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Marianne Nicolson's Land-Based Knowledgescape *Cliff Painting*

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Abstract: Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies are connected to tribal lands, resilience, and claims for sovereignty. These ways of knowing offer an indispensable resource for Indigenous communities in surviving and resisting assimilationist policies. Modes of Indigenous knowledge are not only discussed in academia and practiced in local spaces but are also integrated into artworks that promote public access to First Nations political agendas within settler nation states. Knowledgescapes can be created as conversive artscapes. They can be placed translocally but also re-integrated into First Nations lands. A reworking of the land as a tribally marked space can be traced in artworks that attack bio- and geopolitical manners of settler societies. The land-marker, place-maker, and artscape *Cliff Painting* (1998) by Marianne Nicolson shall serve as an exemplification of a specific knowledgescape – created for Indigenous audiences to support their claims, and for non-Indigenous audiences to open up a dialogue on colonial issues within a step-by-step decolonizing discourse.

1 Introduction: Native Land and Tribal Knowledge

Birgit Däwes and Marc Maufort investigate culturally specific understandings of place-making and local environments in relation to their Native inhabitants, especially in the performance arts (Däwes and Maufort 2014). Drawing from their observations and findings relating to Indigenous place-markers and specific localities, this article examines Indigenous land-art as a source and medium of knowledge and healing, power negotiations, and epistemic alterities. The knowledgescape *Cliff Painting* (1998) serves as an example of a specific instance of First Nations place-making (Figure 1). It was created by a contemporary Indigenous artist from Canada: Marianne Nicolson from the

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Figure 1: Marianne Nicolson's *Cliff Painting* (1998, Kingcome Inlet).^a

^aThis photograph of *Cliff Painting* was kindly provided by the artist herself (Marianne Nicolson).

Northwest Coast Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw people of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations.¹

Indigenous knowledge has been painted onto and engraved into rocks, and thus encoded into tribal² landscapes since time immemorial. Such sites witness an ancient and ever-continuing Indigenous presence in North America. These marked landscapes are layered with stories, place names, memories, and genealogies that have been crucial for First Nations continuance and well-being. Many First Nations people draw strength from practicing specific traditions and belief systems that are inherently linked to Indigenous lands, despite the fact that the majority of Indigenous people live in urban environments away from their ancestral land, which is but one of many identity markers to urban Indigenous populations.

¹ There is of course a huge diversity and multitude of Indigenous North American artists. I am in the privileged position of directing a selection process, choosing and interpreting this particular work (from a European perspective) while at the same time omitting equally important works by other Native artists.

² The term 'tribal' is used here with a positive connotation in the sense of 'distinct local Indigenous culture or Indigeneity.' Katja Sarkowsky addresses the problematic use of the word 'tribal' (Sarkowsky 2007, 36): the term should, in this sense, help to overcome the dualism of 'rural' or 'backward/modern urban' as in the colonist dichotomy 'primitive/civilized.'

The attempt to erase such Indigenous knowledgescapes by European, Euro-American, and Euro-Canadian imperialist agendas and market-oriented territorial resource development began with the colonizing of the North American continent and has continued ever since. This paper deals with a local knowledgescape that stands for Indigenous resilience, cultural revitalization, and thus resistance in a specific decolonial context.³

2 Research Interest and Methodology

I am interested in the ways in which knowledge materializations are created by Indigenous visual artists in order to reconnect to landscapes as First Nations knowledge archives and as cultural archives of resistance (Said 1993, 52–53). As such, they provide resources for tribal sovereignty as having an undisputed right to one's land. First Nations sovereignty, according to Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), is more than simple political independence or the exercise of a distinctive cultural identity: it encompasses an understanding of a common social interdependence within the community; a web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the people, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships (Justice 2008, 151). Hence, I investigate the cultural means and materials for re-indigenizing and decolonizing past and present knowledgescapes to imagine Indigenous futures. Is Western scholarship limited in its translation and interpretation of these works due to epistemological incompatibilities as in, for example, an all-my-relations paradigm versus Western anthropocentrism? Local knowledgescapes incorporate a wealth of information about the environment in an all-my-relations model, which can be understood as a holistic paradigm in contrast to Eurocentric philosophies (such as empiricism, positivism, linear thinking, and progressivism). This relational thinking confronts Western economic profit thinking, in which land is still understood as a capital resource whose value is exploited without considering diverse Indigenous conceptualizations of land as, for example, an animated entity featuring human and other-than-human inhabitants as well as aesthetics that find expression in Indigenous traditional storytelling. However, in the colonial context of land disputes and tribal sovereignties, these stories are inevitably contemporary; they are important place-makers that can be visualized via narrating stories of origin and

³ 'Local' here is not meant as a contrast to a perceived urban or Western center. It is, rather, perceived as a distinctly tribal center-place for constructing a specific cultural communal self-design.

inserting them prominently into Western discourses as land claims. It is the culturally specific traditional understanding of land as an interrelated entity that empowers Indigenous people(s) to be attentive to their environment(s). Hence, the importance of conveying knowledge in storytelling for current socio-political debates of decolonization is intentionally addressed in Marianne Nicolson's works, and in this article.

My article is informed by an Indigenous methodology borrowing from traditional knowledge of the Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw people of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation as disclosed by the artist herself. This knowledge system is not a static one but ever evolving and adaptive. In order to decode the orally informed visual narrative *Cliff Painting*, I take into account a specific First Nation belief system and Marianne Nicolson's own interpretation of her work. Within this framework Nicolson followed her people's protocol by acknowledging clan and family duties when she referenced territorial rights. These rights are regarded as a major characteristic in her densely layered artwork.

The Canadian exhibition *Beat Nation*, which featured the pictograph *Cliff Painting* in a photograph, came across as a fashionable urban event that followed Western art exhibitions in its display format. As a photograph, *Cliff Painting* was also integrated into *The Medicine Project*, an online exhibition and healing project created by grunt gallery in 2008 and curated by Dana Claxton. However, one should not be fooled by any superficial similarities that mask different cultural customs and aesthetics. Instead, one should consider that *Beat Nation* exhibition pieces such as *Cliff Painting* offered various multilayered meanings that were only extensively comprehensible to respective Indigenous attendees conversant in their cultural traditions. The catalogue and the explanatory labels next to the artworks merely offered glimpses of cultural references to non-Native audiences. The photograph emphasizes the relationship between the people of Nicolson's Native community in Kingcome and the land they live on. The mere existence of the isolated Indigenous Kingcome community proves that the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations have survived. "We are still there," Nicolson asserts, "[a]ttempts to assimilate us haven't been successful. We still have a strong cultural identity" (Tidwell 2001, n.pag.).

I am aware that mine is a European cultural outsider's perspective. My paper attempts to grasp a specific Indigenous worldview without knowing the language (Kwa'kwala), belief system, or customs. I therefore integrated Indigenous voices to be heard and drew from the artist's perspective in order to let these Indigenous people have their say. Discussing an example of Indigenous knowledge (IK) representation, which was created especially for Indigenous audiences to nourish them and to invite non-Indigenous audiences into a conversation on colonial issues as part of the decolonizing discourse, they should occupy a central position in this paper. According to Melissa K. Nelson (Anishinaabe Métis), IK has

been regarded as primitive superstition and myth, and has been marginalized for decades as pseudoscience by Eurocentric educational systems (Nelson 2015, 188). Today, Indigenous knowledge is gaining recognition in Western mainstream academia.⁴ Indigenous 'ways of knowing' refer to the multiple knowledge systems, epistemologies, worldviews, and traditional practices of the world's roughly 370 million Indigenous people. These time-tested ways of knowing and of interacting with the world offer systems of knowledge that have sustained these cultures for millennia (Nelson 2015, 188). Nevertheless, the specific Indigenous knowledge mentioned here must remain to cultural outsiders, such as myself, just the tip of an iceberg – to use Miriam Clavir's analogy (Clavir 2002, 115).

3 Decolonizing Land as a Specific Knowledgecape

Native land and place-making matter with regard to specific communal Indigeniities. Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) follow this position by proposing a decolonial imperative: in order to refocus on and restore Indigenous autonomy and knowledge systems, they propose a return to Indigenous paradigms that do not reflect or contrast colonialism but that instead emphasize distinctive Indigenous ways of knowing, such as unique communal kinship relations such as relations with family and clan members, and other-than-human entities (landscapes, totemic animals), a rooting in one's community, and the collective and self-defining connection to tribal lands, languages, histories, storytelling, and spiritualities (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 608). Alfred and Corntassel outline a fundamentally Indigenous pathway of action in the form of five "mantras of a resurgent Indigenous movement." The first one is particularly important for this paper:

Land is Life – our people must reconnect with the terrain and geography of their Indigenous heritage if they are to comprehend the teachings and values of the ancestors, and if they are to draw strength and sustenance that is independent of colonial power, and which is regenerative of an authentic, autonomous, Indigenous existence. (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 613; original emphasis)

Katja Sarkowsky also follows this argument on the importance of space as a defining feature of Indigeneity, likewise linking this focus to strategies of political and

⁴ Kerstin Knopf focuses on the problem of acceptance of Indigenous modes of knowledge (IK) as scientific systems in their own right and as complementary to Western knowledge systems and disciplines, and on the danger of belittling Indigenous modes of knowledge and methodologies (Knopf 2015, 179–197). See also Donald L. Fixico's works on IK for further information offering examples of alterNative knowledge systems and perceptions of environments (Fixico 2003, 2013).

cultural negotiation, affirmation, self-representation, and sovereignty (Sarkowsky 2007, 37–38). Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (Seminole/Muskogee/Diné) also emphasizes the meaning of land as an identity marker, stating that Indigenous visual sovereignty is a landscape “full of Aboriginal/Indigenous thought, pain, beads, beauty, petroglyphs, weaving, technology, and action” (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 15). Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) likewise explores the importance of land as a geopolitical empowerment base and stresses the multiple socio-spiritual meanings of land for the field of Indigenous Studies and for Indigenous worldviews on tribal lands and diverse Indigenities. Goeman explains that the colonist process of abstracting land into a bordered and mapped national territory runs counter to Indigenous perceptions of land. She furthermore highlights the meaning of a landscape beyond the physical: land, she writes, “is a salient term and concept that can weave people together around common understandings and experiences. Land within Indigenous Studies carries a currency beyond a mere reflection of physical landscape or specific location” (Goeman 2008, 20). She continues to describe First Nations land as having a specific history and meaning for a people and, on this basis, invokes Indigenous autonomy from the perspectives of peoples who have given it a distinct collective meaning through communal discursive sharing. As such, a tribal place is created through communal memories and storytelling reaching out from the past into the present. Goeman asserts First Nations people’s relations to the land as being part of the land instead of just using it (Goeman 2008, 24). The land’s meaning is conveyed to Indigenous communities through language (storytelling).⁵

By drawing attention to communal land, Indigenous artists reclaim and present land as visions of continuity and self-determination in their works. These creative acts, performed for thousands of years, stem from a responsibility for and connection to the land itself and to the First Nation community living on that land. It is, accordingly, a communal duty to create art for the collective. Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie formulates the intention of artworks that focus on Indigenous sovereignty as follows:

We must instill in the young the importance of thinking about sovereignty, because once those thoughts cease, we will become the settler [...]. We must instill in the young the idea that the artists, the dreamers have a responsibility for creating visual sovereignty: images that remind [sic], art that incorporates Aboriginal/Indigenous technology, shared visions of an Aboriginal/Indigenous past, present, and future. (Tsinhnahjinnie 2008, 15)

⁵ This idea of expressing a conception of a specific tribal land through a distinctive tribal language/worldview is also taken up by Marianne Nicolson in her PhD work on the Kwakwa’la language and the cultural concepts of the Kwakwaka’wakw First Nations expressed therein.

Hence, the land, and with it land art, offers a gateway to cultural knowledge and communal survival for Indigenous communities, and includes embodied tribal knowledge about and within the land such as animal trap lines, fish reservoirs, knowledge of plants, and also intangible knowledge involving landscapes as dwellings for other-than-human entities, providing sites for rites and for collective and individual recovery. Connecting Indigenous peoples to their traditional homelands, which function as an alterNative cultural archive of resistance, can be achieved by creating Indigenous art as a specific cultural evidence production. A step-by-step decolonization process encompasses the rediscovering and reproducing of that local knowledge in particular. It is paramount for the step-by-step transition from the colonial era of occupation to the achievement of tribal sovereignties on the basis of Indigenous knowledge reservoirs to practice reciprocity with one's land and all its inhabitants in a self-determined manner. A local geographic reference to a tribal culture in the form of a pictograph as a distinct place-marker and integrated story of origin is in itself a decolonizing act. Using their own histories as sites and archives of activism, Indigenous artists operate and organize community protests against colonial injustice translocally in displaying their art(ifacts) in public.

Re-indigenizing land as a distinct knowledgescape is not a nostalgic or nationalistic act but rather a recovery process to draw strength from and to engage in redefining what it means to be Indigenous. Though Sharon Macdonald's monograph *Memorylands* (2013) refers to a European context, the author's analysis of the idea of cultural heritage as a memory complex that encompasses diverse forms, policies, processes, and practices of remembrance can be applied here. She describes this phenomenon as *past presencing* (Macdonald 2013, 44–46, 233), meaning the reclaiming and reconstructing of the past by narrating and experiencing it in order to use cultural memories as a resource for the presence to envisage and create a possible future.

4 Marianne Nicolson's *Cliff Painting*

Various examples of artistic activist landscape visualizations of Indigenous knowledge exist across Turtle Island: There are Cowichan Salish/Okanagan Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's surrealistic anthropomorphic landscapes in a distinctive Northwest Coast design that act as metaphors for difficult Native realities in urban and rural areas. Their messages cannot be separated from political activism, collective and individual recovery, or land claims of First Nations. Cree artist Kent Monkman's reintroduction of Indigenous queer knowledge into Western

landscape paintings is an example of two-spiritedness inserted quite literally into the foreground. The street artscape *Wasco* by Anishinaabe artist Larissa Healey and Haida artist Corey Bulpitt depicts a mythical sea-wolf and expresses Native Northwest Coast sovereignty over sea and land while referring to (neo-)colonial geographies, Western anthropocentrism, and settler-nation-state policies. These examples show that Native artworks are again closely connected to the land and can be sites of knowledge generation which can additionally serve as anticolonial platforms of intervention.

Marianne Nicolson, born in 1969, has exhibited her work nationally and internationally in public art galleries and in local areas. Besides creating strictly traditional works for ceremonial purposes confined to the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations, she also works for public art spaces. She honors land as a cultural, spiritual, and political resource for past, present, and future generations of her people. In general, her work can be perceived as decolonizing Indigenous land and a referencing of communal lineage. In *Cliff Painting*, Nicolson visualizes Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw land as a life-sustaining entity; all its relations – humans and other-than-humans – connected and visualized in a massive copper shield crest. This crest displays a worldview that does not comply with non-Native (neo-) colonial resource exploitation, Western monotheism, and assimilationist settler nation-state policies. Marianne Nicolson's artworks seem to borrow from the Anishinaabe idea that asks all people to (re)consider themselves from the position of seven generations back and seven generations forward. Thereby, the idea evokes a great amount of care and responsibility for her people and their land to ensure the continuing recovery process across generations.

To non-Native eyes, Nicolson's artwork *Cliff Painting* may appear to be nothing more than Native Northwest Coast land-art⁶ in a rocky environment. However, the artist works with the landscape in order to re-integrate knowledge of the Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw: knowledge that had been officially suppressed, ridiculed, and ignored for centuries. *Cliff Painting* is a landmark created in the tradition of tribal pictographs and it is visualized as a rock painting on her homeland. True to this tradition, it is a mural that reminds people whose land they actually walk on.

⁶ Native Northwest Coast art (to which Marianne Nicolson's work belongs) is an umbrella term for various tribally diverse artworks. The term art is contested itself because it is a Western term and notion that can run counter to Indigenous intellectual traditions. Former Kwakwaka'wakw curator Gloria Cranmer Webster mentions that her First Nation language has no word for 'art' or 'artist' (Cranmer Webster 2013, 265), there is only the suffix 'inuxw,' signifying that a person is good at doing something (carving, singing, fishing etc.).

The use of rock and stone as conventional knowledgescapes began thousands of years ago and ranges from rock engravings and rock paintings to stone sculptures. Rock art was created for various purposes, for example, telling hunting stories, sharing information about the land such as marking trails or marking the boundaries of tribal territory, commemorating certain events, as well as for the adoration of deities and spiritual communication. Many landmarks express and represent the physical and spiritual connectedness to the land. The mythical dimension is important to contemporary Native artists and their communities – it extends to a social and political framework, thus stressing the importance of contemporary Indigenous art as a long established form of visual storytelling, as a means of expressing socio-political protest, and as a method of promoting a cultural renaissance at the same time.

Marianne Nicolson's land base and community called Kingcome is situated on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia. The village's tribal name is Gwáyi. Nicolson explains her connection to this place in an interview:

It [Gwáyi] has a history that extends back to our origin story, which allocated this land to the Dzawada'exnuw people, the descendants of Kawadilikala [mythical wolf-being and ancestor]. We've remained on this land from the time our people first came into being. That gives the people a certain sense of identity, which is different from that of other people who have been removed from contact with the land. (McMaster 1998, 99)

Nicolson proceeds to describe how this landed community and identity interrelate:

Community has had an incredible impact on my own self-identity. [...] I am defined by my family, by my standing, by my rank, and by my nation. At times, it can be restricting, but it can also be tremendously stabilizing. I am Dzawada'enuw. I am born into a Potlatch family. I have a Potlatch name. I know who my mother and uncles are because they all define who I am. It is how I relate to other people and community members. I know exactly what they will do with me when I die. I know what songs they will sing, how they will bring me to my gravesite. They will howl like wolves four times. (McMaster 1998, 100)

This last sentence refers back to the origin story of how Kingcome was created by Kawadilikala. Most stories of tribal origin and belief systems circle around human beings that, in a mythic past, came into existence or were discovered with the help of anthropomorphic beings such as trickster figures (for example Raven among the Haida Nation). These stories also indicate the close connection of a First Nation to its ancestral land. A crest could carry a narrative of origin such as the one that Nicolson portrayed in her artwork. Nicolson's artist statement

mentions various sources. She draws from oral traditions as well as from present-day media:

My work for public art spaces are extensions on traditional Northwest Coast artistic expressions. I engage in the exploration of traditional concepts and incorporate contemporary media into the visual presentation of these concepts. While I consider that the material component of Northwest Coast cultural production is well represented in museums and commercial galleries, I fear that the conceptual foundations of this work are endangered owing to radical acculturation and language loss. Creating artworks that address these issues and express traditional concepts in new ways in public art spaces is my way of perpetuating and preserving Kwakwaka'wakw/Aboriginal culture as well as sharing those concepts with a wider audience. (qtd. in Claxton 2008b, n.pag.)

In 1998, Nicolson began to create her land-honoring project by painting the image of a copper shield onto a cliff in Kingcome Inlet. Following tribal protocol, Nicolson asked for permission to paint on the cliff and to use the crest depicting the creator wolves. She then worked on a platform hanging from the cliff's top. Nicolson used red oxide paint for the rock painting, guided by a stencil outline. The color red seems to have a spiritual or mystical quality, as red ochre was regarded as a sacred pigment (Lenik 2009, 37). The image, which measures approximately 10 meters (width) by 15 meters (height), can only be seen from the water.

Copper shield-shape plates symbolize wealth and authority among Northwest Coast First Nations. During potlatches these coppers have been (and are still) used to present and distribute the organizing family's wealth, and conflicts have been settled by breaking the copper shields in ceremonial acts.⁷ Aldona Jonaitis recalls an illegally held potlatch which took place in Kingcome in 1927. It was commemorated by an old pictograph painted onto a rock within Kingcome Inlet by Mollie Wilson, illustrating cows, that served as food for the guests, and coppers as symbol of prestige (Jonaitis 2006, 224–226). Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch ceremonies as alterNative economies and cultural collective events went underground but could not be eliminated by the Canadian administrative authorities. As an image of a copper shield, Nicolson's pictograph cites the early potlatch pictograph, thereby continuing the history and tradition of Indigenous pictographs as cultural performance and revitalization, and, in a decolonial context, as ongoing opposition against a colonial regime. In doing so, Nicolson also recalls Canada's

⁷ Thus potlatches are a unique form of maintaining social order and peace by redistributing wealth within a clan or a tribe and of exchanging news, commemorating and honoring individuals and lineages, practicing rituals, passing on inheritance (with the guests witnessing the host's claim to rights and social positions) and settling political, economic, and social agreements.

ban on the cultural practice of potlatch ceremonies, forced displacement and, more recently, Indigenous land claim activities. Many pictographs have begun weathering away just as Wilson's 1927 pictograph has. However, Nicolson's huge crest is still visible and emphasizes the past, present, and future of her people of Kingcome/Gwáyi. It grandly asserts a place-making on their own land through a powerful image that literally shields and characterizes the land as distinctly Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw.

In the upper half of the copper shield, two figures are depicted: two wolves, Kawadilikala and his brother Kwa'lili, with a treasure box, containing the history of Kingcome village/Gwáyi, Nicolson's community. These wolves are an essential part of the visualization of a story of origin, told by James King and Ernie Willie. The two wolves, Kawadilikala and Kwa'lili, transformed into humans, ended up in Wakeman and Kingcome Inlet. The wolf-humans built houses, made canoes, and received supernatural treasures. This is the origin of Kingcome/Gwáyi (Jonaitis 2006, 278). Also quoting Marianne Nicolson, Dana Claxton states that this rock painting in the form of a Northwest Coast copper shield

stands as a tall testament to the endurance of the Dzawada'enuxw [sic] people and the tradition of rock painting. Marianne wanted to create a work that expressed and validated a traditional relationship to the land and paint a pictograph that was a declaration of indigenous presence in the landscape. 'The imagery depicts the original ancestor of the Dzwawada'enuxw in the form of a wolf. He carries on his back the treasures of the Dzwawada'enuxw people in a box on his back. On the box is a painting of the sun. This image is set within the frame of a copper ('Tlakwa'), a symbol of wealth and lineage up and down the Pacific Northwest Coast. This work celebrates the continued occupation of the Musgamakw Dzwawada'enuxw tribes in their traditional territories,' [Marianne Nicolson states] [...]. This massive rock painting is meant to represent all the Dzwawada'enuxw people – not just one clan or family – and to acknowledge an ancient history in that region. (Claxton 2008a, n.pag.)

The painting is a carrier of meaning, or rather, the painting *is* the story. The narrative is illustrated by the painting and inherent to the rock at the same time. Marianne Nicolson explains that "the rights to use certain crests and images were entirely dependent on the ability to recite and explain the origin and descent line of the prerogative. The stories and the artworks were intimately interrelated" (Nicolson 2013, 529). In one of Nicolson's earlier works, *House of Origin*, which was part of the exhibition *Reservation X*, this origin story is expressed in a painting (McMaster 1998, 96).

Mythical animals feature prominently in animistic Indigenous ontologies. Many species like the beaver, crow, raven, salmon, whale, bear, and wolf coexisted in an interspecies environment with mythological narratives of distinct Indigenous communities' origins. Thus, the physical world fused with cultural

landmarks as painted on rocks. Mountain regions within British Columbia are still considered particularly sacred and powerful places within these belief systems. Oral sources speak of places as healing, and offering medicinal means, refuges, ceremonial places, and burial places (Lenik 2009, 109). In Nicolson's own words as a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations, she states that

my understanding of Kwakwaka'wakw culture comes from a blend of oral transmission from community members, audio recordings, photographs, archives, and ethnographic accounts. It is, however, my early memories of sitting at a table after dinner and being told family histories that provide me with the emotional and psychological drive to know more. The impression given to me by the generations preceding mine was that this information was important, a vital part of both our collective and our individual identities. [...] [M]y own understanding of myself still lies within the communal history of the Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw and, by extension, of the Kwakwaka'wakw. (Nicolson 2013, 530)

Nicolson's painting thus represents a small glimpse into a distinct belief system that is home to this place. Non-Indigenous viewers can only guess what the image and the contained narrative might mean. This visualized narrative of power and origin, place, protection, and guardian spirits encodes the rock with a distinct Indigeneity and a communal land claim. Nicolson's emblematic copper shield with crest symbols furthermore functions as a non-textual carrier of orally and visually transmitted stories pictured in culturally owned imagery. Thus, artists such as Nicolson have methods of expressing historical and cultural knowledge; genealogies and related stories that serve as a land-based archive rooted in oral transmission, in contrast to Western national galleries or public museums that put an emphasis on the written word as the dominant form of knowledge communication and storage. Moving Nicolson's artwork out of Western museums or national galleries with their, in parts, still imperial representational practices and painting and inserting it into her land is a crucial step to separate her work from Western infrastructures, and also extends the meaning of her work beyond a mere 'artwork' in a white cube gallery and ethnological museum. In fact, Nicolson materializes cultural heritage and a land claim on her people's local grounds.

5 Conclusion

This cliff painting depicts an image and story in a way that is rare in Western epistemologies. This land-based artwork highlights the fact that non-Indigenous textual epistemologies are only one of a broad range of possibilities to communicate cultures – to commemorate a specific history and lineage of an Indigenous community that is still very present despite European invasion, colonization, set-

tlement, and institutionalized attempts at ethnocide through military violence, assimilation, and marginalization.

First Nations cultural centers and contemporary Indigenous artworks preserve Indigenous land knowledge. Artwork like Nicolson's can provide a legal statement based on orally informed traditions of an Indigenous presence on the land, and therefore for treaty negotiations and celebrations of land stewardship that contains rights and responsibilities to the land. Nicolson's work *Cliff Painting* acknowledges her people's communal origins and continuous presence on that specific territory. It also challenges non-Native audiences to remember on which ground *Cliff Painting* was created. Nicolson situates her artwork as visual storytelling in an open place (Kingcome Inlet) where Indigenous people are cared for. Reevaluating Indigenous knowledge also means changing the center for the local in terms of knowledge production, and to favor the local Indigenous community as the primary beneficiary.

Nicolson's artwork as a cultural agent⁸ is an activist statement against the abuse of land as a property resource⁹ by the settler state and its economic partner investors. Furthermore, Nicolson's land art can also be seen as a narrative that is a statement against once colonial disciplines (anthropology), dominating institutions (museums, national galleries), and academic and political discourses that have appropriated and objectified Indigenous peoples and their carriers of knowledge into remnants of past 'Indianness.' Jennifer Kramer even thinks of art as a social agent, an action, and a verb: "Art can serve as an argument" (qtd. in Campbell 2013, 588). This argument invites a dialogue with audiences – one about the very issues mentioned above.

Instructing her community has become Nicolson's task as their descendant in the position of a visual storyteller. Moreover, Nicolson teaches communal land claims to a wider non-Indigenous audience by means of artwork such as *Cliff Painting*, which was on display in cultural spaces across Canada. Consequently, the artist should have the final word:

In order for my generation to move forward, we must look back. We must return to the beginning, and learn our origins. Where oral transmission has broken down, we can seek written information. [...] Ironically, it is through records, which was written and recorded,

⁸ Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency is particularly applicable here: Art objects are extensions of the sociopolitical agency of the artist (Gell 1998, viii). Consequently, artworks encompass and distribute that agency of a particular Indigeneity. Art then is a projection of its creator's agency into public spaces.

⁹ For a discussion of property language and claims to ownership, social status, and identity different from European-based constructions of property ownership as a tangible separate unit that can be bought or sold and valued in money, see also Jennifer Kramer (2013, 720–756).

that we can piece together some of the information that our current generation is missing because of the breakdown of our oral tradition. [...] If we are careful, we can bring back the dances that have not been performed in years. We can re-establish old family connections we had forgotten. We can do these things if we are considerate and thorough [...] if we pair ethnographic information with elder knowledge [...] everything learned grants us a greater understanding of ourselves as Kwakwaka'wakw and as individuals. (Nicolson 2013, 531–532)

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