

**Unfrozen Currencies:
Money, National Mythologies, and the North**

Patrick Mahon

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Prologue: A Northern History

My experience in the north began in the mid-1980s, when I lived for two years in Chesterfield Inlet—a community of about 250 Inuit people and a few *Kabloonas* (Caucasians)—located on Hudson Bay at the mouth of the waterway that leads to Baker Lake. With my wife, Barbara, I worked as a teacher in a four-classroom school, teaching three various grades to a group of about eighteen Inuit children. Our life in “Chester,” as it was referred to locally at the time (today it is Igluligarjuk), was both fascinating and very routinized. It was fascinating because we were among a handful of only six or eight non-Inuit in a village consisting almost entirely of one extended family, the Sammurtoks. But life was highly circumscribed: even in such a remote place, weekdays were completely structured around the operations of the school.

Airplanes came to and from the community only twice a week in those days, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so the prospect of a weekend sojourn—to Churchill, perhaps—was out of the question. Because a trip of over sixty miles overland separated us from the next settlement, Rankin Inlet, our weekend forays by ski-doo or all-terrain vehicle were limited to explorations of the vast whiteness or colourful tundra, depending on the season. Sometimes an ice-fishing trip was organized to a local lake whose surface would be thick with nine feet of ice, or occasionally, I would be invited to accompany a caribou-hunting trip with some of the men from the community.

On those hunting days, we would depart in the darkness at 8:00 am to follow the red light of the leading ski-doo, bumping across the icy arctic terrain for twelve hours or more. As the day would progress, the frozen world would be lighted by a sun that only rises above the horizon for a few hours a day in the middle of winter. Eventually, a lonely caribou or two would be spied. Because I am not Inuit, nor had I lived in the north for more than two years, I could not carry a gun, but I would actively participate in the search for the animal, and in the ultimate hauling of the carcass and flayed skin back to the community to be shared with the hunters' families and mine. Our return to Chester would be amidst a deep blackness, and as we would approach the

softly lit homes of the Inuit people, I was conscious that the light and warmth they harboured, costly though it was, provided a luxury that earlier generations of Inuit would not have experienced. Yet, I also thought about what had been traded away when frozen domed houses were replaced by prefab matchboxes with their pastel-coloured exteriors, and their cramped, wood-panelled interiors.

In the middle of the 1980s, life in Chesterfield Inlet depended on both shopping as well as hunting as means for the Inuit to feed their families. In the community there were two local stores: the Hudson's Bay Company and the Co-op. This was consistent with the kinds of retail available in other small settlements of the Keewatin Region at the time, and remains fairly typical today. (In fact, the Bay has now been bought out by the Northern, but so far, no strip malls or Wal-marts have taken over the retail landscape populated by those two purveyors of groceries and dry goods, operating in what appears to be a vigorously competitive relationship.)

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, during our time in Chesterfield, the arrival of the Hawker or Dash-8 would set the stores abuzz with people in search of the latest imports from southern Canada and beyond. This stock included heads of lettuce that sold for upwards of four dollars, and could often be depended on to have frozen solid during their long flights from the south. Still, on those days when the fresh foods had arrived, there was usually a mid-morning dash to the two stores by some of Chester's matriarchs. Their quick pilgrimage meant that we teachers would often miss out on the over-priced vegetables on offer, being dependent on the lunchtime school bell for our freedom. But our inability to compete for the produce was not really so troubling, and we were always fascinated when we thought about the resulting culinary fare in some homes on those particular days. Generally the local diet appeared to span an array that included fresh caribou and Twinkies. And on a given Tuesday or Thursday, it would be supplemented by a lettuce, pomegranate, or rutabaga, depending on what was discharged from the bowels of the Dash-8.

The concept of money in the community of Chesterfield Inlet in the mid-1980s appeared to be a complex one, and local understanding of the larger money system ranged between the informed and the fantastic. Of course, the means by which local people became aware of what constituted the value systems around and through which money operated were by turns reliable and farcical. This was a setting within which wage employment, government grants, and traditional hunting practices operated productively and simultaneously; but also, where the spending habits of the wider world were portrayed on the TV series, *Dallas*, that was beamed into community living rooms on Friday evenings. Therefore, it should not have surprised me when one day a thirteen-year-old boy asked me with sincerity, "Do you get paid

for teaching us?" On later reflection, I surmised that though his assumption was apparently based on my race and cultural origins, the fact that he thought me to be a person of wealth who was sent north to promote the values and customs of a far-off (though beckoning) culture was not as naïve as it had first sounded.

Bartering for Drawings

Among the numerous artistic and social gestures inherent to the *Art and Cold Cash* project, which began many years after my first experiences in the north, various instances of "trading" and "bartering" took place. Most noteworthy among those activities was the exchange of photographs that were originally made by Jack Butler in the early 1970s, and the trade for other items, as shown in the video, "*Recalling the Barter Economy: Trading the Past in the Present.*" Of the exchanges presented in the video, a trade for one of my drawings of a seal bone made in the 1980s in Chesterfield Inlet, and brought to Baker Lake in 2004, is significant to this essay. That modest action is germane in that it seemingly challenged the historical paradigm whereby Inuit function as 'artists' and non-Inuit Southern Canadians necessarily act to commission and/or remove the artworks they produce to "foreign" markets.

To be specific about the occurrence: during our trading project, a hunter named Silas Aittauq took an interest in a series of drawings I brought to the north at the start of our *Art and Cold Cash* work as a means of "introducing" myself as an artist to the Baker Lake community. Though it had not necessarily been my intention to trade the drawings, I was intrigued by Silas' expressed interest in them, and by his eventual explanation that if one were to feed a child the meat that was attached to one of the bones I had depicted, the child would grow up to be a great hunter. I was even more engaged by the fact that after sharing his story, Aittauq went back to his house to retrieve a photo of his family to offer in exchange for my work. Needless to say, the exchange appeared to have the benchmarks of a fair trade.

Shifting the positions inherent to the conventional links between "Inuit," "art," and "southern outsiders" became part of another small project I undertook in Baker Lake following our making of the *Barter* video. To do this project, I decided that I would request to photograph some of the local people and their snow machines or all-terrain vehicles, and would use the photos as the basis for making drawings that I would then give to the subjects of the pictures upon my return to Baker Lake the following year. Once I had begun this project, I was fortunate to be able to record the images of about seven people, all of whom were open to the exchange, and appeared to trust that they would eventually be given a drawing—which they were. It was a simple enough project, and a simple trade of one image for another.

Yet, I remain interested in the potential for that work to have helped to slightly shift the historically determined dynamic around ideas of art and money in a northern Canadian context, and also to engage questions around representation and the rights of individuals to control the use of their own images.

Images as Money, Images on Money

With respect to the notion of trading images within a context where the links between culture, place, and identity are powerfully in evidence, an engraved image from 1974 shown on the back of the Canadian two-dollar bill, entitled *Eskimos Hunting by Ice Floes*, comes significantly to mind. The image appears to be overtly intended to engage in the project of promoting Canadian identity. Utilizing an ostensibly “natural” icon, the traditional northern aboriginal hunt is equated with the landscape (another conventional Canadian subject shown on art and money) as an authentic representation of Canada. While such images from the Canadian north have historically been included within the scope of nationalist iconography, it seems inarguable that the present demands a reflection on the “canon” from which such images emerge, and a critique of the 1974 two-dollar bill image, specifically. Furthermore, it is evident that the state of the environment, and the attendant impact on the north’s aboriginal peoples in particular, suggests we ought to reconsider the effects of representations such as those on national currency, and how they are historically constituted and ultimately traded upon. A key question thus arises: How do the markers of “authentic” Canadianness shown on currencies come to be exchanged in daily life, and what is the cost to those who are, or to what is shown?

It has often been acknowledged that ideas of nationhood in Canada have, in part, been forged in relationship to images of the land and of aboriginal peoples, among other “authenticating” subjects. Such images have included those painted by artists and illustrators whose works were modelled on a British idea of landscape, the paintings of the Group of Seven, and other representations such as those displayed on paper money since the twentieth century and earlier. Images of the land have been used to promote Canadian nationalism in a number of ways, including, as Canadian historian Emily Gilbert has shown, by “drawing upon the kinds of natural images that have long fed the Canadian imagination.”¹ Thus, it can be argued that the circulation and flow of currency bearing landscapes and other “authentic” images of Canada has, historically, been a means to encourage within the minds and hearts of its citizens involved in daily capitalist exchange, nationalist sentiments concerning the land, and essentialist ideas about its first peoples. Such representations have also been used to promote an idea of Canada as uniquely allied with notions of wilderness and “the north,” even beyond its national borders.

Landscape Art and Canada

Prior to beginning an analysis of the manner in which money and representations of landscape and aboriginal people figure in producing iconographies of “value” in Canada, it is useful to turn to a more general history of the relationship between the land, and questions of representation in art in this country.²

In his essay “An Iconography of Nationhood in Canadian Art,” historian Brian Osborne offers the following, rather utopian, thought by writer Michael Bell who was speaking at a conference on documentary art in Canada in 1980:

Visual images form a continuum with our imaginative responses to our contemporary environment. They will, if their currency can be increased, help to prevent the destruction of many of our cultural values, and [will also further our] respect for the variety of cultural themes that constitute the cultural whole of Canada.³

Certainly, the history of painting the landscape in Canada charts the development of a pictorial project that evidences an initially colonized visual field, that gave way to a developing tradition more closely allied with the specifics of the geography and the material sensibilities of its subject. In the mid-nineteenth century, landscapes in North America, and in Canada specifically, were produced according to the conventions established by English artists such as J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, and categorized by historians such as John Ruskin and William Gilpin. Osborne’s comment on artist George Heriot could be applied to any number of artists of the period: “As is so often the case, it was convention that framed his vision of the new environment he encountered rather than the environment which challenged that vision.”⁴

It is interesting to note that over and against the mid-nineteenth century depiction of the land as romantic and often unpeopled, the production of some southern Canadian aboriginals at the time (utilizing wood and bark), emphasized the natural world and the subject’s place within it. According to Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill, “...the birch-bark scrolls of the Ojibwa Midewiwin shamans [could] be viewed as two-dimensional plans of the ceremonial procession of the longhouse as well as a four-dimensional statement of arrangements in the spiritual world.”⁵

Osborne notes that development of “a national historical identity was well-served by the efforts of genre painters such as Frances Hopkins, and by historical illustrators, [but] it was the work of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven which contributed most

to the development of a national identification with a distinctive sense of place."⁶ So, while the range of subjects the Group portrayed was vast, they became most known for images of a primordial, unpeopled north. Curator Roald Nasgaard has attributed some of this impulse to the symbolist landscape art movement that was current in Finland, Norway, and Sweden in the early twentieth century. Nasgaard argues that the movement was, in fact, a final stage of the nineteenth century northern romantic landscape tradition, and that Thomson and his colleagues were well aware of it—in part through an exhibition held in Buffalo in 1913. Such influences, coupled with the Theosophist view that the spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic renaissance would come from the north, were at the heart of the Group's project.⁷

The ethos that drew the Group of Seven together and came to be associated with its work was one of a triumphal "northernness." So an ideology of utopian, northern distinctiveness came to inflect the iconography of the Canadian landscape, particularly in the mid-twentieth century. But, indeed, the "northern spirited images" of the Group were thought by many Canadians to have simply replaced one set of foreign images (derived from the English) with another set of exclusive visuals which emanated from metropolitan Toronto—and thus, did not represent the breadth of Canada's continental scope.⁸ So, the particularity of the cultures of Eastern Canada, the Prairies, British Columbia, and the Arctic ultimately came to be considered, in the mid-twentieth century, to be pictorially better served by other image makers, including Alex Colville, Christopher Pratt, William Kurelek, Emily Carr, and aboriginal artists Norval Morrisseau and Jessie Oonark, for example.⁹ Thus, the "regions" had come to be understood as areas of "peoples," along with rocks, trees, and snow.

The Land, Its Peoples, and National Currency

Given the foregoing, and the opportunity to recognize the complexities inherent to representations of the land and its peoples as means to promoting nationalist sentiments, it is now useful to turn to the subject of representation and images on money in order to further address questions concerning the north and its peoples.

In an article cited earlier, "Forging a National Currency," Emily Gilbert notes that (at the time of her writing at the end of the twentieth century) there was an increase of interest in the subject of national currencies as monetary transformations were occurring, and as certain national currencies were being threatened. According to Gilbert, when borders between monetary systems shift, or are removed altogether, and as paper money comes to be displaced by virtual forms of exchange, the cultural status of currency is a deeply significant topic for critical consideration.¹⁰

In general terms, it can be said that the use of national currencies is an invented tradition within which nationalist iconographies can be disseminated, at the same time as potential monetary stability and state sovereignty are promoted. Through the exchange of state-generated currency, the nation becomes visibly involved in daily trade against a backdrop whereby the community defines itself. Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" is significant to the idea that national currencies serve to produce ideas of nation on a grand scale through the ongoing production and distribution of nationalist iconographies.¹¹ Through increasingly inexpensive and ready methods of print production, national currencies also gain the potential to distribute nationalizing iconographies with increasing attention to historical nuance. In Canada, for example, we have been watching Queen Elizabeth age gradually, based on comparatively regular "updates" to her portrait on the front of our twenty-dollar bill.

The idea for a national currency in Canada was introduced in 1840, but was not fully realized until 1954. Gilbert suggests that this seemingly late arrival of national paper money was, in part, due to the lasting ties between Canada and Britain, as well as to our proximity to the United States. Additionally, the Bank of Canada was only formed in 1934, and so it was after that time that the necessary ties between the state, financial institutions, and mechanisms of monetary control existed to eventually allow for the currency to be released.¹²

When the first Canadian national currency was issued in 1954, it was clear that the Bank of Canada was attempting to advance a prominent Canadian dimension within the iconographic program by replacing the allegorical figures that had been presented on some of the earlier currencies that were distributed regionally. Laura Millard has shown that each denomination featured a specific, recognizable Canadian landscape based on photographs from specific locations.¹³ The images represented the following:

- \$1 – western prairie and sky of Saskatchewan
- \$2 – rural scene from Richmond, Quebec
- \$5 – stream, deciduous conifers, and rolling hills, Otter Falls, Alaska Highway in northern Canada
- \$10 – Rocky Mountain peak, Mount Allison, Alberta
- \$20 – winter scene, Laurentian hills, Quebec
- \$50 – crashing seas, Atlantic Coast
- \$100 – mountain valley and Okanagan Lake, British Columbia
- \$1000 – rural idyll, L'Anse Saint-Jean, Saguenay, Quebec

As if in response to the distrust of the mythologized Group of Seven landscapes as national symbols, and by favouring regionally specific, colloquial scenes, the bills represented the geography of the whole country, including seasonal shifts. It is interesting to observe, as Laura Millard has shown, that with the 1954 series, a human presence is visible on only about half of the notes, with no trace of industrialization or urbanism. In the latter regard, the notion of an impenetrable natural world as propounded by the Group is, in fact, still manifested.¹⁴

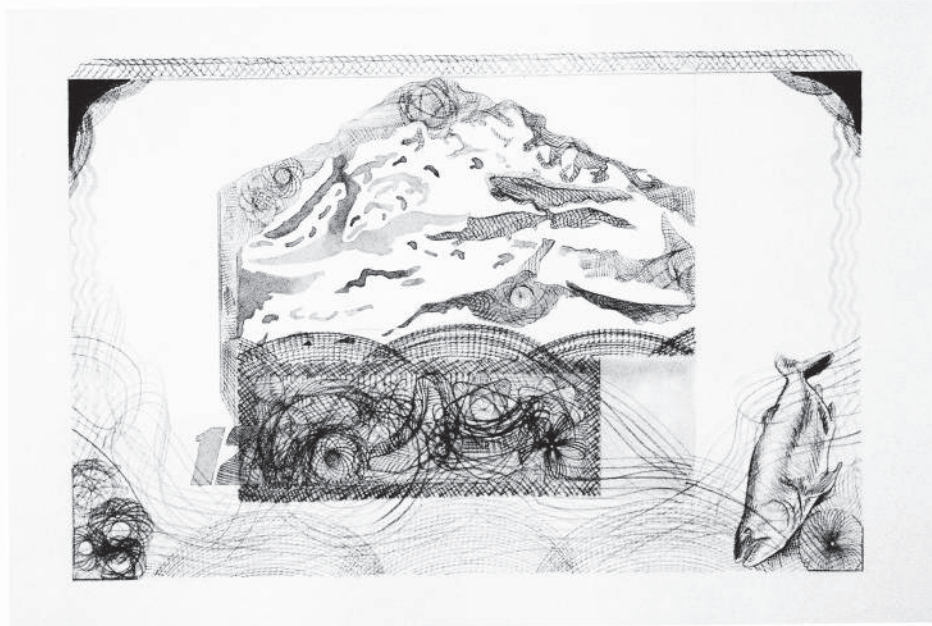
Of course, it must be said that on the 1954 series, and on the series released between 1969 and 1979—and even on the most recent issue from 2001-05—the colonialist influence has lingered via the image of Queen Elizabeth. However, her representation as the monarch of the federalist state is undercut to a strong degree by the images of the land and its peoples.¹⁵ The fading influence of the British monarchy in Canada had begun to be evident in the 1950s, though it is a subject of speculation and possible debate whether the ongoing iterations of Canadian currency manifest a continued retreat from the monarchy or uphold the status quo.

If the 1954 series displayed Canada as a place where nature and land predominate, the second issue, between 1969 and 1979, appears to present a nation at work. On the one-dollar bill, logging is depicted, while trawling for fish is shown on the five-dollar bill; the fifty-dollar bill bears the image of the RCMP Musical Ride. It can be argued that the “hunting on ice floes” image of the Inuit on the two-dollar bill from this series is one that involves labour as well, but clearly the image so strongly favours an archaic representation, which includes “timeless” clothing and tools, that it suggests the labour of aboriginal peoples is something out of history rather than the present day.

The “Canadian Journey Series” from 2001-05, features images that appear intent on advancing an ethos of Canada as a place of action and cultural transformation. The images on the backs of these bills appear graphically complex and challenging from the standpoint of pictorial legibility. The five-dollar bill shows a quintessential hockey game on a frozen pond, while the ten-dollar bill depicts Canadian peace-keeping efforts. On the twenty-dollar bill, the image depicted is of West Coast aboriginal artist, Bill Reid’s *Spirit of Haida Guai*—a sculpture representing a creation myth, which was produced for the Canadian Embassy in Washington. The fifty-dollar bill bears an image dedicated to nation building and women’s participation. It could potentially be argued that in the “Canadian Journey Series,” the aboriginal presence is also made “historical,” or in other words, is mythologized rather than being shown to exist amid the present day Canadian life, such as is featured on the other denominations.

RIGHT: Cleaning and drying char, video still from *Trading the Past in the Present: Recalling the Barter Economy*, Art and Cold Cash Collective, 2004-05.





Patrick Mahon, *Drawn Like Money #3*, ink and coloured pencil on paper, 56 cm x 76 cm, 2005.

Thawing and Redrawing

Emily Gilbert has argued that “the construction of Canadian identity expressed on national currency has been exclusionary, dependent, for example, upon a notion of progress and ‘civilization’ which delayed the participation of Native peoples within a monetary economy...”¹⁶ Clearly, the two representations of aboriginals on Canadian currency instantiate images which belie contemporary subjectivities in favour of historical and mythologized representations. And while it is not the intention of this essay to argue against the general validity of images of Inuit hunters at work in a traditional context, for example, it is arguable that within the framework of the currency program, this image might easily have been read in 1979 by southern Canadians as depicting contemporary Inuit hunting practices—that continued to rely solely on harpoons, kayaks, and on the stereotypic attributes of the “noble savage.” Bill Reid’s *Haida Guai* sculpture shown on the twenty-dollar bill released as of 2001, went some distance to avoid the problem of an archaizing representation, but as implied earlier, in context of other currency images depicting active social subjects, aboriginal representation is shown as far removed from contemporary life.

Speaking personally as an artist, I became aware of the specific, historical problem of aboriginal representation on Canadian currency, and of the more general questions of representation with regard to the north, while immersed in the *Art and Cold Cash* project. In response, this essay has laid out a historical framework regarding landscape, money, and representations of the north and its peoples in Canada, in order to pose critical questions about how troubled currencies—be they actual monetary paper ones, or other kinds of images and representations—may be usefully unfrozen, redrawn, and traded upon. These challenges, some of which I have ultimately articulated retrospectively for my own purposes, inflect my work as an artist, and informed the series *Drawn Like Money*, which was my major material contribution to *Art and Cold Cash*. My work is, admittedly, not made from the position of an aboriginal or a present-day “northerner.” It is, nevertheless, intended to usefully engage in representation within a twenty-first century context where the challenges of geography, the complexities of culture, and the needs of the environment necessitate new, albeit complex, social and cultural responses.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Emily Gilbert, “Forging a National Currency,” *Nation-States and Money* (London: Routledge, 1999), 34.
- ² A version of this section of the present essay was published previously in *Hinterlands: Fastwürms, Glabush, Thomeycroft, and Urban* (London, Ontario: McIntosh Gallery, 2008).
- ³ Brian S. Osborne, “The Iconography of Nationhood in Canadian Art,” *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 162.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Gilbert, “Forging a National Currency,” 25.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹³ Laura Millard, “Images of Canada: Canadian Bank Notes,” (Toronto: *Border/Lines* 28, 1993), 28.
- ¹⁴ Gilbert, “Forging a National Currency,” 34.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.