



**PUBLIC STUDIO
& NYLE MIIGIZI JOHNSTON
THIS PLACE,
NEYAASHIINIGMIING**



Public Studio, *This Place, Neyaashiinigiing*, 2019.

This project is a work of stories. At whichever moment you enter, you'll find yourself immersed in intersecting stories about land and water, energy and extraction, corporations and families, and the species that cohabit this part of the world. Neyaashiinigiing. Cape Croker.

Public Studio's practice is always collaborative. In *This Place, Neyaashiinigiing*, Public Studio invited Nyle Miigizi Johnston, an artist, muralist, and storyteller from Neyaashiinigiing, who has contributed paintings located throughout the exhibition.

Most of the stories are fragmented, purposely kept brief. Some are direct, personal, and deeply affecting but plainly told. Others suggest more publicly available stories, but ones still unacknowledged or rarely recognized. Some are local histories, written with care, while others bring the flourish of propaganda and are written with different intention. Some stories are true; others hide truths within them. Mixing ecological concerns, environmental politics, and histories of colonization through engagements with land and land use, Public Studio have created a work that is itself a form of storytelling. And their stories have, with this and recent projects, become increasingly personal and embodied.

In 2017, fifteen days into a fifty-seven-day journey walking the 900-kilometre Bruce Trail for the durational performance work *The*

New Field, we are told at the beginning of the immersive film installation, the artists came to Neyaashiinigiing. It's as dramatic a place as any to begin a story, and the impressive long views of a large bluff and close-ups of forest interiors set a tone of intimacy with the land. For the artists, based in southern Ontario, this story is drawn from a personal investment in the lands on which they visit and the people who live there. *This Place, Neyaashiinigiing* was co-developed and co-produced through many collaborations: with Nyle Miigizi Johnston; with Ange Loft, interdisciplinary performing artist and initiator from Kahnawake Kanienkehaka Territory; with Anishnaabe scholar, educator, and singer Nicole Ineese-Nash; with composer Dave Wall; and with multidisciplinary artist and writer Miles Rufelds. It's a narrative that offers many perspectives on the changing natural world, told through quiet, tightly framed shots of nurse logs, leafy canopies, quietly lapping water, slowly moving skies. It's a story, in part, about Bruce Power, Canada's first nuclear power plant and currently the largest operating nuclear plant in the world. But, foremost, the project is not about telling stories per se. It's about listening to the stories of others as part of a practice of reconciliation, especially the stories being told by the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON), who remain in the midst of an ongoing, open land claim in Ontario court.

In the film installation, intertitles are used to narrate the first-person accounts of residents



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in the area. Poet and activist Lenore Keeshig, her cousin Peggy Mansur, and Fredric Lavelly are all shown in their homes, standing on the land on which they live, or doing the work that sustains them. And the stories they tell, in succinct but moving dialogue, touch on the legacies of the residential schools, the policing of languages other than English, generational connections to the lake and land, the ways their practices of fishing and hunting have had to respond to dramatically changing ecologies, and more general reflections on life. Lenore acts as a guide, introducing her family and aspects of her community while sharing the frustrations and injustices of life in a colonial state—the “Not Canada” to which she welcomes her guests. Voice, and sound, is significant. Alongside the stories of Lenore, Peggy, and Francis are those of Jean Borrows, who recounts the strange histories of Griffith Island and its now-private hunting grounds. Viewers also hear Ange and Nicole, who both contributed to the composition and soundtrack, providing a backdrop to the foregrounding of narrative. It’s a kind of self-representation in restraint, through a medium that can so often deny voice rather than amplifying it.

These personal encounters are contrasted with the official narratives of state ownership of land and resources, told through the figure of an unnamed tour guide on behalf of the public-private partnership that is Bruce Power. Although

the energy corporation “likes to acknowledge” that they operate on the traditional territories of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, Bruce Power’s history has been written without regard for the lands on which they operate and the peoples who have traditionally stewarded those lands. We learn that 60 per cent of Ontario’s energy comes from nuclear power. It means that those of us living in southern Ontario, in the power-hungry geography of the Greater Toronto Area, are implicated in this region through our consumption. The monetization of energy and the capitalization of value extracted from the resources of nature are stories that undercut the images and texts here assembled.

Nuclear energy has any number of official and unofficial stories surrounding it, from the secrecy and conspiracy of the Cold War, to the myths of the desert test sites, to the permanent toxicity of radiological decay; here all those stories of decades of nuclear activity are hidden within the singular site of the lake and its shoreline. When we learn that the lake is changing, we’re told the stories of Francis and other lifetime fishermen from the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, who know the sensitive balance of the area’s ecology. We’re left to speculate on what it means that the lake is changing so significantly, that schools of fish gather where the runoff water from the power plant is warm, or that nuclear waste might yet



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be buried there, in the lake, slowly decaying for hundreds of thousands of years.

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In the second gallery, a shorter, animated work picks up the story of the lake and the land claims of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation in a more abstract way. It begins with rectangular forms, filled with rippling lake water, perpetually moving as though we're flying above, until an errant pixel slowly grows to fill the screen, revealing a courtroom—or is it a bunker?—hidden beneath the surface. This speculative underwater world is devoid of life, save for a single elk who takes the role of the plaintiff, recalling Jean Borrows's story of the elk on the private hunting ground of Griffith Island. The crown symbol of the province indicates we're in a courtroom, before zooming out to show an opening in the ceiling—a hole in the sky with the clouds of a summer mid-afternoon rolling across.

The lake itself is a contested space, since the Saugeen Ojibway Nation understand the lake to be “part of the land.” Hence, in their precedent-setting land claim, they argue that the lakebeds are their territory, making no distinction between land and water as home. Spoken over the imagery is the voice of Nyle Miigizi Johnston, telling the Anishinaabe story of the bread maker. Johnston's

choice of story to accompany the animation produces a work that highlights the direct tensions between differing forms of historical knowledge. Indigenous storytelling, itself a kind of legal framework, has often been subsumed or disregarded by the legislative power of state courts. Here the courtroom is denied its power, and instead the forms of knowledge that come through Indigenous oral traditions and respect for the rights of nature surround and overwhelm the court.

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Nyle Miigizi Johnston contributes a suite of new works: a series of wall drawings that are presented throughout the exhibition space, including in and around the vitrines located outside the gallery. Johnston's works introduce some of the key issues for the Neyaashiinigmiling land claims and offer nuances in form and aesthetics, composing an exhibition within an exhibition that grounds the project in lived experience.



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There is also the library, containing materials Public Studio accumulated during the research of the project and providing background information on the histories of Neyaashiinigmiing, the Cape Croker reserve, Bruce Power, and environmental activism through written texts: some fiction, some non-fiction. The aggregation of research material demonstrates some of the stark differences between how governments tell stories about land and how people tell such stories. It's remarkable to see how unofficial some of the official documents appear: a handwritten version of the 1854 treaty (Treaty 72), supposedly governing these lands, seems ambiguous and unconvincing against the powerful accounts of land and history told by the people of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation.

The issue of ownership of stories—who has the right to speak or say them and who is an active listener—is sensitive. Lenore Keeshig pointed this out decades ago, in the groundbreaking account of cultural appropriation she wrote in 1990 in the *Globe and Mail*: “Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture, thinks. Such wonderful offerings are seldom reproduced by outsiders.” In a post-TRC “Not Canada,” where so much work toward truth and reconciliation

remains to be done, it is the practices of truths—of listening to and learning from the voices and stories of Indigenous peoples—that are imperative. For all of the artists and citizens engaged in this project, Indigenous and settler, oral traditions and practices of storytelling are ways to share knowledge in opposition to the often-immovable forces of state power. Public Studio's project offers a way to get up close, to see and to hear the stories that get at the heart of how our world is changing. Reconciliation is personal work, and it involves listening to those willing to share their stories with you.

—Jayne Wilkinson



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This essay accompanies *This Place, Neyaashiinigmiiing*, by Public Studio & Nyle Miigizi Johnston, at the Doris McCarthy Gallery from January 14 - March 28, 2020.

Jayne Wilkinson is a Toronto-based writer, editor, and curator. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Canadian Art*.

COVER IMAGE: Public Studio, *This Place, Neyaashiinigmiiing*, 2019.

THE BREADMAKER AS TRANSLATED BY NYLE MIIGIZI JOHNSTON

“Just a crust of bread”

The baker was baking bread. Already she had baked 10 loaves. They were nice and brown, fat loaves that smelled so good that they made her hungry. The thought they would make a fine meal that evening, and from many thereafter made her happy. She hummed a little song as she gave a crust to her dog. The dog growled.

The old woman looked up to see who her dog was growling at. On the far side of the meadow she saw a man walking towards her. He was walking very slowly. She kept her eyes on him. Before too long, the old woman recognized the old man. She gasped, “Oh Heavens. It’s him. Old Nanaboozhoo! That good for nothing beggar; the laziest of men. All he does is go around telling hard luck stories, looking for a handout. Well!” the woman huffed. “He’s not getting a free meal from me. He can work for his meals like other people.”

The old woman didn’t waste another word. She hid her loaves in her weegwaum. But she kept a ball of dough the size of her fist on a flat stone next to the fireplace. Then she dusted off her dress. Presently Nanaboozhoo came up to the old woman’s weegwaum. “My lucky day,” he said, “to have come while you’re baking bread. Perhaps you might be kind enough to spare me a bun or a crust of bread,” and Nanaboozhoo told the old woman of his hard luck.

“Eeeeeeyoooooh!” the old woman cried. “I am as poor as you are. This is all I’ve got to eat,” she said, showing Nanaboozhoo the ball of dough that she had saved. “Just a crust is all I need,” Nanaboozhoo said, and he laid down, and was soon fast asleep. In moments he was snoring.

The old woman took the ball of dough broke it in half. This she rolled around in the palm of her hand. Then she put this half ball near the coals of the fireplace.

In the heat the ball of dough began to puff out. It got bigger and bigger until it was the size of a pumpkin. It was too big, too brown for the sleeping beggar. The old woman took the large loaf and hid it in her weegwaum. She then took the remaining ball of dough and broke it in half. After she rolled it into a small ball, the old woman put it near the coals. The same thing happened. This too she hid in her weegwaum. Again and again the little ball of dough became a huge loaf of bread. She squirreled all the loaves away for herself.

By and by her guest woke up. “I had a good dream,” he said. “I dreamed of bread and a good meal...”

Before Nanaboozhoo could finish what he was going to say, the old woman wailed, “Eeeeeeyoooooh. There’s been a terrible accident. The bread that I was baking for you fell into the fire. Now I have nothing to give you!”

Nanaboozhoo got to his feet. He pointed a finger straight into the old woman’s face. “You lie,” he said sharply. “You are a liar! Worse, you are a stingy old buzzard. You wouldn’t give a crumb to a hungry neighbour. For that you will never eat a whole mouthful of food. From now on you’re going to be a bird. For your meals you’ll eat worms, bugs, insects, grubs.”

At that moment the old woman became a woodpecker.

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