“I work for the Fleurs-de-Lis” – Multiplying the ‘Two Solitudes’ and *avant la lettre* Canadianness in *Frontier*

*Représentation de l'identité canadienne au-delà des « deux solitudes » dans la
série Frontier*

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“I work for the Fleurs-de-Lis” – Multiplying the ‘Two Solitudes’ and *avant la lettre* Canadianness in *Frontier*

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The historical drama TV series *Frontier* is driven by an ambiguous imaginary of Northern North America in the late 1700s. It portrays English, Irish, Scottish, French and U.S.-American settlers variously cooperating with and instrumentalizing Indigenous nations in order to undermine the Hudson’s Bay Company’s fur trading monopoly. Through devices such as the episodes’ epigraphs and in its depiction of First Nations and Black characters, the series speaks to current debates and ongoing controversies surrounding the representation of Canadianness beyond the “two solitudes”. This paper analyzes how *Frontier* multiplies the “solitudes” in its re-imagination of the fur trade through various lines of interaction and conflict.

La série *Frontier* est un drame historique inspiré d’un imaginaire ambigu de l’Amérique du Nord à la fin des années 1700. La série met en scène des colonisateurs anglais, irlandais, écossais, français et américains qui coopèrent avec des nations autochtones et les instrumentalisent pour saper le monopole du commerce des fourrures de la Compagnie de la Baie d’Hudson. À travers des épigraphes et des représentations des personnages afro-canadiens ainsi que des Premières Nations, la série engendre des débats et controverses sur la représentation de l’identité canadienne au-delà des « deux solitudes ». Cet article analyse comment la série *Frontier* cherche à multiplier « les solitudes » à travers une chaîne d’interactions et de conflits.

Introduction: Disputed Territories and Elusive Identities

The historical drama series *Frontier* (2016-2018), commissioned as Discovery Canada’s first original scripted series with global rights held by Netflix, is driven by an ambiguous imaginary of Northern North America in the late 1700s. Set around the mid- to late 1780s and rather unique in representing the emergence of British North America in the format of a TV series, it portrays “French, Scottish and American interests” (S1, E1 expository intertitle) variously cooperating with and instrumentalizing Indigenous nations in order to undermine the Hudson’s Bay Company’s fur trading monopoly granted to *The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson’s Bay* by Royal Charter in 1670¹. The series re-imagines the fur trade, which has long served as a key imaginary of Canadian settler identity formation and nation-building narratives of the “two founding nations”, through various lines of interaction and conflict in

¹ A transcription of the Charter is available from the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Historical Foundation. It grants “the sole Trade and Commerce of all those Seas, Streights, Bays, Rivers, Lakes, Creeks, and Sounds, in whatsoever Latitude they shall be, that lie within the entrance of the Streights commonly called Hudson’s Streights, together with all the Lands, Countries and Territories, upon the Coasts and Confines of the Seas, Streights, Bays, Lakes, Rivers, Creeks and Sounds, aforesaid, which are not now actually possessed by any of our Subjects, or by the Subjects of any other Christian Prince or State” (HBC 1670).

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what it calls the “Disputed Territory” with a – likely deliberate – lack of specificity.

While the notion of “two founding nations” as dating back to the 1867 *British North America Act* remains controversial², the dualist terminology has infamously been debated well into the 20th century in the context of the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* (1963-1969)³. With the terminological switches enshrined in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* assented to in 1988, a binary conceptualization of Canada has become even more problematic. Parallel to these shifts, the governmental legislation concerning Aboriginal peoples through the 1876 *Indian Act* and related policies in its wake has necessitated the ongoing process of working through the painful history that has also been addressed in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2008-2015)⁴. While discourse has gradually shifted to “three founding peoples” in an acknowledgement of Aboriginal peoples, and although activists as well as speakers at public events increasingly reference their presence on unceded First Nations territories, these discursive transitions continue to be shaped by contentious debates, positions and demands.

The parallel terminology of the “two solitudes” – invoked in public debates ever since it was popularized through Hugh McLennan’s 1945 novel of the same title – has survived the Quiet Revolution and the Quebec referenda as well as political opportunism from both sides, but it has also been challenged and supplemented by various notions of a “third solitude” as well as “other” or “multiple solitudes”⁵. In all instances, such discussions relate to broader questions of ongoing Canadian nation-building and identity quests, however elusive these

² For a detailed discussion of pre-Confederation Canada’s history as one of “incomplete conquests” beyond a dualist framework, see RUSSELL 2017.

³ See the “The Key Words of the Terms of Reference” in the report’s “General Introduction”, which addresses the shift in terminology from “founding races” (used in the Commission’s 1963 phrasing of its mandate), to “founding peoples” (ROYAL COMMISSION ON BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM 1967).

⁴ The reports and related documents are available online (TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION 2015). The term Aboriginal here is used as is common in Canadian governmental texts, where it subsumes “First Nations” (in many instances still labeled “Indian”), “Inuit” and “Métis”. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the problematics of terminology and the rejection of specific terms by many communities. While quotations from the respective sources are retained, “Indigenous” is used as an umbrella term. Common self-designations, for which varied spellings and transcriptions exist, are provided in relation to non-fictional persons and contexts.

⁵ The term “third solitude” has e.g. been applied in the context of both Aboriginal peoples and Jewish Canadians, as well as more generally in reference to everyone outside of the Anglo-French dualism. For the term “other solitudes” in the context of multicultural discourse, see e.g. HUTCHEON and RICHMOND 1990.

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may be. Especially in the run-up to the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017, some of these questions and debates received renewed attention, also in regard to how Canadianness is to be represented in the media and in popular culture, which have been key sites of the outlined terminological shifts. While much consideration is given to how current Canadian society can be represented more equitably or how its future should be envisioned, representations of the past have proven particularly challenging – not only in terms of the dualist Anglo-French cultural imaginary, but especially regarding stereotypical depictions of First Nations or the sidelining of the historical contributions of Black people and other groups prior to Confederation. This raises the question of how fictional popular culture representations envision the relation between the past and the present in working towards “breaking down solitudes”, as former Governor General Michaëlle Jean famously phrased the motto on her coat of arms (JEAN 2005).

The series *Frontier* offers an interesting approach to this question of representation through what is analyzed in the following as a multiplication of “solitudes” which, however, ultimately reinforces the dynamics of dualism and separation that still lingers in current debates. Arguably, it is the parallel perpetuation of both dualism and appeals to break down these “solitudes” which marks the show as partaking in the aporetic discourse of Canadian identity. As a fictional popular culture narrative, *Frontier* to a degree is exempt from questions of historical accuracy in its representation of ambiguous characters with shifting positionalities that create dramatic tension and facilitate action-driven plot twists. Yet, it strives to maintain a sense of veracity, amongst other aspects through décor and references to historical events or the names of some of the trading companies. Its *mise-en-scène* and montage techniques, however, as well as the anachronistic paratextual epigraphs featured in the openings of the episodes, indicate a conscious re-telling and interpretation of the fur trade and thus function as meta-fictional devices that extend the thematic reach of each episode across time and space⁶. They comment on silent by-standers to oppression, social hierarchies and follies, the power of fear and hate, the nature and ambiguity of power, oppression and tyranny, courage, adversity as well as unexpected fraternity, agency, indecisiveness, fanaticism, and the question of empathy, which summarizes the broader questions dramatized in the series’ historical imaginary. One of the most telling quotes addresses the notion of complicity, which drives many of the

⁶ These quotes are by Elie Wiesel, Ice Cube, Nelson Mandela, Alan Greenspan and Elizabeth I in Season 1, by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Ice-T, Karoniaktajeh, J. K. Rowling, Abraham Lincoln and Jack Welsh [sic] in Season 2, and by Margaret Thatcher, Joe Strummer, Victor Hugo, Meryl Streep, Eden Robinson and Black Elk in Season 3.

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storylines and the overall representation of the fur trade history: “You can’t come out on a record dissing the system and be in a label that’s connected to the system” (Ice T., S2, E2)⁷.

The function of historical fiction and popular culture such as this drama series, then, is not to show things as they were, but how we can imagine them and how this imaginary speaks to historical as well as current debates. Discussions of TV series’ representational politics in reviews and fandom media frequently address not only the intradiegetic narrative, but also the actors and directors involved, which adds to the complexity of discussions of identity. In this, the wider economic frameworks of production and distribution should also be taken into consideration. In the Canadian context, in spite of the rapidly shifting media landscape, this includes long-standing regulations through the “Canadian content” quotas for radio and television broadcasting⁸. As a “post-broadcast era” Netflix series in association with Discovery Canada, *Frontier* is indicative of these shifts as well. Its complex production partnerships include a wide range of cable networks and public media as well as federal and provincial funds that complicate any simplistic notion of a “Netflix show”⁹.

Multiplying the “Two Solitudes”

Frontier’s “half-Irish and half-native” (S1, E1) protagonist, the renegade former “Company man” Declan Harp (played by Jason Momoa), is positioned at the crossroads of Indigenous and settler identities in a way that evokes common stereotypes and tropes of tragic “mixed” figures. References to him as “little more than a wild animal” (S1, E1) or having “too much of the savage in him” (S3, E5) abound, yet his quest to avenge the killing of his family by his former surrogate father Lord Benton is mostly portrayed as an act of heroic resistance to a villainous and ruthless tyrant. Although he was raised by a Cree mother and is

⁷ Capitalist striving for control, power and wealth is also invoked in the quote by former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, “Control your own destiny or someone else will” (S2, E6).

⁸ For the notion of “Canadian content”, see the 1991 *Broadcasting Act* (GOVERNMENT OF CANADA 1991) and the website of the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRCT 2019a). The content clauses are under review following the stipulations of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership ratified in 2018. The CRCT’s report “The Future of Programming Distribution in Canada” outlines these changes in the media landscape (CRCT 2019b). *Frontier* is presented as a Canadian series shot in Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia as well as the U.K.

⁹ Bell Media as the main shareholder of Discovery Canada is a subsidiary of BCE Inc., which goes back to the Bell Telephone Company of Canada incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1880, historically linked to the U.S. Bell companies. The current rise in co-productions with erstwhile cable companies as well as public broadcasters speaks to the fast changes within an industry dominated by global mega-corporations mostly located in or originating from Western economies.

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well versed in Indigenous languages and cultural practices, some of the Cree who disagree with his actions emphasize his Europeanness and refer to him as “the son of an Irish trapper” (S1, E2 and E3)¹⁰.

In different constellations and shifting alliances across the show’s first three seasons, the main characters all struggle for wealth and power. The treacherous Lord Benton (Alun Armstrong) is on a quest to capture Harp, who in turn enlists the Irish thief and involuntary stowaway to the “New World” Michael Smyth (Landon Liboiron) to steal and re-sell HBC furs for his Black Wolf Company, while the Scottish merchant brothers Malcolm (Michael Patric) and Douglas Brown (Allan Hawco) of the Low River Company vie for control of the Montreal trade with the American trader and investor Samuel Grant (Shawn Doyle) and his henchman Cobbs Pond (Greg Bryk). For their trade, they all rely on the supply of furs through the Eastern Cree “Lake Walkers”, with whom they aim to negotiate in various constellations for the furs of “untold numbers of Cree to the West” (S1, E2), including through middlemen such as the “sensational tracker” (S2, E4) Jean-Marc Rivard (Paul Fauteux), the main Francophone character of the series. The independent companies vie for exclusive trade agreements with one another and the Lake Walkers, but are all committed to the demise of the HBC and ultimately realize that they can only succeed by forming an alliance (S3, E1)¹¹.

Complemented by many more characters and dramatized through fast-paced switches between a range of settings such as the unspecified “Disputed Territory” of and surrounding Rupert’s Land, Fort James, Montreal, the “Northern Territory”, Moose Fort, James Bay, the Atlantic Ocean and Scotland, the show offers a complex constellation of interwoven and action-rich sub-plots. Its *avant la lettre* depiction of what came to be post-Confederation Canada as a territory contested by diverse interests in perpetual conflict, precarious cooperation and shifting alliances opens up lines of inquiry that speak to current debates and controversies surrounding broader questions of representing Canadianness beyond the idea of numerous solitudes. Transposing such debates to a key foundational narrative further challenges the notion of the two “founding nations”.

¹⁰ The term Cree is used in the series, while self-designations are commonly transcribed as Nêhinaw or Nêhiyaw. Although terms such as “Native” are problematic colonial designations, the series’ labels are retained in quotations as indicative of the colonial discourse represented therein. Transcriptions are based on the English subtitles of the series.

¹¹ The HBC’s loss of its monopoly is also signified in Smyth’s refusal to trade furs for HBC “Made Beaver” tokens (S2, E1).

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In the series, the Cree are guided by the circumspect Okimaw Kamenna (Tantoo Cardinal), and Harp's Black Wolf Company is assisted in his dealings with them by his murdered wife's sister, the Ojibwe Sokanon (Jessica Matten). Kamenna generally urges to maintain peaceful negotiations, but also insists on legal sovereignty when challenged (S3, E3). She scolds Michael for bringing the "violence of the white man" to her people and doubts that trading with him "will be any different than the HBC" (S3, E4). Yet, the series is careful to avoid the trope of victimization and instead tends to emphasize Indigenous agency¹². With a wide range of Indigenous characters that are variously positioned towards the colonist-traders, *Frontier* certainly aims to diversify representational patterns of First Nations in a popular culture format that is frequently suffused with stereotyped portrayals and tropes of the "noble savage" or the "white saviour". *Frontier*'s attempt to depict a more nuanced imagery and to focus on the agency of First Nations could thus easily be aligned with the rhetoric of the "third solitude" invoked e.g. in B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell's 2005 statement that "First nations and aboriginal people have been the third solitude in Canada" (MASON 2005) or his call for their acknowledgement as a third "founding nation" (HUME 2006). in response to the 2006 passing of the motion recognizing "that the Quebecois form a nation within a united Canada" by the House of Commons, notwithstanding the controversies surrounding questions of civic vs. ethnic nationalism that remain at the core of many debates to date (CBC 2006).

To counter the common sidelining of "other solitudes" from representations of pre-Confederation Canada, the series' Black characters are also imbued with agency. Charleston (Demetrius Grosse), an enslaved African American later referred to mainly as "Charlie", is aided in his escape from the "Virginian" Mister Russell (J.D. Nichol森) by Harp and McTaggart (Jamie Sives), a former soldier running a remote outpost inn. Russell's depiction provides an implied juxtaposition of the U.S. South with the ostensible "free North", which commonly erases enslavement from the Canadian context and adds to the representational challenges of the character Charleston¹³. When Harp witnesses the lashing in front of McTaggart's inn, he intervenes and himself takes a whiplash from Russell, who claims Charleston as his property. Harp responds with a pointed distinction between material objects ("This is property...") and a human being, threatening Russell and sending him back to Virginia (S2, E2). After helping Harp and McTaggart when they are under attack from the soldiers

¹² See also actress Jessica Matten's comments on Sokanon as a character and on the Indigenous adviser for the show (MATTEN 2016).

¹³ For the erasure of enslavement in the Canadian context, see e.g. COOPER 2007. The TV adaptation of Lawrence Hill's novel *The Book of Negroes* also constitutes an intervention into the representational void of enslavement in Canada and emphasizes the Black Loyalist's contributions.

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with whom Russell returns, Charlie also joins the Black Wolf Company. When he raises concerns about being seen in public in Montreal, McTaggart suggests that Charlie present himself as “a Black Loyalist, granted freedom for service to the Crown” in reference to another frequently unacknowledged group seminal to the formation of British North America¹⁴. His plan fails, however, as Charlie falls into the hands of the American Pond, who “fought in that war” himself, but “not for the Crown”, and threatens to sell Charlie back into slavery (S2, E4). In the third season, Charlie is severely wounded in the attack on Fort Moose and asks McTaggart to read him a letter he had received from his wife many years ago but never opened because he was “afraid of what’s in it” (S3, E3), conjuring up the inexpressibility of the horrors of enslavement. On his deathbed, Charlie reflects on the years of his life spent wanting “to know what it’d be like to be a free man”, which he equates with being “able to choose” how to live – and how to die. In an ultimate insistence on agency, he asks Harp to end his life. Afterwards, Harp is seen smudging, with the Māori sailor Te Rangi chanting in the background. Although this synthesis of ceremonial spiritual practices is a way to offset the ambiguity of Harp’s action in this scene, it also resonates with the all-too familiar trope of the quasi-sacrificial death of the Black character.

The balancing act of Charlie’s representation between oppression and agency is also partially offset by the character Josephette DaCosta (Karen LeBlanc) in line with the show’s focus on enterprising women. Next to the breeches-wearing ale house owner Grace Emberly (Zoe Boyle), the “key to Fort James” (S1, E6) who also trades in news and information, and the Montreal-based Elizabeth Carruthers (Katie McGrath), her Black business partner Josephette DaCosta stands out. Together with Elizabeth she all but nominally leads Carruthers & Co. after Peter Carruther’s murder¹⁵. In spite of the gendered and racialized limitations imposed upon them, these women are imbued with high levels of agency, although Elizabeth does need to re-marry to be able to stay in business, for which she selects Douglas Brown. When they are sabotaged by Malcolm Brown acting on behalf of Grant, Elizabeth points out that without

¹⁴ To Charlie’s comment that “white folks are white folks. No offense”, McTaggart tellingly answers: “None taken. I’m Scottish” (S2, E4), which highlights his own marginalization in the colonial order but also obscures Scottish involvement in the enslavement of Africans. The relocation of Black Loyalists from New York to Nova Scotia occurred in 1782. Pond’s reference to the American Revolutionary War suggests a post-war setting, while the proclaimed foundation of the North West Company at the end of the third season would date to 1783. However, as the North West Company’s history prior to official incorporation dates back to the 1770s, the series again productively utilizes historical vagueness for its fictional rewriting of the fur trade.

¹⁵ Harp acknowledges Elizabeth as “the person actually in charge” and the “brains behind her husband’s company” (S2, E4).

proof, they “will be just dismissed as another woman and her Negro servant who can’t handle business” (S2, E3). In their only encounter at Carruther’s house, Charlie asks whether Josephette is a servant, to which Malcolm responds that she is “one of them”, i.e. the merchants and traders sitting at the proper dining table instead of the “kid’s table” at which Charlie and Malcolm are placed with McTaggart (S2, E4). As per Elizabeth’s will, upon her death Josephette is granted power of attorney over the company, even though it is legally owned by Douglas Brown (S2, E6). However, she also indicates the precarity of her status in that she argues that she was “merely a slave” in the eyes of Peter Carruthers, a notion she emphatically corrects with “which I am not” (S2, E6), just as she scolds Douglas when he calls her a “slave” (S3, E1), reminding him that he in turn is “nothing but a figurehead” to the company and should not “bite the hand that feeds” him (S3, E3). As an empowered Black character, Josephette thus challenges default associations of 18th century Blackness with enslavement. However, although the depicted time frame is prior to abolition, with the exception of Charlie’s liberation the show invokes but does not portray actual Black enslavement outside of the U.S. American context. It is thus only through Josephette’s invocations of the label “slave” that the trope of the “free North” as an ostensible safe haven free of discrimination is somewhat contained. With dramatic license and in its complex representations of First Nations through well-known Indigenous actors whose characters are imbued with agency as well as its empowered Black characters, *Frontier* can be said to ambiguously play with and multiply the notion of “solitudes”.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing the “Solitudes”

While its representation of Indigenous and Black characters can be seen as productive in the sense of a multiplication of the “solitudes” that are also partially broken down in the depiction of Elizabeth’s and Josephette’s cooperation, *Frontier* somewhat paradoxically simultaneously reinforces dualism, albeit an internally differentiated one that speaks to the aporia of the “founding nations” trope. By emphasizing the Scottishness and Irishness of the respective characters¹⁶, *Frontier* undermines the notion of Britishness as a homogeneous hegemonic force. With notable shifts in interpellation according to the respective conflict parties at any given time, the series illustrates the notion of upward social mobility in the colonies for those positioned on the lower social

¹⁶ Malcolm Brown, for example, refers to Captain Chesterfield as “Sassanach” (S1, E6) and McTaggart refers to Vanstone as “English bastard” (S2, E1), while Pond distrusts Smyth’s word because “he’s Irish” (S3, E3) and Vanstone labels the murderer of Major Vinnicombe as a “Scot” in conversation with O’Reilly (S3, E4), to whom he in turn later refers to as “reekie Irishman” (S3, E6).

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rungs in Britain¹⁷. This exposes the mutual disdain of the English, Scottish and Irish while indicating their frequently overlapping interests and common exploitation of the other “solitudes” (hence they are interpellated as “Europeans” by the Cree). Although Britishness is thus fragmented into a variety of interests and positionalities in the broader framework of Empire, division *vis-à-vis* the post-*Nouvelle France* French is generally upheld. Montreal, though, next to Carruthers & Co. and the “tough Highlanders” Brown brothers (S1, E3), tellingly is mostly associated with the American trader and investor Samuel Grant who made his “fortune with American pelts” (S1, E6). Aside from the trapper Jean-Marc Rivard and the brief appearances of the market trader Bertrand Bernard (Alain Goulem), there is a notable absence of Francophone characters that speaks to an avoidance of the classic trope of dualism.

Rivard, who is shown as somewhat naïve and effeminate but ultimately loyal to Grace, Harp and the Lake Walkers, links Fort James and Montreal. When questioned about his employer by Harp, Rivard claims to “work for no man” but “for the Fleurs-de-Lis” (S1, E1). It remains unclear whether this is supposed to indicate a *voyageur*-status, which would prohibit him from independent trading. He is, however, presented as someone whose “discretion can be bought” with silver and brandy (S1, E3) and is sent back and forth through the liminal space of “the wilderness” on various missions for Grace and Grant alike, which makes him more reminiscent of a *coureur de bois* trader, as does his siding with the Cree.¹⁸ His rendition of “À la claire fontaine” (S2, E2) – in New France and, later, in Québec commonly associated with resistance against the British and frequently called its national song – identifies him most strongly as French. Since he is presented as a lonely trapper figure of bygone times who has become dependent on the other companies, however, he also signifies the decline of the once French-dominated fur trade. As he points out to Smyth in a statement that is indicative of both dualist grievances and his nostalgia for *Nouvelle France*, but simultaneously acknowledges the “third solitude”, “[t]he Natives and my people do all the work and the... the [sic] English take the benefit” (S3, E1).

Other references to historical events invoking the Anglo-French dualism include Grace claiming back her father’s hat which he wore “at the Plains of Abraham” as part of the 78th Fraser Highlanders regiment fighting “the French” during the battle that – depending on one’s perspective – is also known as

¹⁷ See e.g. the references to seamen being “press-ganged” into service and to the cross-dressing Chaulk signing up as ‘cabin boy’ out of dire circumstances (S2, E4).

¹⁸ For the itinerant fur trading *coureurs de bois*, who unlike the *voyageurs* were trading without a license, see e.g. GREER 2007, 78-9.

Première bataille de Québec, in which he “shed blood to win this land for the King” (S2, E3). Grant also references “French Law” (i.e. the 1774 *Acte de Québec*) in response to the charge that his dealings with interior traders violate the HBC Charter (S3, E1). Benton, in turn, answers Lord Fisher’s inquiry regarding the extent of “encroachment by the French” into the HBC trade by calling them “a wretched plague” who are “using ignorant rogues to travel up river and undermine our operations” (S3, E5).

This trope of dualism, however, is partially transferred to the American characters of the series, Grant and Pond. A dubious character who embodies the rags-to-riches narrative, Grant is hardly ever seen without Pond, his servant-*cum*-partner henchman. Grant’s aspirations are symbolized in the decidedly French- and continental European connoted music, décor and fashion as well as the *hauteur* with which he comports himself, not least in his attempt to impress the Marquis de Beaumont (Rémy Girard) with “the latest” (though according to the Marquis outdated) music “from Vienna” (S2, E2), and he considers himself and Pond to be the “perfect partners for a Parisian nobleman” (S2, E1). In an evocation of *Pygmalion*’s Eliza Doolittle, Pond transforms Clenna Doyle from “low-bred Irish girl” to a woman able to “pass for a lady” in Montreal (S2, E2). First subtly and in later episodes explicitly topicalizing Grant’s and Pond’s homoeroticism, the show breaks another representational pattern in terms of queer visibility, although both characters are pathologized through their respective back-stories and behaviour. Grant describes his anxious and paranoid mother who “dashed his [infant brother’s] brains out with a rock” (S2, E4), an act that is mirrored in his killing of Elizabeth, triggered by her attack on his masculinity when she calls him “an insignificant man” who cannot bear having lost “to a woman”, while she refers to herself as “more of a man” than he will ever be. Clenna also calls him a “powerful, immoral and frightfully insecure” man (S3, E4)¹⁹. Pond, in turn, is shown as a masochistic character in the prison cell where he is under arrest for the murder of Bernard and beaten by his cellmates. After he kills the prison guard and “lets [himself] out”, his bloody kiss mirrors an earlier scene in which he paints his lips with Grant’s blood from a shaving cut (S2, E5). He is furthermore revealed to be a “wanted man” in the U.S. for ostensibly having burned down churches (S3, E1) and describes himself as “a man that controls fate. Both my own, and that of others”, while Malcolm Brown calls him Grant’s “patsy” (S4, E5).

¹⁹ After Grant threatens to expose her co-conspiracy when she offers to testify as a witness to Elizabeth’s murder, Clenna kills him with the same heavy figurine that he used to kill Elizabeth (S3, E6).

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Grant tries to entice Lord Benton into an exclusive agreement with his company so as for the HBC “to trade their furs though Montreal” because of its

ready port that’s open far longer than Fort James [where] you have enemies from all sides. Montreal is safe, it is immune from Native attack; there are banks, there are warehouses with abundant coal to heat them and men to work in them. Men the HBC wouldn’t have to feed or arm. (S1, E6)

When Benton rejects his “Yankee” proposition, Grant invokes the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill, which he refers to as the British “winning a battle when the war is already over” (S1, E6). Montreal thus is presented not as part of Quebec but as a commercial safe-haven in comparison to the frontier of the Forts. As Pond states, “whoever takes Montreal will take control of the entire fur trade” (S2, E6). In a way, Montreal constitutes a “solitude” of its own that is reflective of the various shifts in power which affected the city during the 1770s.

Cooperation and Conflict between Intersecting “Solitudes”

Accused of selling “illegal” French brandy, Grace’s ale house is searched for items that do not carry the HBC stamp of approval (S1, E3). Grace is also the one who coaxes Captain Chesterfield (Evan Jonigkeit) into a “business partnership” for diverting HBC furs for sale to Montreal for private profit, to assist Chesterfield in discrediting and replacing Benton as governor of Fort James. Although Chesterfield pressures her to marry him after he actually seizes control of the Fort, she remains defiant. Given her feelings for Harp, her dangerous double deals underline her agency and role as kingmaker. The parallel shots of the weddings of Grace and Chesterfield on the one hand and Elizabeth Carruthers and Douglas Brown on the other expose the precarious positions of these two business women while simultaneously emphasizing their agency: Elizabeth “only need[s] a puppet” and Grace negotiates the lifting of the bounty and Harp’s full pardon in the marriage as yet another “business agreement” (S2, E1). After the unceremonious wedding, she enters into a series of power plays with Chesterfield in which she, for the most part, appears to be one step ahead of him²⁰. Yet, Chesterfield finally manages to take away her ale house and entrusts it first to Quartermaster Carter (Charlie Tomlinson) and then to Benton’s former servant and spy Imogen (Diana Bentley), who turn it into a brothel with Indigenous girls kidnapped or taken from their people under false pretenses by the Irishman

²⁰ She e.g. distracts the soldiers by offering free ale to “patriots celebrating the Battle of the Boyne” on a random day (S2, E2), which again draws attention to the contentious relations between the English, Scots, and Irish.

O'Reilly (Stephen Oates). The plot line around O'Reilly and his Haudenosaunee wife Kahwihta (Ellyn Jade) adds forced conversion and marriage as well as the large-scale trade of Indigenous women into forced prostitution and Indigenous enslavement to the previous depiction of sex work²¹. This development leads Mary (Breanne Hill), the ale house's waitress, to fight off and kill those engaged in the trade of Indigenous women and girls (S2, E4). In a turn from observer to agent and avenger, Mary sides and fights with Sokanon, whose priority it has become to free and return the girls and women to safety²². As the Haudenosaunee are referred to as Iroquois and as enemies of the Cree (S3, E4), Kahwihta's ultimate solidarity with Sokanon becomes even more significant²³. Initially, however, it is not clear how Kahwihta will act, as she saves O'Reilly when Sokanon threatens him for the first time, although she previously pointed out to her that it was not her choice to marry O'Reilly but that "religious men gave [her] to [him]" by tricking her family "into believing [her] marriage would secure trade relations" (S3, E4). When Mary and Sokanon enter the ale house determined to kill O'Reilly, however, Kahwihta lets them pass and does not interfere. This constitutes a silent statement of solidarity that is emphasized by the cinematic poetics of this scene, which plays with and deconstructs the ostensible "Pocahontas" trope that was suggested by Kahwihta's erstwhile assistance to O'Reilly²⁴. Sokanon's choice to prioritize the women instead of the Black Wolf Company also leads her away from the possibility of re-engaging her previous intimate relationship with Michael, which adds another layer to the depiction of Indigenous-settler relations that speaks to the Eden Robinson quote "I don't really get romance. Bring me fish or moose, not flowers" opening the episode (S3, E5). Kahwihta later observes Imogen blaming Michael for the murder of O'Reilly, which leads her to testify on behalf of Michael, thus saving him and Sokanon while having Vanstone (Paul Ewan Wilson) burn at the stake in their stead. Smyth's eyes as he looks at the flames indicate the complicity of this sacrificial burning, which symbolizes the possibility of a new, albeit burdened beginning.

²¹ The differentiation between sexual slavery and sex work is addressed on the diegetic level by Imogen's reference to "men and women who crave independence from marriage" (S2, E4). Criticized by Mary, Imogen claims to be forced by circumstances (S2, E5), thus denying her complicity in the trade in Indigenous women.

²² After Mary and Sokanon have been captured, they fight and escape together, with Mary's shooting the trader in the head being portrayed in a *mise-en-scène* invoking Tarantino-style Western tropes and aesthetics.

²³ The complex history of the Haudenosaunee, their Confederacy and shifting settler relations before, during and after the American Revolutionary War, however, is not addressed.

²⁴ The camera work and montage of this wordless scene in partial slow motion and close-ups also resembles a Tarantino aesthetics, especially in the depiction of Mary as avenger.

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Throughout the series, almost all intimate relationships as well as all characters and trading companies are marked by double and shifting loyalties, thus exposing the “battle for wealth and power” in which “the fur is the gold” (S1, E1) as one in which everyone is or becomes complicit, including the drunkard Father Coffin and the “Godly men” and nuns who buy and sell Indigenous women as prostitutes and “wives for the working men” (S3, E4). It is Lord Benton, however, who most strongly embodies corruption and treachery in his quest for “total domination” and restoration of the HBC monopoly in the face of the “most powerful navy in the world [being] run ragged by men in canoes” (S1, E2). When his soldiers manage to capture Harp for the first time, he personally tortures him and reveals the back story of their relationship in the process. Accompanied by a Prospero-like monologue invoked by the phrases “I taught you” and “You forced me to teach you a lesson because you turned away from me”, he punishes Harp for his disloyalty and disrespect in a rhetorical gesture of colonial paternalistic apotheosis *par excellence*:

No, it’s too easy for you to blame me. I’m not destroying this world. I am bringing light into the darkness with the gift of civilization, lifting up the land and its people. It requires violence, yes – it’s a brutal place, but I am its saviour. I am its future. And I demand respect. Say the words, Declan. “Forgive me, father, for I have wronged you”. (S1, E5)

Harp’s defiance during his torture connotes a Calibanesque resistance in which he repeatedly articulates his difference from Benton, while his hanging off a chain and Benton’s words underline his martyrdom. Like his earlier quotation from the 1670 HBC Charter from which he derives his authority – “We do give and grant unto said Governor the powers to make peace or war with any Prince or People whatsoever, that are not Christians” (S1, E6) – Benton’s rhetoric while he is torturing Harp deconstructs the “civilizing mission” and reveals the hypocrisy of the colonial endeavor by exposing the extent of his fanaticism, increasing paranoia and reign of terror, which is also apparent when he has Commander Everton (Jean-Michel Le Gal) lashed for insinuating that he illegally governs Fort James²⁵. Similar to the epigraphs and characters’ occasional use of anachronistic phrases, the filmic fourth wall, as it were, is also broken through the

²⁵ In the same episode, Benton again invokes the HBC Charter as empowering him to “raise armies and wage wars against all its enemies”. Chesterfield, in turn, refers to it to justify Benton’s removal as “a Governor who is deemed unfit to manage”, for which Benton tries to accuse him of being “in league with the French” (S2, E1). When Grace calls Benton “a man that spills blood with impunity”, he also justifies this with his status as “a soldier of the Crown and the Hudson’s Bay Company. Any blood that has been shed is sanctioned by the Charter” (S3, E3), which de-personalizes guilt by projecting it onto “the company”.

rhetorical performativity of Benton's monologue and his quoting of the Charter in a meta-historical self-referential gesture. Grace is thus quite right to predict that Benton "will self-destruct" (S1, E6). Although she cannot relate to the male quest for revenge²⁶, she in turn seizes every opportunity to prove that, as she tells Clenna, women like them "are capable of things here that we would never have thought possible" (S1, E6), which again references the notion of New World upward social mobility, while also indicating a current representational consciousness in terms of the series' portrayals of women's agency and colonial masculinities.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose? Masculinity, New World Slavery and Indigenous Resistance

Notions of masculinity are also challenged when Wahush (Nathaniel Arcand) implies that Sokanon may have found a "wife" in Smyth and that she is more of a man than him (S2, E3), or when Rivard calls Grace "a man at heart" (S2, E4)²⁷. The epitome of hypermasculinity intersecting with indigeneity as well as the trope of the tragic "mixed" figure, however, is represented through Declan Harp in juxtaposition to Benton's embodiment of imperial vice. Having narrowly escaped the gallows, the wounded Harp literally melts into the countryside in the cliffhanger between the first two seasons. Rescued by Rivard, who puts him on a canoe that he pushes northward, Harp in a Styx-like journey, imbued with visions of the deceased Samoset (Zahn McClarnon) paddling the canoe²⁸, ends up in Inuit territory, which spatially symbolizes not only his physical and spiritual healing with the help of an Inuit father (Natar Ungalaaq) and his daughter (Nagliniq Amagoalik), but also demonstrates how far the bounty hunters are willing to go to hunt him down. Harp's healing is symbolically completed when he dives into and resurfaces from the arctic waters (S2, E1).

At the end of the second season, Harp declares full-fledged war on Benton for having captured Grace. This war is shown in all its violence unleashed against a "Northern Métis Village" shown in flames and under attack by the

²⁶ As she asks Benton, "Do you really think your mutual desire to annihilate one another ends in some sort of salvation?" (S3, E2).

²⁷ Elizabeth, in turn, refuses to "emancipate" Douglas, whom his brother calls her "wee dog" (S2, E5), upon which she orders Douglas into her bedroom to consummate their marriage just before she is killed by Grant.

²⁸ While paddling the canoe, Samoset answers Harp's question "Am I going to hell?" with "That's just your Irish half talking". Taking into account the actors and McClarnon's Irish father, this is a potentially ironic meta-fictional gesture that deconstructs notions of purity and authenticity in relation to representations of indigeneity. The name Samoset also invokes the Abenaki Sagamore Samoset who greeted the Pilgrims at Plymouth in English. See e.g. MATTHEWS 1904.

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British in the opening episode of the third season, with the diegetic sound muted by dramatic music leading up to Harp’s declaration to the captured soldiers that they are:

nothing more than slaves. Owned by a company that would turn boys into dead men in pursuit of profits. Slaves to a crown. A crown that spits on you, as you wallow in your own filth. They don’t even see you as humans. A crown that forces you to cross unforgiving seas to fight free people. We are the Black Wolf Company. We are your outlaws. You call us the merciless savages, filthy half-breeds, natives of this land. We fight with the dregs, the despised! We are the killer of Redcoats. You think us devil to the Crown, and we are. We are because we are free. This [holding up a pelt]. This is your worth. You are prostitutes for fur. This is our land and you whores don’t belong here. So leave, go home, and live a life decided by your masters. Or...or...you turn coat and fight with us. Earn your way as free men with the Black Wolf Company. (S3, E1)

His speech serves as a counter-monologue to Benton’s imperial self-apotheosis and juxtaposes capitalist enslavement to a glorified freedom to be won in and through resistance. The precarity of this freedom, however, is indicated in the price of warfare. In light of Charlie’s won and lost freedom and sacrificial death, Harp’s monologue borders on a similar apotheosis to Benton’s. Preparing for his final battle with Benton after his failed attempt to free Grace, Harp claims that he is “already dead” and that killing Benton will be his “resurrection” (S3, E1), again invoking his martyrdom. He crosses the Atlantic in pursuit of Benton and the captured Grace in the Portuguese Captain Fortunato’s (Michael Raymond-James) ship *Madelena* with the Māori sailor Te Rangi (Temuera Morrison), McTaggart, the wounded Charlie and Chaulk. In an extended representation of indigeneity and indirect reference to imperial rule in other parts of the world, it is also Te Rangi who solicits the help of Barclay’s men by appealing to anti-colonial solidarity based on shared experiences of “oppression from others”, in his speech invoking the Polynesian concept of “mana” (S3, E4)²⁹.

The havoc wreaked on the Métis village is mirrored in the fighting scenes on the Scottish beach at the end of the third season, where Barclay’s men assist Harp in fighting like his “mother’s people have fought [...] for centuries”.

²⁹ The concept has been appropriated in various popular culture contexts, especially in fantasy literature and video games, as a spiritual energy or magical power in fantasy literature and video games. Its use here is ambiguous and borders on a depiction of the ‘noble savage’ trope – which, however, is somewhat offset by the parallel invocation of another stereotype in that the Scot challenges Harp to a drinking duel to test his steadfastness.

Drawing out Benton's soldiers at dusk, music first accompanies Te Rangi's *Haka* and then blocks out the diegetic sounds of warfare as night falls (S3, E5). This use of sound, silence and music underlines the representation of resistance. When the tides are turning against Harp's men in the opening scene of the next episode, the battle sounds resume and increase, highlighting the cost of war.

Benton wants to instrumentalize Grace to rebuild his reputation through a false testimony *vis-à-vis* Lord Fisher (Jay Simpson), the head of the HBC. Finding her father Edward (Gary Lewis) not dead but as Benton's prisoner, Grace, however, does not succumb to his threats but once again demonstrates her wit and agency by suggesting to Lord Fisher that she be made governor of Fort James (S3, E5). Edward, in turn, draws attention to Benton's "resentment of his power" with the statement "It must be a difficult burden. Being born into wealth. Having done nothing to earn it" (S3, E5) – a veritable calling out of privilege that speaks as much to contemporary debates as to the HBC's power politics depicted in the series. This verbal defiance, like Elizabeth Carruthers' previous attack on Grant's masculinity, puts Benton over the edge and he stabs Edward to death.

In the last episode, aptly titled "The Sins of the Father", the final showdown between Benton and Harp is dramatized. But it is Lord Fisher whom Harp finds first as he makes his way through the castle looking for Benton. Fisher claims that Harp is blaming himself for the death of his family, offering him "salvation" through "revenge and redemption" by testifying against Benton and rejoining the Company under his patronage (S3, E6). As the prospect of money and power within the Company does not entice Harp, Fisher follows up with initially uncontextualized reflections on rum as a "dark spirit" and "slave garbage" that is "born from dirty, dangerous work being done by slaves who suffer terribly for their master's great benefit", only to reveal in a sadistic dénouement that Benton did not kill but instead sold Harp's son into slavery and that he "most likely still toils somewhere on a plantation" (S3, E6). This revelation only increases Harp's wrath, and he again rejects Fisher's offer, cuts Benton's throat and, in a final turn towards another action-driven cliffhanger as demanded by the serial format, Fisher assures Harp that he will be "pursued to the ends of the Earth", but offers him "a brief head-start" in the pending chase. He thus reinforces Harp's outlaw status with tropes of piracy and the prospect of new feuds, while the explicit reference to systemic enslavement seems to respond to the previous elision of slavery from the Canadian context, opening up a potential new setting (again safely removed from the *avant la lettre* Canadian territory) for the depiction of imperial vice in seasons to come. Through the figure of Lord Fisher this vice is again transposed onto the Company as the quasi-embodiment of villainy.

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Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the new alliance members Smyth, Rivard, Malcolm Brown and Pond take over the Fort James ale house in celebration. Smyth demands to end the “business of buying and selling women”, offers to build a church and promises to “be everything that the HBC is not” – which, however, is observed with expressions of skepticism by the observing Kahwihta and Sokanon. Smyth – echoing Harp’s previous monologue – sends off any remaining loyal HBC soldiers with a reminder that their “loyalty to the Company will result in nothing but death, starvation, and poverty” and that they should instead “sign on, and join a new company” (S3, E6). Watching most men do exactly that as Smyth raises a toast to the new “North West Company”, Kahwihta and Sokanon lock eyes in silent agreement and leave, their action signalling that they expect nothing to change as long as the goal of riches in fur or other goods will be pursued, by whichever company, and that they will not be a part of this. Yet, their final act of defiance through this implied non-cooperation firmly embeds the Indigenous context within the series’ multiplication of solitudes in its depiction of a foundational phase of *avant la lettre* Canadianness.

Conclusion

While *Frontier* plays with and at first sight seems to deconstruct the “two solitudes” narrative through its multiplication into “third” and “other” solitudes, the various intersectional alignments of the characters ultimately seem to draw more attention to the historical formation of Anglo-hegemony than to the “breaking of solitudes”. Although the series can be credited for a more complex representation of Indigenous and Black characters and an acknowledgment of agency and resistance, it repeatedly glorifies this resistance, not least through the hypermasculinist representation of Declan Harp. This representation is only partially offset by the pan-Indigenous solidarity of the characters of Sokanon and Kahwihta³⁰. Series like *Frontier*, then, are probably best understood as drawing

³⁰ Pan-Indigenous resistance is also referenced through the quote from the Mohawk activist (Louis) KARONIAKTAJEH (Hall), taken from the so-called “Mohawk Ten Commandments” of his *Warrior’s Handbook* (1980): “Be strong... to be weak is to invite aggression, oppression, tyranny, misery and woe” (S2, E3). In addition, the final episode’s epigraph – “Grandfather, Great Spirit, once more behold me on earth and lean to hear my feeble voice” (S3, E6) – is from Black Elk, or Heháka Sápa, whose earth prayer and other sayings have frequently been appropriated in popular culture and esoteric spiritual quests. Black Elk’s words were popularized through the publications of NEIHARDT (1932) and BROWN (1953) and many others. The Oglala Lakota undoubtedly is a complex historical figure and witness to crucial events in North American history on both sides of the border who in many ways embodies the ambiguity of the crossroads of cultural encounter, cooperation and conflict. He is also frequently associated with ex-frontiersman William Cody’s infamous “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” show that toured the U.S. and Europe in the 1880s and 1890s. The show was deeply entwined with the representational politics of its time and contributed greatly to the creation and perpetuation

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attention to the multi-faceted nature of historical conflicts as well as the contemporary debates surrounding practices of representation which inform them. Projecting calls for more equitable and agency-driven representations of Indigenous and Black characters as well as women onto the temporally as well as spatially strategically unspecified “Disputed Territory”, *Frontier* alerts us to the many levels of complicity these questions of representation inevitably entail, especially concerning our own vicarious pleasures derived from the consumption of valiant and glorified resistance in this exploration of *avant la lettre* Canadianness.

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of stereotypes of Indigenous people. This reference certainly complicates the representational politics of the popular culture format, especially as questions surrounding cultural appropriation have become more prominent.

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