

Fig. 1. N.J. Sawatski, *Autochthonic Landscape: Re-entry Without Lem Service*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 111.7 x 167.9 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

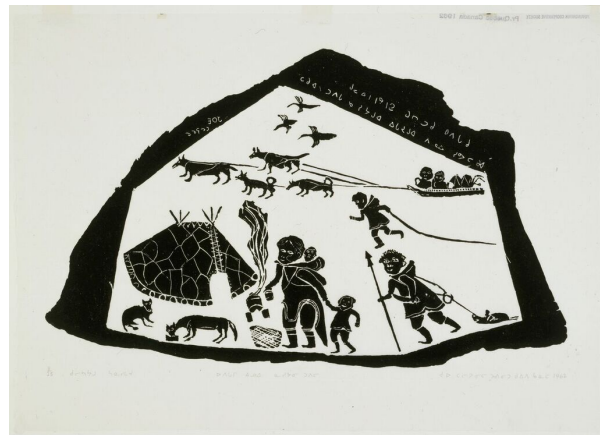


Fig. 2. Joe Talirunili, *Spring Camp*, 1962, stone cut, 34.3 x 57.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Annie Pootoogook, *Composition (Family Eating Lunch)*, 2005–6, felt pen, wax crayon, graphite, 56.6 x 66 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

## Myths of the North: Challenging What it Means to be Canadian

Isabelle Nguyen

A cohesive sense of national identity fosters a sense of belonging in its citizens and serves as a template for how a sovereign state should navigate its trials and tribulations. In the West, the family is conceived as a microcosm of the nation, a site where a nation's ideals are instilled in its citizens.<sup>1</sup> The dominant narrative of the ideal citizen is often written along the lines of core beliefs, language, race, ethnicity and geography. Even in today's highly globalized society, the relationship between citizenry and territory is often a key component of national identity.<sup>2</sup> This geographical component has proven difficult for nations such as Canada where, for the majority of the population, a sense of belonging is not tied to the Canadian landscape. Dominant narratives of Canadian identity attempt to resolve this by presenting cultural and geographical artifacts as the collective inheritance of all Canadians.<sup>3</sup> This is often done to reinforce an imagined difference between the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples by Canadians and by Americans—namely the notion that Canadians were more benevolent.<sup>4</sup> In reality, by appropriating Indigenous land and culture in the construction of Canadian identity, this nationalist narrative ends up exposing this bloody history.<sup>5</sup> This exhibition essay examines works that, intentionally or not, destabilize the myths inherent in Canadian nationalist narratives. More specifically, this paper looks at how depictions of children, the family and the domestic realm as microcosms of the nation subvert or resist hegemonic constructions of Canadian identity.

*Autochtonic Landscape: Re-Entry Without LEM Service* (1970) (fig. 1) by N.J. Sawatski (b. 1942) is a deeply humorous painting that uses the uncanny to draw attention to the doublethink required in justifying settler colonialism.

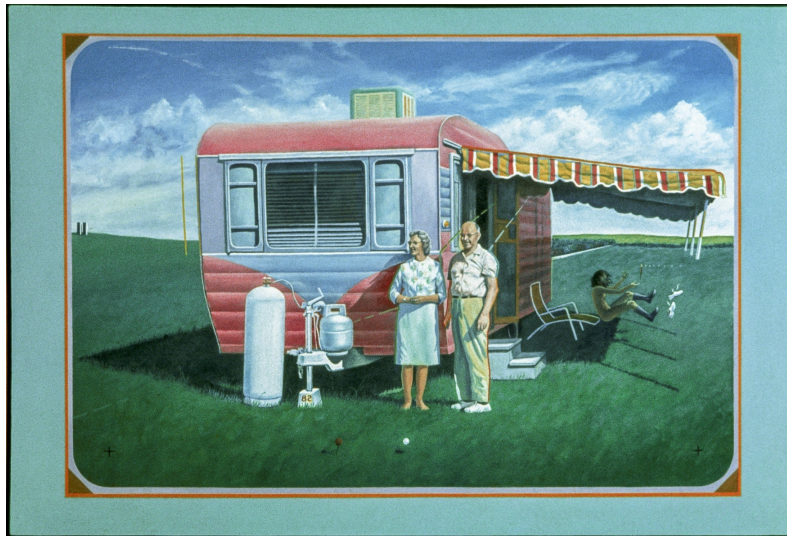


Fig. 1. N.J. Sawatski, *Autochtonic Landscape: Re-entry Without Lem Service*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 111.7 x 167.9 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The term settler colonialism refers to a type of colonialism wherein the settler population outnumbers that of Indigenous peoples.<sup>6</sup> The words “autochtonic landscape” in the title are a direct reference to the relationship that First Nations peoples have to the land. With this in mind, the mobile home depicted in this piece becomes a reference to the nomadic lifestyles of many First Nations peoples. The surrounding landscape is vast, empty and manicured to perfection, invoking the colonial myth that the Americas were previously uninhabited, thereby absolving settlers of any guilt in having stolen this land.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the landscape lacks any blemish or imperfection suggests that it is a caricature of this myth, an attempt to exaggerate and thus critique its idealization.

This feeling of unreality extends to the family and their home. Rendered with an eerie realism reminiscent of a 1950s advertisement, this domestic scene contains several elements that do not add up. For instance, the poles used to hold up the awning do not line up with the shadows that they cast. Stranger still is the young girl under the awning, who seems to be frozen in space, hovering naked above the lawn chair with her shoes bursting off her feet. The demeanour of the two adults standing in front of the mobile home enhances this bizarre atmosphere, as they awkwardly avoid each other's gaze and touch despite the implication that they are a couple.

The uncanny effect of all of these elements implies a critique of the idea of whiteness as the default race. Even in societies like Canada that promote multiculturalism, whiteness is often seen as natural, whereas non-white people are understood as deviating from the norm.<sup>8</sup> In this painting, this is not the case because the family is too abnormal to be considered ideal. Acutely aware of his position in Canadian society, the artist presents the existence of white settlers as something foreign, surreal and at times horrifying. Sawatski's work exposes how the hegemonic image of family and domesticity is dependent on yet conceals settler appropriation of Indigenous land.

*Spring Camp* (1962) (fig. 2) by Joe Talirunili (1893–1976) offers a look at the traditional domestic life of the Inuit. This work features several objects that are central to their nomadic lifestyle, including a dogsled, fire pit and portable tent.



Fig. 2. Joe Talirunili, *Spring Camp*, 1962, stone cut, 34.3 x 57.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Prior to the 1950s, Inuit travelled on predetermined routes for practical as well as cultural reasons. Knowledge of these routes was transmitted as a part of the culture's oral traditions.<sup>9</sup> While these paths were a means to travel from one point to another, the journey itself held greater importance than the destination in that travel was slow-paced and passed through fertile areas for hunting and fishing. Even today, it is not uncommon for travellers on these routes to stop and socialize when they run into each other.<sup>10</sup> This relationship between travel and food is represented by the man carrying food to the camp in the bottom right corner. Spring is often associated with hunger in Inuit culture because low food reserves means a limited ability to acquire food. This often resulted in people travelling long distances to find food.<sup>11</sup> This may have influenced the artist's decision to name this work *Spring Camp*, as the characters depicted seem to be returning from a hunting trip. Taking this context into consideration, the domestic space pictured describes not only the material needs of Inuit families, but how these needs are linked to social rituals and cultural values. This campsite may thus be viewed as a site where

Inuit children learned these rituals and values. The appropriation of Inuit culture in the construction of Canadian national identity ignores the cultural significance of practices related to the everyday needs of the Inuit, instead prizing them as picturesque and unique images. Idealized and nostalgic artistic depictions of traditional Inuit life have been criticized in the past for catering to settler tastes rather than reflecting reality.<sup>12</sup> However, this type of criticism does not take into account that these images are nevertheless self-representations.<sup>13</sup> This spirit of self-representation is precisely what allows *Spring Camp* to challenge the ways in which Canadian nationalism exploits Indigenous cultures for its own ends.

In comparison to *Spring Camp*, *Composition (Family Eating Lunch)* (2005–6) (fig. 3) by Annie Pootoogook (b. 1969) is a more contemporary look at Inuit domestic life.



Fig. 3. Annie Pootoogook, *Composition (Family Eating Lunch)*, 2005–6, felt pen, wax crayon, graphite, 56.6 x 66 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



As mentioned earlier, in the 1950s many Inuit families began moving into permanent government housing to take on more stationary forms of employment. Traditional nomadic lifestyles became less common as a result of this new type of housing along with heavier regulations on fishing, hunting and land use. These restrictions have also limited access to traditional foods for Inuit communities.<sup>14</sup> Pootoogook's drawing acknowledges how the Inuit have been cut off from their traditional lifestyles. Whereas Talirunili's work insists on the necessity of Inuit traditions for survival, Pootoogook's picture reveals how a traditional way of life is no longer attainable. Elements in the image that point to this reality are the stark modernity of the interior, objects of Western consumer culture such as the fridge magnet that says, "Jesus is Lord," as well as what is presumably a store-bought, processed meal.

Although settler society eagerly incorporates traditional aspects of Indigenous cultures into Canadian identity, it tends to disavow its role in undermining the traditional lifestyle of the Inuit and to shirk responsibility for the consequences. It is hypocritical to advocate a multicultural Canada that invites all Canadians to the national table while restricting the Inuit from the resources and lifestyles that allow their communities to flourish. Talirunili's and Pootoogook's works challenge settler-colonial authority on two fronts in that they address the cultural and the material importance of the relationship of the Inuit to the land. The fact that both works function as matter-of-fact renditions of lived experience is key to deconstructing how popular notions of Canadian identity subsume Indigenous cultures for their own purposes. Presenting a variety of personal accounts of life as an Indigenous person makes it harder for settlers to tokenize Indigenous cultures and appropriate them for nationalist means.

It is important to acknowledge that not all settlers in Canada benefit equally from settler colonialism. Those who have come to North America because of slavery, war or persecution have not enjoyed the same privileges as white settlers. However, it is this exhibition's sincere hope that through careful consideration of the works by Sawatski, Talirunili and Pootoogook, viewers will come to understand that while multiculturalism broadens the meaning of Canadian identity, uncritically accepting popular notions of what it means to be Canadian leaves us blind to the ways in which Canadian identity is predicated on the idealization and oppression of Indigenous peoples. The works analyzed in this essay position the family as a microcosm of the nation in order to bring these issues to light. While the popular image of Canadians as tolerant, polite and aware of their environment is appealing, it is often used to downplay the structural violence that occurs within Canada's borders. Depictions of children are of special importance to this criticism because they symbolize the potential to transform existing realities and to create a more inclusive and just society.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Genders, Representation and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 136.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Mackey, "Becoming Indigenous: Land, Belonging and the Appropriation of Aboriginality in Canadian Nationalist Narratives," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 42, no. 2 (July 1998): 151.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 193.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Furniss, "Systemic Ambiguity, First Nations and Canadian Nationalism: Dilemmas of History-Making in the Development of the National Heritage Trail," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 44, no. 1 (January 2000): 48.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Helleiner, "The Right Kind of Children: Childhood, Gender and "Race" in Canadian Postwar Political Discourse," *Anthropologica* 43, no. 2 (2001): 150.



<sup>9</sup> Claudio Aporta, "The Trail as Home: Inuit and Their Pan-Arctic Network of Routes," *Human Ecology* 37 (April 2009): 137.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 135–36.

<sup>11</sup> Debbie H. Martin, "Now We Got Lots to Eat and They're Telling Us Not to Eat It: Understanding Changes to South-East Labrador Inuit Relationships to Food," *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 70, no. 4 (2011): 390.

<sup>12</sup> Janet Catherine Berlo, "Portraits of Dispossession in Plains Indian and Inuit Graphic Arts," *Art Journal* 49, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 136.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, 391.

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