

“A Particular Kind of Romantic Entanglement”

Kent Monkman’s *Nation to Nation* (2020) and the Limits of Canadian Political Pornography

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*“As you self-isolate on our home and Native land with your true patriot love, stand on guard and see it rise, staying safe for you and me.
- Miss Chief Eagle Testickle” (Monkman 2020)¹*

On Sunday, March 22, 2020, just as COVID-19 lockdowns were first beginning to reshape Canadian society, renowned Cree artist Kent Monkman released a view of his latest large-scale “history” painting, or monumental narrative piece in the western tradition.² The piece, entitled *Nation to Nation*, was accompanied by the above quote by Monkman’s alter-ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, who (as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Monkman has just mounted a new and critically acclaimed exhibition of two enormous paintings, describes her) is a “genderfluid...time-traveling, shape-shifting, supernatural being who reverses the colonial gaze to challenge received notions of history and Indigenous peoples.”³ *Nation to Nation* marks a return by the artist to the more explicitly sexual subject matter that catapulted his work to public attention. For example, Murray Whyte of *Toronto Star*, reviewing *Prick Island* (2001) at the exhibition “Hot Mush and the Cold North,” Ottawa Art Gallery (cur. Emily Falvey), described Monkman’s overtly homoerotic early work as “cheeky recreations of several of Harris’ pieces in watercolour, overlaid with text, and an addition or two—a cowboy and Indian, say, in a particular kind of romantic entanglement” (Whyte 2005, emphasis added). This cautious, glib language exemplifies much of the sexual prurience that continues, for all its theoretical tolerance, to overlay Canadian society within the conservative frameworks of (censored) heteronormativity.⁴ Nor has this language gone away: as recently as 2018, a respected collector outright refused to describe Monkman’s eroticism as pornography: no, he insisted, the sexual intimacy between men shown in one of Monkman’s provocative wallpapers was “like a flower” (Guardino 2018).

Kent Monkman, a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation in Treaty 5 territory (Manitoba), is not just a painter. His work interfaces between film, performance, installation, photography, and other filmic media, and is often concerned with the moving image (Bick 2014, 21). For example, in *Group of Seven Inches* (2004), Miss Chief Eagle Testickle “inverts the colonial representational equation by presenting herself as a painter studying two young white men and documenting their curious ways, all the while seducing her unwitting specimens with alcohol and titillation” (Cousineau-Levine 2017). Other examples of Monkman’s use of



Figure 1.
“As you self-isolate on our home and Native land with your true patriot love, stand on guard and see it rise, staying safe for you and me.- Miss Chief Eagle Testickle.” Kent Monkman, *Nation to Nation* (2020). Instagram.

the moving image similarly collapse the traditional boundaries between various visual media, where painting, performance, film and installation are all used as a kind of *gestamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art. Indeed, Monkman's use of social media, such as Instagram, to reach a wider social audience than one allowed by the physical confinements of the gallery or the saleroom insists on the value of Indigenous social leadership within the sexual sphere.⁵ The pornographic content in *Nation to Nation* moves between two very different types of media: the ossified format of history painting, and the new social networks of vision, community, and fashion that coalesce around an app like Instagram. In this essay, I demonstrate how Monkman's work and its aura hybridizes digital and material space to allow for "fantastical authenticity" (Hurley 2019) where political and sexual agents express different identities and realities than those currently allowed by the repressive statue apparatuses of the Canadian nation state.⁶ As such, I hold that Monkman's pornographic content is political criticism of the sexual insularity and social complacency featuring so heavily in Canadian society. I argue that Monkman's work functions as a commemoration of the repressive policing which has long been visited on the queer male body, and specifically in Canada, in the context of outdoor "public" sex, that is, "cruising". Through a survey of Monkman's use of homoeroticism as a potent tool of both state and colonial criticism, I explore the work's modern relevance to post-pandemic surveillance policing, suggesting that Monkman's practice calls for the continuing relevance, vitality, and necessity for such spaces, which thereby become, to use a critical tool culled from social geography, a Place, with a capital P, or a kind of community territory (Massey 1994). I also explore critical reactions to another work in the same series, *Hanky Panky*, and suggest that Indigenous leadership can create a "fantastically authentic" space for queer liberation.

Context: Sex

Showing the erect phallus engaged in oral sex, as Monkman does in *Nation to Nation*, is, quite simply, highly pornographic, at least in the western tradition of visual art (Hammer-Tugendhat 2012). The centrality of the male gaze has left the nude, exploitable female body as the dominant erotic signifier, while the voyeuristic elements of control and scopophilia inherent in established (white, straight, male) modes of looking, as they have been canonized by visual art and film (Mulvey 1975), are seriously challenged by the presence of an erect phallus. Early critics of Monkman's painting were quick to note the power dynamics that feature so consistently in his homoerotic scenes. "Monkman wants us to spend some time in this territory to get a feel for its ambiguities," writes Richard William Hill, "Are these men fighting or fucking? Or perhaps a bit of both? (This is not the first time that sex and power seem impossible to untangle)" (Hill 2002). Hill's canny acknowledgement that sex and power are at the core of Monkman's politically-motivated pornographic painting suggests something of the difficulties with consent, abuse, power, and masculinity that are endemic throughout Monkman's oeuvre.

Monkman's work is highly art historical, in the sense that his production is very informed by the complex histories of traditional western painting. It is also historical in the sense that he recapitulates, or re-presents, history painting itself. A recurring theme is the pictorial subversion of the splendid 19th-century canvases of Paul Kane, George Caitlin or other settler-colonial artists working within the framework of "Manifest Destiny". The Cowboy's assumed virility, heterosexuality, and canonicity—a *de facto* symbol of the Wild West, admittedly one heavily-demarcated by later filmic representations—is called into question by Miss Chief's sexual dominance. Instead of an uber-masculine settler-warrior who makes his own Law, the Two-Spirit Miss Chief, very much in control of her surroundings, her accomplices, and her enemies, is the puppet-mistress. *Selflessly she gives herself for the promulgation of her kind* (2004) is a particularly successful example of a work by Monkman where highly charged erotic content both feeds into established modes of looking (the glittery imperialism of David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* meets the burnished pulp consumerism of Harlequin Romance covers) and simultaneously subverts these processes through the suggestive, rather than explicit (at least in the western, pornographic sense detailed by Hammer-Tugendhat) queer homoeroticism and tricksterism of the piece.

Many of Monkman's most explicit works are small-scale: the *fête-galante* format of these miniaturized scenes invites closer inspection and the process of connoisseurial looking.⁷ The costume worn by Miss Chief in *Nation to Nation* duplicates many of Monkman's canny, satirical re-presentations of Paul Kane's infamous *Fishing by Torchlight* image, with the thigh-high ruby-red boots a key signature of that (hugely homoerotic) colonial painting. Miss Chief also wears these distinctive "Kane" boots as accoutrements of power in Monkman's previous most stridently subversive, politically erotic work, the 2016 *Bears of Confederation*, which shows the so-called Fathers of Confederation, white patriarchs revered for their formative legislative role by settler-colonial society, dressed in the fetish harnesses of the "leather" subcommunity of gay men. As an example of semiological parallelism, in this instance, the "bears" are sexually mauled by real bears! *Bears of Confederation's* miniaturized figures do still belong to this *fête-galante* tradition, filtered through the heady sublime of the Manifest Destiny painters like Kane or Caitlin, but *Nation to Nation* is, by way of contrast, an epic history painting on a scale that sets it apart as monumental, insistent, and canonical.

A key to interpreting *Nation to Nation's* political content, as conceived by the artist, comes in his comments on some of these earlier, typically smaller-scale erotic works where the consensual sexual subservience of symbols of Canadian embodied masculinity to Miss Chief's sexual dominance is of prime narrative importance. "These images reveal a nearly 20-year long creative process... All works show a Mountie, a symbol of Canadian manhood, servicing an engaged and engorged member of the Cree Nation," Monkman writes in his caption for the 2002 watercolour *The Treaty of 1869*, which like *Nation to Nation* shows a Mountie on his knees before a standing Miss Chief, and which, also like *Nation to Nation*, takes the pregnant temporal point immediately before sexual consummation begins.⁸ Monkman continues, in his description of *Treaty of 1869*, that "Settlers

may find indigenous sovereignty difficult to swallow, but being on the receiving end of this exchange and taking in indigenous worldviews will prove mutually satisfying” (Monkman 2002). This quote is particularly telling in two crucial ways for how settler-Canadian audiences should read *Nation to Nation*: one, this is no idle use of pornography, but a motif that has been instrumental to the artist’s career success, which he and his studio have continually and self-consciously returned to throughout his oeuvre. Secondly, that these images of Indigenous sexual dominance over figures like the cowboy, the Mountie—or in some cases, such as in *Expelling the Vices* (2014), the priest—are represented specifically so that the settler-Canadian audience can “swallow” their awkwardness about viewing such explicit material and take in Indigenous worldviews about sex, identity, and place.

Authority: RCMP and Policing

The visual centrality of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Monkman’s recent work is, perhaps, best illustrated by the major narrative series featured in his critically acclaimed “Shame and Prejudice” exhibition. From this series, *The Scream* (2017) unflinchingly displayed the RCMP’s active role in the genocide of Canada’s Indigenous peoples through the Residential School Program, highlighting the racist need of the nation state to deprive specific northern communities of their children and their culture as a form of resource warfare executed dually by its twinned military and religious forces. In Monkman’s series, the RCMP officer is a potent visual metaphor for the masculinized settler state. Critics and viewers from settler-Canadian media responded with a certain discomfort to the monumentalized dark truths painted by Monkman and his studio: “though his style is exaggerated, the events it depicts are real,” admits a journalist from the *Economist* (D. L. 2018). Indigenous writers and journalists were more explicit: Martin Siberok from the *Nation*, an Indigenous news service serving James Bay Cree communities, describes the police troops in *The Scream* as “participating in the removal” of a community’s children in a manner described as “gut-wrenching” (Siberok 2019). “Their removal was devastating and destructive—an act of pure evil,” Siberok states, in language considerably more precise, and more emphatic, than that of his *Economist* colleague (2019).

Broadly speaking, mainstream society in settler Canada still continues to cling, in more than just an ideological sense, to the repressive interpellative hegemony offered by Canada’s racist police force. Interpellation, the term coined by French theorist Louis Althusser in his germinal 1970 essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, suggests the constitution of the diverse (working) citizenry as civic subjects through a process of “hailing” by the forces, both repressive and ideological, of the (elite) state (Althusser 1971). Althusser famously gives the example of a police officer who hails “Hey, you there!” to a member of the public, who by turning to respond to the aggressive public act (the hail), “by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion...becomes a *subject*” (1971). For Althusser, as media theorist Cindy Nguyen notes, “this subjecthood is double: although he is recognized as a social subject by the law, he is also subjugated to

the law” (Nguyen 2015). As pandemic policing and enforcement have so stridently illustrated in 2020, through the glorification of the ideological and forcible power of the police, citizens become therefore “complicit in their own domination” (2015). Settler Canadian society’s valuation and mythologization of the same state-ordered security forces which violently abuse non-elite, working-class and Indigenous populations is a form of what Althusser calls the RSA, the “Repressive State Apparatus” (Althusser 1971). In comparison to a multitude of “Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as the family, educational institutions, and media such as literature, radio and television,” the RSA, such as the RCMP, explicitly use force, domination and physical abuse to achieve their (elite, state-controlled, government) ends (Nguyen 2015).

In her essay “Mounties and Metaphysics in Canadian Film and Television,” Patricia Gruben reminds us that the filmic romanticization of the RCMP as a supposedly virile, heroic, and rugged colonizing army was and is endemic (Gruben 2014). More than 250 films about earnest, do-gooder (white) Mounties were made in the first half of the 20th century, while the valorisation of white heterosexual masculinity insisted by such films eventually became so legible, both in a domestic and international context, that the trope of the Mountie became a parody (2014). “When the RCMP are not depicted as comically virtuous,” Gruben notes, “they are usually competent, colourless detectives” (285). A watershed in filmic representations of the Mountie in Canadian media is perhaps the mixed comedy-mystery series *Due South* (1994–1999), where an officer is played by the “blandly handsome” Paul Gross. *Due South* was so popular in Canada that it ran for five years across two channels and two production partners, and its vision of the slightly parodic, but still virile, upright, *necessary* (and above all distinctively Canadian) police officer recapitulated the fantasy of power articulated by the rich filmic heritage of such celebrations. Indeed, Gross cemented his reputation as “one of Canada’s most recognizable actors” by playing a morally righteous Mountie, and his 2010 cameo in the feature film *Barney’s Vision*, long after the end of the series that launched him to fame, suggests an inter-textual recognition of his image’s association with the RCMP (Czach 2012). Monkman’s use of the sexually subservient Mountie is of course parodic, and is much in dialogue with the moving image of the Mountie valorised by *Due South*.⁹

And yet, of course, as Grueben notes, “recent real-life revelations about the RCMP continue to taint its Dudley Do-right image” (2014, 285). In just the first six months of 2020, in a very public raid on the Wet’suwet’en nation in overt support of the Coastal GasLink/TC Energy pipeline, the RCMP brutalized and arrested Indigenous elders, water protectors, traditional guardians and their intentional supporters on their own unceded territories (Bracken 2020). In a chilling contemporary reminder that the horrible realities depicted in *The Scream* are ongoing, the RCMP publicly dragged unarmed women and seniors away from the Unist’ot’en healing centre, ripping down red dresses that were exhibited as a reminder of the nation-state’s lip-service commitment to Reconciliation and to the much-needed inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada (MMIWG).¹⁰

These iconoclastic acts of physical violence visualize much deeper rot at the heart of Canada's police forces, where systematic racism and discrimination are embedded into policing. "Anybody with his [Alberta RCMP Deputy Commissioner Curtis Zablocki] experience in the RCMP either knows it, has seen it, smelt it, or been around it," insists Brian Beresh, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation Chief Allan Adam's legal counsel. Beresh here reiterates the systematic racism experienced by Indigenous peoples at the hands of the RCMP, who as Musqueam activist Audrey Siegl reminds a *Toronto Star* reporter, were "created to quash the Indian rebellions. The police were created to protect and serve the colonial state." (Morin 2020) Allan Adam, a respected Indigenous leader, was brutally battered by an RCMP officer in March of 2020. During an arrest in Fort McMurray, Alberta that originated over an expired license plate, and eventually embroiled his wife, Adam was left severely cut and bruised by police violence. As Robin Levinson King of *BBC News Toronto* reiterates, during his arrest, Allan Adam retaliated against well-known aggression with characteristic words, saying "I'm sick and tired of being harassed by the RCMP" (BBC 2020). For Beresh, who has forty-four years of experience practicing law in Canada, "police violence against indigenous people has been a constant issue" Beresh encountered "from the first day."

Adam's case is simply the latest and most high-profile example of a long and terribly tragic litany of abuses against Indigenous peoples by the RCMP, who, for all their filmic adulation and "blandly handsome" nationalist characterizations, have zero moral righteousness in this country, as is made very publicly evident by the images released of their takedown of the Wet'suwet'en water protectors camp. Those images, of brutalized women who were driven off their own land at the hands of majority white, male RCMP officers, are haunting in the extreme. Monkman's work acts as a kind of counter to this terrible tragedy, and deploys a kind of "fantastical authenticity," a concept developed by Media Studies scholar Zoe Hurley, where social media, and the publication of aesthetic images—however pornographic they might be in *Nation to Nation's* example—offer a digitized intellectual space for the conceptualization of a different kind of politically authentic, socially liberated public life. These acts of authenticity and fantasy, conceptualized visually and spread via social media, are acts of resistance that are, extending Hurley's model to this specific case study of Monkman's work, mediated and led by Indigenous efforts for sovereignty. Included within this "fantastical authentic" version of social possibility offered by *Nation to Nation* is a recognition of the value of outdoor public sex between queer men, or "cruising".

Cruising and Place

Cruising for gay sex in public parks has been an inherent component of western urban environments since at least the Renaissance, although due to the nature of furtive and preferably unrecorded interaction, specific corroborated documented evidence of sexual interactions between men is necessarily often found within the very discursive strongholds of oppression: police records themselves. Any history of an oppressed and targeted minority population whose records

therefore overwhelmingly come from the oppressor is, as Foucault has famously noted, highly biased and subject to manipulation. “Wherever there is power, there is resistance,” noted the famous French philosopher, whose writings are so concerned with power, law, authority, and repression (Foucault 1976, 95–96). The elision and the deliberate suppression or outright destruction of queer men’s bodies and histories has long been the purview of the police.¹¹ Ironically, police records of surveilling, targeting and entrapping men into arrestable sexual behaviour has involved the recording of their voices, names, habits, and their Places, some very few of which continue to function as outdoor cruising grounds.

Take one particularly formative early example: Paris. Of course, Monkman’s specific genre, that of academic history painting, is a type of visual discourse profoundly shaped by Parisian cultural life. The bi-annual exhibitions of the Salon at the Louvre, the decidedly Parisian-led popular reaction against official history painting, and the ebb and flow of particular artistic movements and styles, many of which were inaugurated by the avant-garde of the city or their many regional imitations: these are all phenomena that continue to heavily colour art history, as they coloured (quite literally) the development of contemporary art in that period. More precisely, in the type of eroticized history painting at play in *Nation to Nation*, Monkman draws from a wide range of (scandalous) precedents, notably including Manet’s infamous *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, star attraction of the 1863 Salon des Refusés and veritable grandmother of Modernism. This painting, as is well known, deliberately situates (dare I say Places?) provocative erotic content within a specific Parisian park known for its surreptitious copulations. Monkman himself has stridently specialized in blending a heavily informed brand of art historical criticism with the moving image. Monkman’s beloved Romanticism, so cheekily celebrated in his film *Casualties of Modernity* (2015), where (spoiler alert!) the movement itself is deliberately incarnated as a homoerotic cadaver—miraculously resurrected through Miss Chief Eagle Testickle’s selfless powers—is of course an art style profoundly associated, through Delacroix and his many followers, with Paris.¹²

As historian Davitt Moroney reminds us, in Paris, long viewed as a foundational and much-emulated urban environment, the urban royal gardens were particularly crucial for the enactment of inter-class sexual activity between men, and are also significant in police history itself, “as it was not possible for a person to be arrested within them” (Moroney 2005). Eighteenth century Parisian police therefore used a *mouche*, or police entrapment collaborator (many of whom were themselves under duress) who had to lead his victims physically out of the gardens for security forces to be able to apprehend an individual. Moroney reiterates that of the various documented spaces where men had sex with each other in *ancien regime* Paris, “the royal Tuileries Gardens were the most popular (and had been since at least the seventeenth century), especially for noblemen looking for soldiers,” pointing out that as a homosexual Place with a capital P, “the Tuileries have attained an almost mythical status in Parisian gay history” (1027). The gardens of Tuileries continue to remain active outdoor sexual spots for contemporary Parisian gay men: one gay travel blog on Paris, which markets itself

as “Paris tour guides for all travellers, LGBTQ and beyond,” points out that in the Tuileries “a popular cruising spot among the shrubs (classy) is located right next to the Arc du Carrousel at the garden’s east end. *Not that we’ve ever been...*” (Gay Locals 2020, emphasis added).

The suggestive language (“classy,” “not that we’ve ever been”) used by the authors of *The Gay Locals* underscores the spatial (Placial?) continuity of sexual practices among men within one particularly evocative urban community: Paris. Such ironic and deprecatory language also suggests the self-policing notions of sexual interaction between men that continue to reverberate in popular gay discourse. Despite the Tuileries’ rich literary and cultural impact, social class is threatened by the mere notion of non-monogamous homosexuality; outdoor sex in this context is seen, even by likely participants (the authors), as a class-undermining performance/practice, be it undertaken in the eighteenth or the twenty-first century.¹³ Correspondingly, Monkman’s *Nation to Nation*, showing outdoor sex between Miss Chief and a cock-hungry symbol of the masculinized settler state, is all the more unsettling because of its recapitulation of *class*. Social class was of course central to the whole institution of the residential school system and, as the authors of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee’s final report on residential schools remind us, notions of social class continue to negatively impact the disproportionately high rates of Indigenous children forcibly placed in the care of the twenty-first century state (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, 37). As such, *Nation to Nation*’s cross-racial, cross-class depiction of consensual oral sex between men is politicized pornography, and one that draws attention, through Indigenous cultural leadership, to the insidiously normalized classism so visible in Canadian society. In *Nation to Nation*, the class-transcendent social connectivity which fleetingly unites men of wildly distinct social backgrounds via anonymous oral sex is commemorated on the monumental level: the socially transfigurative possibilities attendant within “cruising” has been very, very rarely given anything like Monkman’s celebratory elite history painting.

Cruising Places, once identified (almost always negatively) as such in the minds of the non-homosexual public majority or law enforcement, are subject to alteration and suppression. Parks or other natural spaces in the city, which in theory should belong to all people at all times of the day, are closed and patrolled at nights, their hidden greenery razed, their dark spaces illuminated, their possibilities surveilled and captured on video. The hysteria surrounding public use of urban natural/garden space in the present COVID-19 pandemic is, perhaps, best metaphorized in Canada by the police wagons daily circulating with aggressive messages on loudspeakers through Parc La Fontaine in Montréal, or the egregiously smug social media messages of triumph and elation recently circulated by Toronto Police services, who had successfully tracked down and fined a man accused of taking a selfie in a cherry-blossom tree at night (Westoll 2020).¹⁴ Whatever the health risk of the misdemeanour, what an incredibly innocuous activity compared to the imminent union between Miss Chief and the Mountie in *Nation to Nation*! By extension, their union visually monumentalizes, in the format of the history painting, and publicizes, through the new media of Instagram, the

future: that of every man, and there will yet be many men, who risk discovery and humiliation for a fleeting moment of identity freedom preciously enacted through consensual anonymous public sex. Through visually commemorating that freedom, Monkman insists on the visual visibility, the “known-ness” of the phallus, the blowjob, the gay man, and the Two-Spirit cultural leader. The very media of his large-scale history paintings, which have been institutionally recognized as political tools of social and state criticism, here helps to suggest the sacral transcendence offered to both participants by the context of the garden, the public park, or the territorially claimed and fleetingly Liberated outdoor meeting place. As such, Monkman’s use of *Nation to Nation* on Instagram presents a “fantastically authentic” digital Place for the re-evaluation of grim Canadian political and social realities through eroticized fantasy (Hurley 2019, 8).

Instagram’s policing of sex workers of any kind, or any form of sexually explicit content, is well-documented. Pornography, Instagram says, is strictly banned, and yet large painted images such as *Nation to Nation* seem to be understood by Instagram as moving securely into the “artistic” realm (Fabbri 2019). This status grants them a legitimacy and authority, even if simply the ability to *exist* on the platform, that is outright denied to the purely photographic or filmic productions of lesser-known artists, sex workers, or private exhibitionists. As a documentation of outdoor queer sex that is public without being oppressive, Monkman’s work is a virtual fantastic, digitally authentic counter to the ongoing police repression of consenting male-male sex in the public outdoor spaces of this country. To give simply one (egregious) example, in the name of social distancing, four mature men, each over the age of 70, were slapped with heavy fines by the Sherbrooke, Quebec police forces, their crime a foursome in Parc Jeffrey-Gingas. Social distancing and other health measures enforced by the Canadian police were surely meant to protect the vulnerable, including septuagenarian men (however queer they might publicly or privately be!). However, if the vulnerable feel such a need for the kind of fulfilment that outdoor group sex affords them that they, knowing their risks, still decide to meet each other in a park cruising area—whose needs are really being met by police oppression? Those of the patriarchal capitalist state, investing in the policing of class boundaries? Or do not these actions by elder, consenting adults now mark out, demarcate and “Place” this space as one of future sexual interest for a wider public (Thibault 2020)? *Nation to Nation* gives us a mediated vision of a more honest world, one without the flagrant hypocrisy enacted by the Canadian police towards the Jeffrey-Gingas four, and one where the pornographic sexual subservience of a Mountie acts as an atonement for ongoing social ills.

As Monkman’s visual use of the nationally authoritative figure of the Mountie implicitly suggests, Canada, under Indigenous leadership, should allow for the flourishing, even encouragement of outdoor places for anonymous queer sex. The long urban functionality of The Tuileries Gardens, The Meatrack trail on Fire Island, or the Pier at Provincetown, and their canonization as Places where minds and bodies might make such consenting, anonymous sexual interactions as cruising affords, are vital reminders that cruising is not, even after literal centuries of policing, going to go away.¹⁵ Such gardens—and like many a Romantic history

painting depicting themes of sexuality, Monkman's canvas is positively festooned with flowers—become gardens blossoming with queer liberation, territoriality, and commemoration, which is precisely the reason they are rooted out with such ferocity and frequency by the RSA. The state depends on heteronormative capitalism to survive, while the anonymous outdoor cruising area suggests the potential destabilization of monogamy, social class, or social order. COVID-19, of course, is simply a less community-specific form of destabilization: perhaps that explains one Quebecois journalist's uncompassionate characterization of the Jeffrey-Gingas four as “pris une sérieuse option sur le titre de «Covidiots» de la semaine” (Thibault 2020).¹⁶

Reception

How is Monkman's *Nation to Nation* received? The comments that were posted on *Nation to Nation* provide valuable insight into how members of the public responded to the work, and to the limits of Canadian political pornography.¹⁷ The vast majority of the comments that had been posted, as of April 2020, were positive, including those posted by Indigenous leaders, who correctly noted its value as a political image. “I wanna make a sign out of this at the next protest,” commented one Anishinaabe (Odawa, Pottawatomi) artist¹⁸—who is a drummer, musician, activist, and entrepreneur—recognition of the didactic function of Monkman's history painting, and its aura's ability, in reproduction via protest ephemera, to act as a visual sign of social change, is quite telling. “Love all your work, thanks for representing us native americans,” writes a Cherokee commenter who studies at an art department in Arkansas. Other activist comments in support of *Nation to Nation* are similarly illustrative: “SUCK THE POLICE,” wrote one user, while another commented, “oh my goddd I want this to be in contemporary art classes asap”; another user responded by noting Monkman's integration into the curriculum in Canada: “Kent works in Toronto, so it makes sense we instruct about our locals. :) Significant painting!”

While artists, activists and Indigenous leaders all recognized the (necessary) political context of this painting, a few users, most if not all of whom do not appear, from their Instagram accounts, to self-identify as Indigenous, were critical of *Nation to Nation*'s pornographic content. “Yo this whack asf,” wrote one commenter, prompting the retort, among others, “I think SOMEONE wishes they were the Mountie”. “I think this picture is degrading to everyone in it!” commented another user, which highlights the difficulty many heterosexual people have in understanding consensual oral sex as a significant bonding event between men. More troublingly, a young queer man of colour from New York sees in the sexualization of the Mountie a certain complicit valorisation of the RCMP. “This not revolutionary,” wrote this user, “this is disrespectful to all who were killed by these monsters. Wtf bro.” This comment highlights the disjunction between the elite arts community in Canada, who might theorize and celebrate the iconographic uses of a pornographic subversion of the Repressive State Apparatus, such as represented in *Nation to Nation*, and the experiences of queer youth of colour on the streets across North America, where the experience

of violence is direct, immediate, and lived. Political pornography, even clever, iconographically fertile pornography like Monkman's art, has its limits.

More than simply illustrating a range of public reactions to Monkman's incorporation of "pornographic" imagery into a monumental history painting, these comments are also valuable for documenting an ephemeral expression of public consent. Shortly after the publication of *Nation to Nation* on the artist's website and Instagram page, Monkman became embroiled in a scandal concerning a later painting, *Hanky Panky* (2020), which is presumably from the same series as *Nation to Nation*. *Hanky Panky* represents, in large scale, the current Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, about to be "fisted" by Miss Chief as a crowd of laughing Indigenous women and appalled former Prime Ministers (both living and dead) view the scene. The work's publication on Instagram and the artist's website has caused considerable controversy within the Canadian art world. In Austin Grabish's article for CBC news covering the fierce backlash to the piece, the broadcaster warned readers that "CBC News has cropped the original painting into separate images to avoid showing the nudity"—a statement which suggests much about the parochial and hypocritical attitudes to the nude in art, let alone provocative or explicit erotic content, views which are prevalent among the Canadian public. Monkman was criticized by a variety of activists, including Jaye Simpson, "an Oji-Cree Saulteaux queer artist and writer in Vancouver," and Danielle Ewenin, an elder from Kawacatoose First Nation in Saskatchewan (Grabish 2020). Both figures criticized Monkman for flirting with a monumental depiction of sexual violence. "He's taken the symbol and he's degraded it," wrote Ewenin, referring to the red-handed sex toy, which appeared earlier in the *Shame and Prejudice* exhibition and in his 45s short *Miss Chief's Praying Hands* (2019), but which is here interpreted as a reference to the red hand symbology commemorating Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW) (Grabish 2020).

If Simpson and Ewenin, like select Instagram users, are condemnatory of Monkman's politicized eroticism, other critics and activists, such as independent Manitoba senator Murray Sinclair, see the artist's (pornographically-expressed) point. "[Monkman] has managed to get people worked up over the obscenity of the content, in startling contrast to the intellectual calmness with which people look upon how Indigenous women were treated," writes Sinclair, "I wish people were as shocked and angered at that visual as they are at Monkman's portrayal of it" (2020). Sinclair, the first Indigenous judge to be appointed in Manitoba and the Chief Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is a leader with decades of experience in civil administration. His former jurisdiction includes Kent Monkman's patrimony of Fisher River Cree Nation. Despite this and other support, Monkman was quick to respond to Indigenous criticism of *Hanky Panky*, as one excerpt from a larger and heartfelt artist statement post suggests. "As a cis-gendered Two-Spirit Cree man, I have always wished to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of non-binary, trans, Two-Spirit and women viewers," he posted on Instagram and Facebook, highlighting that, at least for *Hanky Panky*, his mission to use political eroticism had reached a limit (Monkman 2020). "I see that with

this work, I have failed. I wish for my work to resist the colonial traumas inflicted upon my own family and so many others for generations, not to perpetuate harm” (2020).¹⁹

On May 14, under a detail shot of *Hanky Panky* (2020), Monkman further added that because of “racist comments that have been directed towards community members on my social media platforms, I am temporarily disabling comments on some of my social media accounts and closing others where that is not possible for the time being” (2020). The comments I include above as examples of public interpretation of *Nation to Nation* are no longer visible. *Hanky Panky* itself was later offensively written about by Howard A. Levitt, a well-heeled employment lawyer who sometimes writes for the National Post. In an article published on May 30th, Levitt, after claiming to have purchased the work for a six-figure price he admitted was “no bargain,” revealed his intentions for adding the piece to his collection. “The ‘social justice warriors’ are proportionately ruthless in their criticism and even more prepared to turn on their own. If, for no other reason than showing my support of Monkman against this group of straw men (and women), I had to buy it,” claimed Levitt (2020). *The National Post*, seemingly less squeamish than the CBC, reprinted the controversial work in its entirety, without cropping out the (little) nudity the work contains.

Here, then, lie the limits of political pornography in Canada, or rather, the limit as defined by public consensus under Indigenous leadership. Fascinatingly, very little nudity is actually shown in the more controversial *Hanky Panky*: the buttocks of a recumbent Mountie are exposed to the viewer, as is the pale, supple shining rear end of a beaming Justin Trudeau, but Miss Chief herself is (for her!) quite demurely covered in the front. *Nation to Nation*, however, with the clear representation of an “engaged and engorged member” is decidedly the more pornographic image, according to the traditional definition of pornography within the established, scopophilic process of the male gaze that has defined western visual art and its histories.²⁰ The eager consent of the Mountie, and the tacit acknowledgement of the didactic and subversive political content of the work by Indigenous leaders, has however rendered this form of sexuality far more appropriate than *Hanky Panky*, which, by incorporating the likenesses of real Indigenous women and the controversial symbol of the red hand, is the more controversial work. The erect phallus, the depiction of oral sex, and the hierarchical notions of power, public cruising and anonymous sex that are implicit in *Nation to Nation* are no longer the flashpoints of public criticism. Instead, notions of consent, femininity, abuse, and even, hypothetically, a misunderstanding of the consensual nature of “fisting” as a sexual practice are brought to the forefront by a public whose notions of “pornography” are no longer what they once were. On May 21, 2020, Monkman underscored his recognition of these new and for him, likely very surprising, shifting priorities and tolerances, both in Canadian society and in Canadian art. After explaining that he would not be speaking to the media about the controversy the work had generated, Monkman reiterated his indebtedness to Indigenous cultural leadership. “I am prioritizing listening to the feedback from my community,” says the artist, via his (at the time of writing) last comment on

the work via his website, “I can say quite candidly that this experience will have a lasting impact on me and will influence my work in many ways.” (Monkman 2020).²¹ Hopefully, these limits will serve as further guidelines to young artists embarking on an exploration of related issues over the course of the next decade, who stand to either gain a respectful engagement with Indigenous community and ceremony, or risk losing political support from all but the ilk of Howard Levitt and his ossified brand of reactionary conservative “National Post” readership.

Why do the limits of political pornography in Canadian visual art and media matter, in the here and now of mid-2021? And why should Hurley’s notion of a “fantastical authenticity” be applied to Monkman’s work, thus suggesting the need for contemporary queer, gay, Indigenous and other viewing bodies to re-define sex and place? The answer, of course, is in the very nature of what has been already lost in this country, and what is yet under attack. As discussed above, one Instagram user acknowledged that Monkman’s base was in Toronto and that his work, including heavily eroticized or ostensibly “pornographic” pieces, formed a crucial component in a diverse body of visual arts pedagogies in the city. Monkman’s political pornography is thus a strident visual reminder that queer spaces and places in Toronto continue to be heavily contested and contentious battlegrounds—as indeed they are across the wider nation.²² As journalist and historian Tom Hooper notes, Toronto, and Canada as a (w)hole, have a long history of police surveillance, repression and brutality against men cruising for gay sex in parks, despite what he terms “lovers’ lanes” being regularly used for heterosexual activity with little enforcement (Hooper 2018). “There is a long history of police unapologetically targeting men having sex with men in Toronto parks,” writes Hooper, noting that some of the most vociferous opposition to the Trudeau (senior) government’s partial decriminalization of homosexuality came from the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, who argued that “the search by homosexuals for partners often leads to assault, theft, male prostitution and murder.” (Hooper 2017, 2018). The RCMP, so brilliantly lampooned in *Nation to Nation*, were simply the most visible face of a series of police forces and operations that institutionalized the harassment of gay men in Canada (Kinsman 2000). If the infamous Bathhouse raids of 1981 were so brutal as to galvanize public support for gay rights in this country—“I wish these pipes were hooked up to gas so I could annihilate you all,” notoriously raged one policeman—the Toronto Police Service’s lip-service apology for their actions in 1981 did not take place until 2016 and was immediately followed, only three months later, by a widely-criticized blanket raid on Marie Curtis Park, which saw “71 individuals cited for engaging in acts of consensual sex.” (Hooper 2018). The Bruce Macarthur murder trials, the tragic death of Tess Ritchie in Toronto’s Church and Wellesley village, and the firestorm of controversy ignited by the Black Lives Matter’s insistence that “there is no pride in policing” are just three of the most egregious contemporary examples of ongoing racist police harassment that parallel historic destruction of “cruising grounds” in High Park, Allan Gardens, or David Balfour Park, all spaces that were once as important “Places” to Toronto’s queer men as the Tuileries were, and are, in Paris.²³

Toronto's queer community needs Indigenous leadership to deconstruct a prurient, puritanical and toxic culture of placeless sexuality, and to commemorate what has been lost: Monkman's work provides this monumentalization, albeit in the virtual setting of the Instagram app, and potentially also in whichever future exhibition venue *Nation to Nation* finds itself (Clement 2018).²⁴ Indeed, Monkman's ostensibly 'degrading' and definitely pornographic, but insistently political, history painting *Nation to Nation* gives the settler-Canadian gay male community—and I use this narrowly specified position from my own subjectivity—virtual possibility to imagine a different world, one that counters what Scott Lauria Morgensen has called the “biopolitics of settler colonialism,” where Indigenous queer identities are forcibly erased by a class-conscious settler Canadian society hellbent on teleological progress (Morgensen 2011). As Morgensen has pointed out, institutionally racist bias inherent in GLBT organizing can be addressed through “neither erasing nor absorbing Native people, but by critiquing settler colonialism, and on that basis meeting Native people in accountable relationship based in anticolonial alliance politics,” thereby transcending even nationally-delimited boundaries (Morgensen 2011). In this fantastically authentic world, Indigenous leadership by Two-Spirit artists like Monkman renegotiates Canada's sexually conservative, prurient society, resulting in a re-claiming and recapitulation of sacred/sexual space as Place, including a recognition that outdoor cruising, so long as heteronormative capitalist social structures (such as compulsory monogamy) remain mainstream, is an Essential Service for the performance of “a particular kind of romantic entanglement,” that is, consensual cruising.

Notes

1. Monkman, Kent. Instagram. March 22, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-DNREVgOIr/>.
2. The painting was released to public view on the social media platform Instagram.
3. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2020. “The Great Hall Commission: Kent Monkman, mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)”.
4. A 2004 release, this one by a gay publication, suggests both the didactic value and the conservative nature of Canadian viewing practices: “Monkman reverses the ethnological gaze,” writes Gordon Bowness of the *Daily Xtra*, “turning white men into objects of curiosity and scrutiny,” but his erotic work would not be on show at the prestigious McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinberg: it was “too realistic, too dirty” (Bowness 2004).
5. *Nation to Nation*, as of June 23, 2020, was “liked” by 13,120 users.
6. In what follows, I build on the model of “fantastical authenticity” first developed by Zoe Hurley 2019.
7. A process which itself of course is well-established in western art, famously in Watteau's *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* or Rowlandson's *The Connoisseurs*.
8. One object by the artist does show consummation of oral sex: *Bow Down to Miss Chief* (2018), copper leaf on hand carved lake-smoothed ancient Indigenous limestone,

- hand-picked by the artist as part of the *Miss Chief's Petroglyphs Porn* series, shows a similar composition, although oral penetration has already occurred.
9. And, to some extent, by its parallel, *North of 60* (1992–97), although more complex issues, including Indigenous-led policing, are more concretely, if still problematically, here represented.
 10. “MMIW” refers to “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women,” reflecting the disproportionate number of Indigenous women in Canada and the United States who experience violence, incarceration, kidnapping, and murder. See Walker 2016.
 11. For a crucial early work on police repression of public sex, see Watney 1997, also *Dangerous Bedfellows* 1997.
 12. An acknowledgement of Monkman’s profound knowledge of influential Parisian exhibitions is also found, of course, in his monumental work *Welcome to the Studio: An Allegory for Artistic Reflection and Transformation* (2014), an Indigenized criticism of French painter Gustave Courbet’s monumental studio allegory of 1855, which the artist famously, and for art history seminally, had shown to a defiant public through an innovative, independent and much-lampooned private exhibition. For an excellent analysis of this work, see Scudeler 2015, 28–30, esp. 28.
 13. Proust’s literary characters went there, see Moroney 2005.
 14. Put these facts down in words, and they remind us of what future generations must certainly view with trauma, and terror, and grief: a man arrested for taking a self-portrait in a park at night with flowers! See Westoll 2020.
 15. There are, of course, many hundreds of more specific regional examples. Some of the most well-known include, historically, Pershing Square (Los Angeles), and now Stanley Park (Vancouver), Clapham Common or Hampstead’s Heath (London).
 16. Monkman’s *Nation to Nation* also takes note of the presence in cruising grounds of the military, of officers of the RSA itself. As noted above, soldiers were sought by noblemen in the Tuileries of eighteenth-century Paris. Mid twentieth-century American painter Paul Cadmus was continually inspired by sailors, although his homoerotic language is often couched in considerably more veiled terms: the Whitney Museum’s *Sailors and Floosies*, 1938, appropriates the famously homoerotic posture of the *Barberini Faun* to the figure of an idealized, supine, presumably unconscious drunken sailor. Cadmus is fantasizing, but it’s a fantasy grounded solidly in the reality of the time: the American navy’s association with homosexuality was firmly grounded in the public’s eye at least by the time of the scandalous Newport sex scandal of 1919, when the Army and Navy YMCA and the Newport Art Club were ‘outed’ as significant spots for sexual contact between civilian and military men. Monkman’s insistence on the subservient sexual role of an agent of the RSA carries a long pedigree of cultural history behind it, one where the glorification of masculinity promoted as *de facto* membership into the homosocial spaces of various types of police, military, or other institutionalized groupings (the jail) is accompanied by an almost inevitably queer, homoerotic or otherwise dissident expression of sexuality. These expressions have been

codified by many years of art historical representation. What's different in *Nation to Nation* is the context of Indigenous, Two-Spirit leadership.

17. In what follows in the two paragraphs below, transcribed comments on these works that were still available in April and May of 2020, but which were, for reasons outlined below, no longer made available by the artist (as of June 2020). See Appendix Material.
18. As the Instagram comments in question are no longer publicly accessible, the username of each commenter has been anonymized for the sake of maintaining users' digital privacy and respecting the right for personal information to be forgotten online.
19. Monkman, Kent. Instagram. May 18, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAWuv6ugzVN/>.
20. If Mulvey's original postulation of the male gaze was one that directly excluded men being subjects of a normative and scopophilic process of compulsory heterosexual misogynist looking, many subsequent revisitations of her original model acknowledge that the "increased commodification and objectification" of male bodies in the media has led to an "expansion" of the male gaze, one that must acknowledge "many possible spectatorial positions," including a specifically gay-male gaze that is often deployed for commercial gain. See Brennan 2019, 130.
21. Monkman, Kent. Instagram. May 18, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAWuv6ugzVN/>.
22. See Kinsman 2010, 102, 127, 203, 204. On the latter page Kinsman provides a well-documented map of sites of historic interest, many such forcibly abandoned, for gay male activity in Ottawa.
23. Three other, more historical examples of Canadian sexual prurience and violence against gay men include the sensationalized trial of early Toronto settler Alexander Wood, whose lands, formerly known colloquially as "Molly Wood's Bush," are now the physical location of the embattled gay village; the 22 June 1985 murder of Ken Zeller, librarian and teacher, by five youths who specifically targeted Zeller in "lover's lane" in High Park because of his sexuality, and the horrific "fruit machine" built by Frank Robert Wake, a psychology professor with Carleton University, designed in the 1960s to eliminate homosexual men ("fruits") from the state civil service and directly administered by the RCMP, one of whose senior members coined the "fruit machine" nomenclature in the first place. See Knecht 2018.
24. Clement notes: "In a study of cruising in a cemetery in London, Gandy (2012) similarly notes, "public discourse in relation to cruising activity frequently segues into a fear of crime or social disorder more generally" (2018, 732). To reframe this: fear is also about safety, where a fear of 'the other' accompanies the desire to ensure the safety of the public."

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