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### **-nuhsaw^htat-**

#### **to add on a room, to extend a house**

Rowan Red Sky

September 11 – October 17, 2015

Rowan Red Sky's multi-media installation *-nuhsaw^htat- to add on a room, to extend a house* addresses a number of socio-political matters, binding together personal and societal struggles. To accompany this essay, I have stitched together a mind map of the themes that are explored within the works presented. Even if this initiative brought to light the ways in which, for instance, rape culture, cultural dispossession, mental illness, environmental racism, and Aboriginal issues are all connected, the complexity of each theme makes it difficult to formulate a cohesive and comprehensive synthesis that will encompass all. With the realization that this essay might fall short in discussing the many facets of the artist's body of work, my aim is to create a literary map that will illustrate the different threads that tie the installation together, and hopefully add to a conversation that will branch out of the gallery space.

### **Preconditions of Belonging**

#### **#IDLENOMORE**

Rowan, August 11th, 8:30 pm

"One of the first spaces where I felt a sense of belonging and felt like it was ok for me to be in that space, first to relate to, then to claim my own Aboriginal identity, is activism."<sup>1</sup>

Rowan Red Sky was born to a mother who is part Oneida and Canadian (and then

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan (artist) in discussion with the author, August 11th, 2015. All citations were taken from recorded session with the artist during the Xpace at Artscape on Gilbralta's Point. All excerpts were revised and approved by the artist.

adopted by a Catholic family) and to a Father who is an English immigrant of Polish descent. Like many of us, her origins and cultural positioning reveal a broad and tightly knit history of violence. Her positionality results in many ways from Canada's patriarchal system of governance and its treatment of First Nations people. For instance, the Indian Act and Bill C-31<sup>2</sup>, Residential schools, as well as the institutionalization of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families between the 1960's and 1980's (notably referred as the Sixties Scoop)<sup>3</sup> severely affected cultural transmission systems on her maternal side. Writer Christine Smith (McFarlane) recounts her experience as a First Nations child into the Canadian child care system for Briarpath Magazine. In her poignant testimony she claims that in addition to daily physical and emotional abuse, she as many children, grew up without a sense of her culture, language or traditions.<sup>4</sup> Smith also mentions how "children had to fight to learn the ways of their people, often from outside their adoptive families and communities."<sup>5</sup> Rowan doesn't know the history of her mother's adoption or childhood, but this intergenerational interruption of cultural transmission translated into a visceral need to reconnect and readdress what has been held away from her mother and by extent, herself. The Indian Act has been at work for generations to undo cultural and family ties, and being defined legally as non-status is the loss of Aboriginal rights and interests as well as community membership. During our time as residents at Artscape Gibraltar Point we spent quite some time talking about issues surrounding Indigeneity - what does it mean to be recognized as Aboriginal and what are the impacts of being unrecognized by the state through official Indian status? How are cultural dislocation and a rooted sense of belonging constructed and how do those factors contribute to communal well-being? During recorded sessions, Sky talked openly about past disruption with her indigenous cultural ties, the affects of passing for white, its privileges and disadvantages, the uneasy path of self recovery from her traumas, and her journey for self- and cultural reclamation.

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<sup>2</sup> Bill C-31, or a Bill to Amend the Indian Act, passed into law in April 1985 to bring the Indian Act into line with gender equality under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It proposed modifications to various sections of the Indian Act, including significant changes to Indian status and band membership, with three major goals: to address gender discrimination of the Indian Act, to restore Indian status to those who had been forcibly enfranchised due to previous discriminatory provisions, and to allow bands to control their own band membership as a step towards self-government. However it did not redress all repercussions of cultural assimilation caused by the Indian Act. For more information please see: <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act/bill-c-31.html>

<sup>3</sup> Christine, Smith (McFarlane). "A legacy of Canadian Child Care" Surviving the Sixties Scoop. Last modified September 1st, 2013. <http://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/a-legacy-of-canadian-childcare>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

**Rowan, August 11th, 7:30 pm**

My mom was adopted as an infant. Her biological father was status Indian, and a member of the Oneida Nation of the Thames and her mom was white Canadian. (...) So at the time that my mom was born, she was not eligible for status because her biological parents weren't married. She was adopted into a Catholic family, I think of German background but you know, Canadian. My mom is Catholic, that is her belief but I've seen her connect with Aboriginal culture in many ways, like my aunt gave her an eagle feather when she graduated. I relate to my mom's adoption as a kind of immediate assimilation, and that was partly because of the laws at that time—she wasn't given Indian status. And today's laws that deny me my rights and interests like Bill C-31. (...) I remember we went to socials when I was a kid and I learned how to dance and I made things like drums and heard sweetgrass teachings. The feeling I have looking back is maybe that my mom was figuring it out for the first time too. I just talked to my mom about a cultural camp I went to as a kid, a kind of immersive experience.

**Rowan, August 5th, 3:45 pm**

When I was younger we celebrated Aboriginal culture. I was told all my life that I am part Native, one-quarter Oneida. I knew that and practiced that, and then, there were severe interruptions to my life and my family life; my dad's illness, my homelessness as a youth, sexual assault, and mental health issues. So my family life was interrupted and of course it interrupted being in touch with the culture.

**Rowan, August 5th, 3:55 pm**

Interrupted culture combined with not being recognized by the State that I live in create a lot of anxiety and a feeling of belonging in a certain place, belonging with Aboriginal identity but at the same time, I feel like I don't belong there. I feel Aboriginal but like an illegitimate Aboriginal person.

**Rowan, August 11th, 7:40 pm**

There was an effort to bring Aboriginal culture and teachings into my life for a time, and coming from my parents that doesn't exist anymore—that effort. I recently realized I had to start making the effort to stay connected with the culture. And so, thinking about my history of personal dislocation, of moving across the country and also family violence,

mental health problems, these things have contributed to the loss of the culture, again, in a more personal way.

### **Rowan, August 11th, 8:15 pm**

When you read Thomas King, who is a great writer and storyteller, his stand point about this feeling of authenticity is something that is sort of put on Aboriginal people on purpose by the states of Canada and USA in the effort to assimilate us. So if you feel uncomfortable to perform your culture and you don't, then you don't transmit your culture to your children and the culture dies. Sky describes the use of the term -nuhsawΛhtat- as "not just 'to add on a room, to extend a house' [in a literal sense] but [it] also describes the growth of the whole community".<sup>6</sup> With this concept in mind, one can read that not only this installation taps into making space for her own subjectivity within a larger narrative about Aboriginal identities, but it also opens the conversation to think about allyship in the fight against systems of oppression and violence.

### **Wichita Do Ya**

The textile piece Protect Water as well as the video performances from Path of Resistance (which includes Water Song and Appreciation of All Things) invite the audience to pay attention to water's abstract form: as a conductor of knowledge and a spiritual healer. The Water Song (also called the river song or the Cherokee water song), performed by Sky, is an anthem used as a water blessing chant or cleansing song. Moreover, to sing Appreciation of All Things on Gibraltar Point's shore is very symbolic, since it brings forward a deeply felt satisfaction with having the opportunity to enact and transmit newly acquired knowledge. Through these videos viewers happen to witness a transcendental moment where the artist connects with her environment in a way that is profoundly personal but also communal. It appears as though she is singing as a mean to create a healing space for herself, for her mother and all others whom like her have been disconnected in a way or another with their culture and community.

Protecting water, as the artist mentioned in one of our recorded sessions, is to protect life, and protecting Aboriginal land rights is also protecting life. As caretakers and stewards of the land we occupy, individuals of Aboriginal descent's well-being (including physical, spiritual, and cultural) is in sync with its environment. Past and current struggles to preserve ancestral lands from destructive economic developments also include a constant

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Red Sky, Facebook message to author, September 1st, 2015.

fight for cultural sustainability. Issues related to Aboriginal title and land rights are complex but have several common denominators weaving together the fate of our natural resources and environmental racism. Stitched on an ornamented blanket, the words Protect Water echoes past as well as present imperialist projects affecting Aboriginal communities. Interestingly enough, the choice of material and format evoke ambivalent positions existing within Indigenous communities towards this familiar object- the comforting yet deadly blanket. Through the artist's water-themed works, water is portrayed as powerful leverage in political, social, cultural, and economic affairs that are tied to Canada's history of colonial brutality, systems of exclusion and dislocation.

### **#Consent #NoSilenceAgainstViolence**

#### **Rowan, August 20th, 14:43 pm, Instagram Post:**

"...investigating connections between sexual violence and Aboriginal land rights issues"<sup>7</sup>

Spelled in capital letters, black on white, Sky's CONSENT banner (made for the occasion of a protest against rape culture and the presence of Roosh V<sup>8</sup> in Toronto on August 15th, 2015) pin points multiple facets of power relations. Laid in the middle of the room and taking up most of the floor space, the connections between sexual violence and Aboriginal land rights issues become clearer - consent takes on another dimension in addition to its relation to the right for healthy and respectful sexual experiences. The chain of events linking governmental land abuses and interpersonal violence in indigenous communities sheds light on a long history of oppressive politics instituted since the first European settlements in Canada. When speaking about consent the issues of rape culture, cultural dispossession, and land occupation come together as the roots of discriminatory infrastructures insuring the cultural and economic supremacy of a minority. Rendered as a fundamental decree that should dictate current politics, consent is a non-negotiable term of agreement that is far from being honored when it comes to resource extraction on First Nations territories. The land as a material and mythological entity is allegorically comparable to the human body. If one thinks about the process of colonization and

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<sup>7</sup> Rowan Red Sky comment on Instagram, August 20th , 2015. <https://instagram.com/nyssou/>

<sup>8</sup> The infamous American author, blogger, and self-proclaimed pick-up artist Daryush Valizadeh (also known as Roosh V) has produced a number of statements promoting violence against women. The nature of his writing describing techniques of sexual coercion and his stand towards rape has alerted many feminist groups in North America. When learning about his intentions to lead a series of conference in Canada, a petition to stop his entry has been circulating and mobilizations have been organized in Montreal and Toronto. To learn more about the demonstration against rape culture and his visit in Toronto please read: No Silence Against Violence by Iris Robin for Toronto Coop Media. <http://toronto.mediacoop.ca/story/nosilence-against-violence/33836>

forceful occupations, bodies and land are violated in similar ways. Thus, by intentionally obstructing the visitors' spatial navigation; the artist forces them to confront their definition and daily performance of the term. What does it mean if someone carelessly steps on the banner, leaving traces behind? Is it indicative of one's personal stance towards it? Caring and respecting someone on their own terms is not a negotiable grey area but a necessity.

- Geneviève Wallen