

## **“Behind Her Many Garments”**

*Land-Virginity and the Gaze; An examination of Lawren Harris’  
“Pic Island”, 1924.*



Harris, Lawren, “Pic Island,” Oil on Beaverboard, 1924, National Gallery of Canada.

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“Visible nature is but a distorted reflection of a more perfect world and the creative individual viewing her is inspired to perceive within and behind her many garments, that which is timeless and entirely beautiful.” - Lawren Harris<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

As a young, art interested kid growing up in Canada, *The Group of Seven* was hammered into me as the epitomizing movement of art that put Canada on the ‘cultural map’. We were taught that this small group of artists, who were most active between 1919 and 1931, painted in a style that signified an important catalyst for spiritual landscape art that would come to define our country in the years that followed.<sup>2</sup> Their oeuvre emphasized a modernist approach towards depicting Canadian landscape in terms of its ‘essence’, and as the leader of the group Lawren Harris pronounced; theirs was a task to capture “Canada painted in her own spirit”.<sup>3</sup>

Although they remain highly popular, recent years have shown increasing controversy toward the GOS as Canada continues to reconcile with its colonial history.<sup>4</sup> In the increasing number of postcolonial readings of Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven, scholars refer to the problematic nationalist interest in depicting Canadian territory in a state of vast spiritual emptiness, and as something that has been ‘discovered’ by the colonizer.<sup>5</sup> These readings criticise the contradictory dream to deliver a ‘true Canada’ through the bodies of white men, who propose that their artistic tradition is the first to present Canada outside European influence; an ironic statement, as artistic traditions in the Canadian region are already centuries old, but historically ignored due to its colonially undesirable indigenous roots.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lawren Harris personal notebook 1920’s. Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (London, Ont.: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1990), 62.

<sup>2</sup> The names of the artists in this group are as follows: Lawren Harris, J. E. H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Frank Johnson, Frederick Varley, Franklin Carmichael, A.Y. Jackson.

Further reading; McMichael Publication: *Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven* (Kleinburg: McMichael Canadian Art Collection D’Art Canadien), 2020, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lawren Harris, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," *Report of the Annual Meeting* 27, no. 1 (1948): 31.

<sup>4</sup> I will be using the acronym GOS to refer to the Group of Seven.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Margaret Schultz, "More To That Tree Than Meets The Eye: The Group Of Seven, Canadian Nationalism, And Environment," *Constellations* 9, no. 2 (2018), and John O’Brien and Peter White, *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Although this paper does not discuss this, it is worth looking into the indigenous group of seven, which was started by Daphne Odjig in 1974 as a response to Lawren Harris’s claim that he and his group are the first ‘native art movement’ of Canada. (Harris, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," 30.) For further reading on Odjig and the Indigenous Group of Seven, see: Odjig, Daphne, Beth Southcott, and Rosamond M. Vanderburgh. 1992. *A paintbrush in my hand*. Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History.

What these postcolonial readings do not discuss however, is how the depiction and stylistic reduction of Canadian landscape functions as a form of objectification, wherein in the ‘untouched’, ‘captured’, ‘virgin soil’ becomes subject to increasingly fetishitic implications.

In order to unravel this further, this paper takes *Pic Island* 1924, by Lawren Harris as the center point for examining the relation between the depiction of the land-body and the viewing-body. Using the postcolonial writings of Anne McLintock and Harry Garuba, we will examine specifically how the barren depiction of Canada’s ‘virginity’ becomes an object for the sake of fetishitic conquest; using a psychoanalytic frame to lend dimension to this postcolonial reading by applying it in terms of Mary Kelly’s ‘image desire’ and Jacques Lacan’s ‘Gaze’. By following frameworks of both postcolonialism and psychoanalysis, this essay intends to simultaneously examine the merit of their combined theory, while remaining lucid to the potential pitfalls such a strict reading may cause. This research paper is therefore guided by the question; *How does a combined framework of postcolonial landscape theory, and psychoanalysis of the relational viewing body, provide insight into the potentially fetishitic impulses of Lawren Harris’s ‘Pic Island’?*

### **Pic Island**

Before we forge ahead, it is important to describe the importance of *Pic Island* and why I chose it. Although the painting itself is not the most famous from the GOS, *Pic Island* embodies some of the most important characteristics of the GOS’s ideology as it was propelled by their founder, Lawren Harris.

*Pic Island* is made up of large and softly rounded shapes, characterised by gentle slopes and curved edges. The view is long, as it travels from a dark foreground, looking down upon the open lake and sky, before resting on the shadowy central island. The image is somewhat monochromatic, with its base colours reduced to three; brown (with hints of purple and red), beige and blue. It’s inherent calmness is underlined by the distinct lack of bodies, where no moving thing, -not even a bird- can be seen. The image seems to imply a stillness, with even the water pooling flat around the island. In the combination of all these elements, *Pic Island* encompasses the GOS’s most established tradition, which is the ‘capturing’ and exploring of Canada’s nature, in an untarnished, vast, and empty state.

For Harris, the empty, monocoloured and still landscape presents Canada as it truly ‘is’.<sup>7</sup> He reasoned that the primary goal of the GOS was precisely the spiritual emancipation of the viewer as they gaze upon the ‘virgin’ landscape, and marvel at the ripe and unspoiled ‘vastness’ that this seemingly empty Canada has to offer. This ‘terra nullius’ character of painting became highly celebrated and

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<sup>7</sup> Lawren Harris, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," Report of the Annual Meeting 27, no. 1 (1948): 37.

adopted by the Canadian public, as well as by its government.<sup>8</sup> Much of its popularity owed to the fact that it made Canada more marketable to an ‘old country’ european audience, underlined by critics who proclaimed that “Canada has arrived, she has a national style,.. and the time is not far distant when we shall purchase Canadian paintings for our National and provincial collections.”<sup>9</sup>

It is in this way that *Pic Island* grasps the larger significance of the GOS’s oeuvre in that it seeks to reduce Canada to an empty ‘pure’ and spiritual form. For this reason, this paper will continue to refer to *Pic Island* as it pertains to the ideologies of the GOS, as well as how it informs the european gaze that continues to assert itself onto the Canadian geographical body.

### **Land Objectification and the Field of Desire**

In order to outline more firmly why the GOS paintings, and particularly *Pic Island*, functions within the realm of land-fetish and desire, it is important to examine the manner in which land becomes objectified.

Following the writing of Harry Garuba in *Mapping the Land/ Body/ Subject*, the imagery or ‘Mapping’ of land is a topic of deep colonial concern. He argues that the downfall of mapping space lies in the fact that the image of land is simultaneously reflective of reality, but not a ‘real’ depiction of it. Despite this divide between the reality of the image and of the space however, more often than not, the map is still treated as a ‘truthful’ representation.<sup>10</sup> Essentially this means that a map with names and borders undermines the existence of space as a fluid thing, and functions to replace any honest experiences of space with an uncompromising series of dots and lines, thus containing the subject within a falsely painted narrative. He outlines that this contradiction lays the groundwork for the first act of colonisation, which is to *seize* the land by mapping it.<sup>11</sup> Thus making it an object that can be controlled, ‘contained’ and effectively ‘reduced’.<sup>12</sup>

Although Garuba writes specifically with regards to colonial maps of African cultural landscape, his discussion is highly pertinent in reference to the Lawren Harris and the GOS as well. Although *Pic Island* is not at all a traditional map, it functions in a distinctly similar way in that it boasts an act of ‘discovery’ and ‘capture’. By presenting itself as the ‘true’, sensual, and spiritual reality of Canada, *Pic*

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<sup>8</sup> Paul H. Walton, "The Group of Seven and Northern Development," *RACAR : Revue D'art Canadienne* 17, no. 2 (1990): 174.

<sup>9</sup> Lawren Harris, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," Report of the Annual Meeting 27, no. 1 (1948): 38.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Garuba, "Mapping the Land/ Body/ Subject: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies in African Narrative," *Alternation* 9, no. 1 (January 2002): 107-111.

<sup>11</sup> Garuba, "Mapping the Land/ Body/ Subject": 87, 105-106.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*: 87-89, 111-112.

*Island* replaces the landscape on which it is based, and turns that very landscape into an object for ownership. Indeed, in Harris' assertion that his spiritual depictions aim to reflect a totalizing 'true Canada', he too produces an image that reduces the cultural complexity of space, and performs an act of colonisation by seizing it, and making it consumable.

The central success in the voyeuristic nature of 'mapping' and objectification, lies in the 'reduction' of the subject. Following the logic of psychoanalyst Mary Kelly, reduction is the centerpoint through which a viewer-longing begins to emerge. In her text *Desiring Images/Imaging Desire*, Kelly begins by highlighting how the 'field of vision' functions ultimately as a 'field of desire', which she equates specifically to imagery of women as they become reduced to desirable 'bodies'.<sup>13</sup> Although this assertion makes up only one part of her complex reconciling of how to 'image women', it is useful to apply her outline of 'image reduction' onto the landscape. As we consider *Pic Island* to be increasingly an objectification of land, this psychoanalytic reading allows us to examine how the viewer's gaze is invited into the 'reduced' image as means to desire it, and thus places the image in an impossible and perpetually objectified state.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed the very *act* of mapping Canada into a reduced, empty landscape for the sake of spirituality, implies an intended colonial/white-settler audience. In this, Canada becomes the elusive enigma of the viewers desire; an empty Eden, unperturbed, and waiting to bestow upon the beholder a spiritual exaltation; it is a reduction of reality which is complimented by the fantasy that spills into it.

### **Conquest Fetish and the Gaze**

*Pic Island* has now rapidly fallen from being the 'truthful' image of Canada, to the objectified, colonial desire for an imagined, empty and 'captured' Canadian spirituality. Notably this issue of desire falls into a larger, and more overtly sexual history of conquest, and how indeed the viewer continues to act as the centerpoint through which the fetish of landscape is fulfilled.

One of the most overt examples in which Canadian landscape becomes a sexual object lies in the description of its supposed 'virginity'. Lawren Harris references the 'virginity' of Canada almost from the get go when he describes it in his personal retrospective about the history of the GOS.<sup>15</sup> Indeed the term is not uncommon in colonial discussions of the 'new world', as postcolonial theorist Anne McClintock points out. In her chapter *Lay of the Land*, McClintock describes a story of Christopher Columbus, who

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<sup>13</sup> Kelly, Mary "Chapter 12: Desiring Images/Imagine Desire (1986)," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* Second Edition, Amelia Jone, 84-89. New York City: Routledge, 2010, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Kelly, Mary "Desiring Images/Imagine Desire" 86.

<sup>15</sup> Lawren Harris, "The Group of Seven in Canadian History," *Report of the Annual Meeting* 27, no. 1 (1948): 30.

describes his conquests using the image of the female breast, and discusses his search for her “edenic nipple”- a protrusion of land that ‘discoverers’ sail towards.<sup>16</sup> One of the most notable points of her thesis is how the female body, following this tale, continues to distinctly characterise a fetishitic relationship to land and thresholds into land; with the female image naming and adorning ships, and the land itself being referred to as ‘she’.<sup>17</sup> McClintock elaborates by describing how this simultaneously presents a desire for possession and ‘conquering’ of the feminine, while also infantilizing the male, and expresses anxiety towards his own longing.<sup>18</sup>

As we outlined through Garuba and Kelly, the image of land is in itself a reduction that exemplifies ‘desire’, following McClintock however, this desire enters into the realm of fetish, as the land is demarcated in a female form. Indeed to Harris and the GOS, Canada is a ‘she’, and as the opening quote to this paper implies, they believed the role of the artist to be the removal of her ‘veil’, in order to “perceive behind her garments” at her vast and unspoiled virginity.<sup>19</sup> In this way the longing for spiritual release becomes a longing for sexual dominance as well. Here the visual ‘capturing’ of *Pic Island* becomes a doubly possessive act in which Canada is controlled through a discrete and private spirituality, but also appropriated into a fetishitic window which gazes at Canada as a feminized mythological body.

Much like the erotic myth of Actaeon who happens upon the nude Goddess Diana bathing, or the French Salon tradition of presenting nude odelisks that perform for the male gaze; the act of viewing becomes in itself a kind of completion for the artwork, and is central to the emergence of the fetish.<sup>20</sup> As Mary Kelly was building on, and what Anne D’Alleva outlines in her discussion of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is the central role of the Gaze. D’Alleva points out that in Lacan's theory of the Gaze, the very act of looking is marked by longing, control, and power.<sup>21</sup>

If we apply Lacan to *Pic Island*, we see in reference to the power structures we have thus far discussed, what Lacan means by the power of the Gaze. *Pic Island* in its imagined landscape lies still, vast and empty, wherein its lack of visual force, its lack of life and body, and its lack of looking *back* at the viewer, places the one that holds the Gaze in a presumed position of dominance. At the same time

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<sup>16</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21-22.

<sup>17</sup> McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 24-25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Lawren Harris personal notebook 1920’s. Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (London, Ont.: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1990), 62.

<sup>20</sup> Though it is worthwhile to note that Actaeon’s story ends in misery, the issue of the male gaze continues to tell a tale of the erotic fantasy of the virgin body, and the infantilization of the male viewer in her wake. (see McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 21-25. And Heath, John. "Diana's Understanding of Ovid's "Metamorphoses"." *The Classical Journal* 86, no. 3 (1991): 233-43. For further reading.

<sup>21</sup> Anne D’Alleva. *Methods and Theories of Art History*, London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012. 106-108.

however, the Gaze ‘traps’ the viewer’s eye and fixes it upon a specific sight, which is a Canada that anticipates the beholder, and in ‘her’ capture, belongs to him. Indeed this means that the *meaning* and *truth* of Canada that Lawren Harris talks so much about is not inherent to the image, but happens within that very moment *between* the eye and the image, where the Gaze propels issues of longing, control, and indeed following McClintock; fetishitic conquest.

With Canada as the personification of the desirable female object, *Pic Island* physically places the viewer at that very precipice, or ‘entering point’ to Canada’s feminine body; placing the Gaze high above the titillating landscape. Indeed, it is here that the ‘ideal’ white male public becomes a kind of Acteaon, gazing precariously and erotically upon the infinite virgin beauty of Diana.

### **The Framework**

This combined framework of postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis brings us towards new readings of *Pic Island* and the overall intentions of the Canadian Group of Seven. By strictly, and admittedly severely, examining this artwork in the context of land-objectification and the desiring gaze, we note how this framing expands on the postcolonial criticism of using land as a nationalist tool, outlining how that same land becomes fetishized as the exotic and sublime female ‘other’.

Despite the interesting insights gained however, we must be careful not to pigeon-hole *Pic Island* into adhering solely to the story of fetishism, lest we end up performing a reduction ourselves. Indeed, this reading simplifies our observation by placing the viewer into one position of the ‘inserter’ or one ‘desiring to insert’, which implies some phallic male gaze, and subsequently wanders into the realm of gendered ‘essentialism’, wherein the viewer is male and any other gender becomes inconsequential to the reading of this work. Other framings might have allowed for deeper insight into land-objectification as a form of marxist primitive accumulation for example, or indeed produced greater insight into the problem of essentializing gender to begin with.

That being said, the way that psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory work together in this paper remains key towards propelling new readings and new criticisms of art. Particularly when that art has long been deemed ‘established’ within our canonic histories.

## Conclusion

By relating *Pic Island* and the GOS to a reading of fetishism, desire, and the colonial male gaze, this paper casts doubt on the validity of Lauren Harris's claim of depicting *the true spirit of Canada*. By examining the role of spatial imagery through Garuda, we see how the imagining of territory becomes in itself a way of capturing and reducing the subject, which, when applied to Kelly's description of 'reduction', becomes trapped in a locus of desire. It is in this combination of reduction and desire that we see the potential for the emergence of the fetish, as the land becomes allegory for the female body, and the ideal male audience Gazes upon it from a position of dominance, and sensual control. It is in this way that *Pic Island* indeed functions within the realm of object-eroticism, and in presenting the viewer with 'the undergarments of her body', reduces these early images of Canada into a colonial fetish.

Although this reading of *Pic Island* is decidedly harsh, and I do not wish to deny Lauren Harris and the Group of Seven an important role within the history of Canadian art practices, it is important to recognize that the effort to produce and transpose a 'true' and discovered Canada echoes an exploitative and sexually charged history of conquest, through the reduction and objectification of its own soil. This in turn supports an old colonial hegemony that continues to thrive in Canada today, wherein the imagery and story of Canada becomes privately produced for a white-settler (male) audience. This prevents Canada from existing in a fluid and multiple form, tying it instead to notions of 'discovery', 'capture', and 'dominion'. Rather than sway to this hegemony of 'totalized land', or swerve to ignore it completely however, it is important that we treat Canada as a stream of multiplicity that is constantly changing and newly emerging. By utilizing renewed frameworks, questions, challenges and unlikely combinations, these discourses have the potential to poke into Canada's capacity for fluidity, and bely that desire to possess its empty shell. It is time to let Canada breathe without pushing it into singular notions, and to leave its garments where they are.

**Image List**



**Fig. 1** Harris, Lawren, "Pic Island," Oil on Beaverboard, 1924, National Gallery of Canada.

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