitions: Contemporary Indian and Inuit Art of Canada (1997) is an example of the intercultural and transnational exchange of Indigenous artistic representations. The exhibition began its tour in the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, France, and subsequently travelled to the Waikato Museum of Art and History in Hamilton, New Zealand before travelling on to the National Gallery of Costa Rica and the Taipei Fine Art Museum in Taiwan. Transitions was also the first exhibition to be curated by Indigenous and Inuit curators.  

Recommendations for the care and storage of the collection were made over the decade of the 1970s by consecutive Cultural Officers and advisors, stabilizing the operations and defining the Centre as an important site of contemporary Indigenous art and research among academics and professionals alike within the allied fields of curation, museum studies, and arts management. During this period, art juries were held to determine subsequent acquisition procedures for the collection. At the same time, loans were granted by the Centre to other national and international institutions. Ongoing changes to Canadian copyright and curatorial and collecting standards were incorporated into the IAC to meet museum standards, processes which are still adhered to and implemented by the institution.

A pivotal economic and shift in optics for the Centre came in the 1990s. Though prior to this date the Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) funded some of the Centre’s programming, full funding of the Indian Art program’s acquisitions and ongoing maintenance was secured in 1990. Prior to this period, informal processes regarding collection, loans, and acquisitions were documented and adhered to by consecutive managers and officers.

These itinerant processes were formalized into institutional procedures following the consultation meeting in 1992, Bringing the Indian Art Centre into the 21st Century, at which time loan agreements and handling of objects were formalized into legal documents for distribution to the client group. The composition of subsequent peer-juried acquisitions was also approved at this time through a

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25 Viviane Gray, 33.
consultative process “consisting of former managers Tom Hill, Rick Hill, Stephen Rothwell and David General, artists Ron Noganosh, Allen Edzera, Helen Wassegijig, and Indian Art Centre staff, manager Viviane Gray and collections keeper Gilles Henry.” Other procedural developments during what appears to be the most rigorous consolidation period include, but are not limited to: discussions around who should be included in the Collection (status of the artists); the formal criteria for the collection in terms of traditional styles and contemporary forms; loan agreements to subsequent cultural institutions; the proportion of works to be collected annually from established and emerging artists; the expansion of the information database for better networking; and, the opening of the Indian Art Gallery in the lobby at Les Terrasses de la Chaudière providing space for recent and former acquisitions to the Collection to be displayed for those entering the federal department.

The institutional developments of the Centre cannot be separated from intensifying public tensions and scrutiny between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples in the latter decades of the 20th century. For example, the effect of the Oka Resistance in 1990 precipitated a systematic re-evaluation of Crown-Indigenous relations. In 1992, a year prior to the 78-day standoff between the Mohawk nation of Kahnesata:ke and the Canadian state over the protection of ancestral lands in Quebec, The Task Force on the Museums and First Peoples released a report. *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* addressed the tension between the historical anthropological model of representing First Peoples in Canadian museums and galleries, and outlined practical steps that museums could take to ethically engage with Indigenous material culture.

Evidently, the momentum generated from political unrest and subsequent policy shifts overflowed and in fact fed into these seemingly distinct domains, generating counter-dialogues from arts professionals and visual representations from Indigenous artists of sovereign acts of resistance and self-

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determination. Speaking of this time, Haudenosaunee artist and art critic, Jolene Rickard, identifies the need for recognizing visual sovereignty inherent within Indigenous art. She states that:

It is prudent to discuss tradition, art, and sovereignty based on a specific cultural location, while reserving the right to connect these ideas to a broader discussion of aesthetic practice as a colonial intervention. Inevitably, Indigenous artists confront their relationships to the philosophies or traditions that frame their cultural mapping with their artwork. If these philosophies or traditions are not understood, the artwork is typically narrowly confined to thin interpretation based on old-fashioned identity politics.²⁷

Viviane Gray notes such an instance of artistic visual sovereignty evocatively played out in the collections process during this period of political/cultural unrest. It was in 1990 that Gitxsan artist, Chuck Ya’Ya Heit created a piece in response to a national call for submissions to the Centre. Depicting Elijah Harper, Oji-Cree Chief and member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, on a 7.9 foot red cedar pole, Elijah Harper and the Deadheads makes direct reference to Harper’s opposition of the Meech Lake Accord on the grounds that First Nations had neither been consulted nor consented to the discussions around the constitutional amendments. Harper’s act of sovereign refusal is immortalized in Heit’s artistic representation. The cautionary response from TBS management of the Centre towards collecting the piece speaks to the politically and culturally charged valuation of the message it conveys as it actively refuses categorical distance from politics and aesthetic prescriptive definitions of art. Challenging various constructions of what art can and should say while pursuing the fulfillment of the mandate, the piece was ultimately collected and went on to be displayed in various office spaces and exhibitions.²⁸ National arts institutions responded to these events with the collection and display of

²⁸ Viviane Gray, The Indigenous Art Collection, 44.
Indigenous art in public exhibitions, many for the first time. A significant number of these institutions borrowed works from the already established Indian Art Collection.

Prior to the formation of the Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND) in 1967, Inuit Affairs was under the purview of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources while Indian Affairs fell under Citizenship and Immigration. Unlike Indian art which was largely collected for economic purposes by government officials, Inuit art received national and international art collectors’ attention for its fine craftsmanship, as exemplary models of modernist primitivism, as fine art, as tourist art, and as combinations of these categories. This is reflected in the early exhibition of Inuit carvings at the National Museum beginning in the 1950s. Despite garnering early international and national recognition, the governmental collection of Inuit art at the IAC has a sporadic history. Moreover, while the Indian Art Collection stipulated that staff be identified as Indian in its earliest mandate, the Inuit Art Centre had no such requirement. In 1985, the Inuit Art Section discontinued its exhibition program, and the collection of art, accumulated over 35 years, was disbanded to the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History) in Gatineau, Quebec, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario, the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Manitoba, the Inuit Culture Institute in Nunavut, and the Avataq Cultural Institute in Quebec.29 It was not until 1996 that the Indian Art Centre and the Inuit Art Centre amalgamated into the Indian and Inuit Art Centre. The Centre renewed its commitment to collecting and promoting Inuit art in a surprising turnaround given its disbandment less than a decade earlier.

The Centre was re-designated in 2017 as the Indigenous Art Centre – the home of a federally recognized public heritage art collection, and a comprehensive Indigenous-led arts programs consistent with museum standards.30 In 2008, the Centre was transferred to the Corporate Secretariat, Deputy Minister’s Office. Former director, Viviane Gray notes that the “move to the Department’s Executive

29 Viviane Gray, The Indigenous Art Collection, 27.
30 Viviane Gray, 48.
offices gave the Inuit and Indian Art Centre more prominence and stability than it ever had in its history.”

Presently, the Indigenous Art Collection comprises more than 4300 pieces of art, representative of emerging and prominent Indigenous artists practicing traditional, contemporary, and amalgamated art styles in a diversity of mediums ranging from beaded works, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and new media forms. Mandated acquisitions continue through the annual juried selection process. The Indigenous Art Program has crystallized its operations, with sections allocated towards loans, exhibitions, acquisitions, and research. The Centre’s resource library is accessible to the general public and is comprised of various print, audio and video archives of Indigenous arts periodicals, files on artists, conservation-standard images of the Collection, and reports and studies on Canadian Indigenous art. Representing First Nations, Metis, and Inuit art— the latter group amalgamated into the Centre in the 1990s—the IAC occupies an emergent space as an institution defined by federal policies that are negotiated through museum procedures to produce a collection of Indigenous art valued as a national heritage asset.

**Vantage Points and Positionality**

The other part of the story, the part that introduces how I came to focus on the Indigenous Art Centre and my position in relation to the Centre, begins not long ago. I was sitting with a colleague at Queen’s University in the spring of 2017, talking over coffee about arts institutions with significant Indigenous art collections. During our conversation, my colleague asked me what purpose the IAC served. I didn’t say anything initially, because I had neither heard of the IAC nor could I infer what this acronym stood for to patch together a response, and maybe this was something I should already know. I asked. My colleague told me that the Indian Art Centre* had a significant collection of art amassed since the 1970s, but likely earlier, and most of the collection rested in storage in the government offices in

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31 Viviane Gray, 50.
Gatineau, Quebec. They didn’t understand the reason for all that art to be sitting there. I didn’t either. I looked into it.

The Centre piqued my interest. Initially, I was curious because of my gap in knowledge about the Centre. As an academic studying Indigenous art and museum studies in Canada, this was particularly confounding. Especially given that during this conversation, I discovered that the collection numbered in the thousands; hundreds of paintings and sculptures, hundreds of artists, across time, across the country from different nations, residing in one place. I was not aware that the collection existed – had existed – for at least 60 years. Perhaps this was out of ignorance. Inexperience was more generous, and I wanted to be generous to myself. In the spirit of generosity, I applied my inexperienced self to the task of research, and I made a discovery that both pacified my ego and fueled my inquiry. I discovered very little information on the Centre. I used different names – the Indian Art Centre, the Aboriginal Art Centre, the Indigenous Art Centre, the Native Art Centre. I tried for an hour, different search combinations, different indicators marking a legacy extending over 150 years of the Canadian federal government’s recognition of Indigenous peoples.

I was continuously redirected to the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs* website which was down for maintenance. It was the summer of 2017, Canada’s sesquicentennial year, when departments linked to Indigenous services were undergoing structural reorganizations corresponding to federal policies devised by the sitting Liberal government. There was frustratingly little information. In the beginning stage of informal archival investigation, I discovered that there was, and still is, a significant absence of documented information about the Indigenous Art Centre. I also realized that I had become invested in the process of discovery. I carried this realization around, and I sat with it. I am still sitting with it.

This study arises from my personal interests in the cultivation and creation of collective opportunities to grow and share stories which inform and drive my academic/professional aspirations. While I seek to answer larger, systemic questions of the processes at play in the Centre, I am also trying to answer a series of personal questions – how can I share the knowledge I have acquired of the Centre in
order to make it more accessible to the public? And, how do I go about doing this in a way that is respectful and acknowledges and recognizes the actions of others who may be working towards other aspirations or visions of what the Centre can and should be? How do these visions fit together? And what does it mean to engage in work done in the service of, or with the intent of, decolonization?

Depending on the vantage point of the researcher observing the Centre from their field of inquiry, the IAC could be viewed as a generative site for the exploration of Canadian federal policies focused on Indigenous cultural development; the implementation of copyright laws to artistic production and their correlation with Indigenous ways of knowing; the historical implications of Indigenous culture framed as capital for entrance into the Canadian economy; or from the emerging space of literature on cultural diplomacy, discussing the international travelling exhibitions of Indigenous art as products of intercultural exchange leveraged by state actors as a form of soft power.\textsuperscript{32} This is by no means an exhaustive list. Nor am I located in any of these fields.

The following chapter addresses the space from which I approach the study, my motivations, and the genesis and origins of my ontological views that are wedded to ethical commitments and collective and individual responsibilities. The Interlude develops the responsibility of engaging with individuals from a place of commitment and responsibility by explaining my position and web of connections.

Chapter 1

Interlude (Minding the Gap)\textsuperscript{33}

My name is Rebecca Marquez. These are my words. I share details of my life so that you understand where I am coming from and what has brought me here. Sharing who I am, I also aim to answer \textit{why}.\textsuperscript{34} I address why it is I tell this story that is an amalgam of many personal stories, some of them mine, many belonging to others. I explain why I believe I can and should tell this story, and why it matters. The story that I tell begins for me in a place that is not far from where I am writing now. I show you in the only way I can. I begin by telling you about my entrance into stories.

These are the details as I have come to know them. I was born in Kitchener, Ontario, and grew up in Cambridge, a neighbouring city a fifteen-minute drive away. I was born to a Dutch settler mother and a Mexican immigrant father in the early 1990s. My younger brother and I share this experience of growing up in a household with lower German expressions tossed around as frequently as Spanish nursery rhymes. We grew up with love and within family. I revisited many memories from these years since leaving home to go to university in Ottawa, and again when I moved to Kingston to pursue further studies. Some of the details have shifted, however, unchanged in this narrative is my gratitude to my family and the life we have shared, and continue to share. I am eternally thankful for the individuals who share their lives with me, who have become my chosen family, confidantes, colleagues, companions. I am a better person for learning from and with them. We share many experiences that shape who I am, who we are. I know this.

\textsuperscript{33} This is a term borrowed from Willie Ermine’s article, “The Ethical Space of Engagement” and refers to the space that is created between two communities that are poised to engage with one another. Unlike much literature which identifies Western and Indigenous relations on the grounds of difference, Willie Ermine suggests a more generative and generous way of framing these interactions on the grounds of distinct, yet conversant communities joined by common understandings of the rules of engagement, or ethical practices. Engendered out of the understanding that Indigenous communities as well as other communities are implicated by virtue of their proximity to say nothing of the political, social, and cultural enmeshment of Indigenous and Western society necessitates a change in engagement to reflect these ethics.

This story does not belong to me, but is entwined with theirs. To claim it is to recognize my responsibility to share this story knowing that I also call on and include them.

Today, as I write the initial draft of this Interlude, I am sitting in the backyard of the house where I have rented a room since the beginning of my graduate studies. It is nearly mid-July and the sun this afternoon is particularly strong and warm on my skin. I feel the humidity in the heaviness of the air in my lungs. Here I sit, in this city now known as Kingston, Ontario – once the interim capital of Canada, prior to that and still the territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples – and I am struck, as I sometimes am, by the events that have brought me to this place, to the stories that live and are carried here.

Earlier this week, I was prompted in a job interview to talk about myself, where I grew up, my interests, and how I had come to be interested in the Indigenous cultural institute I had applied to for a database and curatorial internship. I began by talking about my childhood, how I grew up in a small southeastern city in Ontario but in a place that for me had no name. This place – home – full of gravel paths, sun, trees, family, the rush of the Grand River and emotions, nurturing of friendships and small life events, coalesce in my memories around the cyclical change of seasons. Thinking about how this practically mattered for the position I had applied to, I shared how my appreciation for the green realm of sunlight had translated into a studied observation of the world around me, which in turn evolved into a profound appreciation for art and a personal artistic practice. From my earliest memories, I remember sitting in trees, reading, observing, attempting to carry these shapeshifting moments home with me where I would try to mold the intangible into eternal material representations. Years passed, I continue(d) to observe, to walk, to create, I continue(d) to change.

During the summer months between my undergraduate studies in Humanities at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, I went home to work at the local art gallery I had taken art classes as a child. I was moving in smaller and smaller circles, honing my personal interests into practical skills within the field of art and museum studies as the twin roots of my vocational aspirations, growing from a life-long appreciation and persistent desire to come to know the world I inhabited and those with whom I
shared this place. I went on to explore Art Conservation as a professional trajectory, ultimately landing in
Cultural Studies.

Freedom to pursue my interests in diverse yet conversant disciplinary fields allowed me to apply
myself to Indigenous methodology and theory courses as well as museum and art history seminars.
Initially, my intention was to learn how to align, to make the disciplines “fit” together, to various ends.
There were many anxious stretches of time where I struggled. I questioned many things. Not only did I
doubt my ability to conduct research within the field of Indigenous methodologies as a non-Indigenous
person, I was uncertain of my capacity to conduct any form of research. For me, the line between personal
and professional ambitions had always been blurry. It became increasingly evident that discrete
boundaries had been left behind to become impossibilities.

At this point in the interview, I realized that I was telling a story, one that was deeply personal. I
had unknowingly adapted parts of my history to provide the information, understanding of my abilities
and motivations the interviewers sought from me. I had introduced myself through my connection to
family and the place I grew up; I had located myself in relation to my career aspirations and personal
interests; triangulating my purpose for pursuing the position around personal and professional
commitments. I was practicing a relational form of introduction.

I offer this story about introductions here, to show where I am coming from, what I hope to
achieve, why I am here, and that this is a story that develops from other stories. It is about me, and it is
about more than me. It is about how to tell stories, how I listen to stories, how I hold the stories of others,
and how to tell new stories about ourselves that recognize and reciprocate our responsibilities to one
another.35

I concluded my response by stating that I was seeking an opportunity to engage with Indigenous
art within an Indigenous community to learn practical skills within an institutional setting. I said that I
was prepared to learn from others how to apply myself to the maintenance, development, and promotion

35 Shawn Wilson, Research is Ceremony, 63
of Indigenous culture, and to offer my knowledge towards the respectful stewardship of Indigenous cultural material. This answer is as applicable to the interview as it is to the interlude to my master’s research that focuses on another Indigenous cultural institution. I include it here to demonstrate that this research emerges from personal motivations. It is intentional. It is conceptual. It is lived, and it is ongoing.

My lifelong aspiration is to engage in processes that enable individuals to share themselves with others, the way they see themselves in the world, and for me to find a way to do the same. The strongest, most compelling way I come to understand the world traces its path through art. I believe art in its essential form to be a process of self-storying expressed through various media to speak, share, and reach out to others through relationships predicated on reciprocal understanding. This is the guiding ethos and intention behind the work I do – to offer my knowledge and abilities to the cultivation, promotion, and sharing of stories communicated through art for relationship-building and the emergent potential this affords for long term community development.

I believe that art necessarily requires conversation. Art asks of individuals to speak it into common understanding. I believe conversations – stories – about art complete the cyclical process of creation. I believe that art fundamentally encourages us to imaginatively construct the stories of our lives alongside and nested within stories of other lives. Art presents visual representations of experiences, emotions, thoughts, that are lived from culturally inflected vantage points. You can agree, or you can disagree. This is the place, both physically and theoretically from which I begin. What I know, what I believe is that art communicates stories of belonging. This is where we begin.
Chapter 2

Nesting Research Within Stories

Histories of Possession vs. Stories of Refusal

I encountered Audra Simpson in 2017. Not physically. I read *Mohawk Interruptus*, so I was introduced to her through her research and what mattered to her as a Mohawk scholar from Kahnawá:ke. What mattered were the disruptive and resistant lives lived by the individuals of her community. Cordoned within the national borders of Canada on the south shore of the Saint Lawrence River in the province of Quebec, individuals living within the Mohawk reserve recognize and act on the understanding that their territory extends beyond these boundaries into northern New York State, land currently under the control of the United States of America.

Not only does their territory contravene national boundaries, their identities do as well. What Simpson discursively enacts in *Mohawk Interruptus* is a calculated, partial articulation of the shared identities and forms of membership created despite, and, at times, because of the constricting political forces exerted by the two state structures upon Indigenous governance and forms of membership. Structures that sought, and continue to seek, to define and dispossess Indigenous peoples of land and identity through their unique set of racialized policies (the controversial White Paper released under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1969, which effectively sought to eradicate Indian status and with it title to land), and other physical forms of removal from land and identity.

Through Simpson’s account, I learned about the complicated forms of membership commensurate with acts of refusal practiced in the Mohawk reserve when there was a risk that the collective identity and personal connections held by individuals would be compromised by external political (re: colonial) forces. I learned, too, that Indigenous scholars enter the arena that is Western research to counter historical misrepresentations and misunderstandings for the possibility that it will benefit their communities and subsequent representations in research. They do so by providing alternative knowledges nested within Western research for wider recognition of the ways of being and knowing that
are lived away from colonial representations. Reading these accounts, I was challenged to reflect on the actual implications and power of research to effect structural/political change, to impact how people see themselves, and how it is they can share these personal understandings and knowledges for communal benefits. This necessitated a model of research that could be adapted to acknowledge and work with Indigenous knowledges in a tangible way; this way was stories.

I learned about the power of telling and listening to stories; the power that could be generated from telling the stories that matter to the people who matter for the researcher/researched. I learned how this relationship became one of family, community, and land, ultimately refusing the dichotomous organization of Western research models for something personal and unwritten, yet deeply felt and collectively recognized. This was particularly relevant in the context of the research question I proposed which asked: what is the purpose of the Indigenous Art Centre? Given what I had learned from reading texts by Indigenous authors, a more fundamental question developed: how do individuals express the purpose of the Indigenous Art Centre through the stories they tell? What does the Centre, an extension of the Canadian government (the normative order), do to nurture and share these stories?

I mentioned earlier that I had always believed myself to be an observer, a silent witness to the natural world. Observing and collecting truths. That’s all it was; that’s all I thought it was. To me, research and play were synonymous. Until I read Simpson’s text and I came to appreciate the ethical mattering of research and how it was often constituted by Indigenous academics as a series of calculated moves to defend, to protect, and to reclaim space at the level of theory in order to live self-determined, political lives. It was the collective stakes – determined by “the researcher” in consultation with and to an extent, with footing in “the researched” – that drew me up short from my passive foray in and out of the verdant grounds of qualitative research models.

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From my place in the academy, I was treading on territory that had serious and lasting epistemological and physical consequences, and therefore, the potential for irreparable harm. Awakening to this liminal place, I realized I had always been an inhabitant. I was tied to lives, to collective ways of understanding the world, epistemologies correlated to relational ontologies arising from worldviews that were not mine, that moved past mine, gathered in the same place and time yet unnamed, unaddressed, unknown.

Historically, the diverse vantage points between Indigenous peoples and Western discourses have been set up to be competitive with one another when Indigenous perspectives are addressed.\(^{37}\) Predicated on ownership and resource control, the inherent diversity of individuals was contained within the linear progression of History, entrenching a normative order of extraction and dispossession.\(^{38}\) Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo identify this structural hierarchy in their own work within Latin American contexts as the abstract or Western universal.\(^{39}\) This method of knowledge production is not only harmful, it is categorically untrue to the experiences of individuals. Therefore, this study works from a position that acknowledges the singularity of individual experiences and moves to interact with individuals as legitimate authorities.

The gathering and sharing of knowledge, and specifically intercultural research, which this study is, engages practical ways of interacting with individuals from the context of their daily experiences. To generate lasting understanding leading to action, the method of sharing knowledge is integral.\(^{40}\) This


\(^{38}\) Willie Ermine, “The Ethical Space,” 198.


\(^{40}\) Intercultural is defined as an ongoing social process aimed at the pursuit of creating communities and collectivities that are disaggregated from the Western construction of society as homogenized cultures in order to capture and control in the pursuit of capital accumulation. Walter Mignolo in On Decoloniality discusses interculturality in the context of decolonial processes as a radical way of extending and expanding an otherwise that begins with communities that have been traditionally marginalized and othered in Western discourses. “Intercultural research” extends this process into the realm of research to acknowledge the particularity and diversity of
research requires the individual to assume personal responsibility for the maintenance, representation, and relational nature in which they are told.

I follow Audra Simpson’s recognition of the imperatives of colonial accumulation and how they have dictated that academic research provides methods and modalities of knowing for control of bodies and territories.\(^\text{41}\) I respond by developing a multivocal series of nested stories. While the focus is not on answering questions about how to salvage reconciliation or a totalizing definition of decolonization, I engage with both of these terms as reconciliation is the mechanism through which the Canadian government and therefore the federal institution interacts with Indigenous peoples and materials, and decolonizing action is what I term my act of storytelling. Exploring what matters to the people who work, live, and create is decolonizing work. Opening the space of research to other forms of living and living knowledges, I take seriously the knowledge of participants as meaningful data, and knowledge that is meaningful to the individuals. As an extension of ways of communicating knowledge that are derived from interpersonal accountability, the stories originate from individuals within particular places, that by virtue of their singularity, challenge the normative order and disperse authority to all participants.

Given that stories are the vehicle of both sharing institutional knowledge and creating interpersonal meaning, I created an adaptive model that recognizes the validity of this form of “data” and acknowledges the importance of place (context), as well as the interpersonal responsibility required of all participants to navigate the process. Unlike other research models, the “interstitial space” of this research where knowledge sharing and meaning making occur is of necessity the same place where people live. This means that the relationships – relationships understood at their most basic level as interpersonal connections between individuals that incidentally interact with one another based on their proximity – need to be addressed in order to move alongside other ways of knowing and being for the sake of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{41}}\text{Audra Simpson, “Ethnographic Refusal,” 67.}\]
reaching collective understanding. In the context of the Indigenous Art Centre, this meant that the community was one that was perhaps derivative of institutional title and professional relationships but did not supersede or cover over collective and personal knowledges.

**Telling Stories in the Ecology of Place**

Funneled through this new awareness of responsibility, I approached the IAC as an environment. This space, “the ecology of place” as I have come to call it, was populated with people, with a landscape of the familiar and the familial. In it were structural markers such as institutional policies and operations that I recognized, processes that that signalled standardized museum procedures, others that seemed exceptional, that I would note for further inquiry. I realized that I was and always had been a part of it, and that I had impacted and become embedded in it simply by virtue of my “observational” role. Not only this, engaging with other individuals led me to realize that they, too, had names for these forms and formations, with associated knowledges that were similar yet unfamiliar to the ones that informed my understandings of the same place.

Necessitated by the imminent collision of diverse human communities, Willie Ermine, a Cree scholar from Sturgeon Lake First Nation in Northern Saskatchewan, argues for the development of a framework for ethical engagement. In Canada, Ermine suggests the precursor to the “intercultural framework” is signalled by early treaty-making between the state and Indigenous nations. His proposed model of ethical engagement affirmed my belief that the ecology of place was epistemologically viable as a model for research and addressed the ethical implications of interpersonal research. Imagining in order to live in the space shared by communities. Formulated from a distinctive vantage and point of living, Ermine indicates the interpersonal, cultural, and ethical responsibility of inhabiting this space, as a return to earlier understanding of communal responsibility.


By disaggregating “culture” into individual voices, theory became subtended to the method of story. In this cyclical, iterative fashion, I read the texts that mattered to the people who mattered in the context of the research; in order to be able to hear what mattered and why it mattered, I located myself in relation to these individuals and to the historical context of the Centre.

Identifying the real physical and local sequence of interpersonal engagements that extend before and after this study, the IAC became a viable opportunity to explore the concept of the ecology of place, a space of imminent knowledge with relational lines of connectivity circulating within and extending beyond. A place that I had entered. Given who I am and what I know and how I come to know, I approached this entrance into story through conversations about art and how people care, maintain, and share art as stories. I remembered what Cherokee scholar, Thomas King, said about the importance of telling stories. There is nothing inherently dangerous about telling stories, he begins. But “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world.” With these cautionary words, I determined that in the ecology of place, storytelling was the ethical, most responsive way to communicate knowledge.

Acknowledging that “an agreement to interact must always be preceded by the affirmation of human diversity created by philosophical and cultural differences,” I engaged in initial research to ensure that I had a basis of understanding of what some of the implications could be in order to tell a story that was open enough to be recalled and retold, and could be taken up ethically by others to become part of and continue these stories.

The space of my encounter, the individuals moving and operating the space, and my position and knowledge determined the literature. Theory was subtended to method in response to ethical responsibility. I read texts on Indigenous methodologies, listened to Indigenous storytellers, and engaged in lectures on decolonization and reconciliation. As I mentioned earlier, I came to learn from authors like

44 Thomas King, The Truth about Stories, Massey Lectures, 1.
Audra Simpson and Linda Tuhiwai Smith about the importance of research for Indigenous communities. I became aware of the political identities and the necessity of recognizing Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledges from the place that they speak, and recognizing that the place they speak is contested because of the nature of settler colonialism and the ongoing systems of oppression that seek to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land – of this land. I also learned that I did not get to know everything, especially when there was a risk that the information could compromise communities, or that it would not prove to be mutually beneficial.

**Refusal Informs Ethical Storytelling**

Audra Simpson’s work stands within a growing body of Indigenous research(ers) theorizing and living resurgence and refusal. My engagement with individuals working/living in this space include Taiaiake Alfred, Jeff Corntassel, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. There are many others living these theories as seen in the grassroots movements of Idle No More, and more recent contestations over the Coastal Gas Links Pipeline in British Columbia. Writing in various locations with unique vantage points, resurgence has been activated within specific contexts, practicing sovereignty, self-determination, and communal ways of knowing and being. Collectively, these individuals speak of the land, and how Indigenous self-determination and nations cannot be (re)generated until land is reclaimed. Until language is reclaimed. And until state systems recognized Indigenous nations’ authority and ancestral rights.

While working through the theory, I also engaged in preliminary investigation into the historical context of the Centre. The history of the Indigenous Art Centre as it had been formulated in national discourses began to unfold. This was part of what mattered in the context of the lived experiences of individuals within this space. I proceeded to sift through both primary sources produced by the federal government, and essays by former staff members of the Centre.

What cohered from these texts were multiple narratives of the political, social, economic, and cultural motivations that stimulated the state creation of the Centre from individual calls for support. Shaped out of circumstantial federal engagements with Indigenous reserve economies that were reformulated and recast in the age of social and cultural protests and policy reforms in the 90s, the Centre
is in a sense, the manifestation of the needs and aspirations of diverse communities. The aim of these collective aspirations was to reach an equitable engagement between the state and Indigenous peoples framed in the realm of arts and culture.

At present, the institution operates in flux between state systems and the category of contemporary Canadian Indigenous art. It is individual Indigenous peoples from across the country who make up and are worked on by these systematic forms of providing support while recasting individuals as producers of cultural commodities. Literature that could be used to explain, contextualize, and refuse a structural history of the space originating from the living ecology in the present was crucial.

In the process of particularizing the different responsibilities and impetuses for the creation of the Centre, a relationship was revealed. This relationship was set up between a community, namely the contemporary Canadian Indigenous arts community defined as clients, and employees of the Indigenous Art Centre, extrinsically defined as facilitators of contemporary Canadian Indigenous art. Coordinating individuals within this programming, the mandate stipulated the Centre was charged with caring for individual works, in the process creating a material collection of contemporary Canadian Indigenous art.

In a way, the Centre was a standalone institution facilitating a program that promoted state-Indigenous relations. An expression of Willie Ermine’s model of intercultural engagement. However, the reality of how the Centre came about, how it developed, and how it is currently managed and continues to evolve, suggested that this was not the only historical process occurring in the space.

Through familiarization with the space and individuals coordinated within the Centre, it became apparent that facilitators were often clients and vice versa. Given this realization, it became prudent to learn about what drew these two groups together and what this meant in terms of maintaining a collection as both producers and promoters.

Rather than imposing a framework, the space and the individuals determined the scope and the parameters of the literature that in turn informed the theoretical basis and methodological framework. The literature review is therefore an assembly of thoughts and ideas that I believe discursively align with my position, and account for the knowledges that are pulled into the space of the Centre. Addressing the
political/cultural, art historical, and interpersonal dimensions of the Centre, the literature generates from these organic processes of familiarization, or relationship-building.

**The Method of Ethical Storytelling in Structural Spaces**

Institutional Ethnography (IE), a qualitative method of sociological investigation, provides space and acknowledges the authority of individuals to share their knowledge. Informing the direction and focus of the study, IE also offers adaptable tools and language to engage with the management of Indigenous art as it is fulfilled by individuals in their daily activities.\(^{46}\) Aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing insofar as individuals are viewed as expert knowers of what they do, this particular iteration of IE proceeds from individuals’ knowledge in sustained dialogue that is site-specific and, therefore, elaborated the political, social, and individual scope of the Centre. Recognizing individuals as experts in exclusive possession of what they do and the contexts and conditions of their work, individuals collaboratively express the social relations of the Indigenous Art Centre. It also raises attention to the way the individual actions are regulated and coordinated by larger systems, or the larger institutional complex of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC).

The model of IE suggested that I draw on topical texts that coordinate the operational function of the Centre and make observable the relations that organize individuals in their daily activities.\(^{47}\) As a federally maintained Indigenous-led art institution, this literature includes institutional texts such as the mandate of the Centre, government documents stipulating the requirements of cultural institutions retaining Indigenous art, and other published electronic information. Informing the structural scope of the Centre, these texts identify the institutional complexes the Centre operates within, derived by the “ruling relations.”\(^{48}\) This aligns with my understanding of a protocol for engaging in the ecology of space among diverse human communities; conveying understanding of place through story.

\(^{46}\) Dorothy E. Smith, *Institutional Ethnography*, 1.

\(^{47}\) Dorothy Smith, *Institutional Ethnography*, 43

\(^{48}\) Dorothy Smith, *Institutional Ethnography*, 68.
There are also texts that interpret the coordinating texts of the IAC. An example is the federally produced monograph on the Centre which features a historical overview of its development from 1967 to 2017. Tracing a 50-year institutional evolution, Viviane Gray identifies pivotal moments in the development of the Centre to its status and operations as of 2017 given her understanding and personal involvement in these operations. The implications of some of the critical shifts in Canadian political history sieved through her narration demonstrate how the Centre shifted within the institutional complexes of the federal government, and how it was consistently coordinated within the ephemeral aegis of Canadian culture. Primary sources, such as institutional reports located within the Centre’s archives, institutional reviews of the IAC from 1990 and interdepartmental essays are included in this discussion. These documents provide historical context that situates the Centre within the federal complex of systems from individuals providing discursive testimonies.49

Furthermore, Gray’s reference to the collection as a “living art collection” in her essay prompted the development of interview questions related to the organic arrangement of individuals around the art collection.50 It also signalled points that were elaborated from an individual narrative that were covered over and generalized in institutional discourses. In this way, the literature is part of the active and ongoing aims of institutional ethnography as it aims to “map” the ruling relations and the institutional complexes they participate in as well as building “knowledge and methods of discovering the institutions and, more generally, the ruling relations of contemporary Western society.”51 In fact, by engaging Institutional Ethnography as a method of analyzing the organization of the Centre, it is apparent that the Centre is fundamentally created as a mechanism of these historical and historicizing processes of Indigenous relations and the management of resources – art being one such resource.

49 Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. “Bringing the Indian Arts Centre Program into the 21st Century.” July 17, 1990.

50 Viviane Gray, The Indigenous Art Collection, 51.

51 Dorothy Smith, Institutional Ethnography, 51.
To this end, the Calls to Action drawn from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, specifically those relating to cultural institutions, as well as UNDRIP are pulled in. These two developments situate the Centre within the matrix of national political and cultural meta-discourses, addressing the universalized mechanisms for state forms of address and redress directed towards Indigenous peoples that have been passively taken up and integrated into the ethos as citations and operational language incorporated into the management of the Centre. These mechanisms have been included in the iterative process of IE which is constantly reflecting back on itself to continuously recreate knowledge of institutional organization. Reference to these instruments is made to explore how they are sustained and operationalized within the Centre by individuals, as well as the impact they have for individuals in their daily responsibilities.

The reality of individuals’ lives as they relate to maintaining, promoting and disseminating contemporary Indigenous art is affected in particular ways. Engaging participants from a place within the historical context of their lived experiences calls for literature and ways of thinking, seeing, and doing that address and expand the culturally derived definition that has come to represent and determine the public perception and, in some cases, self-perception of Indigenous peoples.

While IE recommends a method and suggests that theory is subtended by the historical doings or actualities of people and the way they are socially coordinated – a marked move away from concerns of epistemology in other veins of sociological inquiry – I have incorporated decolonial theory into the ethnography to reflect and engage with ethical responsibilities, self-determination, and positionality as part of the ethical protocol of engaging with Indigenous knowledges and ways of being. I have not arrived at these determinations alone; they are reflected in the things people have to say about the work they do; they grow from sustained engagement with Indigenous-authored texts as well as personal conversations. In short, the literature I select reflects the way that I engage with the world and what I

52 Dorothy Smith, *Institutional Ethnography*, 165.

imagine to engage with individuals on their own terms, within a certain historical context, from a specific place. In this way, the study makes a detour from IE and its focus on indexicality into the space of adaptive creation through storying.

While the primary documents and discussion of the way they mobilize actions in individuals to produce the institutional structure are incorporated, literature that is specific and can speak to the particularity of engaging with lived experiences activated by disparate worldviews to my own is required. Extending ethical responsibilities and interpersonal commitments, literature from several fields is drawn in – namely Indigenous methodologies, Indigenous art history, and political texts predominantly addressing resurgence – to disentangle individuals within the abstract institutional discourse to engage participants on their own terms.

The literature is, therefore, derivative of me. In the language of Institutional Ethnography, it informs my “standpoint” wedded to intentions. While it weaves, closely at times to Indigenous ways of knowing and being, it also wends away in idiosyncratic movements that can only be understood in the context of my lived experience. For this reason, the literature is also informed by my narrative. I continuously refer to my story as part of the process of engaging in relational responsibility within the community as it is defined in the context of the institution, and moving towards interpersonal connection, within the evolving ecology. In the context of larger discussions about decolonization and reconciliation, this study arises as a point of connectivity across disparate academic fields and in different professionalized contexts with the goal of collaborative relationship-building.

Protocols and Positionality

My understanding of an ethical protocol that includes interpersonal responsibility, accountability, and recognition is informed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Margaret Kovach, Shawn Wilson, and Willie Ermine. They identify the need for research among Indigenous communities to be reciprocally beneficial,


55 Dorothy Smith, Institutional Ethnography, 52.
accountable to community, and culturally affirmative. Knowledge-sharing through listening to stories, or storytelling as a form of recognition and accountability guides the methodological approach of the study, representing both the process and final product, and anticipates further evolution.

Stories are what are produced and communicated, the terms of how they are engaged are necessary. In the ecology of place, they are right relationships, interpersonal accountability, reciprocal benefits, and self-determination. The collaborative processes are derived from culturally inflected vantage points that pivot around making connections and strengthening them. Linda Tuhiwai Smith identified the need for research with/in Indigenous communities to be reciprocally beneficial and collaboratively created. Adding to this understanding of collaboration, Margaret Kovach articulates the foundation of research models and specifically Indigenous research methodologies to be based and arise from cultural orientation and knowledges. This study takes up and extends this recognition by reviewing and incorporating literature which fosters, sustains, and encourages the growth of collaborative discourses through practical applications. Theory, literature, and method are inextricably intertwined in this process.

Decolonial theory provides language to ground myself critically within the space and within colonial systems of knowledge production. Its primary use in this work is to root myself in intentions – theory recursively informing physical ways of interacting and being with individuals. Although the work of decolonization cannot be subsumed into other social justice research, it does elaborate a language of intentionality precipitating and guiding actions that challenge and critically examine colonialism. It is

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58 Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 89.

59 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 95.

60 Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 12.

moveable and malleable; context-specific and relational. Signifying the commonality of experiences to overcome, move away from, resist, and counter variously positioned manifestations of colonialism, decoloniality as I understand it is a thinking-being-doing process of moving towards ways of being and thinking that are collaborative and interpersonal, and are aligned with the adaptive and relational nature of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Given the context and historical processes in Canada, this seems apt.

Oriented towards community- and capacity-building, decolonial theory suggests a return to the particularities of engaging in local settings through lived experiences. Echoing the ethos of IE which was created out of a need to address the dearth of attention to the lives of individuals and how they operate within and sometimes contradictory to larger (colonial) systems, decolonial theory derives from the lived experiences of individuals seeking to overcome or refuse ruling relations as they seek to continuously dispossess and violate human diversity.

I align myself with decolonial theorists Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh who advocate for participatory modes of research attentive to place and invested in relationality and accountability arising from local settings. Interacting with the self in relation to others, uniquely positioned towards critically challenging colonial systems is taken up in this study as a way of situating myself in relation to the reality of historical and ongoing dispossession. This also informs the method of the study as I engage with individuals through localized exchanges of knowledge through conversations. Their work also signals the active nature decolonial theory pursues to live in ways that are simultaneously culturally and politically affirmative. Decolonial theory is living and being with individuals in ways that celebrate diversity and participate in learning about these points of uniqueness through a common commitment to ethical engagement.

62 Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, On Decoloniality, 17.
64 Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, On Decoloniality, 19.
In the co-authored text, *Betweener Talk*, Claudio Moreira and Paulo Diversi extend these commitments, describing their engagement in localized community efforts in their home country of Brazil. Announcing themselves as “betweener,” both a state of being and a place, the localities of where their research happens become spaces “where the fixed binary thinking and taken-for-granted hegemonic ways of knowing and producing knowledge are challenged, and where resistance and transformative change can be organized and taken into action.”65 I take this up in the conception of the emergent context of the ecology of place representative of the Indigenous Art Centre to explore the possibility of creating localized forms of knowledge through context-specific relationships. In the process, I nuance and explore what actions and collaborations are happening in a site that is defined by its management, care and dissemination of contemporary Canadian Indigenous art.66

Gloria Anzaldúa mobilizes a similar embodied practice for constructing mental and physical space to live and think in relation to others who, given their positioning outside of the ruling relations, are engaged in struggles outside of and against colonial power structures. In *La Frontera/Borderlands*, Anzaldúa identifies the importance of giving testimony to her experience, listening to the stories of others from her own context, attentive to the self in relation to colonial power. Affirmative acts of reclaiming the self, and moving within the particular to reach towards shared activities are key concepts I draw on to interact with individuals on their own terms attentive to my position.67 Anzaldúa’s language of embodied, cultural action is taken up and articulated in the study in the current focus on decolonization.

A scholar whose research interests include decoloniality and postcolonial theory, Paola Bacchetta provides examples of the kind of coalitional and collaborative work that can be mobilized from her own research experiences. Bacchetta’s critique of traditional ethnographic fieldwork is particularly pertinent. Identifying the absence of contextual location of the researcher in classical anthropology, Bacchetta

66 Ibid., 19. [Diversi and Moreira]
explains the kind of constructive, coalition building that ethnography which is attentive to intersubjectivity enables for building archives of knowledge where none previously exist. Ultimately produced for the individuals who participate in the process as interviewees, sentiments which are echoed in Institutional Ethnography. 68 Emphasizing the researcher’s responsibility to uphold interpersonal accountability, Bacchetta reveals the interdisciplinary nature of decolonial work, sharing her experiences, flagging its theoretical and physical multidirectionality and how it provides space for the constitution of inclusive realities created of the local realities it participates in and emerges from. The “double move” of transgressing dichotomous categories of personal/private and public/academic provides a foundational understanding of the boundary crossing and intersubjective mode of this decolonial, intercultural research. Furthermore, Bacchetta identifies the critical significance of silences and lacks in archival material which generatively signal pauses and moments of collaborative knowledge creation; moments that Audra Simpson and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson speak of in terms of radical refusal as acts of self-determination. 69 The connection between the motivations of decolonial theory and how they are echoed across other communities provides confirmation that this mode of engagement is responsive to ethical concerns while being adaptable to specific places. Attentive to local happenings, this language speaks of and to community and collaboration, that is critical of absolutes and closures.

**Political Recognition vs. Interpersonal Self-Recognition**

These discussions are connected back to the earlier conversation of political refusal and limits. Audra Simpson has informed my understanding of Indigenous self-determination and refusal as generative acts of living as Indigenous peoples in ways that are true to community, and to self-identity. 70 Taiaiake Alfred, Jeff Corntassel, and Patrick Wolfe provide insight into the systematic and pervasive


“shape-shifting colonial powers” that exert physical, psychic, cultural, political, and economic force directed towards the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from the land and from identity.

Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel introduce a definition of Indigenous identity as “an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism.” As an “oppositional, place-based existence” with consciousnesses that are aware of “being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples” in a psychic, physical and cultural struggle, “being Indigenous” requires contesting and participating in “sources of connection to their distinct existences and the sources of their spiritual power: relationship to each other, communities, homelands, ceremonial life, languages, histories.”71 Juxtaposing the collective, organic identity, the authors identify incidental Indigeneity as the “political-legal compartmentalization of community values [which] often leads Indigenous nations to mimic the practices of dominant non-Indigenous legal-political institutions and adhere to state-sanctioned definitions of Indigenous identity.”72

Identifying the multiple levels at which Indigenous identities are constructed and the struggle to counteract and claim definitional authority and ways of life, the authors offer a model of resurgent, regenerative identity and community through lived collective and individual experiences “consider[ing] relationships (or kinship networks) to be at the core of an authentic Indigenous identity.”73 Relationships, Alfred and Corntassel suggest, are foundational to Indigenous peoples’ spiritual and cultural existences and the source of Indigenous community and individual identities. It is this concept of relational identity that is at once cultural and political that I build on to engage individuals from the place of their own understanding within the structural categories of the Centre.


72 Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous”: 600.

73 Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous”: 601, 609.
The discourse of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition that are integral to Canadian identity construction are discussed by Anishinaabe scholar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. According national membership based on “culture” disaggregated from political orders, Simpson states the importance of living on and with the land as a form of radical Indigenous resurgence. The imposition of cultural and political rights-based discourses regulated through colonial mechanisms – cultural institutions are a notorious example of this – of the nation-state is particularly useful in the process of exploring the political and cultural function of the Centre. Simpson’s discussion, as well as the above-mentioned authors, identify how politics and culture cannot be separated but must be viewed at once when authentically engaging with Indigenous peoples.

Dene scholar, Glen Sean Coulthard argues in *Red Skin, White Masks*, that concealed within the multicultural mosaic, a seemingly inclusive system of identification (recognition and rights-based), is another form of colonial dispossession consumptively (re)appropriating Indigenous culture to (re)produce Canadian culture. Coulthard’s critique is leveraged against historicizing state narratives of multiculturalism and liberal plurality that authorize understandings of recognition as a form of redress for historical and ongoing forms of violence and dispossession.

Throughout the course of the text, Coulthard systematically breaks down the theoretical underpinnings of this form of political recognition, drawing on the western ideological construction of “recognition” as it is formulated in the Hegelian master-slave narrative. At its core, Coulthard’s systematic accounting of the manner in which Canadian policies and structures sets up a narrative of restitution that fails to transcend the colonial relationship drawn out in the master-slave narrative. His

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77 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 27.
critique informs my understanding of the necessity of acknowledging political identity of a piece with cultural identity, and how support through recognition is not sufficient for Indigenous peoples.

It is important to note that significant national and international events were happening that flanked and bolstered the creation and consolidation of the Indigenous Art Centre. For example, the Oka Resistance began months before the consultation meeting for the Centre, preceded by the commencement of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), a national examination requested by Order in Council. Mandated “to investigate and propose solutions to the challenges affecting the relationship between Aboriginal Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Metis), the Canadian government and Canadian society as a whole,” the RCAP offered a set of recommendations to change the relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples, categorically assessing education, arts and heritage, health, government, and economic development. Although these events may not seem to be directly correlated to one another, they speak to the public sentiments and national frictions, as well as the efforts for Indigenous resurgence and regeneration circulating in the country.

**Self-Recognition through Art**

Finally, I draw on the archive of Indigenous art discussions, particularly those led by Deborah Doxtator, David Garneau, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault. The discussions held by these individuals signal the deeply implicated nature of Indigenous art within Indigenous communities and social and political life. Neither exclusively cultural nor strictly political, these discourses expand the Western category of Indigenous art, signalling the particularity of these works as material products with local, individual, social, spiritual, and larger cultural histories. These scholars and artists address the multivocal and individuated experiences of creating, promoting, and sharing Indigenous art, and the significance of

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understanding that there are different layers of knowing and accessibility to different kinds of knowledge. 

Charlotte Townsend-Gault stretches the elastic category of “Indigenous art” in her essay “Kinds of Knowing,” arguing that no such category truly exists. Although “Indian art” was used as a recognized category, it served the purpose of authenticating artworks and their producers as “Indian” for economic benefits. Marketing the works as curiosities to non-Indigenous buyers, these externally determined categories also precipitated in culturally destructive processes of delimiting the authentic. 

Elaborating on the transgressive and inventive ways Indigenous artists “translate, transform, re-invent, protect, and sometimes obscure the knowledge that is integral to these cultures,” Townsend-Gault highlights the power that artists generate through their interventions into the ethical and epistemological issues of our shared space and time.

Writing about the exhibition Land, Spirit, Power displayed at the National Gallery of Canada in 1992, Townsend-Gault identifies the continuity of Indigenous artists’ practices to address the “irreconcilable difference” that is produced between what Indigenous artists know to be culturally resonant and truthful and external perceptions and ways of framing Indigenous peoples. 

Encoding cultural knowledge into their works in order to reclaim and defend specific knowledges, it is equally important to recognize different kinds of knowing, in particular “that there exists knowledge that can be shared, knowledge that may be intimated, and knowledge that should be withheld, to control translatability, in respect for the final untranslatability of the essence of cultural difference.”

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I believe Townsend-Gault’s assertion of cultural difference insofar as there are marked distinctions between cultures that need to be kept for the integrity and longevity of traditions, beliefs, ways of life, and other material and spiritual aspects that support Indigenous ways of being and knowing is necessary to stake a claim for the individuality of Indigenous arts. It is this individuality and distinctiveness that are explored in the course of individual stories.

Writing in the 1990s, Haudenosaunee scholar, Deborah Doxtator, and later Metis scholar and artist, David Garneau, identify the implications of categorical closure in terms of identification of Indigenous objects as artifacts and by extension, the artists who make them as cultural relics or alternatively proprietors of cultural wares. Moving beyond the categories of “Indianness” or “Indigeneity,” both speak to “multiple and flexible identities” which are experienced at the level of the individual in the process of creating artworks.84

Doxtator identifies the connectivity between Indigenous ways of knowing in the historical past and continuity in the present, and refutes the Western construction of time and chronology as absolute and legitimate. Pointing to the misappropriation and misapprehension of Indigenous cultural objects, Doxtator animates Indigenous art and identity as evolving, reconstituting processes that condense past and present and require holistic and non-essentializing interaction. Issuing a challenge to the reader to think about the absolute power that is ascribed to history, she highlights the importance of connections and connectivity practiced by contemporary Indigenous artists and Indigenous peoples generally telling individual and unique stories that at times complicate and other times challenge the idea of historical truth. Mixing, juxtaposing and condensing past and present, she identifies the agential characteristic of interacting with Indigenous cultural objects and Indigenous peoples to trouble and assert Indigenous history as an evolving, interconnected history. Doxtator points up the necessity of engaging pieces, arising from traditions that are uniquely taken up by individual artists’ interpretations.

In David Garneau’s chapter from *Arts of Engagement*, a text that situates aesthetic actions taken by arts professionals, artists, as well as the public succeeding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), Garneau speaks to settler-Indigenous relations in the context of arts administration. Garneau states that “while decolonization and Indigenization is collective work, it sometimes requires occasions of separation – moments where Indigenous people take space and time to work things out among themselves, and parallel moments when allies ought to do the same.”

This mutual though differently positioned activity is aligned with my understanding of what is required for listening to refusal and turning it into generative moments of acknowledging limits and boundaries. This is explored in the context of interviews and expanded into a larger discussion of actions and thinking that acknowledge incommensurability as a staggered process moving towards collective understanding.

**Other Paths**

I acknowledge that there is a wealth of critical scholarship available within arts-related disciplines as well as cultural diplomacy as a subfield of public diplomacy studies that I could inform the study. From the perspective of museum studies, Ruth B. Phillips, in her seminal text *Museum Pieces: Towards the Indigenization of Museums*, offers acute insight into the various processes authored by museums directed towards decolonizing collections, including exhibitions, repatriation, and consultation. Drawing from her prolific career as a curator-scholar and her subsequent participation in international exhibitions, Phillips reflects on her involvement in such exhibitions in Canada as *The Spirit Sings* (1988), to discuss the misrepresentation of Indigenous material culture, and to offer practical methods of addressing and revising curatorial practices in light of ethical and ideological gaps.

With a critical eye to her own professional decisions, Phillips unpacks concepts such as curatorial voice and the authorial control of museums as products of social, political, and economic factors originating outside of the museum space. In a different context, James Clifford’s essay on “Museums as

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Contact Zones” re-imagines an entrance into the space of museums as “contact zones” between Indigenous communities and museum professionals. Identifying how reciprocity, exploitations, and mutualities play out in these sites, Clifford elaborates the potential for dialogic mechanisms in museums and galleries engaged between variously positioned stakeholders negotiating differential benefits for and around museum collections.87

It is critical to draw on the practical changes and ideological shifts in the representation of Indigenous art. Following the historical trajectory of collection and exhibition, an evolution from traditional museum practices geared towards anthropological displays to self-determined and multivocal expressions of being and knowing from culturally inflected vantage points emerges. Clifford notes that “when museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship.”88 Collections then, becomes points of unification and common understanding.

That said, the Indigenous Art Centre is not and has never been explicitly identified as a museum, nor does it subscribe to the title and roles of an art gallery. Furthermore, though it was created at a time when the aforementioned socio-political and cultural discourses in ethnographic representation of Indigenous art and cultural materials were circulating, and therefore, bear attention in the scope of the study, it does not rest easily within a single category. In order to address such a collection of motivations and interests moving around and within a space that holds a collection with its own individual motivations, ideas, interests, and values represented in artworks, it is necessary to adapt and respond to the elements as they arise.

Phillips and Clifford elaborate retroactive analyses for the purpose of ideologically and practically shifting museum practices, although their works do not fully address the implications of collections that are created with the informed consent of producers or the implications of the economic

87 James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones” in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, (Harvard University Press, 1997), 134.
88 Ibid., 192.
exchange and national context. While the site is unique and necessarily requires an approach that is attuned to its historical context, it is also part of a national project to extrinsically define and determine Indigenous peoples and accordant rights and fiduciary responsibilities of the federal government. The Centre has been expressly aimed at the representation of contemporary Canadian Indigenous art. The histories that are accounted for in these foundational texts on decolonizing ethnographic institutions do not account for curatorial and management processes that are facilitated by and for the represented community, and how this is complicated by the proximity and direct relationship with the federal government. It is into this ideological and political space that the Centre alights, and that this literature seeks to address.

**Building an Archive of Nested Stories**

Returning to the concept of the ecology of place, the literature animates the dialogues and histories that circulate within the space. It offers knowledge while drawing attention to the information that cannot be shared through the perspective of Indigenous artists, cultural critics, political and anthropological theorists, and academics. It is an attempt to build an archive of knowledge or an alternative history that also lives within and exists adjacent to the “official narrative.” In this process, I begin to create an archive of knowledge of a space that has many stories to tell about decolonizing activities and relationship-building.

While this study is physically based in a federal department building, the story is not about the government, nor is it a critique of what the government has or has not done. It is about how individuals move in and out of this space that is perhaps federally coded but occupies space, physically and conceptually, in places that are not federal, that are cultural, creative, and multiple. To genuinely recognize the space while leaving room for adaptation, I continue to build on the idea of an ecology of place. The literature that I have included animates my ontological position in response to what has been said and written about the importance of recognizing individuals and engaging in responsible actions that hold up and support relationships.
Chapter 3

Ontology in Place

We are told by Cherokee scholar, Thomas King that “the truth about stories is that’s all we are.” In 2003, King began each of his five Massey Lectures with this statement. Listening to them many times over many months, my perception shifted from tacit skepticism to unflagging certainty. Stories are the way that we all communicate messages and meanings. What is an essay if not a formal version of a story told to convince an academic audience of our knowledge? The difference is in the audience, the difference is in ourselves, and the difference is in the meaning we are trying to convey.

If stories are all we are, then like us, there are many ways to begin a story. However, I believe there is one responsible way to share a story. This way requires the teller(s) as well as the listener(s) to engage in discrete yet simultaneous processes of positioning. Referring to physical and mental acts of situating oneself in relation, positioning implicates individuals within a shared place, in relation to the narrative, in relation to one another for a time, sharing an experience. Fictional or historical, oral or written, stories gain strength when and if they create a connection with participants.

I provided a personal introduction above. However, Institutional Ethnography affords sustained methodological accountability to personal connections and positionality. Margaret Kovach states that, “in terms of representation, location as a research methodology is ethical…location brings ownership and responsibility to the forefront. When researchers own who or what they represent, they also reveal what they do not represent.” Bonded with decolonial theory and its practical adaptations between thinking-being-acting towards the goal of moving away from ideologies founded in colonial ontologies that ascribe definitions and categorical understanding upon the world, Institutional Ethnography proceeds from the place of individuals’ actual work in temporally and spatially bound locations. In the context of the

90 Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett, “Putting Ourselves Forward,” Research as Resistance, 110.
Indigenous Art Centre, this means changing the language and the dialogue surrounding the sustained engagement between the Canadian government and the contemporary Canadian Indigenous arts community and its facilitators.

Engaging this adaptive mode of telling, a story created in this environment welcomes and invites participation. Furthermore, this mode of ethical narration responds to and gains momentum from the particularities of place – who is present, where it is being told, when it is being told. Growing from the dynamic arrangement, what I have been calling and engaging as the ecology of place, narratives continuously recreate circles where everyone, either newly introduced or those who carry previous experiences, sit in relation to each other as participants. Getting this right is crucial to ensuring that the message is received in the intended spirit of the teller. Stories that are committed to an empathetic mode of telling, that recognize responsibility, and create understanding of connection, that honour and uphold accountability, are responsible.

It is important to recognize that understanding, insofar as it is conceived as complete and full comprehension, cannot be achieved in the absence of participation, and even then, it is always partial. It is the commitment of participants to contribute to the active process of knowledge sharing in the shared place that determines how or if the knowledge conveyed in a story is meaningfully recognized and interpreted. Institutional Ethnography is the way I have chosen to frame this story. That said, Institutional Ethnography has its own story.

Created as a sociology for people, its intentions and aims envisioned by founder, Dorothy Smith, were to uncover the position that people hold within ruling relations and explicate how they are coded or mapped within these systems, often in ways that are incongruous with their lived experience. Drawing upon her own observations of how sociology continuously missed the realities of her life as a mother and an academic, Smith developed the critical theory/methodology to explore the social lives of individuals and how they are hooked into work processes carrying beyond their immediate contexts.

While IE suggests the suspension of external theory insofar as it is a theory, engagement with the Indigenous Art Centre, and individuals who carry different vantage points recommended Indigenous
methodologies and ways of knowing and being that are not accessible to me. Consequently, I propose a shift in the model to address the ethical space of engagement discussed above.

An IE invests and is in fact predicated on the alignment of the researcher with individuals, what is defined in the qualitative method as a standpoint. However, this standpoint, when it comes to Indigenous knowledges, needs to be attentive to and recognize that the ruling relations, while significant and pervasive, do not fully account for Indigenous existences. Decolonial theory provides the iterative concepts of living within and actively working to critically expand understanding of ruling relations that moves towards particularity and singularity – as IE does – with the added ethical protocol of intentional, and responsible engagement.

What this means for the research process is that I am continuously engaged in the exploration of the Centre to discover what it is people know about their jobs in conjunction with ethical principles. Creating a larger, more complex and particular understanding of the daily activities of the Indigenous Art Centre and how individuals are coordinated within the complex of relations that govern, encode, and spread the mandate to other spaces through the flow of artworks, I propose this as a model of site-specific and personal decolonizing acts. In the process of recursive knowledge generation, I indexically explore what it is and how it is that individuals who are coordinated within the space expand and change the sequential activities of the IAC encoded within the governing documents.

Given the nature of the guiding question, I was directed to navigate the institutional space. It became apparent that parsing out the implications for the Centre’s contingent groups was not only required for structural research purposes given the lack of documented information, it was also an ethical imperative. As a federal program, I had to navigate the political operational dimension of the institution. And, as an institution responsible for the stewardship of Indigenous art, attention to Indigenous knowledges and ways of being were recommended. These two paradigms are ultimately implicated within one another and inform the structural aspects of the study as well as methodological considerations and theoretical/physical mobility of conversations.
I explained above how I came to be introduced to the Indigenous Art Centre through a question: what is the purpose of the IAC? The question informed the development and determined the form of conversational, inquiry-driven research. Institutional Ethnography was retroactively recommended to me when it became apparent that the information necessary to address the question could only be gathered from the individuals whose jobs it was to fulfill the mandate: to support the creation, preservation, and promotion of contemporary Canadian Indigenous art.91

The implications of the exploration reverberated into Indigenous-state relations and state recognized representations of Indigenous art. How it was that these processes had been carried out in a space that was defined within the parameters of the federal government was of particular interest, and how the culturally defined collection, representative of nations who continuously uphold different forms of identification than Canadian citizenship was significant.

As I mentioned, limited published information on the Centre provided the ideal opportunity to discover what people had to say about the things they were doing in the Centre, and how it was that this fit into the operational mandate. What and how this knowledge could benefit individuals in the Centre once they recognized themselves in these coordinating processes was a continuous consideration in the process of generating questions and structuring the study.

Ultimately, I did this in order to understand what and why individuals do the things they do within their professional roles, spanning towards and reaching individuals from the place of their own realities working within and around the Centre to understand how I could do the same. It became apparent through preliminary research that texts that extend beyond the scope of disciplinary boundaries were required to understand the diversity of relationships at play.

While it is individuals’ knowledge that informs the analysis, it is also important to hold up the ruling relations alongside Indigenous self-determination and what this does to the way that these structures are activated within the Centre by what individuals have to say about how they accommodate,

shift, and navigate these processes. Therefore, the selection of literature is also part of the methodology of the study, fitting within the parameters of IE which builds upon coordinating texts, as well as Indigenous ways of knowing which builds upon relationships and other peoples’ stories.

Many of the texts are marked by various degrees of engagement with decolonization. Decolonization is a totalizing term functioning within former colonial nations. When taken up in the discourse of ruling relations, it signals attempts to address and redress various historical processes of violence and dispossession levied against Indigenous peoples internationally. Folded within it are various forms of apologies and mechanisms of redress such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in the context of Canada. These state inquests have been joined with and often cite the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), an international human rights tool that promotes the rights of Indigenous peoples for self-determination, freedom from discrimination, and to practice and develop traditional and cultural values. These mechanisms have been taken up at multiple levels of society, including arts and culture spheres, to address historical harm imposed on Indigenous peoples. Rather than focusing exclusively on the generalizing tendencies of these historical discourses, I sought out individual experiences of these processes and how they operate within the ruling relations within the national movement towards decolonization and establishing right relations.

After assembling and analyzing the archival research, I emailed the director of the IAC, confirming my interest in organizing a study. The research aims and purpose of the study were shared, along with the Letter of Information (LOI) and consent forms, both documents have been reviewed by Queen’s General Research and Ethics Board (GREB), as well a request to meet. The purpose was threefold: to visit the archives, to gain an understanding of the functionality of the space, and to begin to create relationships with individuals working in the Centre. My first visit was in November of 2018. The following is an excerpt from my reflections after this visit:

I don’t know how to describe what it was to go to the Indigenous Art Centre earlier this week. For so long, I had been thinking about and reading about and, therefore, imagining what it was. The image that I had in my mind could do nothing but fall short or fall behind the reality. But when I entered into the building after practically running across several bridges, literal bridges to make it for my 10 o’clock appointment, the reality was nothing but shocking. And hot. I was so incredibly hot after running, which seems like a minor detail, but it added to the anxiety, the agitation of the moment.

So, sweating and out of sorts, I arrived at the security desk in the main lobby, an island in the middle of so many moving bodies, just down the hall from the exhibition space, with an employee stationed in front jangling a bell. Why? A raffle of some kind.

Back to the desk, with the ringing of the bell, with the sound of people in transit, moving towards predetermined points, I wandered over to the desk, unsure of myself. Because in crossing over the bridges...I crossed over into a different land, and a different language. Now in Quebec, French was not just a compulsory addendum at the end of a cereal box, in fine print, minute. It was the only language I heard around me, and its unfamiliar cadence grated against my ears, settling in a place outside of me, outside of my space of comfort. And so, in this foreign space, after having made two crossings, one a failed attempt, the other a point of entry, I found that I was apprehensive for many reasons. Nervous at finally entering into the place that I had been imagining and building (up) in my mind for so long, I had not imagined the sensations of occupying this space. And so, after handing over my driver’s license, I received a visitor pass and then proceeded to wait for my escort, because it was only with an escort that I could proceed. After a few minutes, a man with curly hair, glasses, and an unassuming presence came down to greet me. We shook hands, and we headed to the elevators.

As I quickly discovered, the building we were in was not predominantly occupied by the Art Centre but was the essential heart and core of CIRNAC (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada). Each floor was a different suite of offices with different gubernatorial functions within the Department. The minister’s office was on one of these floors, and it was up to the ninth floor that we ascended. Disembarking from the elevator, Kevin led me through (what I felt was a maze of) several
corridors, to the office of the Indigenous Art Centre. An unassuming space, the distinguishing aspects of the Centre were really the books and the prints on the wall. Works from Daphne Odjig and Pudlat covered the wall and stacks and stacks of books that needed to be filed were shelved on temporary carts to be filed into the online database.

I met Michelle early in the morning. She offered her knowledge of the Centre to me but was quick to defer to Kevin, who I found out was the longest serving staff at the Centre (13 years) as most staff had retired when Viviane Gray left several years ago. And this new staff was operating a collection and program that spanned the breadth of Canada? How was this possible? But somehow it is. Because 25% of the collection is still in circulation at different art institutes and gallery spaces with more being requested on a daily basis. Not only that but students are coming in to work within the Centre, to curate exhibitions, and this of course requires training, time away from other tasks.

In the exchange of federally issued ID validating that I was who I said I was, a phone call up to the offices, and minutes later, the appearance of one of the IAC staff members, I went through a coordinated process of authentication and introduction that brought me finally and at last into the offices of the Centre. Recognized by the mechanisms of the department as an academic conducting research, I was granted access to the space. As an individual intending to build relationships and knowledge of a space in which they have ultimate knowledge, there was more work to do.

On the walls were paintings and prints, some I recognized, others I didn’t; painted in styles that were familiar to me, others that were not, that I noted for further exploration. Into this space that was both familiar and unfamiliar to other arts administrative offices I had entered, this was a space that extended and surpassed my realm of understanding. Locating the study in this physical space, among particular individuals, the method moves to acknowledge and adapt to the needs and actualities of the place – to the ecosystem of the Centre.
Opaskwayak Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson, suggests that Indigenous methodology is “simply the building of more relations.” Decoloniality offers a way to conceptually and practically articulate the building of these relationships in ways that are intentional and particular. Attuned to the diversity of others as well as my own, interconnected within an ecology of place, I make clear my position in relation to others. Envisioning the research process as weaving, participants’ activities become self-determined acts that move away from a linear narrative to speak of multiple sets of commitments and responsibilities in the process of their professional responsibilities. My personal reflections and social observations documented throughout the process are folded into the discussion, grounding the connections between individuals and myself in the process through our rootedness around the Centre and around different kinds of knowledge.

As I mentioned, preliminary analysis of institutional documents initiated the study. Documentary research on the IAC including archival records from federal sources, and secondary published sources disclosing institutional vernacular, mandates, potential contributors, and regulations that I used to begin to create interview questions and to formulate a research approach. Some of these questions were also generated in the process of speaking to current staff and seeing how it was that they interacted with one another and with the knowledge of the Centre. The proximity of participants and the reality of the Centre within the larger administration of CIRNAC encouraged me to question how these departmental entities are mutually informative.

I proceeded by conducting audio-recorded interviews with former staff of the Centre. My initial aim was five to 10 voluntary participants sampled from various roles (directors, staff members, artists collected by the Centre, Committee Members, guest curators). I ultimately managed to hold two interviews. No remuneration was offered for the interviews, and I met with participants around their professional commitments within a two-month window from November to December 2019.

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93 Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 79.

Following GREB approved interview procedures, I distributed the LOI, Consent Form, and questions to individuals initially expressing interest in participation. To encourage dialogue and mitigate emotional and social risks, the set list of general questions was distributed to participants a week prior to the scheduled interview. My intention for providing participants with early exposure to the questions was to afford them time to reflect on their responses as well as the implications of participation. I also speculated that early exposure would increase the likelihood of fulsome responses during the formal interview, and to provide participants the opportunity to seek clarification.

Once consent was secured, one-on-one audio-recorded interviews we organized and conducted. Both interviews were held in-person at various locations in Toronto and Ottawa, Ontario. I designed semi-structured interviews with open-ended, thematic questions to prompt participants to expand and elaborate upon their individual work processes within the IAC. The duration of both recorded formal interviews lasted an hour to ensure participants had adequate time to elaborate upon their comments. An informal debriefing followed the formal interviews, during which time I clarified, confirmed, and expanded on specific details that arose during the interviews.

Incorporated into the debriefing structure at the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they were willing to suggest additional participants to be included in the study. In qualitative research methods, this is known as snowball sampling. I used this method to recognize individuals’ involvement, to afford participants the opportunity to recognize themselves within the research process, to mitigate the power imbalance through the option for nomination, and to reinforce collective recognition of participants in the existing network. Snowball sampling is a dialogic tool that relies on, partakes in, and activates the dynamics of existing social networks. The method generates social knowledge among participants, producing “an organic and ‘thick’ type of knowledge” of the daily and collectivized activities within the Centre. The sampling method aligns with the ethical requirements of the research


design, which emphasizes relational accountability, self-determination and responsibility which are integral to and align with Indigenous methodologies. Accountability and relationality are established and strengthened in the nomination process, producing collaboratively authenticated and shared knowledge.

It is important to note that while this method of inquiry is rooted in ethical commitments and responsibilities to participants who are self-identified as Indigenous peoples, it is not an Indigenous methodology. It is a method of inquiry that picks up and incorporates the responsibilities of who is speaking and where they are speaking from, and is therefore, attentive to Indigenous ways of knowing and being grounded in a recognition of my location. Given my position outside, but aware of the import of these knowledges, I align the method and perspective with Institutional Ethnography informed by decolonial theory to produce a narrative that reaches towards parallel and collective responsibilities and actions.

As a moveable, ethical framework attentive to environmental considerations (place, time, individuals, and historical context), I weave the ecology of place into the exploration as a practice of decolonizing inquiry, and to explore the potential and connections within the space of the Indigenous Art Centre. It is an enterprise of decolonizing my own relationship to a professional space I aim to enter and engage, as well as an attempt to bring awareness to communities variously engaged in these processes to build capacity and recognition of the multiple levels of engagement.

Earlier, I explained the ecology of place through its axiological orientation towards relational, ethical responsibility. I also explained the epistemological nature as it arises from the organicism of time, place, and the diversity of individuals and their relationship to these concepts. In this chapter, I expanded on the practical aspects of this model of relational engagement and how I applied it to structure to pursue an Institutional Ethnography of the IAC. I apply the concept of ecology of place and marry it within a

97 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 97.
specific context, in this case the built environment of the Indigenous Art Centre, to formulate a way of learning about relationships among specific individuals, within a specific place. The ecology of place therefore, draws together and seeks to attend to the diversity of peoples and their relatedness through these fundamental, ethical principles. Brought together by random encounters or intentional conditions, individuals are joined in this space around the production and maintenance of a collection of Canadian Contemporary Indigenous art.

In the following chapter, I will introduce the textual grounds for the Centre as it has been discursively built in institutional texts. I continue to build on the archive I have drawn together around the place of the Indigenous Art Centre and my position in relation to it, continuously adapting the discussion to reflect the ethical commitments of the study to individuals coordinated within the study.
Chapter 4

Storying the Terrain for Relationships

This chapter explores the ideological groundwork for the operations of the Centre as it is constructed in the institutional text(s). What they develop and define creates a discursive terrain that is hooked into the larger institutional complex of the Canadian federal government. This is significant for the study as it is also the groundwork from which individuals engage in their daily activities. Looking at the texts provides a context to understand how individuals address, interact with, and act on what matters to them, and how that is aligned with, and/or obstructed by the institutional texts.

Minding the gap between institutional texts and personal experiences, I look back once again to the origins of the study through narrative. This is part of the process of maintaining ethical responsibility as I work to acknowledge my removed position from the daily workings of the Centre, how I came to enter the Centre via this study, and how I navigate the space with the intent of honouring and recognizing individuals’ stories. My initial understanding of the space is crucial. It informs how (method and theory), when (timeframe for the study and historical context) and why (other events that informed me to pursue a certain perspective on the Centre). Who I am is infused into this process. Storying this introduction, I aim to provide the context for how I came to and continue to understand the Centre as an adaptive, emergent site of sharing and creating stories by interacting with the experiences (stories) of others and their relationship to the space.

From the time I began to explore the Centre in 2017, I shifted my focus several times. Pursuant to the inciting question of the purpose of the Indigenous Art Centre, the general operations slowly unfolded as I moved through published articles by former staff, and publications and press releases from the federal government and the official website.99 Gathering information from a diversity of sources, I

99 Melanie Evtushenko’s thesis “Recognizing Aboriginal Voice in Federal Government Exhibitions: A Case Study of Transitions: Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art.” In her thesis, she analyzes the federally organized travelling international exhibition in light of the government taking up the politics of recognition to provide a space
assembled a working history of the operational functions of the Centre. The texts provided introductions to many current and/or former staff, as well as the roles they occupied. I worked them into the weave of living narratives within the ecology of the Centre. Viviane Gray’s essay is exemplary of this as she offers a prologue into the essential workings of the institution; a story that fits with and expands the larger narrative.

Given the dearth of published information on the Centre, it was remarkable that many publications were personal accounts. The close, personal voice of the authors informed my entrance into the institution and advanced a method that could carry these narratives into a sustained dialogue with the institutional texts. I came to see that nested within the institutional texts of the Centre, were stories from distinct vantage points. Moving within and informing the ecology of the Centre.

I moved towards familiarizing myself with the space and the individuals coordinated within the Centre. In 2017, I considered who could speak to, and what could be asked to understand how the Centre fulfilled its mandate. I focused on how the Centre fit within the government structure and if there was a distinction between the operations of the IAC and other institutions with Indigenous art collections because of or independent from its location. These geographical and spatial considerations extended from interpersonal and communal responsibility analogous to Indigenous ways of knowing and decolonial discourses. From the larger discourse of contemporary Indigenous art, I separated out the activities of individuals in the IAC, and focused solely on this ecology and these stories.

To this end, I began to collect and consider the terms circulated within the literature and federal policies around the Centre. Recurrent departmental titles and group names such as Indian, Aboriginal, Indigenous, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Cultural Affairs, arts and crafts, etc. These terms were inscribed within and came to accumulate around the public image of the Centre. Extending to the artists whose artworks were collected and the staff and jury members responsible for

for Indigenous voice and identity formation through the display and collaborative organization of the exhibition with Indigenous curators.
collecting the works, individuals spoke as members, as experts, as representatives, or recipients of the title and the accordant supports funneled through the programming to “contemporary Indigenous artists.” They persist in the archival records, and the department which oversees the care, support, and maintenance of the Collection. Layers of terminology piled and tangled into the discourse of the Centre; each term corresponding to an era of federal procedures aimed at addressing the interpellated group of peoples. All the more reason for a study that worked on unravelling the stories within the hi(stories).

Exhausting the textual sources, I returned to conversations. With an expansive understanding of what constituted participation, I proceeded; assuming that anyone who had participated in the Centre would want to share their knowledge. I also practiced an open definition of the term relationship. Irrespective of how the term(s) collected individuals, I engaged in conversation based on the individual’s professional affiliations with the program.

As time passed, I was influenced by external research and conversations, namely those relating to Indigenous ways of knowing and ethical research designs predicated on relational responsibility and interpersonal accountability.100 Through the preliminary connections I made, I gained a nuanced layer of understanding of the positions held by individuals orbiting the Centre. It was often the case that individuals wanted to participate, but a barrier would invariably manifest. Repeatedly communicated to me were variations of similar responses amounting to what I initially interpreted as a dearth of information. Either they wanted to participate but their current artistic practices and/or research projects took precedence, therefore, precluding engagement in other ventures or there was no response.

100 I am referring to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s text Decolonizing Methodologies, where she provides a historical account of the relationship that is established in traditional western research designs to assume that all knowledge should be available for possession. Advancing a series of methods that Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous research could follow that account for Indigenous ways of knowing, Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson pick up on these methods. Exemplifying these methods in their own research investigations, Margaret Kovach discusses the particularities of pursuing research using a decolonizing lens to situate the investigation in her text Indigenous Methodologies. Relationships become diffuse and integrated within every aspect of the research, from design to analysis, and the ultimate aims of the study become cultivating relationships (57). Shawn Wilson picks up on this, advocating most strongly for relational accountability as a continuation of the decolonizing paradigm advanced by Linda Tuhaiwai Smith and picked up by individuals in local settings to build localized knowledge for communal and individual growth (55).
These responses corroborated what had initially been posed to me as the problematic of the IAC. It maintained a significant collection of Indigenous art, however, no one seemed to know about the Collection. The Centre’s function to the wider public remained ambiguous; ambiguity lead to uncertainty regarding how to engage with the Centre. I turned to looking at how the Centre was intended to operate to locate and understand the disjuncture.

As I explained above, my first visit was a phased process of coming to understand the place and the operational order of the IAC. Prior to my appointment, I requested all available archival material relating to the origins and organizational structure of the program. In these interactions, I got a sense of how the request of information process was fulfilled, as well as the name of the individual responsible for addressing the requests. When I arrived at the Centre, the documents were ready for me, as well as the current staff of the Centre. I gained insight into how the institutional structure was mediated by the current administration by being worked through these processes.

Rather than a detailed and comprehensive list of positions and duties, budgetary schedules, and structures I had anticipated, there was one document: Bringing the Indian Arts Centre Program into the 21st Century. This document codified a conversation between former and current directors of the Centre held in July of 1990. The record of the meeting went on to become the governing document of the IAC. The mandate and subsequent operations of the Centre are drawn back to this process. In conversations with staff, I discovered that as of 2018, no subsequent document had been drafted. I also discovered that prior to this document, operations were largely mediated through oral directives which partially explained the absence of textual documentation within the institution but not in academic discourses and public knowledge.

I sat down to analyze the text for the first time at the Centre. The text gives the impression of being produced through an oral process. I could follow the general proceedings of the meeting in the first reading insofar as it set out a functional structure of the program and their related functions within the overall operations of the institution.
The draft describes the Centre as “part of Indian business since time immemorial.” Citing a historical trajectory extending beyond the organization of the Centre in 1967. It does not qualify what “Indian business” is. Turning to the surrounding textual details, “Indian business” was taken up in the context of the Centre and channeled through a name and a decade – Clutesi, the 1940s. Referring to George Clutesi, a member of the Tseshahlt First Nation, the national art markets’ appraisal of Clutesi’s art and printed publications in Canada is documented as the initiating point for the creation of the then Indian Art Centre. Pivoting around George Clutesi’s entrance into Canadian artistic appraisal vis a vis political awareness, a connection is formed between Indigenous artists and the Indigenous Art Centre. By invoking Clutesi, the document links the Centre into a history where it functions as the site where the Canadian government and “Indian business” converge. Gathered around the recognition (re: valuation) of Indigenous art, “Indian business” is brought into the government through the mediating force of the Collection program.

A chronology of years, names, and events follows. Beginning in the 1940s, the overview of the Centre provides a shorthand history of significant political incidents impacting the stability of the Collection within the federal government. Paired with each event are corresponding responses from artist networks and individuals. All advocating for securing responsibility for the care and management of the art collection with the federal department. Details of these historical frictions between the government and its stance towards the Collection of Indigenous art are communicated in these notes.

The impetus for the meeting is defined within the working title of the document. Drawing the Centre into the 21st century, the agenda provides a historical review of the Centre’s programming up to the present and outlines a series of activities aimed towards supporting the needs of artists, and how these are hooked into future considerations for the growth of contemporary Indigenous art. Support for artists precedes and is the necessary catalyst for growth.

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101 Department of Indian Affairs and Norther Development, “Consultation with Former Indian Arts Centre Managers: Bringing the Indian Arts Centre Program into the 21st Century,” July 17, 1990.
The text proceeds to list the Indian Art Program services and how they were determined through close consultation with the client group. Broken down into the Indian Art Acquisition, maintenance, conservation, exhibition, and promotion, the meeting provides key points to address these areas of services to Indigenous artists as well as the subsequent care, maintenance, and promotion of the Collection as an extension of these services.

How the points of discussion on the agenda are determined matters. In consultation with representative bodies of artists – here the document references societies such as the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) and the Native Indian/Inuit Photographers’ Association (NIIPA) among others. Concerns presented by the lobbying groups were serious considerations for the development of the institution, exemplifying the collaborative organizational procedures and ratified within the institutional record. Predicated on “Indian business,” these discussions are codified into the general procedures and programs of the art institution.

Encouragement of new and emerging artists through the Acquisition Program is listed as the first article on the agenda. Promotion of artworks through national and international exhibitions and loans leads into the discussion of acquisition of artworks for the Indian Art Collection through a Peer Juried Selection Committee. In this way, the artists and their needs are responded to by specific adaptations to the program. The final point on the agenda was planning for a consultative process with artists to develop an arts policy “in view of transferring the Indian Art Program and the National Indian Art Collection to a National Indian Art Centre.” From the discussion of how the services are determined by and administered to meet the needs of Indigenous artists, the operational structure and mode of consultative and collaboratively based programmatic processes coheres.

A report conducted by Noganosh Consulting Services is drawn in. Evaluating national – the Art Bank of Canada – and international – such as the European Biennale, and the Dade County, Florida Arts

102 Bringing the Indian Art Program into the 21st Century.
in Public Places – models of arts acquisition, the report aims to assess models of arts acquisitions. Certain elements of these models were recommended based on the fulfillment of needs to the client group. The report derived its justification for the Peer Juried Selection Committee on the material conditions and limitations of Indian artists and their cultural concerns. With an eye to the context of the 21st century, a peer juried selection process was selected for its capacity to “democratize art acquisitions. A jury composed of artists, academics, and curators selects art for purchase by the institution and thereby helps to formulate directions and aesthetic considerations for the institution.” Iteratively informing a collection of art from peers and knowledgeable individuals, the juried selection process was intended to foster internal recognition from a community of individuals gathered around the term “Canadian Indian art.”

Recommend a variation of the model used by the Canada Council Art Bank’s Juried Acquisition program, changes to the criteria for collection included recognition of status, non-status, Bill C-31, and Metis artists. Beyond these considerations, limitations on number of pieces and dimensions were lifted as well as any transportation expenses. These recommendations were made in acknowledgement of the prohibitive associated costs for the client group. Unspecified was the origin of these barriers for Indian artists; in its place was a reference to “culturally sensitive concerns” as many artists “make subsistence living at other work in order to pursue their career as artists.”

These phrases enclosed two different forms of support for artists as fundamental and paired considerations. “Support” was expressed on one level as a mechanized device within the Acquisitions process to mitigate costs for applicants. Financial provisions such as shipping and handling expenses, payment for pieces purchased for the Collection, and the promotion of artworks in subsequent national and international contexts were discussed and evaluated. Economic provisions to artists informed the

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103 Bringing the Indian Art Program into the 21st Century.

104 Bringing the Indian Art Program into the 21st Century.
ultimate consideration against which recommendations to the facilitation of the Acquisition program were made.

The other form of support, this in line with culturally sensitive concerns, was referenced but never fully qualified in the document. The only textual reference I could identify referred to the selection of Peer Juried Committee members. The recommendations were for Committee members to have relevant knowledge to assess artworks for their aesthetic market value, while expressing sensitivity to native cultural concerns. That cultural sensitivity fit in to “Indian business” was evident; how this culturally relevant support was integrated beyond the method of Juried members selection went undefined in the document.

Nonetheless, the institutional processes culminated in the collection. The by-product of collaborative discussions and programming carried out by historic administrations and external artist lobby groups, and arts professionals vying for federal support, the Collection was and is the fulfillment of idiosyncratic procedures mediated within the governmental offices of the Indigenous Art Centre in then Department of Indian and Northern Development.

The document also expresses how “contemporary Canadian Indigenous art” as a general category was constructed and conferred on individuals in the exchange process. Through the means of identification and assessment, the collection of an artwork by the Centre also collected individual artists within the general category of contemporary Canadian Indian artists. Gaining federally authenticated status by one’s peers also conferred another form of identification within the domain of Canadian art. In the process of having their works collected, individuals were ideologically joined into Canadian art history, and by extension Canadian society generally. Therefore, the interactions behind having works collected not only represented significant socioeconomic and cultural support for artists, it simultaneously constructed the term and a history for contemporary Canadian Indigenous art and artists in the process.

This was revealed in the template for the application that artists submitting their pieces for consideration had to complete. The “Entry Form” required participants fill out and submit the document as the condition for consideration. Requisite information ranged from artistic medium, dimensions, and
care of an artwork, to a section requiring band affiliation and tribal identity. The identification mechanism requested individuals declare themselves and their “status” of a piece with identifying the medium and care of their artwork. In this way, consideration of the artwork was attached to consideration of the individual as an Indigenous person defined within the parameters of the document.

Triangulating applicants through their self-identification, the conditions for consideration by the institution were as follows: “the call for submissions is open to all status, non-status, Bill C-31, or Metis; and, “they must reside and/or have been born within Canada.”105 However, the details of how this process was affected, how independent committees were selected, and how Inuit artists had been included into the process since the consolidation of the two centres was not clear.

It became apparent that at the level of the ruling relations, which could be traced to the federal government, the Collection became the organizing structure of the institution, determining a community of independent artists producing artworks that fit within the umbrella category of Canadian Indian art (now contemporary Canadian Indigenous art). This seems obvious and redundant. However, an artist’s entrance into the Collection through the Acquisition Program required a coordinated series of steps predicated on different systems of valuation. Reviewed first, for their cultural identity and then, on the grounds of culturally relevant criteria coordinated with artistic valuation, these processes mediated by the members of the Centre in coordination with external members of the arts community with relevant knowledge concentrated and amplified around the creation of a collection with various significances for different communities. Artists, in turn, participated in these processes for the unique financial provisions the Centre afforded at this time, attentive to culturally sensitive concerns. In this way, artists were both constructed, but also recognized by culturally knowledgeable individuals in this complicated exchange of artwork.

The layered mechanisms of (e)valuation conducted by artist’s peers and art professionals led to collaborative authentication and recognition of needs, and the fulfillment of needs, all conducted on the

105 Bringing the Indian Art Program into the 21st Century.
grounds of recognizing an Indian artist’s artwork. Glossed as contemporary Canadian Indian art at the time, inclusion into the Collection conferred status on the artist as a federally recognized Canadian Indigenous artist. However, the interpersonal processes behind the Collection are demonstrative of a series of exchanges recognizing the value of artworks as independent achievements of aesthetic excellence that go beyond this national valuation and display.

The distinctiveness of the collaborative administration came as a surprise. For as I outlined above, my introduction to the published material on the Centre was the federal website. The various processes from acquisition to collection have been curtailed significantly in this text. Rather, the federal text describes these processes for their final public uses generalized into the Acquisition Program, the Lending Program, and the Resource Library.106 Obscured in this linear discourse is how the needs of Indigenous artists are recognized and addressed through collaborative processes of discussion and evaluation in conjunction with cultural concerns. The adaptations from programmatic collection, display and acquisition is standardized within the professionalized language of museum and art discourse and the possessive language used by federal discourses to qualify Indigenous peoples as Canadian Indigenous peoples. The Centre in turn, is presented as a resource for Canadians. In this way, the Collection becomes exemplary of Canadian art as the Centre and subsequent art that falls within its care become coded as contemporary Canadian Indigenous art.

From the working draft of the operations of the Centre, I moved into textual analysis of the Annual Reports from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The earliest mention of the institution is framed as a policy-based response to target Indigenous socioeconomic development. The Indigenous Art Centre is part of federal support programmatically dispersed by the federal government.107 The mechanisms of socioeconomic and culturally relevant support afforded artists are


simplified as “support for the creation, preservation, and promotion of Indigenous art.” There is a marked difference between the focus on Indigenous artists and addressing their needs, to the production of a collection of objects and resources available to the Canadian public and arts institutions. These phrases obfuscated connection to communally specific concerns in favour of an outward focus on the Canadian public building connections with Indigenous peoples and histories abstracted through the Indigenous Art Collection. From the consultation meeting, it was clear that participants spoke from and for the support of Indigenous artists as members of the community while the website was about Indigenous art and artists.

In the absence of an official governing document, the draft speaks to guiding intentions for collaborative arts management. How this feeds into the daily workings in the institution and the collection was what I sought to discover. Created from the spirit of collaborative exchange of needs and supports attentive to relevant cultural concerns, where was the disconnect for individuals collected or working within the Centre?

The theorized method of physical refusal detailed by Audra Simpson in *Mohawk Interruptus* provided another layer to understand the complicated reality of the IAC. Given the importance of the collection for Indigenous artists and the risk of discursively turning individuals into ethnographic voices of Indigeneity, and myself the interlocutor, I re-evaluated individuals’ responses considering who I was and what I was asking them to share. To gain an understanding independent and prior to asking individuals questions that assumed “Indigenous art” as the given point from which they spoke and my own position as an unbiased researcher “able to observe without being implicated in the scene,” I went to the Centre to understand how place had tempered individuals’ voices, and how voices circulated and came to collect here.


Of bodies triangulated through acquisitions and other programs, which draw on their knowledge as artists, arts professionals, and individuals with external affiliations to artist groups to facilitate their delivery. This was and is significant. Not only in terms of the reality of the Indigenous-led management of the Centre, and the history materially represented by the Indigenous Art Collection, but in terms of the administration’s engagement with the ruling relations overseeing the Centre through collaboration and dialogue with the client group.

**Historically and Personally Situating the Voices that Narrate the Place of the Centre**

The consultation meeting revealed that the standard language of institutional processes was not followed. In its place was a discourse relevant to the client group that was normalized. Much of the operations of the Centre are done “in person” or “in practice”, and not codified in the government playbook. To comprehend the importance of cultural concerns and how they nuanced the programming, I turned from the available texts to engage with people addressing these affairs in their daily activities.

This move pivoted doubly on the importance of acknowledging individuals as authorities of their actions as a method for engaging culturally relevant knowledge. As Jordan Wilson, a member of the Musqueam Nation, explains in his community-based research with members from his community, it is necessary to acknowledge that everyone carries their culture within them. As collective or social memory, or as a system of distributed knowledge, every individual is an authority of their culture.\(^{111}\) This is true in the context of the institution as the Centre physically collects individuals who form a community around the execution and delivery of services and programming for Indigenous artists. Operating within the federal government, a collection of interests and ideologies are gathered and manifested in the programming and ultimately the artwork of “contemporary Canadian Indigenous artists.” These processes

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contain, represent, and record stories. The individuals responsible for maintaining, collecting, and promoting them in turn have their own stories. There are stories nested within stories here.

Indigenous ways of knowing develop the importance of telling one’s own stories. IE also acknowledges individuals as expert knowers of what they do. However, it does not acknowledge the transformative hurdle that is necessary between the ontological concerns of discussing what is really happening and what is necessary to understand the historical and relational continuity between work knowledge and cultural knowledge that informs the daily experiences of individuals who hold positions ontologically distinct from the ruling relations. Engaging with the Centre as an ecology of place, interpersonal, cultural, and ethical responsibilities inform the framework of Institutional Ethnography in coordination with Indigenous ways of knowing filtered through a decolonizing lens. The decolonizing lens functions to implicate place, time, and power as they are joined.¹¹²

Applying this method of textual exploration to the IAC, several details become clear. While the site of the institution itself is coordinated from the federal ideology which attaches support for Indigenous peoples to socioeconomic exchange, the individuals who have and do occupy the space bring culturally nuanced points of view that influence and determine their actions within their textually mediated directives. Furthermore, the Centre is unique in that the coordinating text was produced through consultation and collaboration with particular individuals – processes that are exogenous to the subsequent federal texts which generalize individuals into the category of Indigenous artists; endogenous to the needs and aspirations of particular artists with particular cultural needs. Though they fulfill the requirements of supporting and maintaining the Collection of contemporary Canadian Indigenous art, they gesture to other processes at work within the daily operations and active members within these processes. It is the acknowledgement of these processes that allows a more complete understanding and its purpose.

¹¹² Margaret Kovach, Indigenous Methodologies, 79.
As I mentioned above, I had questions regarding the qualification of terminology used in the discussion and how the document was picked up and used by subsequent administrations. Since the amalgamation of the Inuit and Indian Art Centres in the 1990s, and the departmental shifts in the intervening years, no changes had been made to the programming processes. The disparity between the meeting and the federal website on the Centre indicated a move away from an active site of support and dialogue with Indigenous artists to a resource centre for Canadian endeavours aimed at the display and investigation of Indigenous artists. The reality of how these processes came together, the public facing operations of the institution and the support for the client group, was not easily apparent to me.

It was fortuitous that the Centre, but the institution as an extension of the then Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, published a monograph in 2018. Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Centre, the text opened with introductory remarks from the newly appointed ministers of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and Indigenous Services. Carolyn Bennett and Jane Philpott respectively comment on the fact that the Collection “provides a unique representation of this country’s culturally diverse history and realities.”\(^{113}\) That the text will serve as “inspiration to future generations of Indigenous artists and craftspeople, and as a conversation starter for all to approach the rebuilding of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across the country,” their words reflect the federal discourse circulated by the government. There is a conspicuous lack of attention to the creation of relationships between Indigenous artists and the general public.\(^ {114}\)

I added these words (relationships, re-evaluate, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs) to the list I had created early in the discovery process. Together, these terms collected around relationships between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples and different ways of valuing Indigenous cultures. However, these phrases obfuscated the processes necessary to come to relationships


and focused instead on the final product or products in general of these exchanges. Aspiring towards renewed relationships with Indigenous peoples, the terms of engagement and the way to reach these new relationships recommended engagement with Indigenous art as the vehicle to reach conversations between people.

Engaging Viviane Gray’s essay, I got a sense of how these various relationships were mediated and the historical processes that followed from the unofficial mandate of the Centre. Gray shared relevant points of her professional experiences in the Centre coinciding with significant historical and political moves in the history of the Canadian state’s recognition of Indigenous peoples.

In my initial reading of Bringing the Indian Art Program into the 21st Century, it was unclear how the identity of individuals was mediated by the Acquisitions process. Gray provided an anecdotal account of how these concerns were addressed by her and other staff members in the 1970s. Animating the history, she recounted how the Centre was “a front-line program and always addressed issues that were faced by Indian or First Nations artists. Very often these issues were not settled by the Department.”

She cited the discussion which transpired at the First National Indian Cultural Conference in 1970, sponsored by the Department’s Cultural Development Division and the Citizenship Branch of the Department of the Secretary of State. At this time, the Head of Indian Fine Arts, Cathy Donnelly, intervened on behalf of an artist who did not feel that her work was “Indian enough” to be acquired for the Collection. She goes on to write that as of “March 24, 1970, a resolution was passed at the First National Cultural Conference that non-status Indians be given access to government cultural grants and programs.” Convening “artists and cultural groups across Canada, the Conference consulted “cultural workers, Indian/First Nations politicians, non-Native educators and museum specialists from the National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of History).”

115 Viviane Gray, “The Indigenous Art Collection,”

116 Viviane Gray, 34.
exchanges among Indigenous peoples to determine who and how individuals were recognized within the art centre, and among their communities at large.

Viviane Gray’s essay picks up and carries the language and the narrative that was used in the consultation meeting in July of 1990. In fact, she participated in the meeting. Through her personal narrative, she “fills in the gaps,” listing names and drawing in the political terrain in which the Centre was and is currently situated in the Canadian government. In this way, she does not provide an “alternate history,” but a history of the Centre from within the administration that is personal, built on what mattered to the artists and community members with whom she communicated.

Gray gathers a history predicated on points of tension between the federal government and the administration that has been carried into what the Centre currently was and how it operated when she left. Propelling the operations of the Centre between satisfying federal deliverables and individual concerns, Gray recounts how the decisions made in the IAC shifted federal policies in relation to federal recognition of Indigenous identity and title. Negotiating the rights of title and Indigenous identity from her perspective as a Director and member affiliated with the client group, the personal dimension of her account gestures to the closeness between personal relationships and professional duties operating in the Centre; how support was and is intended to be provided by the Centre; and, the collaborative method of engagement that guided the decision-making processes of the administration.

As an outsider invested in learning about the stories held within the Centre, I moved to speak to the people who were coordinated and operated within the space. Asking myself what mattered for the individuals who make up this community and what it was I could offer, I entered the Centre invested in listening to what mattered to individuals working within the Centre, and how I could go about formulating the Centre as a site of support.

In the following chapter, I incorporate my conversations with individuals who were coordinated within the staff to explore how the Centre was and is operated by individuals who occupy multiple positions within the operations of the institution and cultural affiliations and how it has assumed various
significances and obscurity within the larger arts field and among Indigenous artists. Though I interviewed a small group of people, their stories opened my eyes to new realities.
Chapter 5

Speaking/Recognizing the Stories in an Ecology of Place

Prior to analyzing the governing texts, identifying potential participants for the study seemed to be a straightforward process; however, in the process of exploring the texts, significant points of tension were revealed. Often and repeatedly, the requests I posed to artists, arts professionals, and present or former staff members affiliated with the Centre were met with declinations. It was frequently the case that an individual would initially be interested. Then, after providing the questions I received variations of similar responses: “I’d like to help, but I don’t have enough knowledge to speak to your questions,” and/or, “it’s been a long time since I participated in the Centre”, and/or, “my current focus is on my artistic practice”. These responses independently signalled what I initially interpreted as a lack of knowledge on their part. Considering them in relation to one another, they signified knowledge that was purposefully restricted from me.

Speaking with Barry Pottle

I remember that it was a grey November evening. I entered the Ottawa Art Gallery from out of the cold and performed a quick inspection of the main floor, scouting out a quiet place to sit a couple of minutes before the scheduled time. Nothing stood out. I found myself thinking about the appropriateness of the location for our meeting. Several minutes later, keeping a close eye on the entrance, I saw someone who looked like the picture I had found of Barry on his website. I quickly realized he likely had no point of reference for what I looked like. Concern dissipated as we approached each other. Somehow, he knew me in the crowd, posing my name as a question. We shook hands, and together, we looked for a spot that was away from the general din where we could speak comfortably. It was clear to me that Barry was familiar with the space. Settling on a pair of benches on the third floor of the gallery, across the hall was the entrance to an exhibition, Inaabiwin. The Elders of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg explained in the accompanying descriptive text, that from Anishinaabemowin, the word could be interpreted as “the art of
seeing,” reflecting the complexities of relating to the surrounding world.\textsuperscript{117} Now, I consider this word in relation to this research and I cannot help but feel a confluence of meaning.

In the first few minutes, Barry and I spoke of the weather and how long our respective journeys had been to get to the Gallery. Then, Barry asked me the question that I had been anticipating; what was I hoping to accomplish from this research? In the same way that I began this study, I explained my intentions and what I hoped to offer through an exploration of the programs of the institution to discover the purpose of the institution through individuals’ contributions to its development and exploring the potential of expanding the circle of knowledgeable individuals in the process. I believe he was satisfied with my response. From there, we moved into the interview.

I began with a question to guide us both into the conversation and situate us in a common understanding of the place and time that Barry’s involvement with the Centre occurred. I was aware that Barry had formally left the Centre in the early 2000s. To situate his story within a historical context, I also wanted to provide space for Barry to describe his entrance into the Centre in a manner that did not anticipate a certain response. I inquired how it was that he was or had become associated with the programs administered by the Centre.

Barry’s professional involvement with the Centre began in the late 1990s. Hired in 1998, he worked in several capacities within what was then the Inuit Art Centre. Other than the curatorial assistant, July Papatsie, who was responsible for his hiring, there were two other employees working on initiatives related to producing and documenting Inuit artist biographies within their section. In his role as Research Assistant, Barry was responsible for doing “research on art, Inuit art. Specifically Inuit art, at the time we were still – the Art Centre was known as the Indian and Inuit Art Centre –, and it was just coming together to form one entity. But we were still separate in terms of the work that we do, in terms of the programs and policies with respect to Indian and Inuit art were still separate at the time.”\textsuperscript{118} He is

\footnote{\textit{Inaabiwin}, Elders of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, https://oaggao.ca/inaabiwin.}

\footnote{In Conversation with Barry Pottle in November 2019.}
referring to the fact that although they shared office space and common administrative resources, the Inuit Art Centre and the Indian Art Centre were programmatically separate. Gathered around the division between Inuit and First Nations and Metis with their own distinct art collections and administrative procedures, the Centres’ personnel were congruent with the artists’ cultural identities.

Later in the conversation, Barry filled in subsequent details, tracing his professional career in arts administration back to the Aboriginal Training Program in Museum Practices at the Canadian Museum of History, and, preceding that, an interdisciplinary Aboriginal Studies program at Carleton University. Focused on “Aboriginal content” predominantly in the field of art history, he stated that he was perhaps not professionally involved in the Centre during his academic training, but he was aware of it. In fact, he had accessed the considerable archives pursuant to his focus on Inuit art. It was following his completion of the Aboriginal Training Program that Barry applied and was hired on to the Centre.

“Doing research and compiling information, fielding requests, developing later on exhibitions in house as well as national, international,” Barry’s association shifted from a user of the programs, specifically the archival resources, to an administrator. Tasked with responding to inquiries from the general public, galleries, and collectors, he was also responsible for conducting research on Inuit art, “and on the Centre itself as well as providing resource information and whatnot to those individuals that I just mentioned.” Mediating and fielding public inquiries, carrying out clerical duties, including arts administration, Barry along with July, were the frontline operations as well as curatorial leads behind the Inuit arts administration from the time he was hired to the time he left the Centre when it had consolidated as the Inuit and Indian Art Centre. Balancing administrative operations, coordinating the delivery of services to the public while collating research, as the Inuit Art Section was predominantly directed towards archival duties at the time, the art collection, which had been disbanded in the late 1980s was being built up again during Barry’s tenure. The administrative impetus for the reinvigorated collection program was the Transitions exhibition.

Following the reinstatement of the collection of Inuit art, Barry moved into the curatorial section of the Centre. He explained that the primary initiative he participated in at the time was the
initiation and development of the Acquisitions Program. The Acquisitions Program was a multi-step process introduced into the Centre’s programming when Inuit art was (re)integrated into the mandate of the Centre. After the dispersal of the initial Collection in the late 1980s, Inuit art was collected under these new parameters for the purpose of stabilizing a Collection.

In coordination with other staff members, Barry aided in the development of in-house exhibitions showcasing the works acquired through the Acquisitions Program. Before concluding his involvement with the Centre, he went on to co-curate and produce the exhibition Transitions II: Contemporary Indian and Inuit Art of Canada in collaboration with Ryan Rice, and Barry Pottle, a follow-up to Transitions, and various local and national exhibitions.

Though he is no longer employed by the Centre – his tenure ended in 2002 –, he has maintained a professional connection to the institution through his current role as a public servant, with a separate relationship as a photographer. From the Indigenous Art Centre, Barry transferred into other roles within the federal government. Working within the Department now, he has contact with the current operations of the Centre. In these coordinated interdepartmental channels, Barry provides advice and/or information to staff upon request.

Currently, Barry holds a position as a Senior Aboriginal Awareness Officer within the Learning and Wellbeing Directorate in Human Resources spans the Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC). In this role, he provides “services to both departments as well as the public overall.” Tasked with delivering educational and informational services to various audiences, he explained how he often incorporates the display of Indigenous art to supplement his oral presentations. Pulling pieces from the IAC Collection into the discussion, art becomes a heuristic resource to mediate topics of reconciliation or general training about Indigenous cultures. Barry explained that “I try and use if I can – use samples of the Art Centre and the Collection itself not only the Collection but outside the Collection” to navigate these topics.¹¹⁹ Switching between the various positions he has

¹¹⁹ Author in Conversation with Barry Pottle November 2019.
occupied in the operations of the Centre, Barry shared his continual support from and for the Indigenous Art Centre as a valuable historical resource and for the administrative support provided by staff.

Much of our discussion revolved around the historical significance of the Collection as an achievement of collecting and as a representation of significant and remarkable Indigenous artists. Hinged to this were also the professional opportunities and economic benefits provided by the Centre’s acquisition of artworks. A source of economic support for the contemporary Indigenous arts community, artistic recognition within the broader context of Canadian and international collections through exposure of their works in exhibitions, Barry grounded his understanding through the benefits he had experienced as a member of this collectivity hinged to its utility as an educational resource he utilized in professional capacity. A relationship began to form between his intentions for pursuing a career in the Indigenous Art Centre flowing from academic, personal, and artistic interests on “Inuit art” specifically. I did not understand the significance of this until later in the discussion.

I inquired into his knowledge of the history of the Centre. My aim was to discover what kind of institutional knowledge he had of the formation of the program. Prior to entering his account, Barry stated that he could only speak from his perspective and that his knowledge was limited, and furthermore, he was not as proficient as a storyteller as others. Rather than elaborating his own story, Barry drew my attention to a symposium held at OCADU in 2017 in conjunction with an exhibition organized by Ryan Rice. The symposium accompanying raise a flag: works from the Indigenous Art Collection (2000-2015) drew on the knowledge of former or current staff members who contributed to the shaping of the Art Centre’s administration. In the conversation, the history of the Indigenous Art Centre was explored by six former staff members. Barry stated, “I took it from the Inuit perspective and they [speakers at OCAD U symposium] started off with – if you look at the history of Inuit art in Canada and how it came about, the Department was instrumental in developing art as a means of economic development very early on, right. Come in, come up to information, came up to resources, then came up to the exhibitions and promotions
and all the way up there until where it’s at now, right. Right now.”120 Expressing his connection to the Centre through his professional role, he also identified his distinct position and communal affiliations to others coming from and holding an “Inuit perspective.” Stating his position, he then shared his knowledge of the programmatic evolution of the collection of Inuit art from economic commitments. All his comments, when they did not come from his position as a federal employee, were sieved through his communal affiliation to the urban Ottawa Inuk community or to his personal, cultural perspective as a practicing Inuk artist. How these connections were represented and recognized within the setting of the Department was further elaborated in his description of his artistic practice and professional vocation.

As I mentioned above, Barry is currently involved with the administration of the Centre from an arm’s-length position as a public servant. Though he is an employee of the Department which oversees the care of the Centre, his interactions with staff are coordinated through query and response. His responses, when they are requested, are filtered through his role as a staff member. “In that context,” he stated, “I’m aware of what they’re doing as well so if they need some advice or information from my perspective I would, I will provide it, same with any questions in that context in that way.” Highlighting context, Barry expanded on the importance of separation.

Triangulating the discussion around the acquisition of his pieces by the Centre, Barry stated that any involvement with the Indigenous Art Centre, when it came to his professional work, necessitated that he “be careful though, I am a public servant and I work for the Department so everything is done with the conflict of interest as number one.” He continued, “I have to declare my conflict through those processes to make sure I’m not in conflict because I am a Departmental employee as well as a practicing artist. So I keep that separate and we – by doing that we have to…make aware of our conflict or if there’s any conflict we have to go through those processes to clear those conflict of interest charges or conflict of interest processes.”121 At this time, we were discussing his collection entitled “The Awareness Project,” a

120 Author in Conversation with Barry Pottle November 2019.

121 Author in Conversation with Barry Pottle November 2019.
photo exhibition from 2017. For this project, he collected and documented Eskimo Identification Tags* with the permission of Inuit peoples who received the tags from the federal government and currently resided in the Ottawa area. Barry explained the legal process he went through of submitting forms declaring the content of his works to address the perception of potential conflict they posed.

The Canadian federal Conflict of Interest (COI) mechanism was designed for public servants who, placed in a position where their private interests could be interpreted to conflict with their public roles, go through a clearance process to ensure that their private activities do not conflict with public interest. Barry’s role as a public servant preceded his (private/cultural) artistic practice. Framed in the COI procedure as a private interest, the content of the work and the particular perspective from which it originates are framed as personal. The regulating mechanism determines the degree to which there appears to be a conflict of interest in the form of unlawful monetary gains, social activities, and general behaviour. Public interest, though not explicitly stated, requires culture and distinct perspectives be filtered through the lens of the perception of public scrutiny. Culture is therefore reserved to private concerns in order to maintain public interest.

His works were ultimately cleared. However, Barry distinguished his engagement with the Centre into specific relationships contextualized by his responsibilities as a federal employee. The COI mechanism also provides a context for the federal oversight that operates within the Department, and, by extension, the Indigenous Art Centre. Ensuring that the work collected and the employees of the federal government are aligned with federal processes given that it is a public institution, the programs are channeled through and must be seen to serve Canadian public interest.

The processes establish a framework upon which democracy, respect, integrity, stewardship, and innovation are intended to be built; these are the fundamental values that are espoused by the public sector, filtered through and prescribed to Canadian public servants. Cited in these processes is the


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antecedent document from which these values are drawn, namely the Constitution Act. As representatives of the federal government, these values are represented in the mandate of the Indigenous Art Centre.

Barry’s prefatory response was given in his capacity as a federal employee. He later responded to the question of how the mandate of the Centre was realized in his capacity as an artist. Stating that it was beneficial in terms of receiving recognition from international and national exhibition opportunities; providing attention to the specific community he was personally aligned with and artistically represented; and, attention to Indigenous art generally in the Canadian context, and Indigenous history specifically. Furthermore, he said that it broadly provided artists with socioeconomic support to sustain their artistic practices and to have a livelihood. Receiving economic and public attention for his work, he identified that the Centre is one of the only institutions to publicly recognize and fund Indigenous art in such a sustained and comprehensive manner.

From this capacity, Barry expressed how the benefits he received as an artist channeled into personal, professional, community, and international forms of recognition. His art became the symbolic vehicle for directing and circulating discussions around multiple forms of community and other topics related to the content and creator of the works. How the conversations were taken up was determined by the individuals facilitating its presentation and the context of its display. As vehicles, his art personally provided him with socioeconomic support through artistic recognition. His pieces have become moveable cultural products that reach audiences nationally and internationally. Depending on the context in which the works are displayed, they come to signal different meanings with different ways of framing his relationship to his art, to national affiliations, and to the Urban Inuk community he is invested in, and with whom he aligns his perspective.

Responding to the question I posed about the singularity of the Centre, he shared that he believed the Centre’s greatest strength was the Collection, and the breadth of pieces included in the Collection. Highlighting what this has meant for the Inuit arts community that he has engaged with as well as for himself, he has benefitted from the Acquisitions program over the years as well as being able to see and hear how artists have been advantaged from the programs. Expanding on his answer, he expressed the
mutual and multiple points of benefit for artists, as well as individuals who had the opportunity to interact with pieces from the Collection. In the same way that he stated that while the Collection was the greatest strength, he intimated that it was the administrative efforts to ensure the continued dissemination, display, and collection, and promotion as integral to the maintaining and strengthening the Collection.

When we delved further into his involvement with the IAC through his current artistic practice, we got into discussions of the question of contemporary art and the complicated distinction between the idea of modern artforms and “traditional.” Irrespective of these designations, Barry said that it has provided a place for voices to be heard, in national and international contexts through exhibitions.

Aligning himself with contemporary art forms, Barry explained that his work was recognized and therefore he was recognized within the contemporary Indigenous arts community as an individual voice, and as someone who is creating a space for dialogue and for the space to be expanded. When I asked Barry in a follow up email after out meeting how it was that he got into art, he said:

Well by accident really, I did not consciously go out or say that I want to be a photographer or photo artist per se […]

It wasn’t until I read an article from a student (Norma Dunning actually) who did a school project on the Eskimo Identifications Program and I thought to myself can I do this using photography (photograph the E Numbers) so I set out to find Inuit who either have their tags (as it is called also), don’t have them or don’t care about them. I managed to find fellow Inuit who had their tags…I also wanted to put a face to a faceless program [emphasis mine].

I knew that photography was not a large component or genre within Inuit Art so I set out to build a foundation for what I call Urban Inuit Art Photography – I also knew that with the Urban Aboriginal/Indigenous population, Urban Inuit was not as well
researched or known like that of First Nations or Metis peoples, so from that context I set out to make it my theme or niche!123

Barry is uniquely positioned within the operations of the federal government through his position in the Department while maintaining a distinct perspective and personal art practice. Through his knowledge of how the Collection is used and engaged, he sees and mobilizes the Collection for specific purposes, namely the dissemination of knowledge. Negotiating these connections, Barry has various points of contact with the administration of the Centre, and knowledge of the functions of the programs themselves that afford him access to the resources of the Centre.

Speaking of the importance of the Art Centre, he provided responses that vacillated between various personal and professional roles gathered around the culturally significant Collection. As an artist, he stated that it was important to be part of the Collection and to be recognized in the most significant Indigenous art collection in Canada. As a government employee, he explained that the programs of the Centre allowed for the Collection to be shared as an educational and potential source of financial income for artists. He spoke with knowledge that came from previous engagement with the Centre itself and awareness of the significance of the pieces collected by the Centre.

Expanding on the importance of the Collection itself, Barry stated that the process of being acquired was not only important for him as an artist, but for the genre of contemporary Indigenous art, and the community of contemporary Indigenous artists. Contextualizing the genre that he works in as a derivative of his lived experience; he provided an expansive understanding of the people who are captured within this category and derive a living from these distinctly codified artistic categories. Correlating their significance to creating a dialogue in and amongst the genre, Barry explained how it also created interpersonal dialogues between himself and other artists by virtue of the act of seeing who else had been collected in each acquisition process.

123 Author in Conversation with Barry Pottle November 2019.
Barry articulated the Art Centre as a set of shifting administrative processes aimed at disseminating and sharing knowledge about Indigenous art, as well as a generative site for creating interpersonal connections it offers within the community of contemporary Indigenous artists. In these complicated relationships, Barry was careful to frame the discussion in terms of maintaining equanimity and an ethical relationship with his artistic practice and the government by virtue of the Conflict of Interest processes. His knowledge and understanding of these processes was confounding until I rooted what he told me in the community and the perspective he offered.

Returning once again to his motivations for taking up art, it was clear that his commitments and intentions were not necessarily for benefitting all contemporary Indigenous artists, though he has worked to do so through educational programming. His intention was always to research and explore Inuit art. Coming from an Inuit perspective, his movements through academia, to a professional career, and his current artistic practice are filtered through this perspective.

Having the space and the opportunity to speak to Barry, I discovered that these multiple roles, though seemingly separate, are deeply and mutually informative. While the Indigenous Art Centre afforded him the opportunity to pursue Inuit art through the curatorial and managerial dimension of arts administration, his art practice builds on and engages these formal processes to explore the expressive, and divergent lives lived by populations that are defined but whose concerns are not represented or self-identified by the terms of contemporary Indigenous art, and are lived in urban Canadian communities.

The place from which he currently works is significant. Knowledgeable of the operating dimension as well as using the services and programs of the Centre, he can give a perspective that is deeply inflicted by his prior knowledge and current relationship to the Centre.

**Speaking with Ryan Rice**

Barry’s layered understanding of the processes of arts and cultural administration is carried into the conversation I had with Ryan Rice, Kanien’kehá:ka of Kahnawá:ke. Ryan is currently an independent curator, and the Acting Dean in the Faculty of Liberal Arts in the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) University in Toronto, Ontario. With a curatorial career
spanning 25 years in museums, artist run centres and galleries, Ryan served as the Chief Curator at the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, receiving curatorial fellowships with the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in British Columbia, the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Alberta, and Aboriginal Curator-In-Residence at the Carleton University Art Gallery in Ottawa, Ontario.

Rice has a Master of Arts degree in Curatorial Studies from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York, and graduated from Concordia University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in printmaking and received an Associate of Fine Arts from the Institute of American Indian Arts. His writing on contemporary Onkwehonwe art has been published in periodicals and exhibition catalogues.

With a wide-ranging and diverse professional career in curatorial work and arts management generally, Ryan has also held a curatorial position at the Indigenous Art Centre. It was in this context that I came to know Ryan. While I had done preliminary research and come across several of his written pieces looking through the Indigenous Centre archives for primary sources, his name also came up in conversation with others around the topic of the Centre.

I contacted Ryan, communicating my interest in speaking with him about the Centre. I met with Ryan in his office at OCAD University. Unfamiliar with the campus and this particular part of the city of Toronto, it was a welcome change of environment.

By 10 o’clock in the morning, I was in Ryan’s office. We went over the details of how the interview would proceed, and I explained what I was hoping to achieve from the study. The interview followed a similar structure to the first; Ryan began by identifying his involvement with the Centre through his roles as an artist, a curator, and an arts administrator, in that order. His initial introduction to the IAC was “through the public calls for submissions for acquisitions.” Responding to the Call, his relationship “with the Collection started then. They recognized who I was, and they recognized my practice. So over the next few years within the annual acquisition call I would submit works and I think I have maybe approximately five works in the Collection that was acquired through these open calls.” From the initial exchange, Ryan came to understand the operations of the Centre through the Acquisition
process of having his pieces collected. Recognized as a contemporary Indigenous artist, he received the economic support of the institution to ship, display, and promote his works.

His work was chosen and, for several years, received continuous circulation within the promotional material of the Centre. This included use in a newsletter Transitions, that was distributed by the Department as well as in subsequent national calls for acquisitions. At the same time, he began to engage with the Centre from another direction. Sitting in as the Quebec representative for the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA), Ryan came to know the manager of the Centre as well as staff members during his duties. At the time, the then Indian Art Centre was providing financial support to the Society. Participating in national meetings, Ryan shared, “I met a lot of artists, I was sitting at the table as an artist myself.”

It was in the latter part of the decade that Ryan was invited to consider a position at the Indian Art Centre. Coincidentally, both Barry and Ryan graduated from the same professional development program at the Canadian Museum of History, and followed similar routes into the Centre. Coming into the institution in 1997, Ryan assumed the position of Assistant Curator in the Indian Art sector.

Ryan believed that he was brought into the Centre for his ability to invigorate the programming. Combining his breadth of skills as a curator, arts administrator, and museums educator, Ryan and Barry Ace “dived into changing the way the Acquisition program was conceived, or was carried along at the time to meet the artists’ needs…we continue[d] the open call, the open call was open across the country where people would apply with the intention of doing an exhibition. From the exhibition would come an acquisition.”124 When he began working in the Indian Art Centre, his first initiative was to address the Artist in Residence program. This entailed reviewing the Acquisition process considering what artists needed beyond merely collection of their artwork by the Centre.

124 Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14th, 2019.
Responding to these requests, Ryan and his colleagues coordinated for written material about their works by Indigenous writers, and solo as opposed to large group exhibitions, ultimately developing the Acquisition program based on exhibiting at the Indian Art Gallery. Starting with the artists’ needs, the program was developed within the annual funds allotted to acquisitions to accommodate sourcing Indigenous writers for commissioned pieces, as well as refurbishing the Gallery itself. Ryan described this as “a whole infrastructure change” while staff were “doing the regular duties that came with the Indian Art Centre.”125

Describing the momentum of the programming at the time as being propelled by an ethos “where everyone chipped in,” Ryan unfolded a human context for understanding the Centre as a space where individuals did what needed to be done beyond their assigned roles. The impetus for the exceptional effort that was put into the Centre was in the interest of collective benefit for the artists and for the institution. Constantly pushing for new and emerging artists to receive attention for their artistic endeavours.

Folding the determinations made in Bringing the Indian Art Program into the 21st Century committee into their activities, Ryan explained that he and his colleagues ensured the mandate of collecting and exhibiting 60% emerging artists and 40% established was tangibly reflected in the programming. Supporting not just acquisitions but the artists themselves, “we followed the criteria of focusing – emphasizing emerging [artists]. So 60% of the selections were emerging and the rest were mid-career and established. For the emerging artists we decided to pair up artists, to do two person shows rather than solo, and the mid-career and established would get a solo exhibition…we paired Indigenous writers, we produced catalogues, and we did it in a very DIY type of way where, we just did it.”126

Ryan emphasized on several occasions the expansive importance of exhibitions in his understanding of what the institution should be offering for artists. As an institutionalized mechanism of activating the Collection for public recognition, simultaneously addressing the needs of artists for

125 Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14th, 2019.
126 Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14th, 2019.
professional exposure and career-building, he spoke of exhibitions and the kaleidoscopic capacity they
promoted for diverse publics to interact and engage with the material generated from their production as
the purpose the Centre should be striving towards and what he sought to promote.

Like Barry, he, too, referred to Transitions. However, given his immediate involvement in the
curatorial display, he spoke to how the exhibition pivotally shifted the mandate of the institution given its
latent capacity to promote diplomatic ties through the exchange of cultural forms. In this iterative process,
the international display of contemporary Indigenous art shifted the operational focus and purpose of the
Centre within the Department to be able to produce with greater facility the symbolic capital of
Indigenous art abroad. Used as a resource in international diplomatic exchanges, Ryan highlighted that
during his time working in the Centre, they were generating a program that saw the exchange of art and
artists through international interchanges. The degree to which they orchestrated this change, or if this
approach was directed and facilitated by Foreign Affairs, representing the strategic interests of the federal
government presented as an interesting question. “Represent[ing] Canada as a whole to some extent,”
Indigenous art was the national image of Canada. These exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art not
only satisfied the needs of artists, they benefitted the agenda of other federal departments as a tool of
symbolic, national representations in diplomatic exchanges given that,

“people were looking for something…so Transitions I, it came through the
Canada Cultural Centre request, and through some other government requests. So
through the Minister down, there’s requests for artworks, there’s requests
for…we start working with trade ministers, trade offices. Specifically with
Taiwan. So we brought Transitions to Taiwan, we create[ed] a program where
artists were going to Taiwan, Inuit and First Nations and Metis. We were working
on relationships with Brazil…”

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However, when it came to regional and national circulation of the Collection, exhibitions were not as readily supported. Ryan cited the abrupt termination of *Transitions II*, a follow up exhibition to *Transitions I* that travelled to Montreal and the Yukon, but no where else in the country as an example of a chronic lack of attention to regional exhibitions. Had it had the opportunity to continue touring, Ryan shared that “it would have potentially continued, and it would – it had the opportunity to circulate, and activate works, and recognition for the Collection.”

We moved into a discussion of what had encouraged him initially to become involved with the Centre. He pointed to several minor exchanges he had with the institution prior to assuming a professional role in 1997. Reiterating his involvement with SCANA, as well as having pieces collected over the span of several years, Ryan became familiar with the programming as well as the director at the time and other staff through meetings in his capacity as a representative for the Association. Prior to these infrequent encounters which precipitated in his direct involvement with the institution, it was the annual call for submission poster that informed the entirety of his engagement with the Centre to that point. He stated that he was compelled to submit works because of the “attraction of the poster as being one of the only things that was actually calling for Indigenous art at the time.” Although these posters offered the opportunity for the collection of Indigenous art, an opportunity that was not afforded by other collecting institutions at the time. For artists and the general public at large, “there was no way to understand what this, what was, what [the Centre] was at all, unless you went there.”

Not until he moved to Ottawa for the Canadian Museum of History internship did Ryan visit the Centre. The reason came through in the discussion of the anomalous position the Centre occupies within and between the federal government and the Indigenous arts community. As a site with resources available to fund Indigenous arts organizations such as SCANA, Ryan was pulled in through his active role as a provincial representative on the Society’s board, and as a recognized Indigenous artist with

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pieces collected and circulated by the institution. However, the institution itself is largely inactive. He went on to qualify his understanding of inactivity.

A repository of archival material related to contemporary Indigenous art production (exhibition catalogues, essays, photographs) examples of Indigenous art for those working in related fields, the benefit of the Centre for Ryan “came through…because I was active, and I pursued participation with SCANA, they used my artwork, and they bought my artwork. And just networking, so with all the work we were doing, and as artists, circulating your updates of CV, because they have archives. So it was all just hands off and networking relationships.” Offering the space and the resources for these events and linkages to develop, Ryan articulated the Centre as a site that collected all forms of material resources related to contemporary Indigenous art and the individuals who created it.

Activation of the works, Ryan suggested, came out in the process of producing exhibitions, catalogues, and producing collective knowledge among the general public of the value of the Collection and the messaging contained in the artworks. The Collection as the purpose and the activating principle of the institution could only become recognizable through the investment of individuals in these processes of networking and building relationships.

The majority of the conversation revolved around Ryan’s devotion to the co-production of exhibitions leading to acquisitions of artworks, and the logistical requirements entailed in their production and display. This is reflected both in the volume and diversity of exhibitions mounted during his professional tenure at the Centre. At a certain point, they reached twelve exhibitions a year, translating to approximately one per month.

That he had administrative duties within the Centre did not curtail Ryan’s and his colleagues’ attention to exhibitions and the accompanying material documents. Gathered around the space of the Centre and its collection of artwork, staff worked to build up a space that could support the display of Indigenous art while developing Indigenous curatorial practices, and supporting Indigenous artists from collection to display, as well as facilitating networking opportunities through publications and conference attendance. Staff as well as artists were working in tandem to expand and diversify their skillsets as well
as to connect the Centre into discourses outside of federal discourses to produce standalone spaces of Indigenous curatorial authorship and management.

Ryan shared that it was the staff of the Art Centre who were responsible for shaping the programming of the institution, rather than their actions being shaped by the institution. For Ryan, his curatorial involvement in *Transitions* initiated what became five years of exhibition and curatorial work to build a professionalized Indigenous workforce to tell, record, and develop an Indigenous art history. At the same time, Ryan continued to produce his own artwork and attending to the daily administrative operations of the Centre.

Though his professional involvement with the Centre ended in 2002, Ryan went on to provide an observation of the Centre from his current position as a professional curator and occasional participant infrequently drawn into the operations of the institution through jury participation. Despite his distance from the Centre and the years that have passed since his direct engagement, a continuous connection to the Centre exists through the relationship he has maintained with the Collection.

Present distance notwithstanding, he believes that the disjuncture between what the institution should function as, in terms of being active and accessible to the public through continuous exhibition of artwork, and the creation and promotion of Contemporary Indigenous art bolstered by the publication of subsequent written material, persists. Accessibility featured prominently in our discussion. Regarding access of the public as well as arts professionals, Ryan stated that only few knew the Collection as intimately as he did in the early 2000s, and this posed a challenge to engaging with and knowing about the work being produced by Contemporary Indigenous artists, and similarly, what works already comprised the Collection.

Access was also mentioned in terms of who received the national calls for submissions. This was raised as a crucial concern for artists and the Collection overall. That the institution is under federal oversight posed a significant barrier from Ryan’s vantage point. Given the dependency of outreach and technology of the Centre on government resources – resources unrefined to an institutional art context – the medium of transmission and the regular processes observed by independent art institutions are not
available in the context of the Centre. The gaps in technological outreach, Ryan reflected, presented another barrier, another impediment to accessing the Collection. If the institution was an independent entity, entrance to archival resources and navigation of artists and their artworks would be addressed as common practice. These barriers added to what Ryan described as the critical importance of the Collection, and the “historical precedent that it has.”

Despite the challenges posed by various institutional structures and discrepancies in managerial oversight cited throughout our conversation (ie. technological limitations, resources, and obscure location within the federal department), Ryan shared that the service provided by staff for support, archival or otherwise, was beyond reproach. He shared that this had continuously been the case. If services facilitating access to the resources of the Centre were easily navigated, what was the challenge? In order to make a request, “you really need to know, you really need to intimately know the Collection, or go through that list of names and then inquire.” Insider knowledge of the institution and the appropriate channels necessary to initiate the processes of archival retrieval afforded Ryan a coded knowledge between federal procedures and enough of a basis of understanding to pursue subsequent requests. Ryan shared that in accessing the Collection most recently in 2017, he relied on his prior interactions with the Collection, retroactively calling upon these stores of knowledge to provide a general sense of what was available. Although it has been several years and several administrative shifts, the system of operation had remained static.

Without this knowledge, few people can first, understand and then, are willing to interact with the Centre in its various capacities as a resource library, a collection, or a gallery space with regularly rotating exhibitions. Ryan stated that the accessibility and the utility of the Centre “is only if you know that it

129 Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14th, 2019.

130 Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14th, 2019.
exists.” Not only is there uncertainty around how to access the Centre, the antecedent to this is that there is limited public knowledge of the institution.

To this end and in response to the Canadian sesquicentennial, Ryan mounted an exhibition at the Onsite Gallery at OCAD U. In the fall of 2017, he presented the award-winning inaugural exhibition raise a flag: work from the Indigenous Art Collection 2000-2015 at the gallery. Featuring works from the Collection, he explained that he returned to the Centre in his current curatorial capacity to activate the pieces collected in the 21st century, “because all the previous works…have had opportunities to be activated and I know that works going into the Collection…we weren’t seeing.” The particular mission for raise a flag was to bring “attention to this Collection but also activating the Collection, making it known, giving it some recognition, bringing together this next generation of emerging/established [artists]. And seeing the works that weren’t consistently being circulated.” Acknowledging the breadth of work done by the administrative staff to create a comprehensive collection of Indigenous art, Ryan also highlighted his desire to showcase specific, less well decorated artists than the traditional canon of Indigenous artists, as well as bringing attention to the Collection in its totality.

While the mandate of the Centre is to support the creation, promotion, and preservation of Indigenous art, Ryan articulated the disjuncture between the ruling relations of the institution and the reality of being a curator accessing the Collection. Noting the discrepancy between what the Collection produces and what it stands for through a historical revision of the collaborative actions of staff to create a comprehensive Collection, albeit one with some gaps, Ryan shared that he believed the Collection was the legacy of the Centre. However, for it to be visible and recognizable, it needs to be activated through the various mechanisms of an arts institution; namely, exhibitions, publications, and networking. Stressing relational connectivity, Ryan identified that the most significant failing of the institution was its insularity within the federal department.

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132 Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14th, 2019.
Describing it as an anomaly, Ryan articulated what he felt was the fundamental paradox of the institution. In asking how the programming of the Centre was comparatively different to other arts institutions, Ryan had this to say:

Because it’s a federal government program and it’s the only one of its kind…it’s not an artist’s run centre, it’s not an exhibition space, it’s not a – so it’s not a lot of these things that a Collection-based entity would do. So they’re not producing exhibitions, they’re not producing literature, they’re not presenting scholarship, they’re not, you know. So it’s sitting there waiting for the public to come in and consume it, but again you have to have access to it, right.\textsuperscript{133}

Although the Collection is one of the most comprehensive representations of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada, the operational parameters of the Centre delimit where it can go and who can access it. Under the purview of the federal government, this entails the collection, promotion, and creation of Contemporary Indigenous art. However, the support for Indigenous artists themselves as well as what the art means as a collective body of works created by a specific population of people is not reflected in the operations of the Centre at present.

Following up on what he believed were important advancements during his time working in the Centre as Assistant Curator and later Chief Curator were the relationships that were cultivated. He shared that “within the five years what was important was not just maintaining the Collection but creating relationships across the country with artists, was key to what we did. Going to the conferences and being present, going to meetings and being present, inviting people in.” It was through these invitations to participate in exhibitions and engage through networking opportunities that the Centre and by extension, the artists, received greater public recognition. Not only did it establish connections for the artists within the art domain, the essays and catalogues drawn up to accompany the exhibitions drew in Indigenous writers, cultivating a workforce of emerging Indigenous arts scholarship.

\textsuperscript{133} Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2019.
Conceived early on as a working collection, Ryan explained that this service, which was conceived to generate sales for Indigenous artists through the placement of artworks in government facilities as well as other public venues, never truly came to fruition. From his experience as an artist, he shared that he has never been approached for a sale of artwork. And as an administrator of the program, he commented on how this posed a greater impediment to staff who were required to monitor the pieces, as well as facilitating condition reports and the rotation of works. Since that time, this program has been curtailed, with requests for pieces only granted to the highest echelons of the federal department.

In the final minutes of our recorded conversation, we discussed the depiction of the Collection as a living collection. Moving away from the programming of the Centre, Ryan stated that the Collection is the function of the Centre. As a living collection, the Centre represents a collection of artworks that, while not the finest representations for many individuals, was often their first acquisition, their first group show, and represented an entrance into the professionalized space of Contemporary Indigenous art. For these individuals, the benefit of the Centre was the recognition of their works by their peers, “and those people wouldn’t have been collected anyway by AGO or...you know those emerging people would never have had an opportunity to get into a collection. So as a collection, I mean, it’s very significant. Like and that’s it’s strength.” For the Centre to realize its potential, it must reflect the Collection of art, and the individuals whose histories are to an extent, contained within their works. For this process to be facilitated, it needs the involvement of others in the process of sharing and communicating this history.

While the work of individuals within the Centre reflects the collaborative spirit that Ryan and Barry shared in their respective accounts of their layered coordination within and around the Centre, the barriers around the Centre do not reflect these processes. What is reflected is a historical narrative that delimits the collaborative and diverse nature of the collection and contemporary Indigenous art which is in continuous dialogue with itself and others outside of this canon.
Concluding Thoughts

In the beginning, I was posed with and came to assimilate the question: what is the purpose of the Indigenous Art Centre? As a thought experiment that became a driving question for inquiry, a problematic was established. Once I discovered that the purpose of the Centre was to foster Indigenous art production and create a space for the care and maintenance of the Collection, I was perplexed. I could not understand why there was not more awareness, why more was not being done to recognize its significance as an example of Indigenous-settler cooperation, and more specifically, why public attention was not directed towards the Collection. Put simply, why did no one seem to know enough about the Centre to speak about it? Coming to understand what this meant given the purpose of the institution evolved into the subsequent iteration of the problematic.

Having exhausted the knowledge of my personal contacts, I used their suggestions as well as integrating my knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing and being to inform an investigation of institutional records and secondary resources. Not only did I analyze and collect information, I began to formulate a set of assumptions about what an art centre should be, and specifically, how it did and should engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and being to discover how these factors impacted awareness of the institution. These ranged from the means by which the institutional administration should function, what kinds of services the Centre should provide, best practices for collection and management, and a critique of the accessibility of the Centre as a public institution.

With little to no public outreach, the initial impetus for investigating the purpose of the institution was adapted into creating and building an institutional history of the Centre to promote and introduce the institution for public recognition. I sought to provide an explanation for public engagement with the Centre as another national art centre, and another viable resource to engage with the growing national awareness of Indigenous cultures mobilized through recent advancements in federal mechanisms of reconciliation. This is still an intention of mine, though it is no longer the only one. For, moving through
the multistep process of gaining access to the Centre, an additional question manifested regarding the connection between the federal government and the institution.

Discovering what the purpose of the Indigenous Art Centre was, and how it was that individuals had come to be coordinated within the general operations of the Centre, I asked many other questions of myself. Ultimately, there are many stories, and many entrances into and out of this place. In my conversations with Barry and Ryan, I learned of their different needs and personal and professional aspirations for entering and using the resources of the Indigenous Art Centre. As a resource, individuals were able to attach their own intentions for using the art as a conduit for knowledge sharing in various contexts.

For Barry, this entailed facilitating cultural training within the Department and amongst other audiences. As teaching tools, he used the Centre to fulfill his role as Cultural Advisor wedded to his personal knowledge and awareness of what the Indigenous Art Centre offered and what individual pieces could contribute to the conversation. This layered knowledge translated to culturally nuanced operations within his role as a public servant that would otherwise go unnoticed. By tracing his connection to the Centre and his knowledge of the Collection, I was able to produce a history for these actions and a narrative of personal, professional, cultural, and intentional acts that exceed the understanding of the mandates of the Centre and his current role, enhancing both.

In his current role, Ryan uses the Centre to facilitate the creation of exhibitions. Directing me to the exhibition he curated at OCAD U in 2017, he explained how he intentionally chose to highlight works from the Collection in an attempt to activate the Collection and draw public attention to the wealth of this resource of Indigenous artistic excellence. Supplementing the exhibition with an Education Resource Guide, he provided educational material on each artist featured in the exhibition as well as relaying their national affiliations through a nuanced autobiography. The IAC also provides these services through analogue as well as electronic resources, however, neither are easily accessible to the public. This is for a combination of reasons, either budgetary cuts to the department at present or because the Centre is reliant
on the technological advances of the government, which are behind other public of private arts institutions.

Both Ryan and Barry acknowledged the significance of the Collection and the significance of having their works collected by the Centre for the benefits it affords socioeconomically and for being recognized within the Indigenous arts field. At the same time, they noted that neither of them had received recognition or been approached for purchase of their artwork through the exhibition processes of the IAC, a core tenant of the services to be provided by the Centre. Rather, they discussed how it was through self-promotion and through display in other institutions that their works were collected.

The most significant benefit afforded by the Centre is the stability of the Collection as a federal heritage resource. However, the mobility of the Collection as the main resource, and the programs are through the intentional acts of individuals to activate the space and to draw attention to it as a cultural resource, as an artistic repository for academic and professional use. It is through individual dissemination that knowledge of and about the Centre circulates and how it is predominantly used. It is not the case that the Centre activates itself. By this I mean that the Centre is a static space. While the governing documents suggest a space that is dynamic in collaborative in nature, the layers of governing documents attached to the Centre have largely immobilized actions of the Centre to reach beyond the federal department. As such, they Collection required individuals to coordinate themselves to the Centre.

Although there is an initial benefit to both parties, the relationship ultimately ends with the transaction of the artwork which becomes an asset. In this way, the government is able to levy economic support as fulfilling its relationship to Indigenous peoples. However, the recognition of the political nature of Indigenous art must always be separated off from the discussion. Indigenous art and Indigenous artists are recognizable only when they are explored through the individual stories they tell from the individual voices who tell them.

It was not the institution that is turned to for conceptual markers though it is the focalizing point of the discussion. Rather, it is the reality of individuals who work and whose work is collected in the institution that determines the method. Under exploration was how the institution addressed and took up
these markers to generate programming. This IE proceeded from individuals’ knowledge in sustained
dialogue that is specific to the IAC and, therefore, works to elaborate the political, social, and individual
scope of the Centre through its unique occupants.

Recognizing individuals as experts in exclusive possession of what they do and the conditions of
their work, the experiences shared in interviews expressed the social relations of the Indigenous Art
Centre as they are tied into relations outside of the Centre. They raise attention to how individual actions
are coordinated by larger systems, specifically the federal complex of Crown-Indigenous Relations and
Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC), and as an extension of that, the ideology of the Canadian
government in relation to Indigenous peoples. It also raises attention to other relations that are
coordinated and determinants of actions in the various forms of cultural and community connections.

Institutional Ethnography is intended to operate from an ontological position that addresses the
nature of an institution as people experience it in their daily lives. For this reason, it is detached from
extrinsic theoretical applications at the risk of anticipating or leading the study to predetermined
conclusions. As I explained above, decolonial theory and Indigenous ways of knowing are incorporated
into the research design in response to two factors: the first, to address the social and cultural rights
recognized by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the second, to engage
the historical relationship of appropriation in Indigenous communities by setting up the study from a
position that begins with an engagement with interpersonal responsibility.

In the UNDRIP, rights of self-determination, self-governance, and establishing a cooperative
relationship with Indigenous peoples are built up through the 46 articles.134 These rights have been taken
up discursively and acted upon by the Canadian federal government as of 2017. However, to address the
community aspect of research and to identify my own position and subsequent implication within the
research, I adopted a model and method of personally engaging with the place of the Indigenous Art

134 The United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
Centre. Creating the framework of the ecology of place is how I determined to address responsibilities, to contextualize the location of the Centre, and to construct a theoretical, lived model that can be engaged by others. In this way, I have used decolonial theory and Indigenous ways of knowing to build upon the model of Institutional Ethnography to be interpersonally responsible and accountable. In the process, I discovered that IE’s turn away from “epistemological issues” is endogenous to the topics raised in my conversations with individuals about the Centre.  

Epistemology matters. It matters especially when it comes to a variation in cultural paradigms. The proximity of the Collection of Indigenous art became a serious consideration and the way it has filtered into the administration of the programming and operations of the institution. As Ryan explained, the Collection has been used as a resource for the display of exhibitions in diplomatic initiatives, as symbols of Canadian culture abroad. Within Canadian borders, it has been used as a diplomatic tool of continuing the policy of establishing renewed relationships with Indigenous peoples.

Proximity to the government for staff and artists alike has meant that individuals must declare conflicts and ensure that they have cleared these conflicts so as not to be disparaging of the Canadian government. It has also meant that the Collection is held within a federal system of operations that, while they approach museum standards, mean that individuals seeking to activate the collection must do so filtered through federal processes which are not easily navigable and it is often the case that it is broached by individuals with prior knowledge. Beginning relationships on the grounds of interest is not a common practice. It is only through coordination in the Centre by other professionalized means that relationships are established.

Furthermore, the continuous shifting of the relationship between the federal government and the peoples politically constructed in the Centre and through federal policy has meant confusion in terms of name and title and locating a history of the Centre. It has also meant changes to services and relationships

135 Dorothy Smith, *Institutional Ethnography*, 52.
predicated on social (re: economic) support. The foundation for these relationships is of a piece with the concerns that infuse and inform the relationship with Indigenous peoples elsewhere.

However, engaging with the voices in the institution has revealed lived histories which, while informed and crucially impacting these alternate histories, are not the only story. Individuals have successfully advocated for forms of recognition that exceed the limitation of band council affiliations and the Indian Act which would seek to define them as authentic Indians. These events were facilitated through the program of the Indigenous Art Centre and codified into federal policy.

They have also advocated for the Collection of artworks that were not necessarily approved by the management of the Centre initially, pushing the boundaries of political and artistic display in the process.

Individuals within the Centre have mobilized to establish governing documents and practices which are collaboratively authorized and self-defined. The friction then and the problematic is that the government through the governing documents continues to sieve these acts of communal, national, and individual determination through the lens of federally authorized discourse. Speaking to individuals, I was made aware of the multiple forms of affiliations and uses that they have made of the Collection. These possibilities only came about because of their awareness and prior and continuing familiarity with the operations of the Department at large. It is known by the network of individuals working within and expanding the Centre and its recognition in different forums; contributing to the resource that is the Collection with their own artworks as well as promoting and sharing the Collection and works of their peers in subsequent forums; these individuals are responsible for extending the lines of connection and knowledge about the Centre to other spaces.

They do this while they are also working to build recognition for their own communities in other spaces as well. They see the value of the Indigenous art Centre as a significant resource of teaching the general populous about culturally relevant topics, the aesthetic excellence and creativity of Indigenous artists generally, and contributing themselves to this narrative through their contributions to this Collection.
The physical location of the Centre and its proximity to the heart of ruling operations affords an opportunity to engage directly with these relations through individual actions. As such, there have been significant moves in recent years to shift the perception and dissemination of Indigenous art. The enduring anomaly is that the Centre is still not recognized in its own right as a generative space and a place where these histories of resistance and collaborative action have run through. Recognition of the emergent possibilities that have been afforded by art and the work that individuals have done within and after their involvement with the Centre speaks to the potential for others to learn from and engage with these alternate histories as told by the individuals who have worked to make them possible.

The purpose of the Indigenous Art Centre is to promote, display and disseminate contemporary Indigenous art. It is done by a predominantly Indigenous led administration. But what is the purpose of this when the work that is being done is not recognized, or it is only recognized by those who work within the Centre? How does recognition of the Centre on its own terms, as a space where acts of Indigenous self-determination have been activated and upheld in spite of and at times in direct contestation with the ruling relations of the federal government create a different narrative? A different history of Indigenous-state relations? What happens when this story is told by individuals who have worked within the institution and have continuous affiliations with it? Who speak of the ruling relations as the direct points of friction and difficulty they experienced through funding cuts and conflicts of interest based on defaming the Canadian government?

At the conclusion of this study, I return for the last time to the inciting question: what is the purpose of the Indigenous Art Centre? By looking at what was written about the Centre and how this was mediated by individuals engaging in these daily operations in the course of their responsibilities, it became clear that the aspirations of participants were largely in the service of sharing and disseminating the works of Indigenous artists in as many contexts and as broadly as possible.

These processes are done by individuals who uphold commitments to their personal communities and to the dissemination of the collection to other places. It is the commitment of these individuals to the project of collaboration; this is consistently what is spoken of and how the Centre seems to have been
formed. It was through the collaborative efforts of former managers in consultation with the client group that the IAC’s policies and operations were determined. Anticipating the future developments of Indigenous art, the Centre fits within the role out of government issues public programming aimed at Indigenous peoples.

Although they do not explicitly speak about this relationship, I took it upon myself to look into these relationships and this history. As part of a commitment to decolonization and the imperatives of learning independently and with others, I have learned about the complicated relationship and involvement of the communities that Ryan is involved in, from his professional work at OCADU and curatorial work in art spaces around the world as well as his community in Kahnawá:ke, and the urban Inuk community that Barry is from and that he represents in his artwork. I have started to do the work of disaggregating individual voices who speak of community affiliations and frustrations.

The issue of an intercultural society, as Canadian society is, runs the risk of obfuscating other ways of being and knowing, and therefore, while the reality of the institution is predicated on a unified whole, the reality of individuals is determined by community and relationships to cultural knowledges that escape the definition of Canadian culture. To recognize the other forms of community and relationships that are drawn into the operations of the Centre, and to acknowledge my responsibility as a researcher working with Indigenous knowledges and cultures, certain adaptations have been made to the method.

Both participants as well as Viviane Gray’s first-hand account cite conflicts within the Centre. I will not give too much attention to these issues at the risk of obfuscating the work that has been done by individuals in collaboration with others to build a program for the collection, dissemination and promotion of Indigenous art. Significantly, decades before other national institutions began to first, recognize Indigenous art beyond the ethnographic paradigm of cultural artifacts and secondly, to collect Indigenous art. These difficulties are not insignificant. They have been discussed by Viviane Gray in her essay and they were mentioned but not discussed at length by participants in our conversations. I acknowledge these moments for what they are, moments where no good would be done by entering into
these discussions. My point in bringing these up at all is to say that conflicts are, to an extent, inevitable in a space with so many competing interests and so many competing positions and understandings of what the ultimate aims and aspirations of the Centre are and should be.

I will, however, share my own difficulties. These include, as I am sure is the case for many graduate students, the issue of time, academic rigour, and most pervasively, the issue of positionality. I sought to address the latter to the best of my ability through an engagement with Indigenous methodologies from a position that ran parallel to these cultural ways of knowing and being. Inflecting this position with decolonial theory, I sought to articulate a position and a way of thinking and being that modeled this position. Ontologically, it meant a shift in the concerns of the Institutional Ethnography to build up relationships and acknowledge my intentions for doing so. I realize that this may have been imperfectly done, and at points, my concerns for articulating to honour the space of others may have clouded the discussion. I also understand that this concept of the ecology of place is not a new idea.

The other significant challenge that I faced in this study was also related to time and the complicated relationships between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples. While my initial intention had been to interview a larger number of participants to strengthen and deepen the narrative, I was only able to secure two interviews. Although I cannot say definitively why this is the case, the historical relationships (or lack thereof) lead me to believe that stepping into this space may have led to unwanted attention. This does not mean that these conversations have ended for me. It is an ongoing process of learning to carry responsibility and to shift, in whatever way I can, the stories of our relationships to others. The two interviewees provide perspectives that relate to their unique cultural, generational, gender, and language profiles, and thus the finding of my study may be challenged and/or expanded by the addition of other voices.

In spite of and because of these limitations, the concept and way I moved alongside others, and how it was I could come to express the physical and conceptual space I occupied in the process of thinking through and being with individuals moving around the Centre that rose to prominence. It is a way of seeing the world as a place that is constantly moving, that is diverse, and political, and cultural,
and always relational. For this reason, it requires adaptation and must be invested in a grounded understanding of one’s place in relation to others. It also signals time and the necessity of investing in the cultivation of a relationship with other individuals and the place that these relationships are centred. For this reason, it is also derivate, but intentionally and necessarily so.

Filtering the investigation through this organic, and somewhat loose understanding of place, allowed me to draw on resources that included conversation, personal experiences, documentary research, and embodied experiences surrounding the process of thinking through and with others. It is a way of thinking and being that germinated in my personal experiences, was fertilized by decolonial thinkers, and was nurtured and watered by Indigenous methodologies and ways of being. It is deeply committed to growing within community, in whatever manifestation this may come, within ethical imperatives of intentionality and reciprocal benefits to create generative spaces of being in relation. What this means in the context of a built environment such as the Indigenous Art Centre is that I acknowledge my position outside of these operations and the knowledge of what is required for the institution to function and continue to function, but I am committed to learning and nurturing the continuation and knowledge of these initiatives by listening, learning, and sharing.

That is ultimately what I have aimed to create through this collection of stories, some of them mine, many shared by others. The stories that were shared with me by participants I believe are equally as valuable and significant as the stories that are communicated in the artwork. It requires both art and individuals who know the stories, who can share the stories, to generate conversations. I have attempted to demonstrate the generative processes that individuals have been engaged in since the creation of the Centre, through narratives about individuals’ tenure working in the institution, and how they carried these commitments into other areas and contexts given their commitment to sharing these narratives in other spaces.

The Indigenous Art Centre is indeed an anomaly. It is an institution that operates within the department, which is responsible for administering the Indian Act, a series of policies which continuously and persistently define Indigenous rights and title. In spite of this, the Centre operates in ways that exceed
and defend different understandings of community, that are not recognized by Canadian legislation, but that support community nonetheless, and are carried forward through the art which speaks from and to these communities. The individuals responsible for the creation of these artworks are often those who are working actively to shift policy within the institution and in other realms as well. Acknowledging the systematically persistent nature of refusing misrecognition, the Indigenous Art Centre continues to collect, promote, and disseminate stories from different vantage points through the actions of individuals in strategically positioned sites.

Rather than working to undermine the government and its involvement in these, at times harmful processes, individuals seek to foster a relationship between these entities, drawing on whatever resources and provisions that are made to support the development of communities and relationships.

Recognizing the work that has been done and continues to be done by the individuals working within and beyond the Centre, this study and the conversations and connections I have built in the process speak to my commitment to pursue and share these stories to the best of my ability. In the acknowledgement that stories are all we are, I have endeavoured to tell this one in a good way.
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Interviews

Author in Conversation with Barry Pottle November 4th, 2019

Me: Wonderful. Uhmm so, yeah, so the first question as you see outlined there is, just trying to figure out what is your association with the programs administered by the Centre? Which you addressed when you said that you’d worked there from ’98 to 2004 –

BP: -2 I believe, yeah-

RM: 2002, yeah…also working – your work is collected in the Centre as well?

BP: Yes and that’s much further along down the road. We’re talking in the last 10 years. I’ve only been in the arts doing arts professionally for the last 10 years or so, right? So I wasn’t an artist before that.

So my involvement with the Art Centre was as an employee. I was an employee there from ’98 to 1998-2002. I was a research assistant starting out then as a curatorial assistant. So this is my professional involvement with the Art Centre. So my role was to - coming in was to do research on art, Inuit art, specifically Inuit art, at the time we were still – the Art Centre was known as the Indian and Inuit Art Centre and it was just coming together to form one entity but we were still separate in terms of the work that we do, in terms of the programs and policies with respect to Indian and Inuit art were still separate at the time. So I was responsible for fielding questions, doing research on Inuit art, fielding questions from the public as well as galleries, collectors, general population on Inuit art, right? And on the Centre itself as well as providing resource information and whatnot to those individuals I just mentioned. So when I came in there were a couple of employees there and we worked on a number of initiatives including the acquisitions program. So we developed in house exhibitions based on the acquisitions program we had developed or that was going on at the time and I was responsible for doing most of the Inuit art and stuff, right? So professionally that was my role in the past. Presently, it’s not as – I’m not involved in the Art Centre per se, professionally, as my job. Although they do ask me questions once in a while if they need some advice or information or contacts I will provide that as a public servant, as an employee of the Department. So I do have sporadically now. Right so, but starting out we were responsible – I – we – as I mentioned I came into the Department through just graduating the Aboriginal training program in museum practices at the Museum of Civilization at the time, named that program. So this is where at the end of graduation I submitted my resume to the Art Centre and they hired me on. And then I went from there in terms of doing the research on Inuit art. Doing research and compiling information, fielding
requests, developing later on exhibitions in house as well as national, international. So that’s my professional involvement with that, with the Art Centre at the time.

RM: Right, okay. And as you said more recently it’s in the capacity of an artist –

BP: - Yes, yeah, as an artist.

RM: - You’ve been collected by the Centre –

BP: Yes I’ve been collected. I applied to their programs or their calls whenever they have them. If it’s pertinent to my artwork. I have to be careful though I am a public servant and I work for the Department so everything is done with the conflict of interest as number one. So there could be, I could be perceived as being in conflict.

RM: Oh I see.

BP: So I have to declare my conflict through those processes to make sure I’m not in conflict because I am a departmental employee as well as a practicing artist. So I keep that separate and we – by doing that we have to – what’s the word I’m looking for? Make aware of our conflict or if there’s any conflict we have to go through those processes to clear those conflict of interest charges or conflict of interest processes.

RM: Okay, so are there separate documents you have to submit?

BP: Yup. Just like I don't know how familiar you are with my work?

RM: I know some of your pieces.

BP: The tags? Especially the tags. They collected that. I had to do a conflict of interest process for that to make sure that number one I was not in conflict based on an employee as well as to make sure I’m not trashing the government or the Department. So we – the conflict of interest guidelines was a process we had to take – we have to do in order to do that. So as an artist I’m aware of their collection, I’m aware that they have certain programs, acquisition programs where we can apply and submit submissions for that where it’s juried through an independent process, right. So everything’s up front with respect to that. So my goals and my interests is to be collected through anywhere so that’s why my professional – my personal artistic endeavours stem to. To that, right.

RM: Okay, so have there been any calls recently that you’ve submitted your work to?

BP: No no, not in the last couple of years no because I know I have probably, I’ve actually donated pieces to them as well as they’ve collected. So I have probably got five or six pieces in that Collection so I goes it’s time for somebody else, right? Plus I didn’t have anything new at the time so and I just want to, to, I don’t want to be greedy. Although it’s okay but you know, you have to be careful. You have to be aware, be conscious, make sure other people have
opportunities. But their call was only at the time for papers and two-dimensional works not three-dimension so…

RM: Right. I see. To my understanding their policy has shifted some and they’re now collecting more multimedia works.

BP: Yes, that’s my understanding of it.

RM: Okay. Well that’s exciting.

BP: Yeah it’s exciting.

RM: Very cool. Okay, I guess I’ll just move along to question number 2. Which again you’ve kind of elaborated on already in your other response but what events or experiences can you point to that encouraged you to participate in the programs and operations of the IAC.

BP: Well like I said it’s an opportunity to submit my work to be viewed. Number one obviously for my work to be viewed, doesn’t matter if I get accepted or not. It’s an opportunity to be viewed because what I do in photography, especially in an urban setting here is not really, has never really been explored before so that’s my niche. So obviously my goal is to be viewed by a jury, it doesn’t matter if I’m selected or not. Yay if I’m selected yay like everybody else. It limits my involvement to that right so…I do come to their shows every once in a while when they have openings and I’m aware of the work that they’re doing both from an artistic perspective and artistic interest and experiences as well as a professional, as my professional duties I’m aware of what they’re doing as well so if they need some advice or information from my perspective I would, I will provide it same with any questions in that context in that way. So I will provide that from a professional standpoint as me being a public servant provide information and whatnot in my role right. But I do tend to keep it separate. Just awareness of who’s in the art gallery. Some of their changes, some of their changes to their programs, some of their changes to their policies and whatnot. So just trying – not always up to speed on it – but trying to keep abreast of what’s going on right.

RM: Right.

BP: Artistically. As well as to find out who’s been collected, what’s been collected, how is it added, how does it add to their collection overall. This is a working collection as well and a very prestigious collection in terms of one of the strongest Indigenous – probably the strongest Indigenous collections in Canada right. So just knowing who’s being collected, who’s being exhibited there, at the national, international and regional level. Just being aware of that and trying to engage artists that way, other artists both the three groups First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. Just and to see what’s new, see what they’ve been collecting, see how they enhanced their collection and what it means overall to the Collection and to the working collection itself
right. So you get to see all this wonderful work in the buildings because it is a working collection so you get to see it in the foyers in the offices. Some people question that but it gives a presence to art within the department. There’s still a need to educate all the employees on the Collection itself: what it means, where it’s been, where it’s going, the history, the programs and policies that effect it right. So there’s still that need within the department to do that itself. So I mean in having art displayed in that context as well as in an exhibition space it does provide that opportunity for the employees to engage, to seek out through their own personal endeavours, more information, more knowledge of the Centre itself right. And how it effects the Department, the employees, what it means as an Aboriginal or Indigenous artist and that sort of stuff right.

RM: So do you think it’s mostly employees that access the Centre and –
BP: No I don’t think it’s, I think it’s a little bit, I think it’s all. Because the employees if you, we, they don’t just give art to anybody, you have to be I think a directorate and above to get art in your space and that right. As well as the public spaces. So it’s not only the employees national, regionally, because we do have ten offices right, throughout Canada right. Then there’s artwork in those offices as well and those spaces as well from our Collection right. It’s also academics such as yourself, collectors, general public, researchers, gallery owners, all of those wonderful things. They all at one time, interact with the Centre. I don’t know how…I think it’s selective in terms of the work that they do along those lines. It seems to be steady work.

RM: Right. And so in terms of how you came to know about the Centre, because like I was telling you, I had never heard of it until Michael had told me, was it through your training program at the Museum of Civilization-
BP: It was before that, it was before that. I was through university, I did a program in university and I did an Aboriginal Studies Interdisciplinary Program starting in ’93-’94 and at the time the program was based on follow your own path. So you selected Aboriginal content through all disciplines and you build your program along those lines right. So whether it’s archaeology, whether it’s anthropology, whether it’s sociology, whether it’s art history, geography, you select that and you focus on the Aboriginal content. At the time Carleton cut a lot of arts programming because they wanted to go hi tech. So that really put me in a difficult situation because there was not a lot of Aboriginal content at the time, except Art History right. So and at the time, at the same time, I was working as a summer student at the Inuit Art Foundation when it was here in Ottawa. So this is where I get to know a little bit about the Centre itself. Through that and through school itself through Ottawa up through Carleton University right.

RM: Okay so it was mentioned in those programs.
BP: It was mentioned in those programs, we – especially the Inuit Art ‘cause that was my focus and my interest in Inuit art not so much Indigenous art as Indian art they called it right. It was the Inuit art it was one of my very early on, this is where my interest still is from a professional standpoint right. So that was how I got to know about the Centre. At the time it was more focused on Inuit art, I knew the Indian art was there but it wasn’t so much of that it was more the Inuit art cause it was my interest. So this is where I came to know, and to be aware, and to engage very early on in the Art Centre itself.

RM: Very neat.

BP: Through not only just knowledge but also research and tapping into their databases and everything they have because they have – if you look at the Centre itself – they have an Inuit art library there so right, so tapping into those resources, tapping into the people, the employees resources and knowledge so this is where I became aware of it.

RM: Right. And so kind of building off of that would you say that that is what is – I mean, I don’t want to give you any leading questions or anything like that but if you would say that there is anything unique or what is that kind of made you gravitate to working at the Centre. Was it the wealth of knowledge of people, like the library, or…

BP: Well no it’s more, it was that in a roundabout way or a little piece of word on the side but it was more my own…I need a job. Like I was we were finishing up at the Museum and we needed work we were looking for work so I submitted my resume and I actually got hired for a year. But…I was just looking for work more or less right. After I graduated from Carleton and from this training program we had to look for work and it was in the arts field, it was the Inuit arts field that I was interested in the art centre and an opportunity came up and I took it, right jumped at it right. It wasn’t a conscious decision going I’m going to go work for the Inuit Art Centre, or the Indigenous Art Centre, it wasn’t. It was just a matter of where can I find a job. Because I had a young family at the time and I needed, needed work, right.

RM: Right, yeah so it was just a perfect…

BP: Yeah, it was perfect timing, it was going timing, it worked out well. Let’s just say based on what’s transpired over the last 23 years it worked out pretty good right. I still maintain that contact with the Art Centre not as strong as in the past but because our career paths have shifted professionally. Although I am still involved to a certain extent with, not really involved, but know the people, go down and say “Hi how are you?” Try and go down and see what’s going on in the arts field itself. And that sort of stuff, right. Trying to keep up on things in the Art Centre the current staff down there are really good for that. They’re welcoming and they do provide if I’m looking for it, information and…they still provide that service whether you’re internal or
external right. So that’s consistently hasn’t changed over the year although personnel has changed over the years. That level of service has, I think, maintained, been consistent over the years, right. Although cutbacks have taken its toll on programs and services, not only our department but federally as well right so, so there were some challenges there at certain times but I think it’s consistently been working quite well, right.

RM: Right. And sorry you’ve alluded to it several times but what position do you currently hold?
BP: My position, I’m Senior Aboriginal Awareness Officer within the Learning Wellbeing Directorate within HR within the Indigenous Services and Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. We’re going through a split, right. But my role is to provide services for both Departments as well as the public overall. So trying to do programs on Indigenous. And we do use art as a way of reaching our audiences as well. So sometimes I use art as a means to convey a message or even highlight the Art Centre itself, right. So I try and promote that as well even if I go to a new sector or something, I say “hey you know our Art Centre is here.” A lot of people don’t even know that the Art Centre is there.

RM: I know.
BP: Right. So they have, there’s a need and a want to highlight that and to bring it out, it's just a matter of getting there. Because everybody’s, like I said budget cuts and program cuts has really affected the Department overall. So and they're trying to build up on that as well.

RM: Right.
BP: But in my role as Awareness Officer, I try to use art when I can to highlight the Centre and highlight art as a way of talking about – whether it's talking about reconciliation, whether it’s Indigenous training, whatever, right. So any kind of cultural knowledge, cultural training that sort of stuff. So I try and use if I can – use samples of the Art Centre and the Collection itself not only the Collection but outside of the Collection.

RM: Right. Uhm let’s see here…so…
BP: By the way I sent your name to a friend of mine up North, Nancy Mullick. Have you ever heard of her?
RM: No I haven’t.
BP: She was an MA student. She did her MA in…what was it…museum history or something? And she did some work on the Indian – Inuit Art Centre way back on the policies and programs. So when you sent me your contact information I sent her right away. I goes “oh you may be interested in this.” But she hasn’t gotten back to me yet, right.
RM: Oh shoot.
BP: But no she's a good resource in terms of...she looked at the programs within the Inuit Art Centre and tried to develop policies around that, programs right. Sort of...Inaudible...So I still may try and reach out to her because she may be of interest to you as well, from the Inuit perspective. As well as knowledge on the transfer of the Collection itself, right. Inuit, Inuit collection.

RM: Yeah right, the Inuit Collection over to...

BP: Yeah but she did some work for the Centre and I thought she may be a good resource for you. I don't know, right.

RM: Yeah no for sure. I appreciate that. Any resource is helpful and I am grateful for.

BP: Because before me and – July Papatsie was the curator at the time who hired me on. He was doing the work I was doing before I came on, so, he’s here in town but he’s very difficult to get a hold of and...I want to say something but that's on. I'll tell you after.

RM: Okay.

BP: He may be difficult to get a hold of him.

RM: Right, okay.

BP: Right. Because he was here before me, a few years before me and there was other people in the Inuit Art Centre who was working in it for years and years and years, so, but they seem to be nowhere.

RM: Oh really? Disappeared?

BP: Yeah. It’s very difficult to track them down, right. Because if you’re looking for a history before that, right.

RM: For sure. It’s difficult for me because I’ve started on this path and not that I’ve just, like, I feel like I’m just scratching the surface and there’s so much to it.

BP: Oh there’s a lot more that you’re not...even before because we’re talking...40 years before...of history, right, right so.

RM: Yeah. I know.

BP: I know we came did – we came together two years ago, we did a session over in Toronto at the onsite gallery OCADU? And they talked about this sort of thing. Stories and whatnot from the, about, and from the Centre itself. Myself was on the panel, Ryan Rice, Barry Ace, David January? Was it David January or David General and Hill.

RM: Richard Hill?

BP: Uh Richard Hill or Charlie Hill I don’t remember but one of them, right. And I think they, I don’t know if they recorded it or not but you can get a lot of history on that. Let me check into that.
RM: Okay.
BP: I’ll let you know. See where it’s at. I don’t – I’m pretty sure they recorded it. But it gives you a lot of stories about, especially the Inui – the Indian Art Centre and the history around that. Because David General – I think it was David General – or David Cardinal, don’t remember, one of them, and Hill. Can’t remember his name. Charlie Hill or the other one over in Woodlands counter, the Woodlands Centre. Two of the founding members as well as Viviane of the Art Centre, right.
RM: Right, right. Okay, yeah, that would be fascinating. I guess I could also ask Ryan.
BP: Yes yeah, because he was there, right. They’re really good story tellers, I’m not a good storyteller because I didn’t, I wasn’t there a long enough time to really have that perspective per se. When I came in everyone was basically leaving, right. Right.
RM: Right. Because it was a transitional time. Okay.
BP: Because I look at it from the Inuit perspective and they started off with – if you look at the history of Inuit art in Canada and how it came about, the Department was instrumental in developing art as a means of economic development very early on, right. Come in, come up to information, came up to resources, then came up to the exhibitions and promotions and all the way up there until where it’s at now, right. Right now.
RM: Right, right. Okay. So many questions I want to ask but I’m going to try to stick to these and then after maybe we can address those afterwards. Okay, yes so…how would you remind to the statement, I guess the mandate really that the Centre is a site that represents, collects and promotes contemporary Canadian Indigenous art and artists. So as an artist how do you see your work being promoted, maintained, and developed under this kind of identity as a contemporary Canadian Indigenous artist?
BP: How?
RM: Yeah.
BP: That’s a tough question. That’s a lot. Well number one is they support Indigenous art, right. They’ve always supported Indigenous art whether it’s through exhibitions, whether it’s through collection, whether it’s recognitions, very, very important. Because there’s not too many institutions that are doing that on a regular basis over the last sixty years, right. So that yes, especially Inuit art. They’ve really, really, really, really gone up. I don’t know about now but they’ve really supported Inuit art as well as Indian art, and Metis art, right. So they did that. I think it’s very important, I think it’s still important, and still relevant for them to do that. Because who else is doing that from a public standpoint? Public administrative, nobody else is really doing that so it’s very important they do that. It’s very important they collect it, acquire it, it helps
the artists. It helps feed artists and bring a livelihood to them. It provides an opportunity for the
general public to be aware and to bring discussion and dissemination and discourse around
Indigenous art in Canada. I think the Centre has done that to a good extent. They continue to do
that and I think it’s important that they do that in the future as well. Like I said who else is doing
that from a public perspective ie. Federal government, right. I think it’s very important that they
do that, continue to do that. And from me as an artist very, very pleased that they can look at my
work and view it as not only as new, because nobody is really doing what I’m doing from an
urban perspective. Looking and focusing on urban. As well as some of the issues that are
around the history and culture and society of Inuit, right. So in that sense I’m very, very pleased
and honoured that I’m part of that Collection, part of that process, part of that dissemination,
right. It allows people to not only see their works and see who’s around but also builds a
dialogue, right. So I think it’s important that continue, right. Anything else?
RM: No that was – I mean that was a difficult question for sure.
BP: Well you know it’s a very individualistic response to that, right. Some people will say other
reasons I mean, you know, but, photography is not a big genre with Inuit art and this is what I’m
trying to obviously lay, obviously I want to lay a foundation for photography within Inuit art. And I
think I’ve met that goal, and I think I’ve met that goal through being collected and acquired not
only through the Indigenous Art Centre but other institutions here in Canada as well. And
through private and public entities. So as an individual artist the Centre has provided that
avenue and that source of voice for me on a national and even on an international level, right.
So I think it’s important that they continue to do that and it’s important that we acknowledge as
artists and respect and try and support them in any way we can, right. In that, right.
RM: Yeah, okay, you answered a difficult question very eloquently so, in my personal opinion.
BP: Well you know it’s, it depends on what they’re looking for, too. It depends on what their
needs are in terms of enhancing and building their Collection, right. Because they are
contemporary, as well as traditional, right. So but the contemporary, very contemporary stuff. I
think it’s very important that they continue to do that. Not only for myself but for other people as
well. Not only for other, the genres, but photography itself. I mean they did a whole show on
photography which was never done before and my work was in it and other Inuit artists were,
photographers were in it as well. So that has I think enhanced their mandate, enhanced their
ability to, to focus and promote and to continue their mandate.
RM: Okay. In what way do you think it’s changed the mandate, or, enhanced it?
BP: I think it builds a better Collection. I think they have a better collection of contemporary. I
think they have a more diverse collection, more diverse artwork, and more diverse voices from
artists. Which is not only traditional, although traditional is important and we do still have traditional artists in traditional practices. But being able to broach the contemporary and to be able to support contemporary artists such as myself and others I think is very important and I think they’ve done a good job at that right. Throughout the years, right.

RM: And out of curiosity how would you define traditional? Like when you say traditional forms.

BP: Well from an Inuit perspective stone, stone. Drawings. Not so much drawings per se because it came after what’s traditional such as carvings because we’ve always done carvings way, way back. And we even do amulets now, right. And bits of everything else like that, right. As well as seamstresses, cultural artifacts such as seal skins and any of that cultural stuff, right. So, that sort of stuff, right. And artists making, what do you call it mitts or, gloves. What’s the word I’m looking for? Arts and crafts, right. Even the arts and crafts have been highlighted, too. Brought up a level, I think. Through not only through the Art Centre but through other avenues as well. So you’re looking at the traditional such as that, I don’t think videos traditional per se.

Prints and drawings very early on, because that’s where it started with Inuit art through Dorset and through James Houston so is that a traditional practice per se? Yeah because we go back, all the way back to scrimshaws and all that so there is drawing there is print. So is it traditional? That’s a judgement call I can’t really say that. But in my own mind it is one interpretation of it, right? And then you have like First Nations, Metis, you have quills, quill – what do you call it – work, basketwork, cultural artifacts. All those sorts of things, right.

RM: Right.

BP: That’s a, that’s a tricky one, contemporary versus tradition, right.

RM: I know because I mean it is an interesting thing thinking through because I know that the Collection officially is dated to around the 1950s when Indian agents were collecting pieces from Inuit and First Nations, Metis and…and it was, I guess we would consider it to be traditional works at the time. But now it does include more contemporary mediums like mixed media, photography, which are arguably not traditional so the definition of what that means is also something that’s interesting to me, like Contemporary Indigenous art.

BP: Well look at Norval Morrisseau and his works, at that generation. I mean they, they opened the doors. They were the first ones to look at doing contemporary art, Indian art. And the Department started collecting that early on. So that has continued throughout the years, throughout the generations so those sort – don’t know if you’d call that traditional or not but it’s hard, right? It’s hard because there’s so many different interpretations of it, right. And you would have to speak to those involved in Indian art to get a better perspective than I because I have more knowledge on Inuit art. That’s my specialty per se, or my interest and passion, right,
so…whether it’s stone, whether it’s wood, whether it’s prints, drawings, cultural artifacts. It’s – they’ve got everything, right. So at what point is it contemporary? They’ve always called Inuit art contemporary Inuit art, right so, right from the beginning right so. Whether it’s sculpture or not, right. It’s you know that contemporary art market, contemporary art market. That’s where it begins. Through economic development, starting out as arts and crafts and building it into an art genre within the whole art field itself. Nationally, what do they call it, art world
RM: So kind of when economics was incorporated into it I guess?
BP: Economics, started as an economic endeavor because James Houston went up and started collecting art through from Inuit – well they were called Eskimos back then but, right? Eskimo art, right. So from an economic perspective they wanted to be able to provide monies and economic opportunities for Inuit up in the North so this is where they started working on the art, right. Focusing on developing art.
RM: Right.
BP: Arts and crafts as economic initiative. Then it boiled over into what we know as contemporary Inuit art today.
RM: Okay.
BP: Right. So very different path from the Indian Art Centre, the Indian Art. Very different path in terms of - I think they tried to do that with Indian art very early on such as using tags you know, you know we have the igloo tag? Are you familiar with that?
RM: No.
BP: Oh no, you have to check out that. They used to have a beaver pelt that they would use to identify Indian art as well and Indian artists didn’t like that whatsoever. They felt that it was disrespectful and whatnot, right. But we, Inuit art have maintained that tag as a way of authenticity of Inuit art. Because they developed that very tag for that specific thing to combat – they developed the tag to say this is certified by the Government of Canada. So this is “real art” because at the time the “fake art” was coming into being so they had to combat that, right. So they developed the tags put the tag with the sculpture “this is certified by the Government of Canada, this is Inuit art.” They had a beaver pelt tag like that for the Indian art but there was such an upheaval from my understanding. And Ryan may be able to elaborate on this more as well but the artists said we don’t want anything to do with this right. So the Inuit arts has maintained and continues to maintain – because the Inuit Art Foundation took over the administration of the igloo tag, right so. It’s a way of curtailing mass produced stuff, it’s handmade stuff by Inuit artists, right.
RM: Right, okay, I did not know that. I will have to look into that.
BP: Are you familiar with the Inuit Art Foundation, the Inuit Art Quarterly?
RM: I am.
BP: Okay, check there’s some of the stories on that. There’s some articles on that as well, right.
RM: Right, I know. There’s treasure troves of articles everywhere. For sure, I will have to check that one. I have two more questions…so, yes, when I was reading the article Viviane Grey’s article on the Indigenous Art Centre, she stated that a lot of Indigenous artists endorsed the Centre as a place where they wanted their works to be collected. And I’m just wondering if you feel that that is still the case? And if so –
BP: I can’t really speak for the Indian or Metis group…from what I hear, from what I see the artists that I see and know and been collected, they still think it’s relevant. I’m talking Indian and Metis, right. I think they still – from the very individual artists that I’ve talked to, I think they endorse it. Inuit perspective, yes, I think we still endorse the Art Centre as a means of collecting, acquiring, exhibition, promotion and all those wonderful things. I think it’s still relevant today. I think it’s still very relevant today to be honest with you, right. I don’t know how active the Art Centre is in terms of the Inuit art side these days, I don’t know, you have to talk to them, right. You need to talk to them about it because I’m only me and the people I know and the artists I talk to here in town we still think it’s relevant and important and we endorse it, right. Who else is going to collect us? What are we going to say no? Very hard to sit there and say no I don’t endorse it when they buy my art.
RM: Yeah no for sure.
BP: Sort of a mixed message, right. How could you not endorse it? By not promoting it, by not talking about it, by not trying to submit applications for calls, for submissions and requisitions.
RM: Yeah I guess that question is not exactly how I wanted it to come across. Because –
BP: - Well you will get a very different reaction if you say what would happen if they got rid of it? You should ask that question. I think that’s more – you’d get a stronger response, right.
RM: Yes, yeah because that is – that is kind of, I know that that was in conversation for a long time was that, whoever it was wanted to get rid of the Collection within the federal institution and to go to the National Gallery and the Museum of Civilization. But to my knowledge many artists advocated against that and they wanted to have their pieces together to form this Collection. They wanted –
BP: - Yes. From the Indian art perspective and the Metis, the voices have been very strong to support that. From an Inuit perspective I think, the voices haven’t been always that strong because of the dynamics of the Centre, the dynamics of the people, dynamics of the artists because half the artists I know live up North, right. So it’s really hard to gauge that dynamic. The
Art Centre did have huge Inuit Art Collection in the 80s they decided to get rid of it. They deaccessioned it to five institutions, right. I don’t know if there was an outcry from artists at that point, I didn’t see anything, heard anything or read anything to contradict that or to support that but I know when there’s talk of getting rid of the Art Centre, the voices come out from the Indian and Metis much more strongly than Inuit. So yeah there is that voice there that says we want to keep it, we want to keep this Collection this is a very, very important Collection, right, in my mind it’s very important. Not only from an art standpoint from collecting and maintaining it but disseminating the art, disseminating information about the arts and culture of the three groups, right. So I think it’s, I think, yeah…there’s been a lot of rumbling in the past of if they want to get rid of it, there’s always been that question of shall we get rid of it? Shall we keep it? And there’s still saying a voice here that says no we got a keep it, we need to protect it because it’s important, right. Not only it supports the Collection and maintains the Collection, as a working collection it’s still very important and I think it’s the ability, well that’s the thought. But to keep it, that voice is still there, I think.

RM: Right, to keep the Collection. Would you say that the voice is stronger from the Indian and Metis just because of proximity? Like would you say because, like you were saying most artists are –

BP: I think it’s a little bit of both. I don’t know you need to talk to artists up North. And I haven’t heard of anything in the last five years that would contradict that, right, and I haven’t heard of anything that would…I think the closest thing that comes to it is the discussion around the igloo tag and the transfer of the igloo tag out of the Department to the Inuit Art Foundation and what would happen if you got rid of the igloo tag and the ramifications around that, right. So that’s the strongest voice there, and maintaining the Collection. You need to talk to other artists to get that perspective because it’s only me now and I’ve been out of the voice, and the dialogue for the last couple of years so I may not be the most…what’s the word…there’s a word I’m looking for. I may not be the one who can answer your questions about that properly, right. But from my perspective the people I talk to, Inuit artists here as well as other artists that I’ve come to find, we both see the Art Collection as relevant, important and a place where we can actually have an opportunity to apply and to be acquired and to be part of that Collection is always important Collection. Have I answered that properly?

RM: Yes. Yeah. And I think you’ve essentially answered the fifth question as well which is what would you say is the most significant aspect of the Centre that individuals who interact with it should be aware of? And I feel like you said it was promotion and display.
BP: Yeah I think it’s, it’s not just one entity, I don’t think it’s just one single answer to that question, right. What do they do? They acquire, they exhibit, they promote, they disseminate, they loan, they develop policies, they develop programs and they get the word out there about the Centre and the Art Collection itself. So it’s not just one thing. I can’t just say they’re good at exhibiting, I just can’t say they’re good at collecting, I can’t say the best part is acquiring, yeah, well, you want to acquire my art, right. Pretty biased, pretty biased answer, right. So I don’t think it’s...Because I’m a little biased because I know the history of it to a certain extent, I know what they do, I know what they’ve been doing over the years and they still maintain that mandate of acquiring and collecting and disseminating and promoting Indigenous art in Canada. So to me it’s, it’s I could say yeah it’s the exhibitions, yeah they do really good exhibitions, they do, it’s important that they do that. But do they do that as the best that they do or the number one that they do, I really can’t answer that. To me, I think, I think globally, I think nationally, and I think along those lines, right. A compilation of everything I think. So it’s really hard to say they do this best, they don’t do this good. We haven’t talked about the negative things about it but you that’s fine, I’m not here to talk about the negative things about it, right. Because I think there is a need, there is I think, an opportunity to enhance and develop more programming, and develop more exhibitions, and develop more policies and I think they are working on those things. But number one is resources, human resources, monetary resources and change in governments, change in mandates within government and always the issue, always in the back of the mind is shall we keep it? Is this the right place for it? If not where is it going to go? Where can we put it? And I know damn well that, excuse my language, that artists will fight for the Collection to be maintained within the department, right. Because it’s important. Think of some of the best artwork developed ever, right. I mean we had a collection of almost five thousand pieces of Inuit art that went to five different institutions in Canada. Some of the best art that was ever created, right. Right. So you can’t just ignore that and you just can’t wipe it off the face of the earth. Or just plow through it without ramifications without an uproar and…what’s the word…

RM: Resistance?

BP: Yes, thank you, resistance from artists and other – not only artists, I think there’s other institutions I think that support and promote the Centre itself, right. So I mean through interdepartmental loans, right, through loans I think they do that. I think that is very important as well, right. They do loan our works to the National Gallery or institutions nationally, internationally, and regionally. So that in itself is important and that is one, that is another reason to keep it, right.
RM: Right. For sure. Yeah and so the last question and kind of building off of that is again referring back to the essay – you really should read the book – Viviane refers to the collection as a living art collection and kind of for that reason because at least to my understanding, my interpretation of what she meant, is that artists still very much have an active role in deciding where their pieces go and knowledge of what’s happening to them, and also, I mean maybe this is not the case for your works which are photographic but in terms of how to care for the pieces, it’s a very open dialogue with artists. So I’m just wondering how you would kind of define what the Collection is and how you see your pieces within that Collection.

BP: It is, it is a living collection it’s a working collection, right. Number one I think it’s a working collection in the sense that the works are dispersed amongst not only our department here in HQ but as well as regionally, right. As well as internationally in terms of loans, in terms of exhibitions and loans and throughout those things as well. So it is a working collection, and it has been treated in that sense, too. So it has to be respected, it has to be maintained, and it has to be cared for, safety and whatnot. They do – they try to do a good job at that, right. So in terms of if you’re loaning a piece of art, you have to make sure that this institution has the right atmosphere to take that artwork on, right. As well as regionally, too, we, we, the departments brings works out into the regions. Mind you regions have their own collections, too, right. They do do that. So you have to maintain and care for that collection so it is a working collection very important, and I see it as that. I see it as a collection for the purpose of collecting ie. If you’re – if they think the jury or the department or the mandate of – whoever is in the Centre – think that your work is important enough, they would acquire it, and they would maintain that and it becomes part of the working collection. But it’s bigger than that, too, because it is a collection it’s a very important collection, right. For the history and evolution and future of Indigenous art in Canada. I think it’s very important that we realize that it is a very important collection, very important artists, top notch artists that have been collected throughout the years that are with – housed within the collection, right. I agree with Viviane, it is a living collection and it’s working collection and I think people treat it that way. A lot of people may not know that but that’s the way it is, right. I think a lot of people are surprised, too, that it is a working collection, that we put artwork in the office, we put artwork in the public spaces within the department, in the building so that people can see that, see that this is a part of our Collection. They may not realize that or they may not know about the Collection per se but that’s the obligation of the Centre is to do that, is to disseminate that and to be able to bring forth knowledge and information on the Collection itself, right. So I think it’s a working, living, important collection. I’m not just saying that because I’m trying to be nice to you, right. It is very important, I mean come on now you’ve got
Norval…some of the top Inuit artists and some of the top – the top artists, Indigenous artists in Canada, in that Collection. So you have to treat it with that respect, right. In my mind anyway.

RM: No I agree. I agree. It was incredible because I had no idea what to expect when I went there, I went really with no kind of knowledge at all. I went to meet with the Director and walked in and I saw this library, this wealth of knowledge and all of these paintings on the wall and I was like ‘that’s a Norval Morrisseau’ and I was just astonished…

BP: I mean that question is open to interpretation from a very, I think, individualistic as well as communal perspective. So I think you’ll get answers along those lines, right. Yeah but you know, I mean their vault could be like bigger and better and more professionally, but we work within our means, right. But at least it’s protected, at least it’s cared for, and at least it’s disseminated and accessible, which is really important, right. You don’t want to have a Collection that has been sitting and not shown. So in that sense there is a bit of advantage to that because people get to see the Collection, not all of it mind you because there are some things that are really difficult to display and some things are, I think, needs to be treated with utmost care and respect so, some of those things may not be exhibited. But at least there’s an opportunity, and at least there’s a way of – and people, people wanting and caring, and I think passionate about it, right.

RM: Yeah no for sure I agree. I think for me what I took most from my visit from the Centre and learning about it is how much respect and care goes into maintaining that Collection and how it’s remained consistent like you were saying from the very beginning.

BP: But you know, and again I think some people, I don’t know, you have to talk to the artists who are in the Collection and who want to be in the Collection about it being a working collection and seeing work in an office environment, or in a lobby environment they may not be…supportive. I don’t know enough. But then again, if I see my art, I haven’t seen my works in anywhere in the buildings so I don’t know, come up on it –

RM: That might be fun to stumble upon one of your pieces.

BP: Yeah, I don’t go looking for it. Because I know what they’re like, right. But because I’m also an employee so I need to be really careful because there’s always the perception of…there’s always the perception of conflict, right. So I need to be very careful. I don’t talk about my artwork at work. I don’t talk about my practice at work. Very rarely do I do that because of the conflict of interest perceptions, right. So I keep it separate, try to keep it very separate, right. So – and I haven’t even seen any of my art, in anywhere in the spaces, right. So how will I react to it when I see it, I don’t know, right. But at least it’s there. Some people may not like the fact that it’s, their artworks hanging in an office or a boardroom or a lobby but people get to see, I guess. But
that’s a very, I think, a very personal and individualistic answer or... you know what I’m trying to say? I don’t know, it’s very individualistic. So my answer versus somebody else’s could be different, right. But the people I know, I mean they’re very happy to be acquired, right, and to be shown whether it’s in a space or an exhibition and the monetary funds that come along with that as well. It provides additional resources to artists, right.

RM: Right. Yeah, I think that’s really interesting, too, thinking about what is an appropriate space to hang art like in an office or a gallery and how that changes maybe the way it’s perceived.

BP: If at all. I’ve got artwork hanging in the Ottawa Art Gallery, excuse me, the City of Ottawa Collection, and I know some of the counselors in that organization and they’re really proud to have art, Indigenous art in their offices. Very proud to have it there. So, you know, it depends on where you go, I guess. It depends on who you talk to, it depends on what kinds of questions you ask and what kind of responses you get from the very individual artists, right.

RM: For sure.

BP: That’s it?

RM: Yes.

Author in Conversation with Ryan Rice November 14th, 2019

RM: Okay, so the first question I have for you – I’ll just jump right into it is – what is your association with the programs administered by the Centre? And to follow up, how do you professionally connect to or navigate the Centre? Or did you?

RR: So I have a history with the Centre as both an artist, a curator, arts administrator. I was first introduced to the Art Centre through the public calls for submissions for acquisitions. So this came back in the early 90s where I submitted my artwork as an artist and was acquired for the Collection. So my relationship with the Collection started then. They recognized who I was and they recognized my practice. So over the next few years within the annual acquisition call I would submit works and I think I have maybe approximately five works in the Collection that was acquired through these open calls.

RM: Okay.

RR: I was also pursued on a number of occasions to have my artwork included in a newsletter called Transitions that the Department used to put out. And then just from there I start
understanding what the Collection was. I also understand at the same time start participating within the national organized group SCANA. You know SCANA?

RM: I'm familiar with it.

RR: Yeah, okay, so I sort of was a sit in for the Quebec representative towards the end of their, their like, however you would call it, their institutional organization. And through that the Indian Art Centre at the time was supporting that organization. So I was in national meetings, I met a lot of artists, I was sitting at the table as an artist myself…I also, through the Department’s call, through the Indian Art Centre’s call, there was a call for – I think it was the International Year of the Woman? – a competition for artwork, Indigenous artworks, so I submitted to that and I was granted the honours of being recognized as one selected to do this poster. That went sour very quickly but that wasn’t directly linked to the Centre.

RM: Okay.

RR: So formally I was invited to consider a position at the Indian Art Centre right after I was finishing an internship at the Museum of Civilization. So I started working there, and I don’t know my exact title, it was like Assistant Curator or – so I started working there in I think 1997.

RM: Okay.

RR: And I was brought in because I guess they seen as a way to like invigorating the program. So I came in and start working on establishing the Artist in Residence program, we start reviewing the Acquisition process, there was a hold on the Acquisition process because there was supposed to be a retrospective that was going to be produced by the Centre and all funding was being allotted to that. So I came in and sort of reimagined, with Barry Ace, the needs that artists were indicating that would support their careers beyond an acquisition. And that meant they needed somebody to write about their work, they needed solo exhibitions rather than big group exhibitions. So this is soon after, this is after the Quincentennial, and things have sort of started to – Indigenous art was not at the trend as it was in 1990. I was part of a First Nations collective called Nation2Nation where we were doing like DIY type of projects nationally, locally and nationally. So the work that I was doing was being recognized by the Centre so they brought me in in the capacity sort of to like, reimagine how, invigorate a program beyond an Acquisition program.

So I came in with skills of a curator, skills of art administration, skills of museum, skills of an educator because I worked in a museum as an educator. So combining all those skills we dived into changing the way the Acquisition program was conceived, or was carried along at the time to meet the artists' needs. So we start, we continue the open call, the open call was open across the country where people would apply with the intention of doing an exhibition. From the
exhibition would come an acquisition. So and we budgeted through the annual funds that were allotted to Acquisition, funds to support this program. We followed the normal procedure where a jury came in and made the selections of the artists who were going to be received for the exhibitions. And we followed the criteria of focusing – emphasizing emerging. So 60% of the selections were emerging and the rest were mid-career and established. For the emerging artists we decided to pair up artists, to do two person shows rather than solo, and the mid-career and established would get a solo exhibition. So we refurbished the Gallery at – what’s the address? 100 La Chaudiere? – Yeah so we refurbished the Gallery there, we got new lighting systems, we lifted the carpet. So we redid a whole infrastructure change within that on top of doing the regular duties that came with the Indian Art Centres, and then the Inuit Art Centre was side by side us. So we moved forward with that project and it was very successful. We paired Indigenous writers, we produced catalogues, and we did it in a very DIY type of way where, we just did it. And as an anomaly within the government, and I think we were situated within facilities…

RM: Okay.

RR: People left us alone to do whatever we needed to do. So I mean everything was, you know, it created a spirit within the Centre where everyone chipped in. So we painted the walls ourselves, we cut the vegetables ourselves, we hung the works ourselves. So all the skills we – everyone carried over with working within no budget to a budget – we still carried that over in producing these exhibitions and we did twelve a year.

RM: Wow.

RR: So it was a very quick turnover in terms of exhibition goes up, catalogue gets produced, printed, show opens –

RM: - That’s monthly.

RR: And then from the curatorial perspective, we would select the works for acquisition. Based on the remainder of budget, what was, what filled the niche of the Collection at the time, how was that going to represent the artist as an emerging artist, as an established artist within the Collection. So the jury selected the artist, we selected the artworks for the…so our curatorial support for the Collection came through that. And it was the jury who selected the artists who would get this, this…so we carried that on for maybe four years? I ended up working at the Centre for five years, I became an indeterminate employee after five years. I shifted into acting Chief Curator probably two years after. Because the former Director went on an interchange to Canada Council, Barry Ace moved up to Manager of Director, so I stepped into his job as Chief Curator and stayed there until I left. And…
RM: Do you know what year that was?
RR: I left in 2002. Yeah, yeah I was there ‘97 to 2002 so like almost the full five years – I was there a little bit more than five years. Within that time period we were still travelling the Transitions exhibition, we were working with…it was quite a very busy time because we were working side by side with the Inuit Art Centre and trying to bring them into the fold of…also to be showing in the Gallery space. And also to encourage curatorial practice within their writing. So using what we were doing as a model and moving it over into the Inuit Art Centre as well. And from the Transitions – so we seen the success of Transitions and the request for exhibitions to tour, we put in place Transitions II to sort of to carry on as the – as an exhibition that had the opportunity to move and to sort of like, activate the Collection. Because prior to that nothing was really going, there was no, there wasn’t much movement within the Collection.
RM: And sorry the request, did that come from the artists or…? To tour.
RR: The requests come from any institution.
RM: Okay.
RR: So people are looking for something. People were, were…so with Transitions I, it came through the Canada Cultural Centre request, and through some other government requests. So through the Minister down, there’s requests for artworks, there’s requests for…we start working with trade ministers, trade offices. Specifically with Taiwan. So we brought Transitions to Taiwan, we create a program where artists were going to Taiwan, Inuit and First Nations and Metis. We were working on relationships with Brazil, we were working with…so we were, we were branching out as well, and looking at…the Minister was happy that we were putting this out. Because it represents Canada as a whole to some extent. So Transitions II was going to be in the sort of like, in the queue for something to go. And it was all from recent acquisitions.
RM: Okay.
RR: So it’s like, how do you, how do you circulate and activate what was coming in? And it followed the same sort of like, suit. Barry Pottle was the Inuit curator, I was the First Nations curator, we brought together artists, we produced a catalogue that would be freely available when it tours. And I think the exhibition toured, it went to Montreal and it went to the Yukon.
RM: Okay.
RR: There were other venues being pursued and established, and at one point everything was shut down towards the end of my term, which is one of the reasons why I was leaving.
RM: Oh okay.
RR: Yeah.
RM: Okay, I see. So it would have potentially continued.
RR: So it would have potentially continued and it would – it had the opportunity to circulate, and activate works, and recognition for the Collection. So as you say, not many people know about this Collection.

RM: Right. Right yeah it is true. Yeah okay, that’s interesting. And so that was around 2002?
RR: So 2002 I left. And around that time period Barry Ace also left to pursue a Director training and the former Director came back. So that’s when everything stopped, and everything changed from that point. And there’s a lot of issues around that, that, you know?

RM: Yeah for sure, no because Transitions: Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art is the last large travelling exhibition that I’m aware of that the Centre produced.

RR: Yeah so Transitions II: Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art would have been the next one and it’s almost erased from the history of the Centre.

RM: Right. Yeah that’s really interesting. Something to look into for sure. Okay.
RR: And I can talk about relationships after if you want?

RM: Yeah, I mean yeah for sure.

RR: So after that I…I mean I had first knowledge – firsthand knowledge of the Collection. I knew it as only a very few handful of people knew the Collection, quite intimately. And seeing the rigour of what we did just completely stop. We were also a – probably the highest Indigenous employee space within the federal government, and everyone was let go at some point. People were just dropping off, and we were being replaced by non-Indigenous people. And then, after that the Centres merged and sort of, I think, lost the momentum of the recognition that I think it actually had. I think the Call for Submissions and Acquisitions were brought back to the surface at some point and have gone. So I was invited to sit on a Peer Jury Acquisition Selection maybe…within the last eight years I would say. And then I was invited to select works that publications for Canada150 that they put out. And then I started, I was invited to do an exhibition here at OCAD for the Onsite Gallery where I ended up working specifically with the Collection for the show raise a flag: works from the Indigenous Art Collection (2000-2015). So I returned to the – basically I returned to the Collection almost 15 years later. And I was interested to understand…I could have done a show that had all the stuff that we were working on for, we were actually working on, there was a retrospective being produced prior to me attending, coming on board. And we were actually working on a large retrospective that was different from what was previously planned that was called Perpetual Bundle. That was in the queue that was ready to go as well, and that got cancelled. So I was interested in returning to the Collection through this exhibition proposal, and look at only the 21st century. So only the last 15 years from 2000 to 2015, and how to activate that. Because all the previous work has…have had
opportunities to be activated and I know that works going into the Collection...we weren’t seeing. So the impetus was I would return, and it gave me the opportunity to look at, I think, close to 680 works within a 15 year period, and I pulled probably 43 works for this exhibition. So again it was at the moment of Canada150 I wanted to bring attention to – so raise a flag was about bringing attention to this Collection but also activating the Collection, making it known, giving it some recognition, bringing together this next generation of emerging-established. And seeing the works that weren’t consistently being circulated. So you would see works circulated within the Alex Janvier, Daphne Ojig, Group of Seven, but we weren’t seeing a lot of the works that were coming in by more emerging artists.

RM: Right.

RR: And then the collapse of the Centre allowed me to look at and include Inuit art within the survey of the 15 years, which previously I didn’t have access to outside of the Transitions projects that we were doing.

RM: Right. Because they were just consolidating at the time.

RR: Well they were separate, and now they’re consolidated. Yeah. And they were, their Collection wasn’t supposed to exist anymore because it got disbanded.

RM: Right.

RR: And then they start recollecting because of the Transitions exhibition.

RM: Oh really? Oh so that was the impetus to collect again after Transitions?

RR: Yeah because the request was an exhibition for Paris.

RM: Okay.

RR: So they had no works to show. So they had to restart a Collection. So that’s the impetus of where that started. And then following suit with the Artist in Residence program, Acquisition. And then Transitions II also allowed for those Acquisitions to have a life and to start developing a collection again.

RM: Right.

RR: So the mandate was never for the Inuit Art Centre to have a Collection again once it was dispersed.

RM: Right. But it was because of outside demand that they –

RR: Yeah.

RM: - that they started collecting again. That’s really interesting. Very neat, okay. I want to ask you so many more questions but I also want to get through these. So I’ll move on to the next one and yeah. So what events or experiences can you point to that encouraged you to
participate in the programs and operations in the IAC? So was there, was there something unique about the approach that you saw the Centre taking or something else?
RR: No it was just, it was the...you know, seeing a random poster for the call.
RM: Okay.
RR: That's basically what it was, so that was probably either through the Native Friendship Centre in Montreal or some public office.
RM: Right.
RR: Where I would have seen that, I'm not sure.
RM: Right.
RR: I also worked in a high school at the time so I, we might have received the poster. So they used my work twice for the poster after, that was another relationship I had. So these posters, these calls for acquisitions went across. So you would see the poster, you know, there was no email or anything so you had to make the phone call, you had to submit everything by hand...you had to, so, the attraction of the poster as being one of the only things that was actually calling for Indigenous art at the time.
RM: Okay, I see. So you didn't have prior knowledge of the Centre before seeing this poster?
RR: No, no, not at all, not at all. And I didn't even understand what the Centre was. There was no website, right?
RM: Right.
RR: So you had to, there was no way to understand what this, what was, what this was at all, unless you went there. Yeah.
RM: Which is what I guess you ended up doing and...
RR: Well through the acquisition process, your work gets preselected you had to get it shipped, and from Kahnawá:ke we don't have street addresses and using Purolators were still new. So it was really problematic to get the work there. They would meet me on the highway, hand over the work, like it was crazy, right?
RM: Yeah.
RR: Because we don't have street names?
RM: Right.
RR: And the couriers weren't coming to the reserve. And then through them purchasing my work, they seen my work as sort of like, capable of attracting interest. So my work shows up twice on the Acquisitions – the Call for Submissions posters. So that was where my relationship also started. But I don't think I ever attended, I don't think I ever visited them until, when I moved to Ottawa for the Museum of Civilization.
RM: Right, okay. And that’s when your relationship kind of shifted and you began to –
RR: Shifted into a professional capacity, yeah.
RM: Right, okay. That’s really interesting.
RR: And working on that SCANA board, we would, we met on a few occasions in Ottawa. So I got to know the manager and the curator who would participate as well.
RM: Right. And then so, once you were involved with the Centre, did you find that there was something unique about the way that they operated or was that your first exposure to…?
RR: I mean the uniqueness came through…because I was active, and I pursued participation with SCANA, they used my artwork, and they bought my artwork. And just networking, so with all the work that we were doing, and as artists, circulating your updates of CV, because they have the archives. So it was all just hands off and networking relationships, and just making sure they were on the mailing list for your exhibitions and stuff like that.
RM: Okay, right. So moving on to the next one. How would you respond to the statement the Centre is a site that represents, collects, and promotes Contemporary Canadian Indigenous art and artists?
RR: I think, I think that’s a vision rather than a statement. I think it’s still an anomaly, let’s people know about it, there’s not much history written about it. It’s not active in the way that it could be, it doesn’t serve the purpose the way that it should. So the accessibility of it is only if you know that it exists. And then, other than that, there’s very little outreach of it. Either because of the management or because it’s a government office. So there’s a lot of barriers to actually…so there might be an exhibition on right now, we don’t know that. Because they’re not using social media, they’re not establishing a presence. You might be on the mailing list, email list for the next call…so you’re really, it sort of went back to what this call was circulated and that might be your only access to it. So who receives it nationwide is an issue, that was still an issue back in, when I pursued it. Because not everybody’s aware of it, not everybody receives the notification, not everyone’s on the mailing list.
RM: Right, yeah. And these are all barriers.
RR: And there is a website, there is an archive that has no access. It’s very generic and very general. When I was there we created, we hired a student to write short bios for everyone in the Collection that was supposed to be posted on the website and that never got posted. So the work was done for all the artists that were in the Collection.
RM: Right.
RR: So now I think you just click on the name and you get an image of the work that’s in the Collection.
RM: I think it’s the name and the nation that the artist is from.
RR: Yeah, so we, we had a student at the time develop a bio for everyone that never got uploaded. So lots of issues around that. One is the management came back in and the other one is what a government website does. So if it was an independent entity that could have been uploaded and then bandwidth and all those issues with technology, and then government.
RM: Right. When you say that management come – came back in, can I ask you to expand on what you mean?
RR: Well when the management, the management left and Barry Ace became Director and I became Chief Curator, we were already in a momentum of building the Artists-In-Residence program. The manager left for an interchange to Canada Council, so we were just pursuing the momentum that we created when, that Barry Ace initiated, that I came to participate in, that Transitions did. So when they came back that person shut everything down. That person has a name and I’m not naming that person.
RM: Yeah no that’s understandable.
RR: And we, if you read that book, that whole period has been erased from that essay. So it says it was the most invigorating time but does not name or place accolades to people who were there at the time.
RM: Right, I see.
RR: I guess that’s a personal decision to erase us from that, that moment.
RM: Right, okay, I see. Because I had read your essay actually and I’d seen so much information, like, archives produced about the Centre from the Centre during that period of time that you’re talking about, and then it stopping. And that’s yeah, it’s never been…identified as to why…
RR: It’s someone dysfunctioning and not knowing how to work. And being in that position forever so that’s what happens with government employees they become indeterminant. And they were the leader of it, so, stopped everything.
RM: Right, I see. Okay.
RR: And if you look at a history of it, it’s, there’s a number of times that you see…severed production going on in the tenure of that person.
RM: I see. I’ll have to look into that. So I mean because you have worked in different capacities in the Centre, as an artist, how do you currently see your work being promoted, maintained, and developed?
RR: I, I, it doesn’t. I see it inactive.
RM: Okay.
RR: So unless someone like me comes in and borrows works, it is not publicly accessible. It’s not on the website, it’s not. So you really need to know, you really need to intimately know the Collection, or go through that list of names and then inquire. I would say they’re very helpful in supporting getting images, and getting, you know, you’re doing a publication, if you need information. That is…that is a process of their support, and I think that’s always been there, but it’s not at your fingertips. So you really need to, to…And then to do a visit, is not exactly easy anymore either.

RM: Yes I found that process to be kind of intimidating and difficult actually. Having to sign in and go up, and you kind of already, you need to know exactly what you’re looking for.

RR: Yeah you can’t just go and browse, you need to be very specific. So it’s, it’s…as an artist, it’s, I get surprised. I think I was in an exhibition last year, someone borrowed the work. But yeah, I mean, I don’t know what it’s doing, I don’t know where it is. The other thing is it’s a working collection, so it was used as office decoration since its inception. Which was – the intention of that was, it would fill the walls of Indigenous works across the country, and it would be an access point where people would be interested in buying Indigenous art.

RM: Okay.

RR: The works weren’t for sale but you would see it and you could ask, “who is this artist?” That has never proved to be successful, right. And it’s more of a burden on the people who work there because you have to go into an office. Because at one point everyone got artwork, and one of the mandates was it was public spaces, directors, managers, board rooms, lobbies, higher. But since 9/11, because you have to sign in in every building, artworks were pulled from people’s offices who weren’t the…the government was moving to open space. So instead of walls you got the dividers.

RM: Oh yes.

RR: People who had no relationship to any position within their…had artwork in their office by Alex Janvier so…there was a shift in how that gets distributed.

RM: Okay.

RR: So I know Barry Ace, prior to me attending did a full inventory, and then when I was there, I did several inventories, to visit the work, to rotate the works. Some things were up for 40 years, some things were missing, some things were stolen, things were next to a water cooler…So there was no, sort of, curated care to these works. They were, whoever it was sent, hung up and then however it got…moved around the office. Could have been put behind a bookcase. So we would go to headquarters office and do an inventory, and decide what gets sent back, who
gets artwork. So the process of requesting artwork shifted to boardrooms, public spaces, and managers.

RM: Okay, and was that specifically within the Indigenous federal government buildings?

RR: Yeah, yeah.

RM: Just those facilities.

RR: Yeah. And then there would be requests sometimes from other ministers who would, instead of going to the Canada Council Art Bank, they would request Indigenous art.

RM: Okay.

RR: And come see us. So that is still…that still exists. It still decorates spaces but the impetus of it being an economic development driver, I can’t say I’ve ever been pursued by anybody in the federal government or a visitor to it who has seen my work, has reached out to me and said “I want to buy your work.”

RM: Right, okay. So that’s never materialized for you?

RR: No. What has materialized is if a curator sees the work or is interested in my practice and I say I have five works in the Collection…

RM: Right, okay I see.

RR: So no one is promoting it in a comprehensive way.

RM: Right. It’s more passive, I guess?

RR: Yeah.

RM: Okay, I see. Okay. Right. And then so, I guess as a staff member, you’ve already explained how you engaged with the Collection…but since, I guess, maybe reflecting back on that time, you’ve worked in other arts institutions as well. Can you identify any differences between how the IAC administered their programming versus other institutions?

RR: Because it’s a federal government program and it’s the only one of its kind…it’s not an artists run centre, it’s not an exhibition space, it’s not a – so it’s not a lot of these things that a Collection-based entity would do. So they’re not producing exhibitions, they’re not producing literature, they’re not presenting scholarship, they’re not, you know. So it’s sitting there waiting for the public to come in and consume it, but again you have to have access to it, right. I guess the other thing that within the five years that was important was not just maintaining the Collection but creating relationships across the country with artists, was key to what we did. Going to the conferences and being present, going to meetings and being present, inviting people in. So getting the writers in place and stuff like that. So establishing a lot of relationships and network that would promote the Collection was key to how we moved it forward at the time. And key within the Inuit Art Centre as well. So establishing a presence.
RM: Right, and the content that was produced at the time, was it – forgive me if I’m misspeaking – but I believe it was predominantly Indigenous-led. Like many of the texts that I’ve been –
RR: - Yeah, it was. I think the mandate that we were supporting the artists was, we need writers, so we went out and found Indigenous writers. Yeah. I don’t think there is any non-Indigenous writers within that time period. So we were supporting these pockets that were, had no support at the time. And there were very few curators.
RM: Right, okay. I see. Okay. I’m going to move on to the next one. Yeah so, to your knowledge, do Indigenous artists continue to endorse the Centre to collect their artworks?
RR: I would, I’m surprised on how little participation artists have within, with their work in the Collection.
RM: At this time?
RR: Ever. Yeah, it should be, if you’re in a Collection, and if it’s something that you care for…so updating your file, your artist’s file, informing the Centre that you have an exhibition. So the professional practices that have sort of slipped away because of social media. So what is your relationship to your artwork in the Collection? So at this point, I don’t have any relationship to my artwork in that Collection. I don’t update my bio, I don’t know if anybody else, if anyone there is. So it gets purchased and then it, whatever happens to it, happens to it. There’s no engagement I would say. Unless you’re invited to sit on a jury.
RM: Okay.
RR: And that’s limited because there’s, what maybe five people if they sit on a jury of acquisitions?
RM: Okay, okay, I see. And the juried selection process, I think is it once a year?
RR: I mean if they continue a program it would be once a year. But it goes like this, right?
RM: Okay, I see. Yes just because, I guess a follow up question, or I guess just explaining that question, in reading the essay that was produced by the Centre in 2017 I guess it was? I think many times throughout the history of the Centre, there has been talk about it being closed and the pieces being dispersed. But many artists advocated for their pieces to remain together. So I just wonder, I guess, if the Centre were to disband, do you think that artists would – would there be a public outcry?
RR: I, I…I don’t know.
RM: That’s a difficult question.
RR: I’m not optimistic at this point because at the time there was the lobbying efforts of SCANA who were on it, and fighting to get in the door of every institution. And then once that happened, another generation comes in and so we started Nation2Nation and Aboriginal Curatorial
Collective. But there’s no national body of artists. So I don’t know…I don’t know what the public or the artists’ reactions would be to this. I would assume people would stand up, but I don’t know.

RM: Right.

RR: Because of the inactivity and…sort of the distance, distant relationship that people would have with the Centre. So sometimes things, people might submit a work for acquisition and get purchased and then there’s no relationship ever beyond that, right? So I don’t know if people understand the critical importance of the Collection, the historical precedent that it has. So I’m not sure. With the exhibition raise a flag, I reached out to every artist who was alive and also to estates. “Can you update your CV? Can you send me a bio? Do you have an artist statement?” and I heard from very little artists. Yeah. So it’s only through the engagement of, “I’m writing about your work” and I send them a…you know, the formal, the formal request didn’t heed any results. Very few people sent anything back.

RM: Right.

RR: Very few people said, “Great I’m in an exhibition, let me know when it is.” So only through social media and my relationship with programming the exhibition, and actually going back to an artist and saying “Is there anything more you can tell me about this specific piece.” But it was all done outside of the Centre, right?

RM: Right.

RR: So I wasn’t representing the Centre, I was an independent curator here at OCAD.

RM: Okay. And you received more responses that way?

RR: No I received responses when I had a specific question and probably Facebook messaged them and say, “Can you tell me about this piece?” But the formal letter that we sent saying “you are in this exhibition, this is your work, can you send us a new CV, an updated bio…” Maybe four people sent stuff back?

RM: Oh wow. And there were 46?

RR: 43, I think there was 38 artists? Yeah. So were people interested in being in this exhibition? Is it because it’s in a collection they don’t participate in, and let it exist on its own? Yeah that I don’t know.

RM: Yeah, it is definitely difficult to say. Okay. Okay, so the next question, I feel like you’ve kind of touched on many things but, related to this, but what is the most significant aspect of the Centre that individuals should be aware of?

RR: That it has the largest comprehensive collection of Indigenous artwork in Canada. There’s…it’s not the best work, you know, it’s a mix but it’s a wide representation of things that
were being made over those 50 plus years. Again, it’s who had access to knowing there was an acquisition, who was buying the artwork at the time, how was it being circulated? But it’s comprehensive in the fact that it gives you…it’s ironic that it’s the government doing this when no other art institutes are doing this. So when you look at other arts institutions, everyone’s trying to catch up to what they didn’t collect in the last 50 plus years. They didn’t have any of that stuff, that the Centre has. So that’s why when you do a retrospective on Daphne Odjig, you have to go borrow a work. You have to go and access the only space that was doing that collecting. When you look at other art institutions you’ll see collections pop up in the mid-90s because Canada Council was funding this special acquisition fund for Indigenous art. So you’ll see probably 1995–’98, all these institutions now have Indigenous artwork. But it would be interesting to see what was before that, and what has happened after that. So no one has that—

RM: Range?

RR: There’s wide gaps in anybody’s collection, outside of maybe Thunder Bay and the Woodland Cultural Centre.

RM: Okay. They have comprehensive collections as well?

RR: And Thunder Bay was, I think their mandate was Indigenous at one point, and I think that stopped in the early ‘90s. So they would have a, they would have, sort of as a collecting practice of probably, regional. And then the Woodland would be the other one, because they’ve been collecting since they opened. And they have a range of…in their collection, they still collect. But again that’s another inactive collection that, we don’t know what’s in that, we don’t know what’s in that collection.

RM: Okay.

RR: And we know like, the National Gallery is the Carl Beam and then there’s a big gap, and then it starts again, right?

RM: Right. Okay. So the most significant thing, I guess, would be, yeah, it’s the Collection, really. It’s not so much the programming that’s going on right now or anything like that. It’s consistently the Collection.

RR: Yeah. Yeah, it’s the Collection and the value of the Collection. How, how can that be—like it needs to be activated. You can’t have a collection and just hoard it. It needs to be activated. Yeah.

RM: Right, okay. So we’re on the last question. Yeah so how would you respond to the statement that the Centre holds a living collection?

RR: Yeah I think that’s more valid than the, the sort of like, other statement that you raised? Because that’s what it does. It has a collection, we don’t know the future, we don’t know how it’s
going to be activated, we don’t know…but I think the importance is that it is consistent. There might be a gap here or two, but it is consistent, and it was…it was important to the discourse, and to artists because it was, in many cases, it was their first acquisition. So it was many firsts for many people; their first solo exhibition, their first group exhibition, their first acquisition. And the choice between doing the emerging collection is critical, to understand – to write an Indigenous art history in Canada. Because if you go look and you say “Oh, this is what Maryann Barkhouse was doing in 1995, look where she is now.” Her work came in the Collection here, it only came into the collection of McMichael in 2000. So you can follow people’s careers through this Collection, and you can follow people’s inactive careers through this Collection. So this person was an artist, and then we never, we never seen them produce another work in their career. And there’s significant people like that where works come into the Collection and then they don’t have a practice anymore. Or they just fall off the face of the earth.

RM: So it charts a really interesting history.

RR: Yeah, and those people wouldn’t have been collected anyway by AGO or…you know those emerging people would never have had an opportunity to get into a collection. So as a collection, I mean, it’s very significant. Like and that’s it’s strength, but if it just sits there, it doesn’t have power.
Appendix A

Research Ethics Approval

June 04, 2019

Rebeca Marquez
Master’s Candidate
Cultural Studies
Queen’s University

GREB Ref #: GCUL-093-19; TRAQ # 6026703
Title: “GCUL-093-19 A Story of Story(telling): Listening to Narratives of Belonging within the Indigenous Art Centre”

Dear Marquez:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “GCUL-093-19 A Story of Story(telling): Listening to Narratives of Belonging within the Indigenous Art Centre” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/trac/signon.html; click on “Events;” under “Create New Event,” click on “General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies”). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/trac indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/trac/signon.html; click on “Events;” under “Create New Event,” click on “General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form”). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/trac/signon.html; click on “Events;” under “Create New Event,” click on “General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies.” Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinators, Ms. Gail Irving, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or Chair, GREB.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

Chair, General Research Ethics Board (GREB)
Professor Dean A. Tripp, PhD
Departments of Psychology, Anesthesiology & Urology Queen’s University

e: Dr. Norman Votano, Supervisor
Dr. Dorit Naaman, Chair, Unit REB
Ms. Carrie Miles, Cultural Studies, Administration