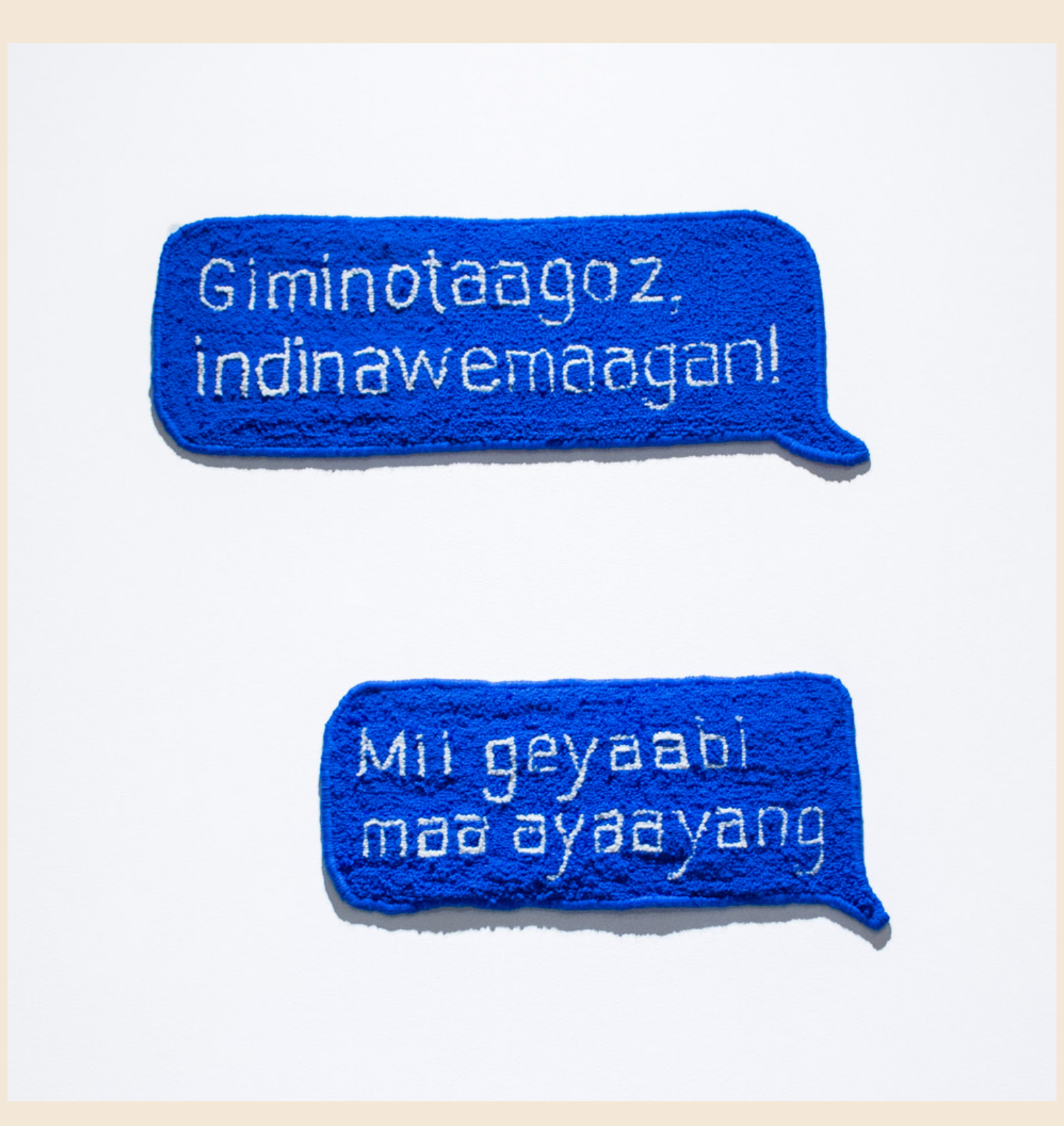
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

MARCH 27, 2026

SPELLING IT OUT

LANGUAGE IN INDIGENOUS ART

When words become images.


Giminotaagoz,
indinawemaagan!
Mii geyaabi
maa ayaayang

Susan Blight, *On the Occasion of Our Small Gatherings*, 2019–ongoing, courtesy of the artist.

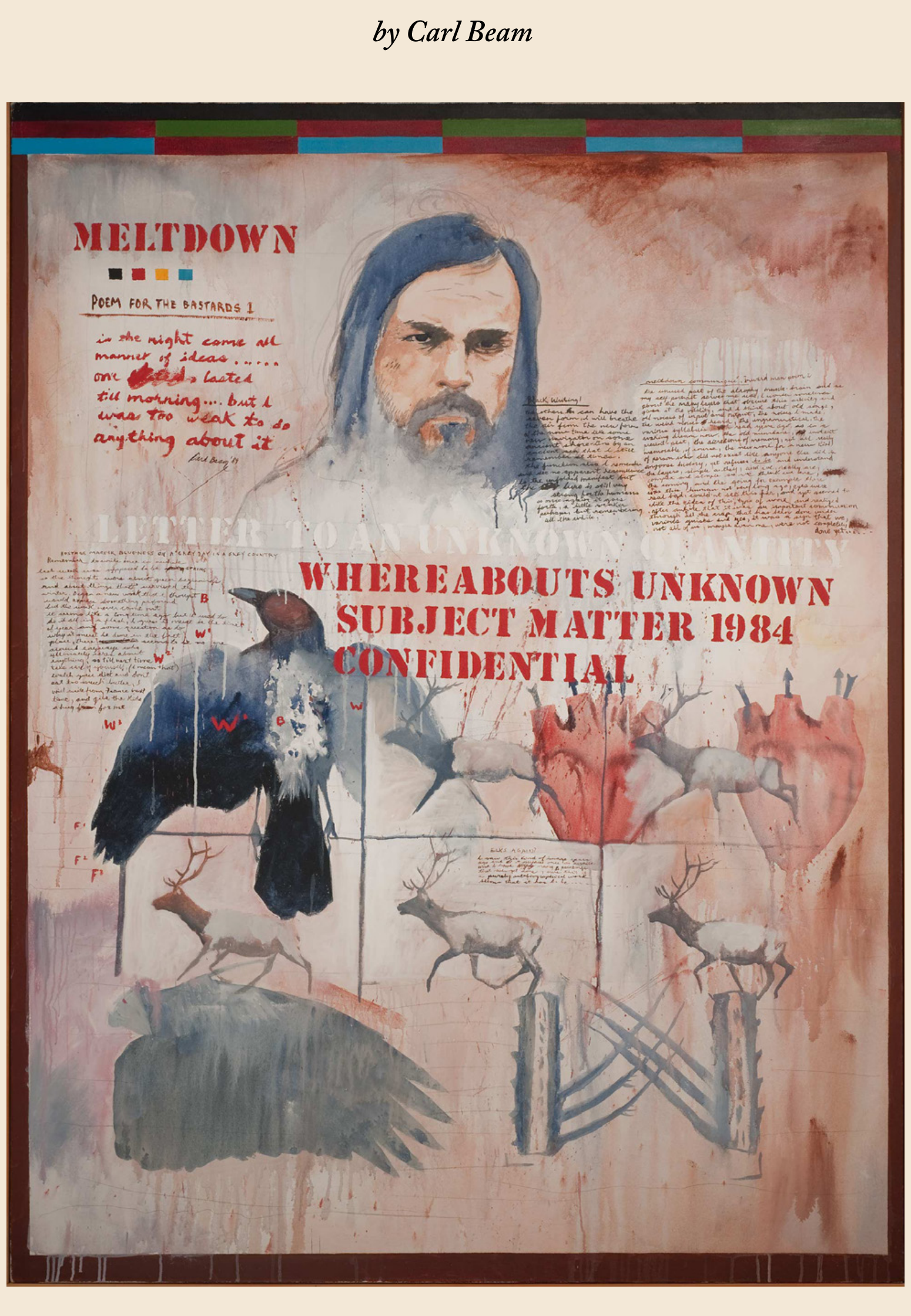
Jim Burant

March 31 is National Indigenous Languages Day in Canada. Established in 1989 by the Assembly of First Nations, the day highlights the need to protect more than seventy distinct Indigenous languages. To mark it, this week's newsletter, guest-edited by author and ACI board member Jim Burant (Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation), spotlights Indigenous artists whose work incorporates words as a visual force of creativity. Each piece below carries knowledge shaped by history through which culture, memory, and meaning are sustained. While some artists reinvigorate Indigenous text—using syllabics or romanized script—others work through English to acknowledge the profound loss of culture caused by colonial policies. Whether woven, etched, encoded, or superimposed, language asserts resilience and self-determination across generations.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

MELTDOWN, 1984

by Carl Beam


MELTDOWN
POEM FOR THE BASTARDS I
in the night came all manner of ideas . . . . . one lasted till morning.... but I was too weak to do anything about it
LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN QUANTITY
WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN
SUBJECT MATTER 1984
CONFIDENTIAL

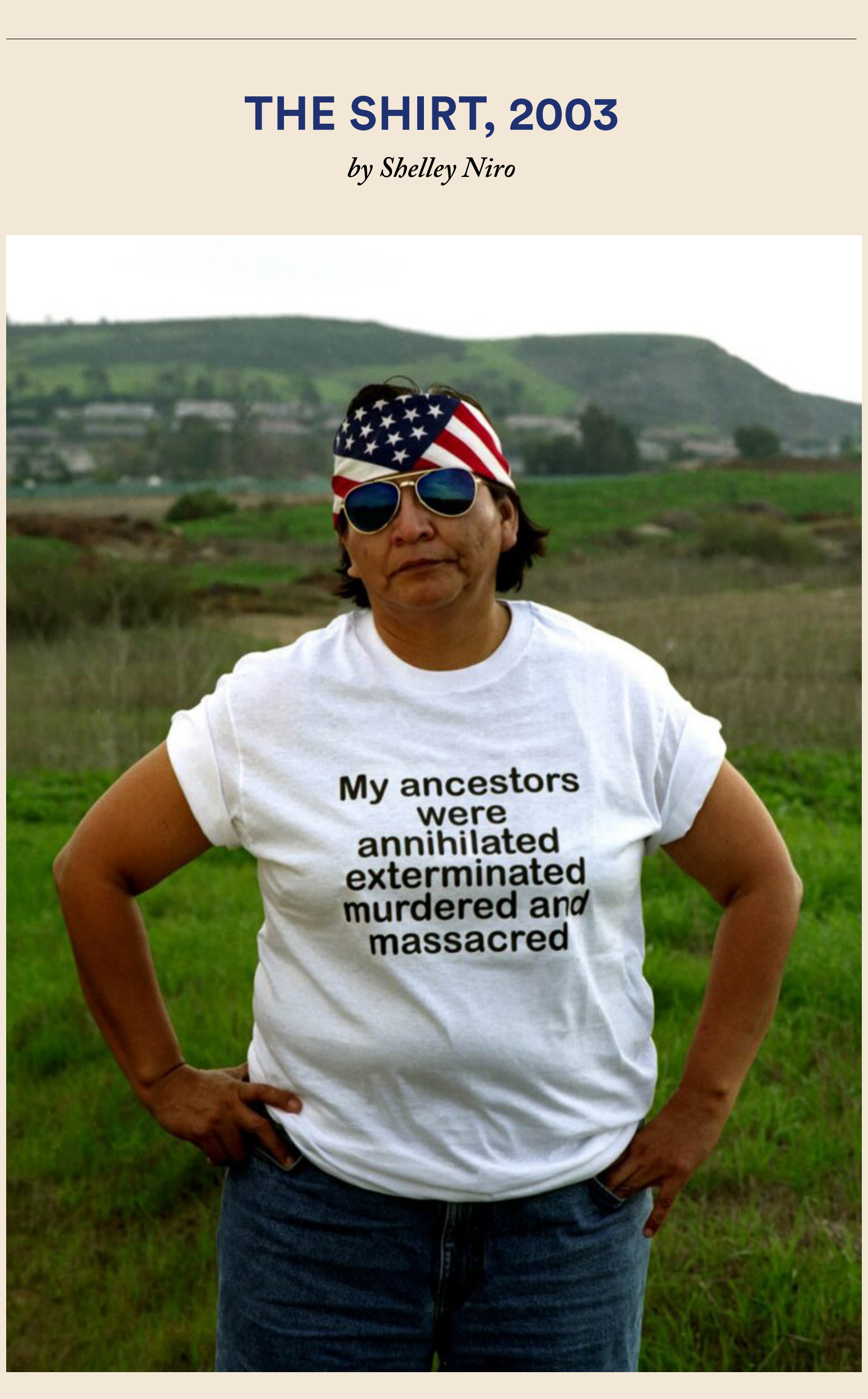
Carl Beam, *Meltdown*, 1984, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

Meltdown, 1984, by Anishinaabe multidisciplinary artist Carl Beam (1943–2005) uses collage to explore how visual and textual languages construct meaning. The large-scale piece includes handwritten and stencilled texts, with the words "Whereabouts unknown" and "Subject matter confidential" most prominently displayed. The image field incorporates a painted self-portrait and elements such as a running elk, a bird, and a heart, motifs that recur across Beam's work, evoking different responses depending on their surroundings. In this composition, Beam "melts down" stable interpretations and invites viewers to read the work fragment by fragment, constructing meaning through their own linguistic and interpretive frameworks.

Learn more in ACI's
Carl Beam: Life & Work

THE SHIRT, 2003

by Shelley Niro


My ancestors
were
annihilated
exterminated
murdered and
massacred

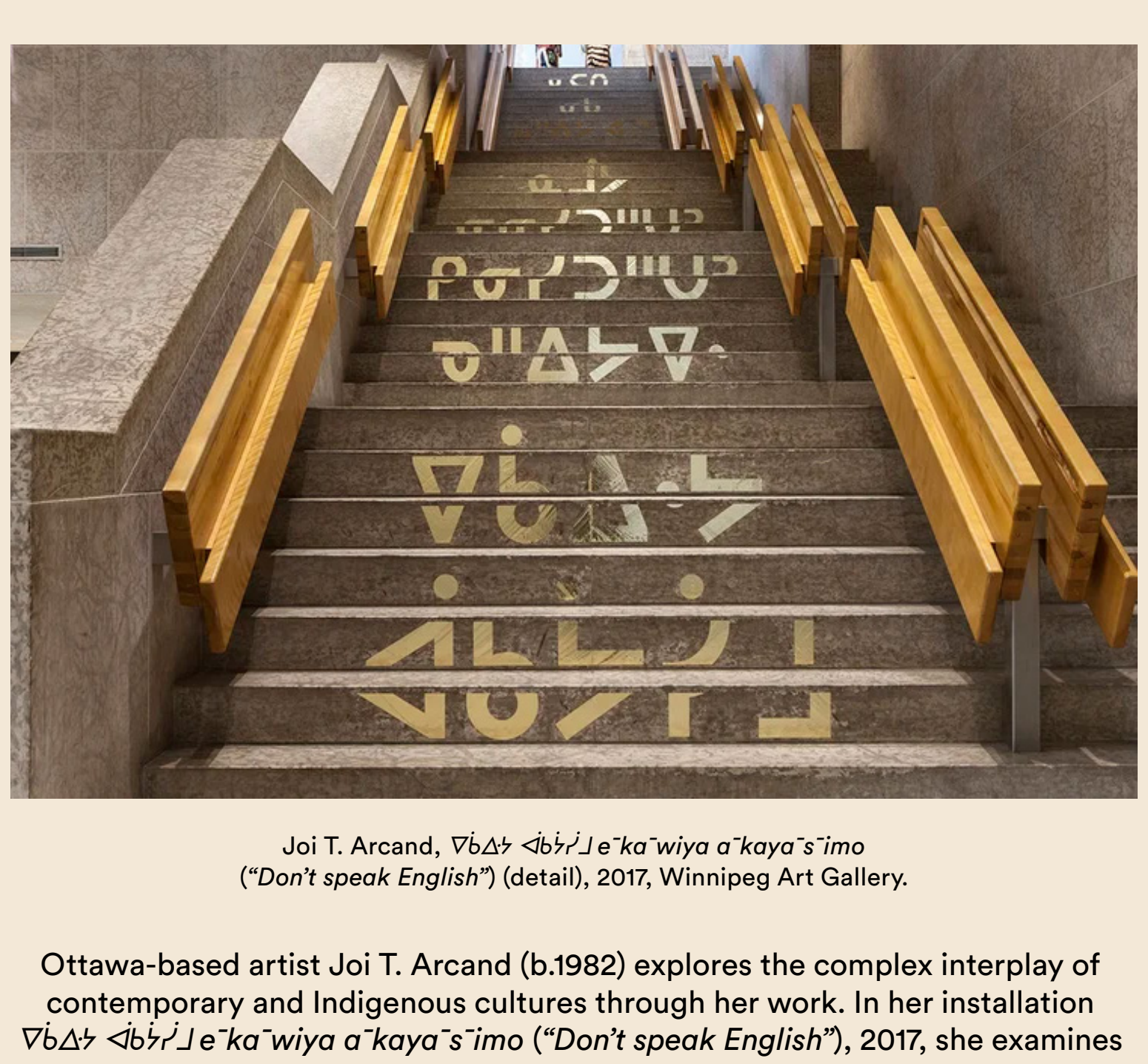
Shelley Niro, *The Shirt* (detail), 2003, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

In *The Shirt*, 2003, Mohawk artist Shelley Niro (b.1954) uses text on a T-shirt to confront colonial violence and Indigenous erasure. The sequence of images begins with a shirt reading "My ancestors were annihilated, exterminated, murdered and massacred." Similar messages follow, until Niro arrives at her darkly humorous final one: "And all's I get is this shirt." By placing these bold messages on everyday clothing, Niro transforms a familiar object into a narrative and political device, highlighting both the absurdity and the persistence of colonial narratives. The work blends irony, wit, and directness to assert Indigenous presence and storytelling through text.

Learn more

ᐁᑳᐃᔾ ᐋᑳᔮᓰᒧ E¯KA¯WIYA A¯KAYA¯S¯IMO ("DON'T SPEAK ENGLISH"), 2017

by Joi T. Arcand



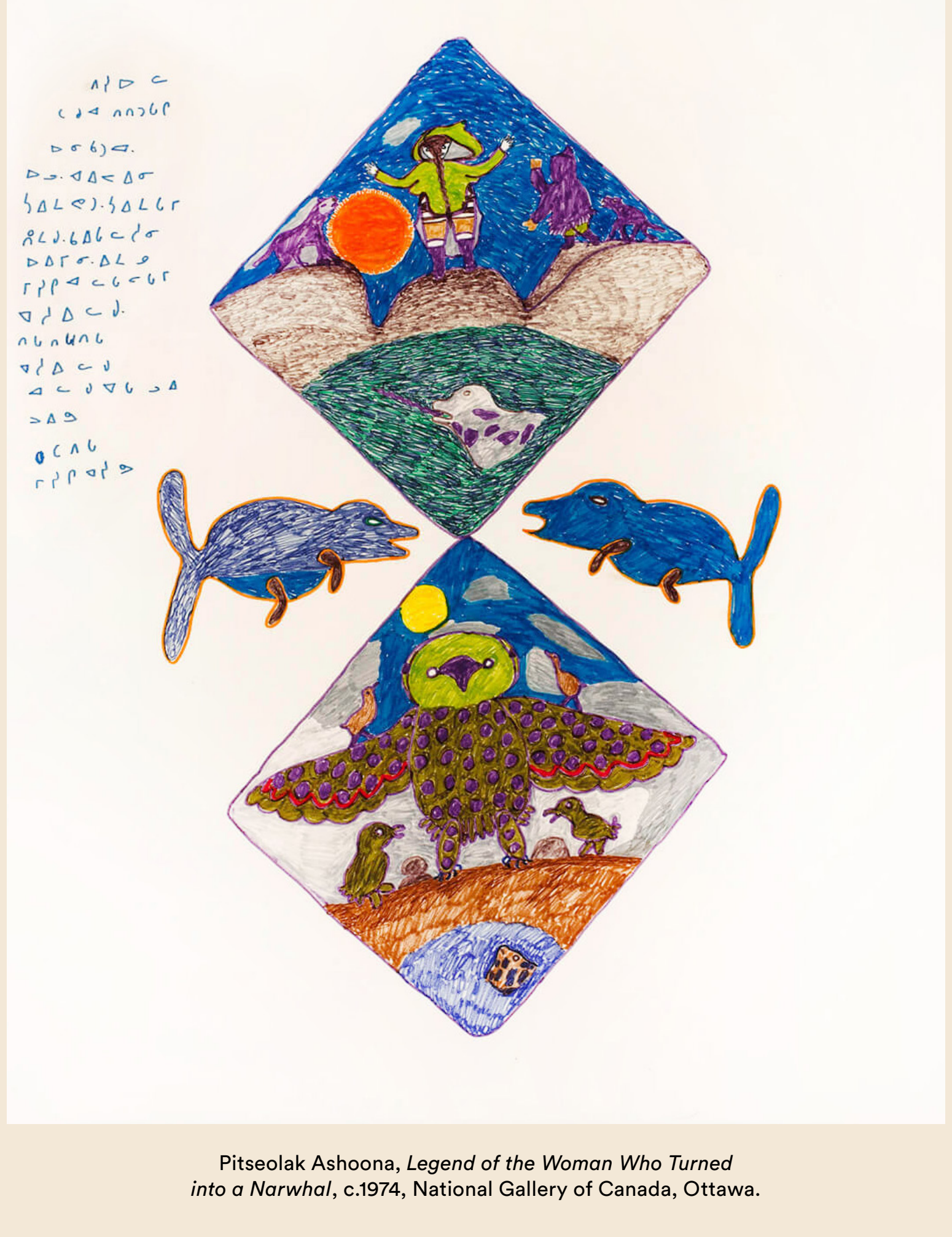
Joi T. Arcand, ᐁᑳᐃᔾ ᐋᑳᔮᓰᒧ *e¯ka¯wiya a¯kaya¯s¯imo*
(*"Don't speak English"*) (detail), 2017, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Ottawa-based artist Joi T. Arcand (b.1982) explores the complex interplay of contemporary and Indigenous cultures through her work. In her installation ᐁᑳᐃᔾ ᐋᑳᔮᓰᒧ *e¯ka¯wiya a¯kaya¯s¯imo* (*"Don't speak English"*), 2017, she examines how colonization disrupted language transmission across generations and imagines a future where Plains Cree syllabics are visually dominant. Arcand critiques English's cultural primacy as a way to highlight the struggle to preserve Indigenous languages. Her work not only confronts colonial histories but also celebrates linguistic resilience and the importance of revitalizing "mother tongues" in shaping Indigenous futures.

Learn more

LEGEND OF THE WOMAN WHO TURNED INTO A NARWHAL, C.1974

by Pitseolak Ashoona



Pitseolak Ashoona, *Legend of the Woman Who Turned into a Narwhal*, c.1974, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In *Legend of the Woman Who Turned into a Narwhal*, c.1974, Inuit artist Pitseolak Ashoona (c.1904–1983) pairs coloured ink drawings with a side caption in Inuktitut syllabics. The text transforms the visual into a storytelling artifact, connecting viewers to oral history, cultural memory, and the linguistic world of her community. By combining words and image, Pitseolak demonstrates how Indigenous artists use language as a tool for preserving, communicating, and performing community knowledge across generations.

Learn more in ACI's
Pitseolak Ashoona: Life & Work

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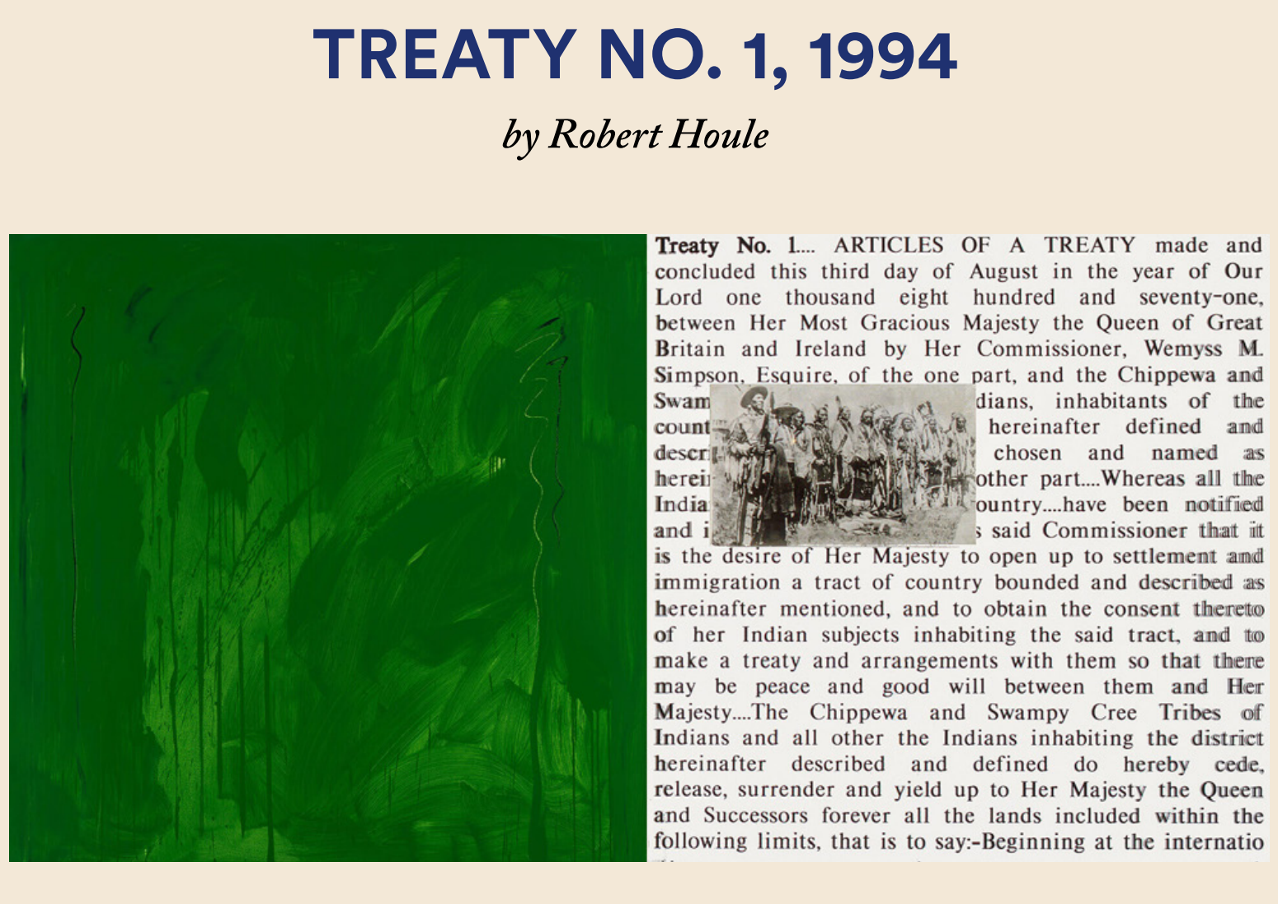
PREMISES FOR SELF-RULE: TREATY NO. 1, 1994

by Robert Houle


Treaty No. 1... ARTICLES OF A TREATY made and concluded this third day of August in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and seventy-one, between Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland by Her Commissioner, Wemyss M. Simpson, Esquire, of the one part, and the Chippewa and Swam ... dians, inhabitants of the count ... hereinafter defined and descr ... chosen and named as herei ... other part....Whereas all the India ... ountry....have been notified and i ... said Commissioner that it is the desire of Her Majesty to open up to settlement and immigration a tract of country bounded and described as hereinafter mentioned, and to obtain the consent thereto of her Indian subjects inhabiting the said tract, and to make a treaty and arrangements with them so that there may be peace and good will between them and Her Majesty....The Chippewa and Swampy Cree Tribes of Indians and all other the Indians inhabiting the district hereinafter described and defined do hereby cede, release, surrender and yield up to Her Majesty the Queen and Successors forever all the lands included within the following limits, that is to say:-Beginning at the internatio

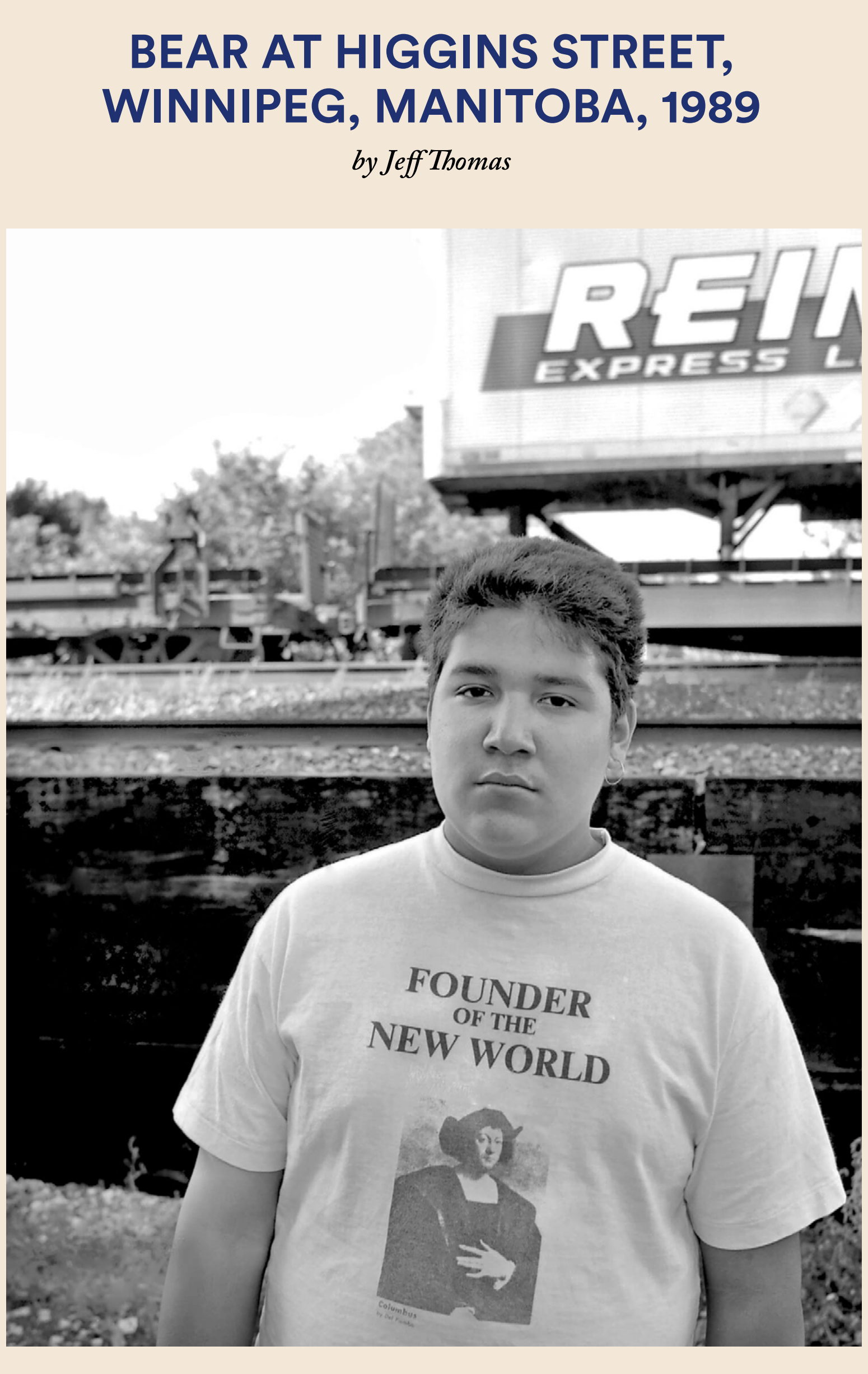
Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1994, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Indigenous artist and curator Robert Houle (b.1947) uses text as material and message in *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1994. A monochrome green panel is juxtaposed with the full legal text of the 1871 Treaty No. 1, overlaid with an archival photograph of Indigenous people looking at a medicine bundle. By placing the photo over the legal text, Houle not only creates tension but also confronts Canada's failure to honour Indigenous land rights and exposes how legal language has rationalized dispossession.

Learn more in ACI's
Robert Houle: Life & Work

BEAR AT HIGGINS STREET, WINNIPEG, MANITOBA, 1989

by Jeff Thomas


REI
EXPRESS
FOUNDER
OF THE
NEW WORLD
Columbus

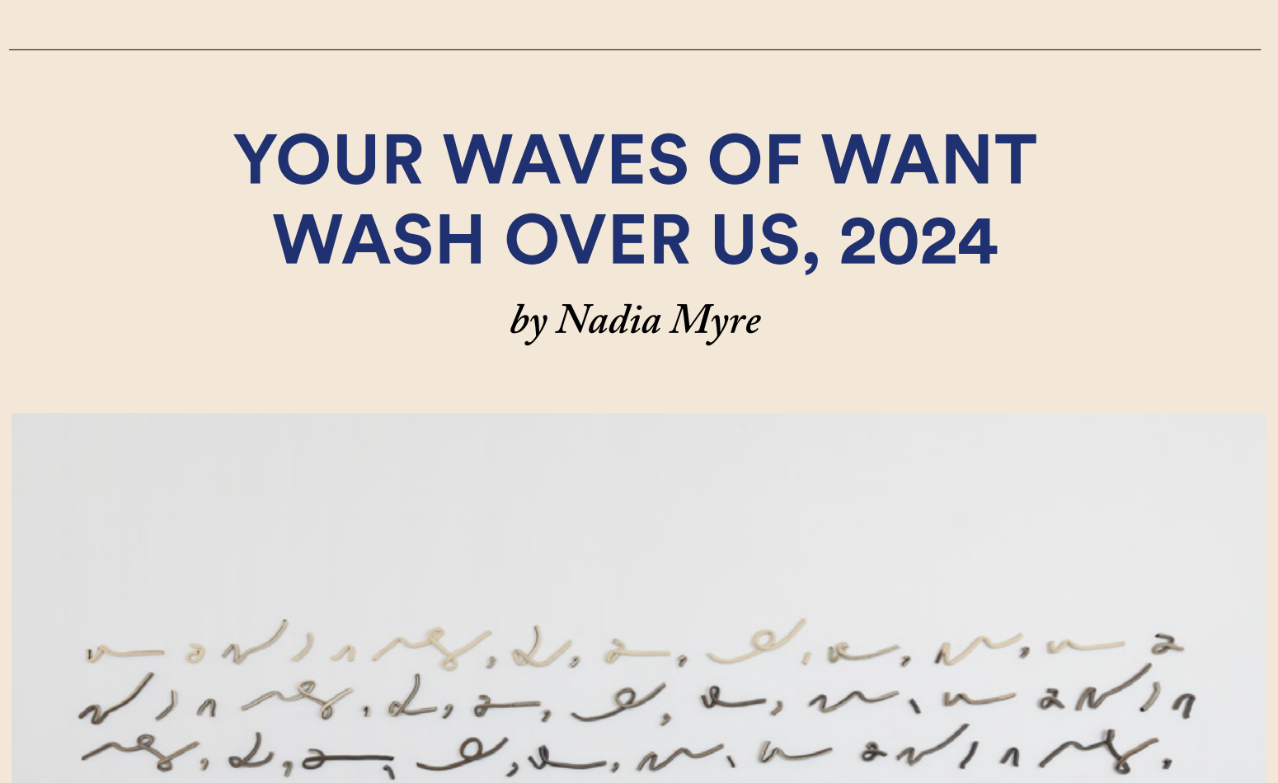
Jeff Thomas, *Bear at Higgins Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba*, 1989,
CMCP Collection, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In *Bear at Higgins Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba*, 1989, Jeff Thomas (b.1956), who identifies as an urban Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), photographs his son Bear wearing a T-shirt printed with an image of Christopher Columbus and the words "Founder of the New World." The work asserts Indigenous agency into urban spaces, while the shirt critiques long-standing colonial narratives. By forcing viewers to consider the words on the shirt and the context against which they're set, Thomas highlights the irony and tension between entrenched histories and lived Indigenous experience.

Learn more in ACI's *Photography in Canada, 1839–1989: An Illustrated History*

YOUR WAVES OF WANT WASH OVER US, 2024

by Nadia Myre



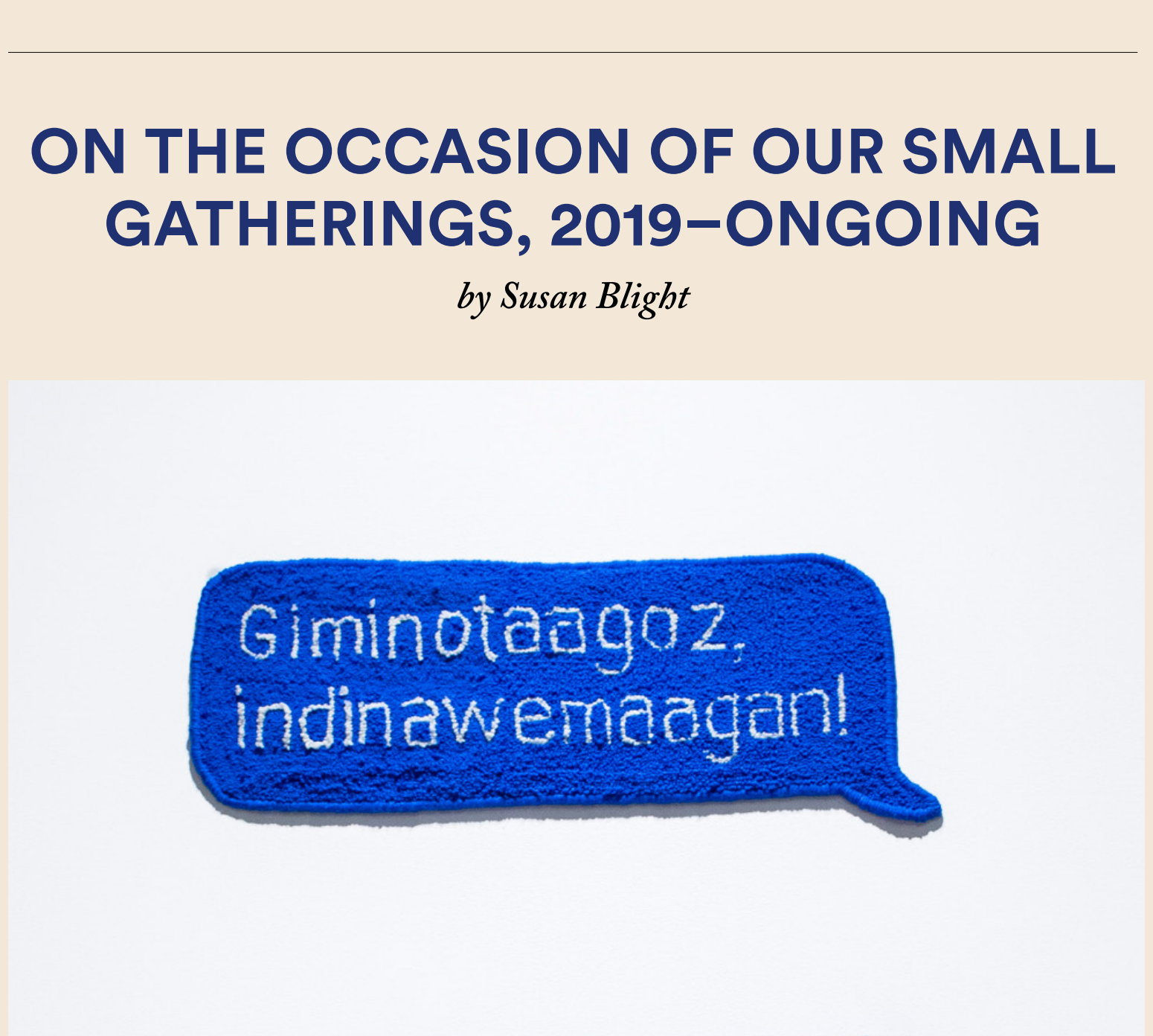
Nadia Myre, *Your Waves of Want Wash Over Us*, 2024, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In *Your Waves of Want Wash Over Us*, 2024, Anishinaabe artist Nadia Myre (b.1974) explores language, power, and colonial histories. The massive installation is made of tubular ceramic forms that read "All we want is your trinket, fur, women, land, oil, water" in Gregg shorthand, a phonetic system that reduces English letters to abstract signs representing sound. By translating this message into symbolic script, Myre highlights the material structure of language itself. Meaning becomes mediated and obscured, emphasizing how language can conceal and perpetuate exploitation.

Learn more

ON THE OCCASION OF OUR SMALL GATHERINGS, 2019–ONGOING

by Susan Blight


Giminotaagoz,
indinawemaagan!
Mii geyaabi
maa ayaayang

Susan Blight, *On the Occasion of Our Small Gatherings*, 2019–ongoing, courtesy of the artist.

Anishinaabe artist Susan Blight creates a series of hooked rugs that look like Anishinaabemowin text messages in *On the Occasion of Our Small Gatherings*, 2019–ongoing. By translating the visual format of digital communications into textile form, Blight emphasizes how language moves across platforms and generations. Everyday phrases and community affirmations become acts of linguistic resurgence, asserting the vitality of Anishinaabemowin in online spaces. In the words of the artist, "This series references the ways in which language is being shared through Facebook, iMessage, sms texts, and email but also alludes to a near future in which our languages are spoken and texted as regularly and casually as English."

Learn more

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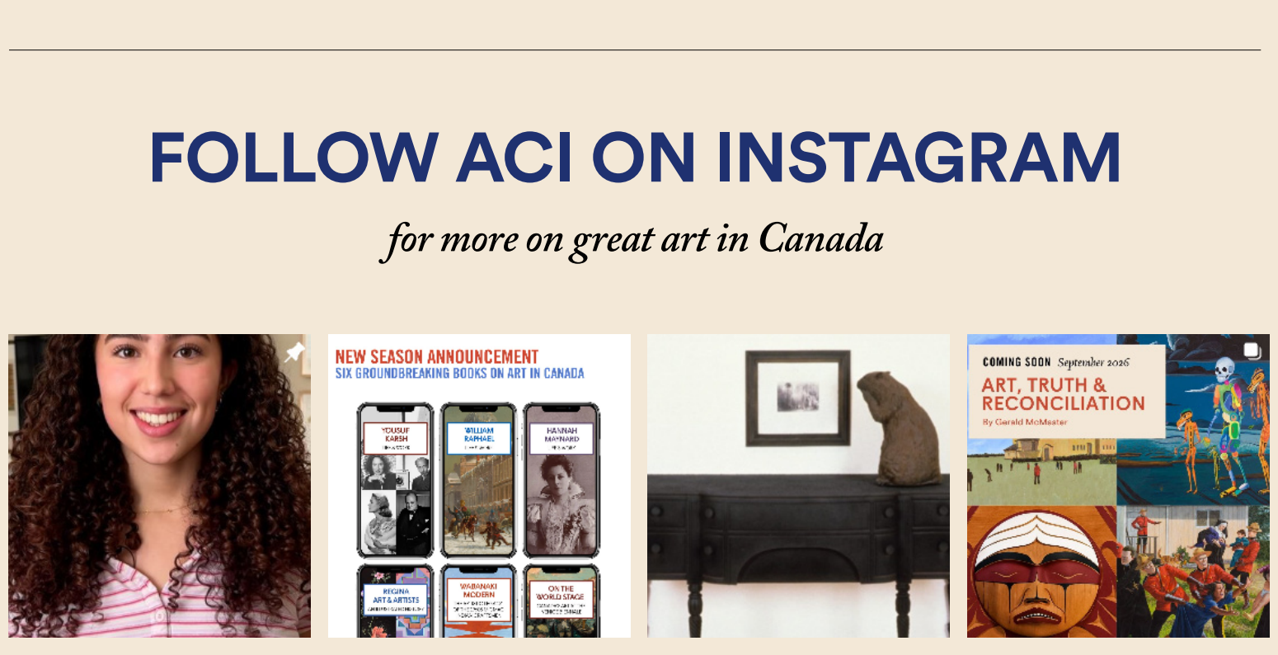
NEW SEASON ANNOUNCEMENT
SIX GROUNDBREAKING BOOKS ON ART IN CANADA
COMING SOON September 2026
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BUILDING CANADA, ONE PHOTO AT A TIME
WILLIAM NOTMAN'S CELEBRATED ARCHIVE
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Image Credits: [1, 9] Susan Blight, *On the Occasion of Our Small Gatherings*, 2019–ongoing, yarn, monks cloth, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and TRUCK Contemporary, Calgary. © Susan Blight. **[2]** Carl Beam, *Meltdown*, 1984, acrylic pen and ink on canvas, 217 x 164.5 cm. Collection of Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau (1984-054-001). Courtesy of Canadian Museum of History. © Estate of Carl and Ann Beam / CARCC Ottawa 2026. **[3]** Shelley Niro, *The Shirt* (detail), 2003, nine duratrans transparencies in lightboxes, lightbox (each): 12 x 110 x 138 cm. Collection of Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with assistance from the Estate of P.J. Glasser, 2016 (2016/41.1-.9). Courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario. © Shelley Niro. Photo credit: AGO. **[4]** Joi T. Arcand, ᐁᑳᐃᔾ ᐋᑳᔮᓰᒧ *e¯ka¯wiya a¯kaya¯s¯imo* (*"Don't speak English"*) (detail), 2017, metallic vinyl, dimensions variable, on-site installation at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Collection of the artist. © Joi T. Arcand. Photo Credit: Scott Benesiinaabandan. **[5]** Pitseolak Ashoona, *Legend of the Woman Who Turned into a Narwhal*, c.1974, coloured felt-tip pen on paper, 66 x 50.7 cm. Collection of National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1989 (36412). Courtesy of National Gallery of Canada. © Dorset Fine Arts. Photo credit: NGC. **[6]** Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1994, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser-cut vinyl, 152.4 x 304.8 cm. Collection of Winnipeg Art Gallery, acquired with funds from the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program (G-96-11 abc). © Robert Houle. **[7]** Jeff Thomas, *Bear at Higgins Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba*, 1989, gelatin silver print, 47.2 x 29.7 cm; image: 33 x 22.9 cm. CMCP Collection, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 2001 (2001.46). Courtesy of the artist. © Jeff Thomas. **[8]** Nadia Myre, *Your Waves of Want Wash Over Us*, 2024, ceramic, 162 × 855 cm (approx.). Collection of the artist. © Nadia Myre / CARCC Ottawa 2026. Photo credit: NGC.