

*Settler colonialism is a way of thinking about power and migration that allows us to better understand the nature of contemporary Canadian society.<sup>1</sup>*

## A Dissonant Lullaby

Emily Neufeld has been performing interventions in houses slated for demolition in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia and in abandoned farmhouses across the Canadian Prairies since 2015. Combing through remnants of the empty sites, she probes for traces of the lives and histories of those who inhabited them to better understand the powers and influences shaping a place and the incremental changes that occur over time.

Neufeld travelled to a dozen farmhouses over the summer of 2018 as part of her research for the exhibition, *Prairie Invasions: A Lullaby*. These are a few of many deserted homes punctuating the Canadian prairies, built by Settler migrant farmers who came in waves during the 1800s and which form part of the complex history of colonization in Canada. As the decades passed, many of the family farms became conglomerates of larger holdings and farmhouses were left behind.

Neufeld's search for vacated properties was guided by friends, or friends of friends – even included a farmwomen's card night. When considering a house for an intervention, she attempted to meet each owner in order to gain permission to enter the farm and to learn something of the family's history. *Prairie Invasions: A Lullaby* focuses on six homes – four in Saskatchewan and two in Alberta. Once on a farm, Neufeld responds intuitively, attending to what catches her attention, to what gives her pause – it might be the faded and peeling flowered wallpaper; the open windows and ceilings, exposed and stripped of their coverings; or the floors nearly erased by the detritus that had either blown in or fallen through a failing roof.

Neufeld's interventions — the activities she undertakes and the sculptures she makes from the materials found within the homes and in the yards — she likens to “a funerary rite.” Before leaving, Neufeld documents the evidence of her actions in photographs and leaves the sculptures to follow the same fate as the house.

Born and raised in Alberta, Neufeld's engagement with the Canadian Prairies is genuine. Her great-grandparents, Mennonites, arrived in Canada in 1874 from the Russian Empire. Her grandmother, Mary Wiebe (maiden name Giesbrecht), was born in 1931 in Manitoba, and later moved to a farm in Alberta. Neufeld remembers her grandmother well

and recounts details of her life; she was farmed out at fourteen years old to work on another farm, later she married a farmer, Peter Wiebe, and bore six children. Mary Wiebe, like other Mennonite women living in spare homesteads and harsh conditions, found ways to beautify and soften their reality through expressions of pride rooted in their labour – glass jars of precisely cut peach slices lining a shelf; wallpaper - painted by hand; or planted flowers outside the door.

Neufeld asserts that she takes a Mennonite approach to making art. If she is not “sweating, hurting and exhausted, it doesn't count as work” and justifying it is difficult. Though she may be hefting clods of dirt and grasses under a hot sun there is a tenderness in the curious efforts she makes within the houses - moving a barn swallow's nest to an alcove, tacking a bedroom wall with dozens of native Brown-eyed Susans from the ditch by the highway, or mounting a shelf as a final repository for the bulrushes gathered from outside.

As Neufeld walks through the remains of a deserted farmhouse, she wades through Canada's colonial past. Gathering barn swallows' nests to use in her interventions, she draws comparison between the migration of her Mennonite ancestors and the displacement of Indigenous peoples to the European barn swallow that forced other birds out from the land cleared for farms. Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker in *Settler: identity and colonialism in 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada* speak to the attachments and different relationships that Indigenous and Settler people have to the land— *the land is what sustains Indigenous communities and identities. The land is what Settler people need in order to have a home and economic stability.*<sup>2</sup> *There is a simple but important difference in the ways that Indigenous and Settler identities operate with respect to place: one integrated into the land and one imposed upon it.*<sup>3</sup>

In her investigations to better understand the powers and influences shaping a ‘place’ — the prairie farmhouses and land — Neufeld assumes the role of Settler, granddaughter and artist. Her title for the exhibition, *Prairie Invasions: A Lullaby* expresses the tensions of an unsettling reality and a sweetness residing in personal memory.

Nan Capogna, Curator

<sup>1,3</sup>Lowman, Emma Battell and Barker, Adam J. 2015. *Settler: identity and colonialism in 21st century Canada*. (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing) 24.