

# 2 Grids and Parks: Two Sides of an Extractive World- view

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Dang

*For a long time, I believed the problem was that people don't have enough of a connection with nature, and that's why they're able to do the things that they do. I don't believe that anymore.*

— John Mohawk, *How the Conquest of Indigenous Peoples Parallels the Conquest of Nature*, 1997

In early 1886, George Alexander Stewart, a Dominion Land Surveyor was sent to conduct a topographical survey of a series of hot springs in the Rocky Mountains recently reserved by Prime Minister Macdonald for the creation of Canada's first national park. Upon arriving in the Rockies, it became clear to Stewart that along with the survey, the development of the area to accommodate visitors was urgently required, as he noted in his first annual report: "it became evident that an effort must be made to meet the necessities of the public in their desire to reach the sulphur springs."<sup>1</sup> By the following year, Stewart had been appointed as the park's first superintendent. Over the next decade, he oversaw the planning, design, construction, and management of the park, facilitating its transformation from a "remote" railway siding into a major tourism destination.

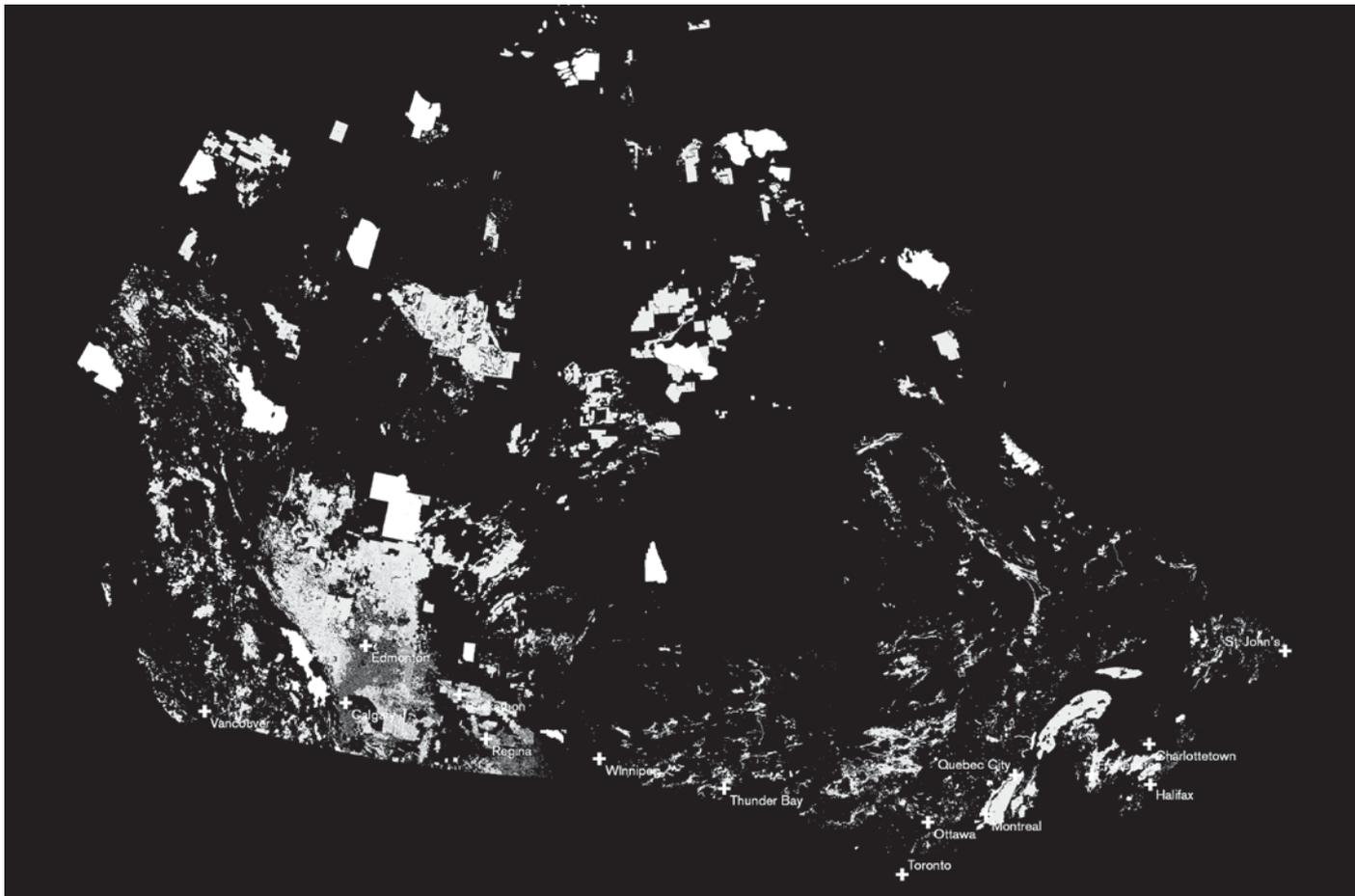
The significance of surveying and landscape planning in the establishment of Canada's first national park stem from long-standing colonial ideologies largely predicated on Indigenous dispossession and ongoing settler-colonization. As an extension of the colonial project, the creation of national parks provided the colonial government with a program for asserting control over the "remote" regions of the Rocky Mountains. Tourism in the first park was promoted by selling the vision of an uninhabited virgin wilderness, a vision which required the displacement of the local Stoney Nakoda people—onto whose territory the park encroached—into an adjacent reserve.

Since 1886, nearly fifty national parks have been established throughout Canada. The expansion of the national parks system has been driven by the same extractive worldview which led to the displacement of the people of the Stoney Nakoda Nation at the turn of the twentieth century and which drives the resource extraction industries. Extraction is not limited to the mining and resource industries, but rather, extraction is a worldview that defines the contemporary global economy, which is rooted in only one principle: perpetual, unceasing, and infinite growth.

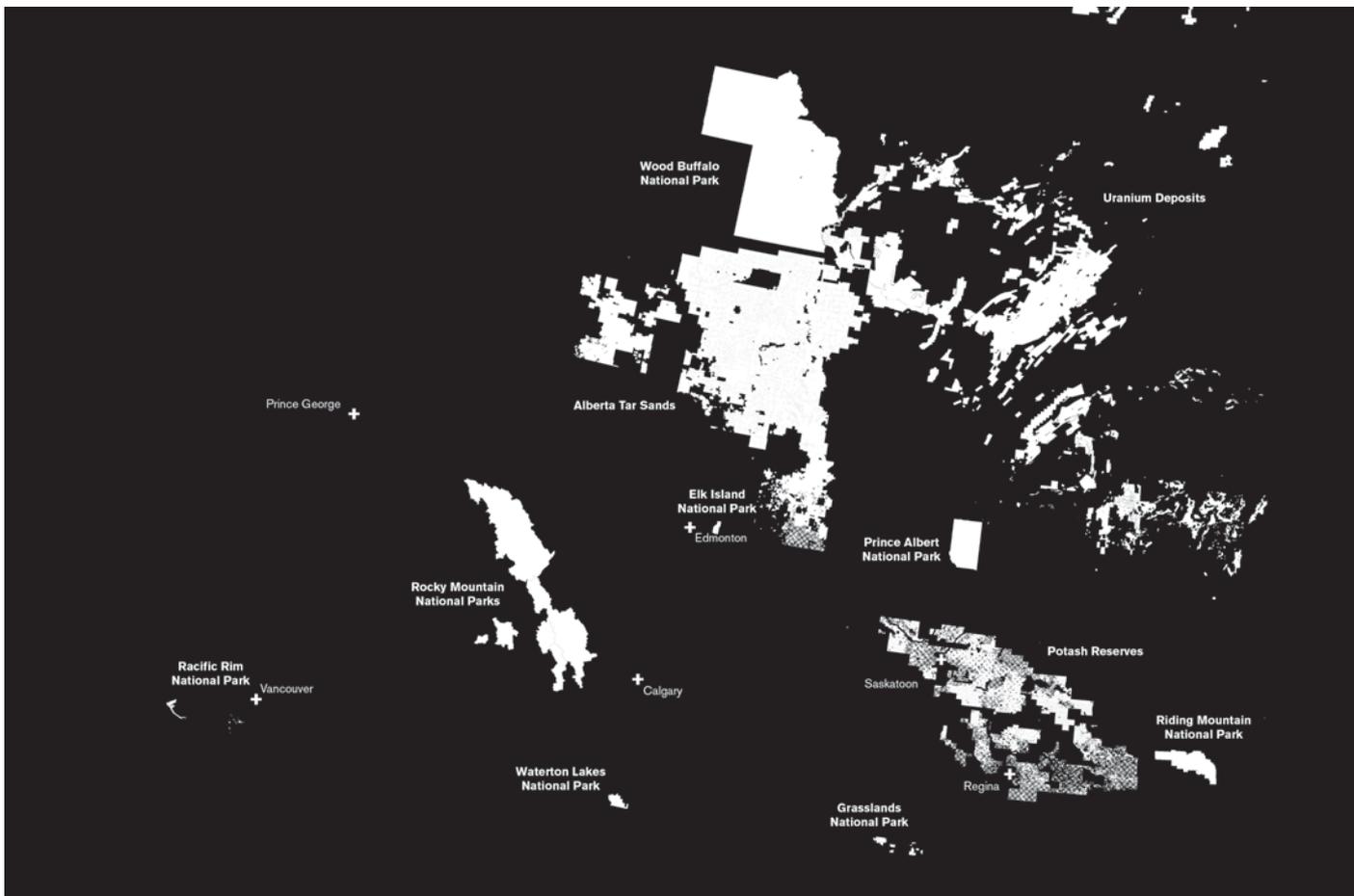
## The Power of Parks

The current goal of the Parks Canada Agency stems from the *National Parks System Plan*. As described in the *System Plan*, the "fundamental principle" of Parks Canada is to "protect a representative sample of each of Canada's landscapes."<sup>2</sup> In order to achieve this objective, the nation was divided into thirty-nine representative "natural regions," and Parks Canada set a goal of establishing at least one national park within each region by the year 2000. In essence, the *National Parks System Plan* is a territorial expansion strategy,

delineating



**Canada, A Nation Built on Colonial Narratives, National Parks and Cities  
(Highlighted Against a Background of Mineral Claims, Natural Gas, Coal and Bitumen Deposits)**

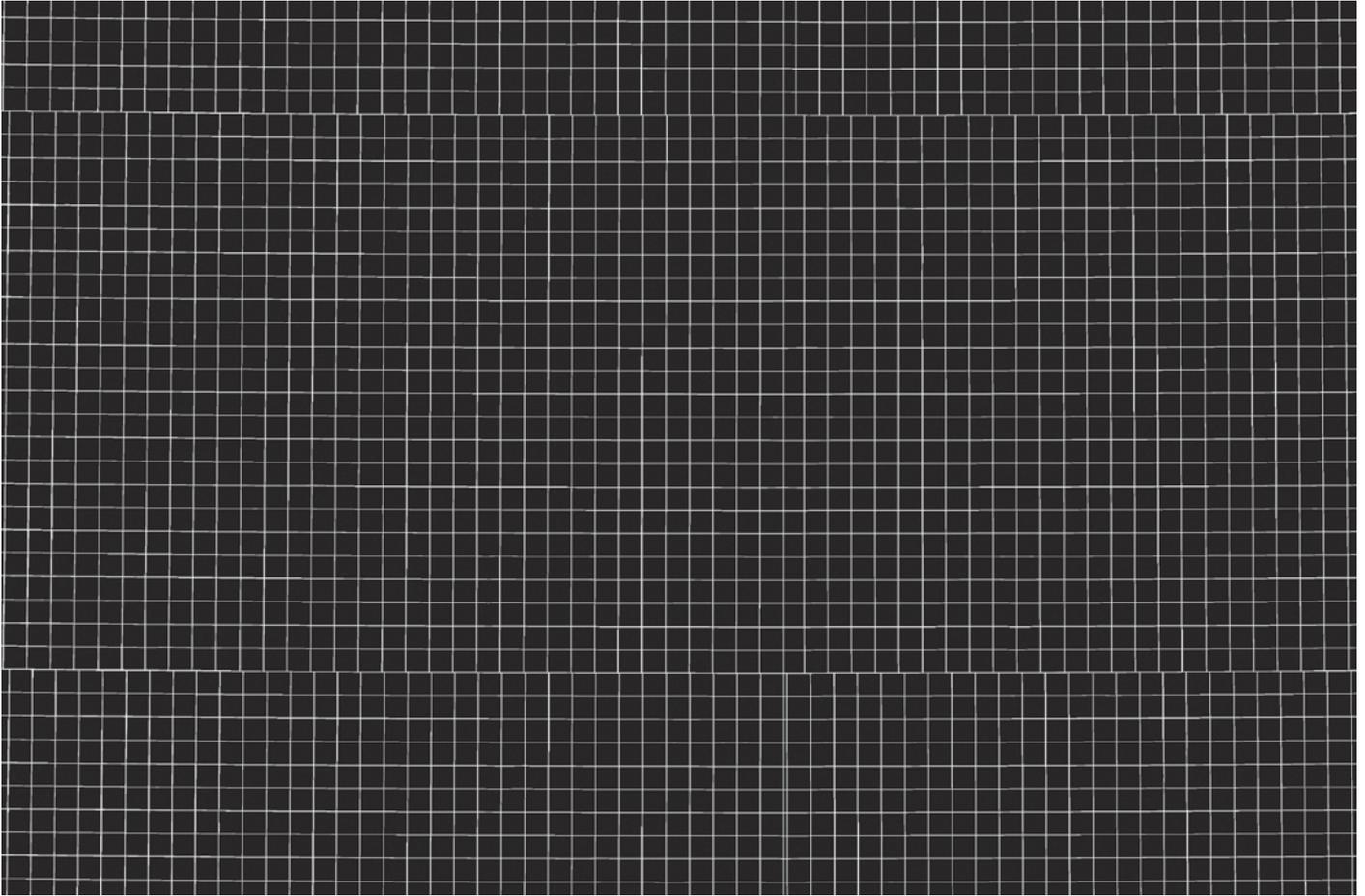


**Hinterlands as Extraction Landscapes. National Parks, Alberta Tar Sands, Potash, Uranium, and other Mineral Deposits**

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(Detail) Alberta Township Grid (c. 1900). Townships are six by six square miles, and are subdivided into sections, each measuring one square mile.

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(Detail) Alberta Tar Sands Claims and Leases (c. 1970).



(Detail) Banff National Park (1885) 1 : 2,000,000



(Detail) Wood Buffalo National Park (1922) 1 : 2,000,000

with an aim to expand the national parks system into all corners of the Canadian nation.

When the *National Parks System Plan* was first initiated in 1970, there were nineteenth established national parks in Canada. In the five decades since, twenty-eight new national parks have been established. To date, the implementation of the *National Parks System Plan* remains ongoing, as thirty-one of thirty-nine regions are currently represented by forty-seven national parks across the country.<sup>3</sup> The *National Parks System Plan*—in outlining a national territorial expansion strategy to be implemented over a target period of time—unmistakably confirms the national parks as a systematic infrastructure for colonizing the nation's "remote" regions. The adoption of the *National Parks System Plan* by Parks Canada serves to explicitly codify into official policy the colonizing agenda which has underscored parks development since the 1880s.

During the earliest days of national parks development in Canada, the parks were managed under the purview of the Department of the Interior, along with the Dominion Lands Survey, the Geological Survey, forestry management, and the administration of the Northwest Territories.<sup>4</sup> With the dissolution of the Department of the Interior in 1936, the responsibility of national parks became part of the Department of Mines and Resources, where it remained until 1966, when it was shifted into the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The historic

pairing of national parks management with resource development suggests that the same extractive forces drive both national programs.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the move in 1966 of National Parks administration to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development highlights the prerequisite ideologies of Indigenous dispossession underlying national parks management and development.

Under the political structure of settler-colonialism, the space of the metropole serves as the centre of settler society, where economic and state power are concentrated. All other regions act as resource hinterlands from which capital is extracted for the benefit of settler-dominated metropolises; these spaces include national parks, as spaces of leisure and relaxation for tired urbanites, as well as resource extraction projects, which provide the raw materials needed to support urban life. As political economist Mel Watkins notes, "not only is the hinterland interest being made subservient to the national interest, but by some sleight of hand, the national interest is equated with the metropolitan interest."<sup>6</sup> This naturalized hegemony of urbanity stems from a history of Canadian settler-state expansion, spatialized by the national infrastructure projects implemented in the first decades after Canadian Confederation.

### Drawing the Grid

In 1871, the Dominion Land Survey was initiated to systematically map the prairies, preparing the region for the growth of the agricultural industry and fostering European settlement. Led by Surveyor General Lieutenant-Colonel John Stoughton Dennis, head of the newly formed Dominion Lands Branch of the Department of the Interior, the Dominion Land Survey was an ambitious program with an immense scale, requiring systematic coordination and implementation. To say the least, Dennis' military background and training were appropriate for the task. Beginning in western Ontario and marching westward across the prairies, the Dominion Land Survey mapped nearly 800,000 square kilometres in only a matter of decades, resulting in the canonical map collection known as the "Three-mile Series." This map series, which "was to be Canada's first extensive systematic mapping exercise,"<sup>7</sup> transformed the vast prairie landscape into an expansive property grid available for systematic occupation by settlers. Showing "only the section and range property lines,"<sup>8</sup> the main purpose of these maps was to serve as spatial ledgers of settlement, tracking the progress and administration of settlement, an indispensable tool of colonization.

The abstract measure and totalizing geometry of the survey grid applied by the Dominion Land Survey are especially legible with the introduction of ground and aerial photographic surveying technologies in the 1920s, where the principles of linear perspective were applied to produce maps:

*In order to use this principle [of linear perspective] it is assumed that the surface of the land*

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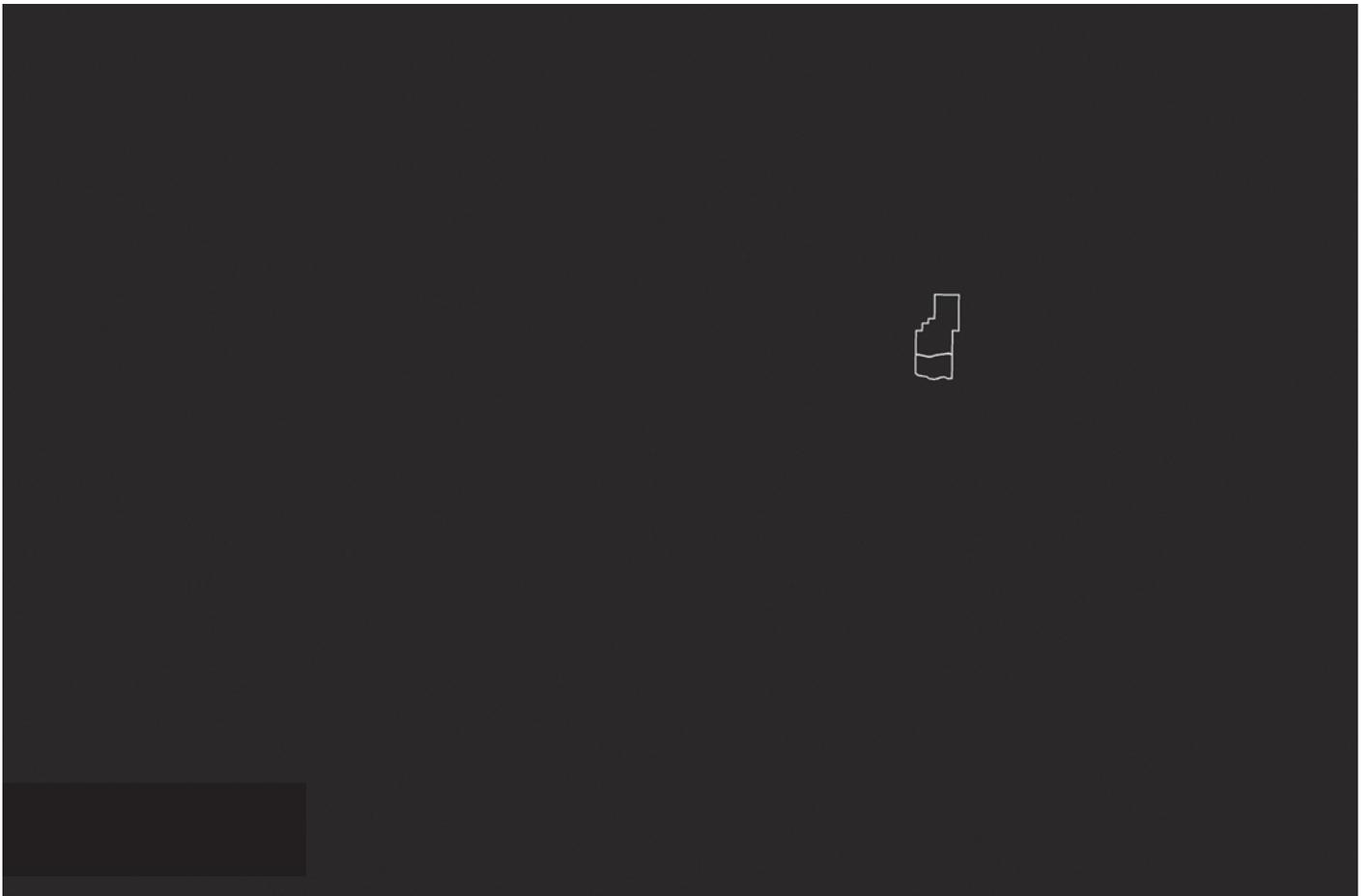
(Detail) Forestry Concessions South of the Peace River (c. 1990) 1 : 2,000,000



6 (Detail) Coal Tenures in Western Alberta (c. 1970) 1 : 1,000,000

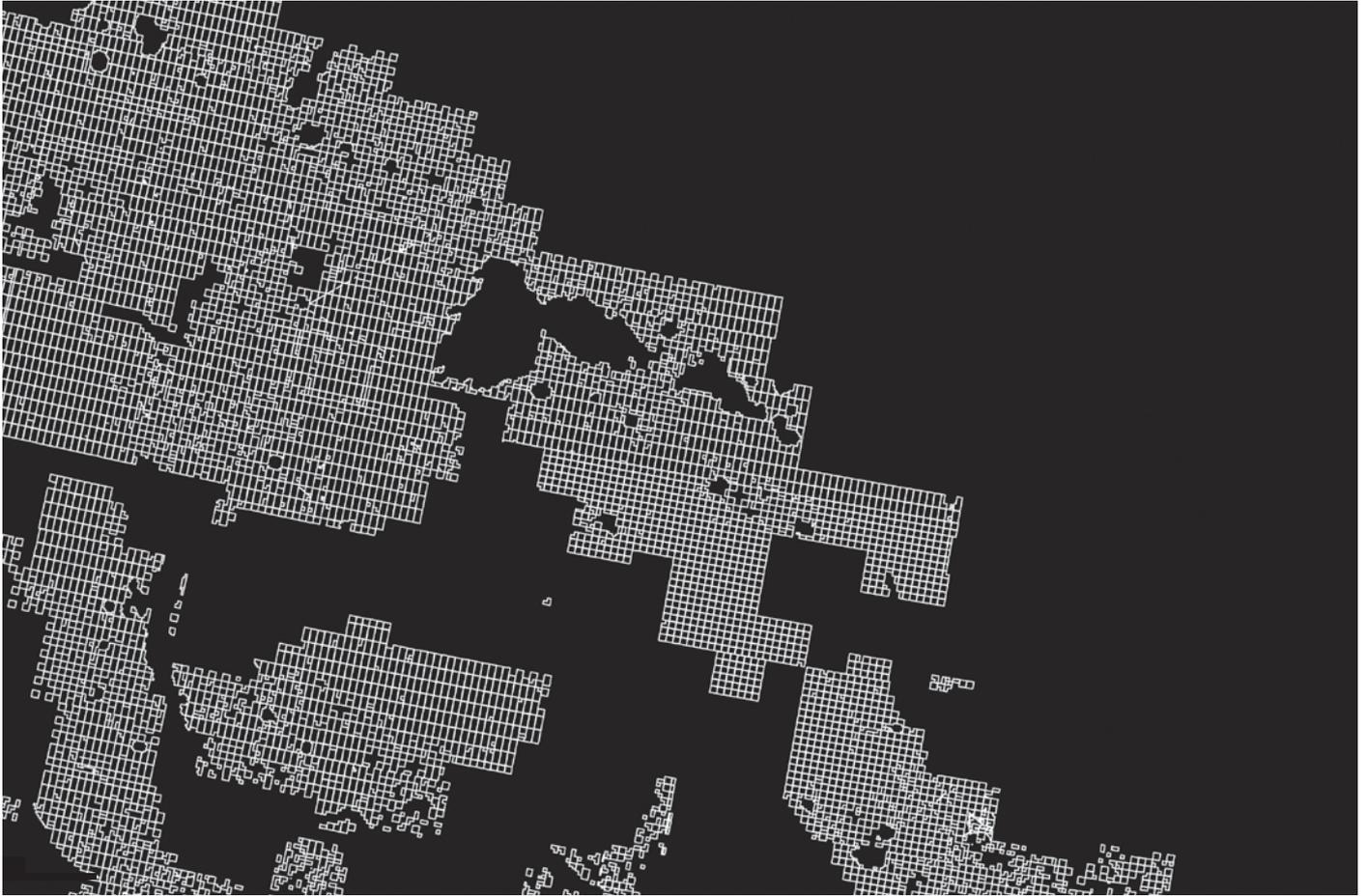


(Detail) Pacific Rim National Park (1970) 1 : 1,000,000



(Detail) Elk Island National Park (1913) 1 : 1,000,000

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(Detail) Potash Claims in Saskatchewan (c.1960) 1 : 1,000,000

viewed in an oblique photograph is a horizontal plane that may be subdivided without sensible error by drawing straight lines to suitable vanishing points. A net of such perspective lines drawn at uniform distances apart, so as to enclose squares on the ground, has been given the name of perspective grid or perspectrometer, and its use in constructing a map consists briefly in noting the position of all features of importance with respect to the grid lines and then reproducing these features by hand on a rectangular grid in which the squares have been laid out at the scale of the map. The unit of measurement in the Dominion Land Surveys being the surveyor's chain, 66 feet in length, the unit of subdivision adopted for the grids has been made a square 10 chain lengths on a side.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond a mere inscription of geometry, the indiscriminate imposition of grids onto the prairie landscape by the Dominion Land Survey serves an ideological role as well. The survey grid "embodied and inscribed a national teleology on a landscape that, although bounded by the cartographic abstraction of national borders, had not yet been rationalized in relation to them."<sup>10</sup> It is not enough to simply impose cardinal geometry on a territory, settler territoriality must be generated through the ideological framing mechanism known as *landscape*—here understood as the field of theory and practice which interprets the world, reflecting a specific set of cultural values, ideological frameworks, and knowledge systems, read through

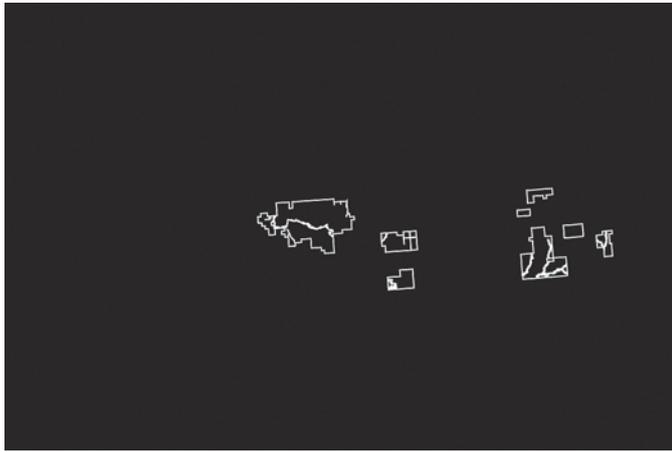
representations of the land—establishing colonial knowledge as a mode of territorial control.

As the Dominion Land Surveyors made their way westward, so did the construction of the transcontinental railway, leading the way as an infrastructural corridor of colonization, realizing Macdonald's dream to unify the Canadian Dominion *from sea to sea*.<sup>11</sup> Rail construction proceeded systematically during the 1870s and 1880s, with five segments being constructed simultaneously and eventually joining to compose a single transcontinental line in 1885. As the railway arrived in Western Canada, so too did large numbers of European settlers, populating towns and cities along the railway line, allotted by the Dominion Land Survey.

### Re-Landscaping

Before the transcontinental railway crossed the prairies, the land first had to be cleared. Between 1871 and 1929, the eleven Numbered Treaties were signed with the purpose of extinguishing Indigenous land title, displacing Indigenous peoples into reserves, and appropriating land for the benefit of the Canadian settler-state. By systematically pushing Indigenous peoples into peripheries and establishing concentrated settler strongholds in towns and cities, this triad of infrastructure projects undertaken at the turn of the twentieth century—the Numbered Treaties, the Dominion Land Survey, and the Transcontinental

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(Detail) Grasslands National Park (1981) 1 : 2,000,000



(Detail) Treaty 8 Reserves (1899) Fort McKay, Athabasca Chipewyan, Mikisew Cree, Fon du Lac Dene, and Little Red River Cree First Nations 1 : 2,000,000

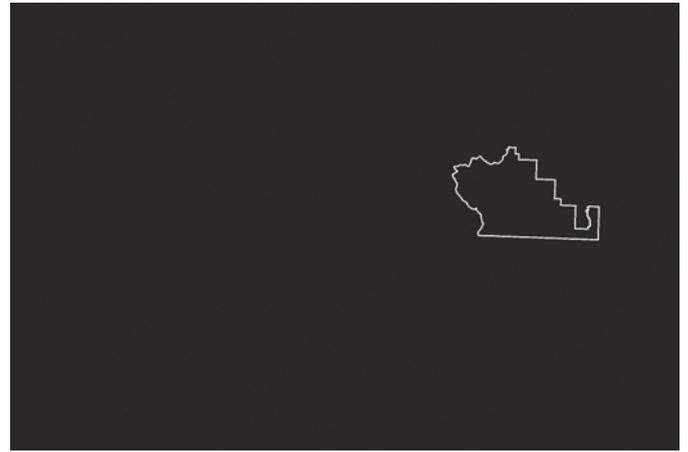
Railway—established a spatialized settler hegemony which persists to the present day.

The exclusionary policies of the early national parks also aimed to erase Indigenous presence from the landscape. While undertaking early surveying and planning work at Banff in 1887, Superintendent Stewart remarked that, “it is of great importance that if possible the Indians should be excluded from the Park.”<sup>12</sup> In the years following, a combination of discriminatory hunting laws and border controls resulted in the forced expulsion of the Stoney Nakoda people from the park, setting a precedent for the exclusionary nature of national parks as spaces of settler control.

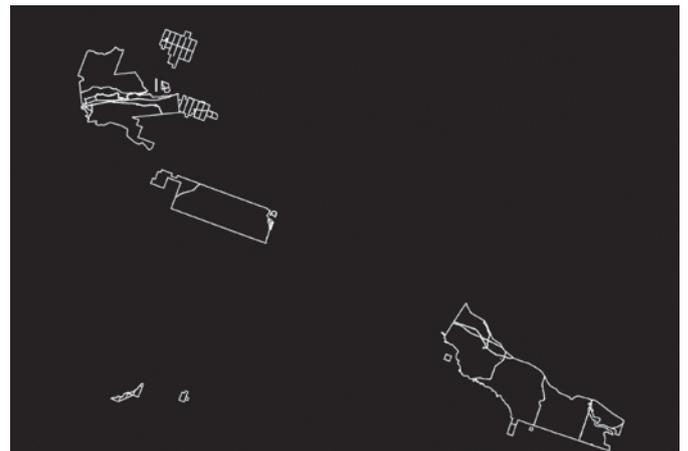
The core tenet of colonization is access to and control of territory, achieved through not only the physical seizure of land, but also the ideological inscription of settler value systems onto Indigenous lands. “Human cultures have an enormous capacity to reframe things,” observed Seneca Historian John Mohawk, and “[part] of our problem in Western culture has to do with how we reframed nature.”<sup>13</sup> In the case of the Canadian national parks system, the ideological construct of the parks as spaces of uninhabited wilderness pre-empted the invisibilizing of Indigenous presence, establishing the parks as spaces subservient to settler desires for recreation and relaxation, an escape from urban life.

Coupled with the technological processes of cartographic delineation, division, and transcription,

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(Detail) Waterton Lakes National Park (c. 1970) 1 : 2,000,000



(Detail) Treaty 7 Reserves (1877) and adjacent Stoney Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, Siksiká, Shuswap, and Akisqnuq First Nations 1 : 2,000,000

the ideological re-landscaping<sup>14</sup> of land is essential to the project of settler-colonialism as a naturalizing cultural force. Without forced ideological transformation, material interventions on the land do not hold the same power to dispossess; a line inscribed by a survey chain cannot itself colonize without the underlying colonial logics of settlement and resource exploitation. The imposition of colonial practices of relating to land as resource justified Indigenous dispossession through the flawed conclusion that “‘we’ could use the land better than they could.”<sup>15</sup> Nowhere is the ideological re-landscaping more legible than in the national parks. Wilderness, as a culturally constructed landscape, has been mobilized to de-politicize Indigenous territories, masking programs of dispossession under the guise of primordial environmental protection. For the Canadian settler-state, this idea of wilderness is embodied by the national imagination as a defining characteristic of Canadian identity. It is the shared relationship between Canadians and their national landscape—including the inherent un-tameability of the uniquely “Canadian” wilderness—that defines our national identity.<sup>16</sup> The banal façade of environmental conservation and protectionism behind which national parks operate is perpetuated by what Frank Tough calls “a long-held presumption that conservation and resource management are uncontroversial.”<sup>17</sup> However, as the history of environmental imperialism has shown time and time

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again, colonial-state control over so-called “wilderness” has had profoundly negative consequences for the Indigenous and other dispossessed peoples who live on that land, and the Canadian national parks system is no exception. As it turns out, in the mode of settler territoriality under which the Canadian nation state operates, resource exploitation and the glorification of wilderness are merely two sides of the same extractive worldview.

The final irony of Canadian national settler identity is a bewildering one. Despite Canada’s economic dependence on environmentally degrading resource industries, the iconic significance of national parks and extreme value placed on protecting “untouched nature”<sup>18</sup> persists as a core symbol of Canadian national identity. As a marker of their importance, in 2017, Parks Canada offered free admission to all national parks across the country as part of the sesquicentennial “Canada 150” celebrations. The most appropriate response to this national promotion can be found in an article published by the satirical news outlet *The Beaverton*: “Enjoy Canada’s amazeballs natural beauty and try not to think why the people that resided there for thousands of years are now mostly absent.”<sup>19</sup>

#### Endnotes

- 1 Department of the Interior, “Part VI: Report of the Superintendent of Rocky Mountains Park,” *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the year 1887* (Ottawa: Printed by Order of Parliament, 1888).
- 2 Environment Canada Parks Service, “National Parks System Plan” (Government of Canada, 1997), 4.
- 3 Figures include both National Parks and National Park Reserves.
- 4 The 1888 Annual Report of the Department of the Interior consists of six parts: Dominion Lands, Dominion Lands Survey, Geological Survey, Northwest Territories, Forestry, and Rocky Mountains Park.
- 5 The management of the National Parks System did not become responsibility of the Department of the Environment (where the portfolio of National Parks is currently held) until 1979.
- 6 Mel Watkins, *Dene Nation: The Colony Within* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 86.
- 7 Iain C. Taylor, “Official Geography and the Creation of ‘Canada’,” *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 1–15.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Gerard H. Matthes, “Oblique Aerial Surveying in Canada,” *Geographical Review* 16, no. 4 (October 1926): 572.

10 Bruce Willems-Braun, “Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post) Colonial British Columbia,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no. 1 (March 1997): 13.

11 The national motto of Canada is *A Mari Usque Ad Mare*, or “from sea to sea.”

12 Department of the Interior, “Part VI: Report of the Superintendent of Rocky Mountains Park,” *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the year 1887* (Ottawa: Printed by Order of Parliament, 1888).

13 John Mohawk, “How the Conquest of Indigenous Peoples Parallels the Conquest of Nature,” Seventeenth Annual E.F. Schumacher Lectures, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, October 1997.

14 See Charmaine Nelson, *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016): “The process of colonization entailed the literal and material reconfiguration or re-landscaping of territory as well as its visual artistic re-presentation as a unique imperial possession” (14). Furthermore, “This re-landscaping, integral to colonization, was itself the act of dispossession and re-possession, a dispossession of indigenous populations and presence and the installation of European populations, methods and ideologies” (19).

15 Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 389, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

16 Eva Mackey, “Becoming Indigenous: Land, Belonging, and the Appropriation of Aboriginality in Canadian Nationalist Narratives,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 42, no. 2 (July 1998): 151.

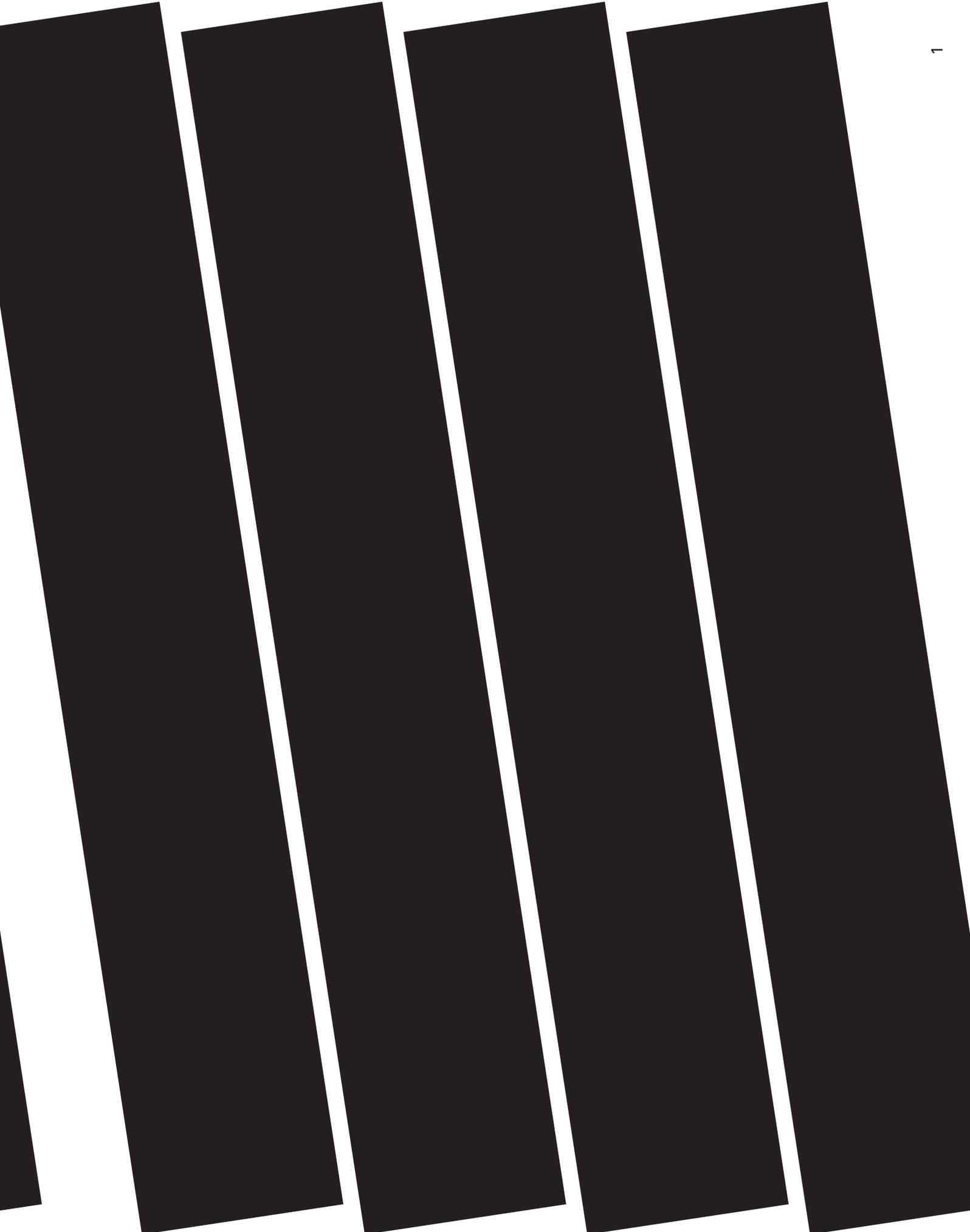
17 Frank Tough, “Conservation and the Indian: Clifford Sifton’s Commission of Conservation, 1910–1919,” *Native Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 70.

18 In 2016, CPAWS reported that “Canadians continue to value our national parks as one of the top symbols of Canadian identity [...] and this has not changed for decades.” Furthermore, “Canadians continue to value unspoiled nature and wildlife above all else in their national parks.” Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, “Protecting Canada’s National Parks: A Call for Renewed Commitment to Nature Conservation” (CPAWS, 2016).

19 Callum Wratten, “7 Ways to Celebrate Canada’s 150th Birthday That Aren’t Contemplating the Genocide on Which It Is All Built,” *The Beaverton*, 23 May 2017, <https://www.thebeaverton.com/2017/05/7-ways-celebrate-canadas-150th-birthday-arent-contemplating-genocide-built>.

Grids and Parks:

Two Sides of an Extractive Worldview



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