Notes from a CanLit Killjoy

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I have nothing soothing to tell you . . .
—Dionne Brand, Inventory

i hate canada: because “canada” is the most powerful ideological tool deployed historically and still deployed in the interests of a settler colony’s colonial project.
—peter kulchyski, “bush/writing”

To be involved in political activism is thus to be involved in a struggle against happiness. . . . Our activist archives are thus unhappy archives. Even if we are struggling for different things, even if we have different worlds we want to create, we might share what we come up against.
—Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)”

Although demonstrations and assemblies are often not enough to produce radical change, they do alter our perceptions about who the people are, and they assert fundamental freedoms that belong to bodies in their plurality. . . . Only a broad-based mobilization—a form of embodied and transnational courage, we might say—will successfully defeat xenophobic nationalism and the various alibis that now threaten democracy.
—Judith Butler, “Reflections on Trump”

1. I recently finished reading the breakout book of 2016, Notes from a Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life by Erin Wunker. Full disclosure: I am in the book’s acknowledgements as one of the author’s “mentors, friends, inspirations” (207). Erin and I worked together on the Board of Directors for Canadian Women in the Literary Arts (CWILA) and we have remained
friends. Wunker dedicates a chapter to women’s friendship and the necessity of engaged mentorship and community building. In *Notes*, Wunker also writes eloquently about issues as disparate as rape culture and motherhood, as well as contemporary popular and civic culture in North America and beyond. Importantly, she writes about intersectional feminism and about the need to acknowledge privilege in its various forms. What draws me to this text here and now, however, is her introduction of the concept of the feminist killjoy into Canadian cultural conversations. I am interested in what the feminist killjoy brings to Canadian literary criticism.

Wunker takes up Sara Ahmed’s notion of the feminist killjoy—“that irreverent figure who lights a match and joyfully flicks it into the dry hull of patriarchal culture” (15)—and runs with it. Ahmed writes that “the figure of the feminist killjoy makes sense if we place her in the context of feminist critiques of happiness, of how happiness is used to justify social norms as social goods” (n. pag.). For Wunker, as for Ahmed, the feminist killjoy is a “positive figure” who “is not okay with the status quo” (46). She resists “restrictive categories of gender or gender performance” and “[s]he will not tolerate casual instances of racism or classism. She won’t keep quiet to maintain the smooth dinner conversation. Oh, no. The feminist killjoy is one who understands that to be a world maker and to make space for herself in the world she must disrupt the complacency that the happiness imperative demands” (46). That final phrase is so relevant and so powerful. Each generation of CanLit scholars and writers seems to have thrived on a new form of space-making pyromania.

With Wunker, I recognize that “it is complicated to be a hopeful feminist killjoy, complicated and necessary” (34). Her intersectional feminism “takes into account the ways in which different oppressive conditions—sexism, ableism, homophobia, racism, transphobia, classism, and so on—are interconnected” (38). This ask is a big one, and potentially so all-encompassing as to be unmanageable. Further, not all people (killjoys come in all genders) have the same access to being a killjoy. For some, it is unsafe to stand up to power. For people who are already marginalized (by virtue of race, religious belief, class positioning, history, sexuality, or gender identification, for example, or by institutional precarity), resistance might be met with censure, aggression, or even violence. The scope of possible resistance varies for each person. Here, I am using killjoy as a term that highlights the practice of resistance, as a term that says *No!* with intent, and as a term that functions as a starting point for individual and/or communal protest.
2. In the pages of a journal whose name implies a cultural nationalist mandate, given the current political climate, it is important to consider what is done in the name of nationalism, to scrutinize exclusionary, and often dangerous, paradigms, and to think about what role Canadian writers and critics have had and continue to have in resistance, protest, and activism. How have they been killjoys? Much of what I try to do as a CanLit scholar is intersectional literary critique that disrupts the complacency demanded by the happiness imperative. Historically, a variety of constituencies (in government, public institutions, and the media) have turned to CanLit to justify versions of Canadian culture as a social good. Over the decades, what constitutes the social good has changed shape, but the perception of communal happiness has remained remarkably consistent. It is a truism to say that the CanLit community has never been a singular harmonious group, but it is also true to say that it has sometimes been seen as such. The thing is, as many critics have pointed out, such a fashioning of cultural cohesion has often overlooked the naysayers and those who have been excluded in the cultural imaginary of the day. In fact, I would argue that Canadian writers—both critical and creative—who resist have been vocal for decades, even centuries. The question is whether they have been heard. This brings me to the three recurring questions that I seem to infinitely rehearse: Who speaks? Who listens? Who pro-ts?

3. In an article published in *The Walrus* in November 2016 entitled “The CanLit Firestorm,” Simon Lewsen argues that “[f]rom the ’70s until about two weeks ago, CanLit seemed to operate under a broadly progressive consensus. The community wasn’t perfectly cohesive, but it was about as cohesive as any national literary movement could be. . . . Along with David Suzuki and the NDP, CanLit was the moral conscience of the nation” (n. pag.). Lewsen concludes, however, that this cohesion was destroyed in the controversy around the dismissal of the Chair of the UBC Creative Writing Program, Steven Galloway. As a faculty member at UBC, I can’t say much about the details of the Galloway case. I bring it up here to consider how the case opened public fissures in the CanLit community. Eighty-eight writers—many of whom were well established (Joseph Boyden, Michael Ondaatje, Susan Swann, Margaret Atwood, and Madeleine Thien, among them)—signed the original “UBC Accountable” Open Letter in support of more transparency around Galloway’s suspension from academic duties and eventual dismissal from his position. Another 547 people signed the
Open Counter-Letter petition that was spearheaded by University of Alberta professor Julie Rak and inaugurated by a group of “Canadian literature and littérature québécoise scholars, writers, cultural workers and allies” (n. pag.). The Counter-Letter is an excellent example of what can be seen as a collective act of CanLit killjoy-dom. The response letter argued for a recognition of the rights of the students whose voices were overlooked in the original Open Letter—those who had made complaints against the Chair of their program and those who remain in the program. The Counter-Letter also argued the need to contextualize this controversy in larger cultural discussions about sexual assault and the right to privacy. Finally, the Counter-Letter advocated “transparent and fair process for all parties involved, not just those with recognizable names” (Rak n. pag.). In short, the Counter-Letter implied the need for everyone to be a sharper reader and to consider the implications of what was said and what remained silent. So many emotions swirled publicly around this event in the fall of 2016: anger, betrayal, bitterness, sadness, frustration, pain, disbelief, disappointment, disdain, even fury. As scholars of CanLit, we have become familiar with literary criticism that draws on the equation “X author challenges Y convention or retrograde belief.” Yet, clearly, not all authors are “social justice warriors” at all times. Some writers—again both creative and critical—have more power and cultural capital than others. Some have more imperative to be a killjoy than others, as well. What the Galloway controversy did was destabilize the specious positioning of the author as a moral arbiter or the field of CanLit as the “moral conscience of the nation” in the public mind (Lewsen n. pag.).

4. In the fall of 2016, Donald J. Trump was elected President of the United States of America, having campaigned on a platform to “Make America Great Again.” On January 20, 2017, he was inaugurated in front of a small crowd of supporters as he cried “America First! America First!” The next day an estimated two million unhappy people marched in cities across the continent and around the world protesting his politics. They held signs that said “Love Trumps Hate”; “The Handmaid’s Tale Is Not An Instruction Manual”; “My Body! My Choice!”; “I can’t believe we still have to protest this shit”; “Injury to One is Injury to All”; “Trump and Brexit are the Same Movement”; “WTF America?”; “Injustice Anywhere is a Threat to Justice Everywhere”; and “We the People Unite / Stop Islamophobia!” In his first week in office, Trump passed Executive Orders that worked to weaken
women’s reproductive rights, to curtail the rights of refugees and those marginalized by war, to push pipelines that disregarded Indigenous rights (DAPL), to limit the rights of members of the LGBTQ community, to silence the rights of the environment, and even to mock the right to free speech and journalistic integrity. At the end of that week, Trump issued an Executive Order that effectively banned people from seven predominantly Muslim nations from entering America. On January 28, more people took to the streets in opposition to the ban. On January 29, a white gunman went into the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec and opened fire. Six Muslim men who were at prayer were killed and over a dozen others were injured in one of the largest mass murders in Canadian history. The twenty-seven-year-old arrested for the shooting had shown support on social media for Trump, Marine Le Pen of the French far-right, and a right-wing nationalist Québécois organization. In the first week of February 2017 alone, approximately two dozen people walked across a frozen field in Emerson, Manitoba, to seek refugee status in Canada, risking life and limb, literally, to reach safety. The events are all connected, of course, and not just through simultaneity. The actions in one nation can have repercussions elsewhere.

5. In response to Trump’s travel ban, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted an image of himself welcoming a young Syrian refugee child in 2015 together with the words “To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada.” In the familiar Canadian move of definition by negation, Trudeau shows what Canada is by reactively showing how it is not America. The problem with this feel-good tweet—retweeted at least half a million times—is that Canada has not yet followed up with specific actions. The government has not yet increased the number of refugees allowed in or rescinded the Safe Third Country Agreement. It has not commented directly on the ban or reaffirmed its position as a signatory of the Geneva Convention on Refugees, nor has it taken on the overt racism of politicians or radio talk show hosts who pander to nationalist fears. Following the shootings in Quebec, there have been more tweets but not a lot more action by the federal government. As Martin Lukacs notes, “many desperate and endangered people will not be able to come to Canada, despite there being groups ready to welcome and host them. Sparkling in his symbolism, Trudeau has been desultory in his deeds” (n. pag.).
happiness imperative that politicians peddle by configuring Canada as a deeply welcoming nation needs to be met with killjoy incredulity to keep it grounded.

6. Since the first anniversary of Canada becoming a self-governing dominion in 1867, July 1 has been set aside as a day to celebrate the nation, first as Dominion Day and, since 1983, as Canada Day. While July 1 is a day of national celebration, it is on July 2, the day after Canada Day, that the stories of community, inclusion, peace, and patriotism are published. A *Globe and Mail* article from July 2, 1998 follows standard format, with a killjoy twist. Under the headline “Canadians new and old mark July 1” and beside a collage of photos of a parade of people carrying a banner saying “Keep Canada United,” beside two separate images of children with face-painted flags, and beside a picture of a smiling new Canadian displaying her citizenship certificate, journalist Kim Honey quotes a member of the Iranian Women’s Organization of Ontario saying “[n]o matter what part of the world we come from, once we’re in Canada, we are one” (A10). Honey also, however, gently resists the happiness of the pat Canada Day narrative by also telling the story of “stateless Palestinians” who were refused entry to Canada and who have sought sanctuary in a church. Honey unsettles the joy of the photographs and the interview with the story of those refused by Canada. Here, the creative juxtaposition of image and story—of harsh bureaucratic exclusion—effectively undermines the inclusion narrative, even in its July 2 frame. What happens after July 2? That is when I think Canadian critics, writers, poets, playwrights, and journalists step in and resist a single story.

7. Lest Canada’s sesquicentennial in 2017—with all of the *Canada 150* celebrations planned—turn into a year-long July 2, CanLit killjoys will need to be out in full force, pointing to gaps, highlighting exclusions, and telling “untold stories” occluded by the celebratory narratives of the nation. T-shirts reading “Colonialism 150” are already for sale.

8. Recently, in conversation over coffee, Simon Fraser University professor Hannah McGregor succinctly asked me, what happens if you do not want to be part of the community you have been imagined into? Who gets to do the imagining? In reference to the Galloway case, Lucia Lorenzi posed similar questions of the “imagined community that is CanLit,” drawing on Benedict
Anderson’s definition of the nation as “imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail . . . the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (qtd. in Lorenzi n. pag.). “How,” Lorenzi asks, “is the ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ constructed and upheld, and by whom? How far are we willing—or are forced—to go in order to defend it or suffer for it?” (n. pag.). Such questions, I would argue, have animated Canadian literary scholarship for years. In fact, for me these questions are at the heart of being a CanLit killjoy. Canadian criticism is filled with those who have resisted the joys of cohesion and who have imagined new futures, different pasts, and disparate social goods.

I think that critics are particularly good at killing joy, productively. As critics, we are trained to be skeptical of history, of texts, and of our own institutions. Sarah Brouillette, for example, examines how universities are involved in labour markets as she critiques the easy assumption that the privileges we are accorded in academia are warranted and justified because we are socially useful. Further, her work rails against inattention to the material grounds of expression and reception. Really, any list of CanLit criticism prepared for a doctoral comprehensive examination could be filled with critics who have resisted orthodoxies. Consider Smaro Kamboureli’s whole TransCanada project, Daniel Coleman critiquing white civility, Roy Miki arguing for redress, Fred Wah playing with hybridity, Warren Cariou creatively using bitumen in his petrographs, Diana Brydon advocating planetarity, or Arun Mukherjee holding CanLit to task for its whiteness and elitism. Think of the work of Carole Gerson on women’s writing, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson on decolonization, Pauline Wakeham on reconciliation, Kit Dobson on transnationalism, Jo-Ann Episkenew on healing, or Bart Vautour on Canadian involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Each critic’s project began, I suspect, with a recognition that the gaps in narratives of a happy Canada had to be addressed.

9. While resistance is not new in Canadian letters, neither is complacency. And yet, Canadian literature is full of killjoys who have pointed to the pitfalls of self-satisfaction. There is a long history of writers who have said No. “Here’s a bomb to blast complacency” wrote F. R. Scott on the cover of The Blasted Pine in 1957. “I Accuse Us” ranted Earle Birney in response to Canadian non-opposition to the Vietnam War less than a decade later. Mordecai Richler distrusted nationalism and his fellow writers, in similar
parts. Whether we turn to Dorothy Livesay’s “Day and Night,” E. Pauline Johnson’s “A Strong Race Opinion,” Jeannette Armstrong’s “History Lesson,” or Sui Sin Far’s “A Plea for the Chinaman,” we see examples of writers driven to unsettle orthodoxies, criticize inequality and discrimination, and offer dissent from expectation.

10. The morning after the shooting at the mosque in Quebec, University of Toronto professor Karina Vernon asked the following on her Facebook feed: “Colleagues in CanLit: what will you be teaching this week? I’m thinking of scrapping what I had planned and teaching Wayde Compton’s ‘Illegalese: Floodgate Dub.’” Erin Wunker responded with a comment about how she planned to teach 1930s labour movement poetry around issues of immigration, enfranchisement, race, and gender. Farah Moosa quoted from Oobasan as particularly pertinent: “What is done, Aunt Emily, is done, is it not? And no doubt it will all happen again, over and over with different faces and names, variations on the same theme” (219). I replied that I would be talking about “alternative facts” and the Monsanto/Percy Schmeiser patent infringement case as depicted in Annabel Soutar’s docudrama Seeds. Wayde Compton noted that if he were teaching a literature class at the moment, he would teach Cosmophilia, by Rahat Kurd.

Following Karina Vernon’s lead, I asked my own Facebook community “for examples of CanLit that resists,” referencing the figure of the CanLit killjoy and giving examples of Earle Birney, Dionne Brand, Marilyn Dumont, and the Enpipe Line collective. Within seconds came the suggestions of “Speak White” by Michèle Lalonde and “Borders” by Thomas King. These were quickly followed by Shane Rhodes’ X, Soraya Peerbaye’s Tell, “Trickster Beyond 1992: Our Relationship” by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, “The Crows Cope” by Diane Tucker, Makeda Silvera’s “Caribbean Chameleon,” Sharon Pollock’s The Komagata Maru Incident, Souvankham Thammavongsa’s Small Arguments, Cecil Nicholson’s Triage, and “The Uses of Poetry” by Di Brandt. Sonnet L’Abbé pointed out that “there is resistance in simply asserting and reasserting that brown Canadian, Black Canadian, [and] Aboriginal stories are Canadian stories,” and noted her forthcoming anthology with Véhicule Press, tentatively titled “Resisting Canada: Poems for Post-Multicultural Times.” Others listed work by Phinder Dulai, Marvin Francis, Brian Fawcett, Sachiko Murakami, Anahita Jamali Rad, Renée Sarojini Saklikar, Vivek Shraya, Anthony Stewart, and Moez Surani.
The suggestions kept coming. The diversity and range of writers and texts, of genres and generations, was striking. There were as many versions of “writing that resists” as there were postings. A lively conversation sprang up around the work of M. NourbeSe Philip and of Lee Maracle. Larissa Lai’s suggestion of Marie Clements’ work, “all of it but especially Burning Vision and The Edward Curtis Project,” sparked discussion too. Karis Shearer noted that lately she’s been thinking about Leonard Cohen’s Flowers for Hitler “and his examination of culpability, responsibility, and the banality of evil.” Others urged us to go beyond creative works to think about the resisting work of nonfiction as well. Janice Williamson recommended books that deal with Islamophobia by Monia Mazigh and Sheema Khan, as well as the poetry and fiction in the collection she edited, Omar Khadr, Oh Canada. More people piled on with names of writers who resist: Rob Budde, George Elliott Clarke, Jen Currin, Mercedes Eng, Liz Howard, Ray Hsu, Wanda John-Kehewin, Lisa Robertson, Gregory Scofield, Nancy Shaw, Catriona Strang, and Katherena Vermette. Hannah McGregor and Tanis MacDonald provided the passages I have used as epigraphs by Peter Kulchyski and Dionne Brand, respectively. Others wanted to historicize by reminding us of the work of Betsy Warland, Dorothy Livesay, E. Pauline Johnson, Maria Campbell, and F. R. Scott. I am not sure that all of these writers would appreciate being placed under the heading of CanLit killjoy, but I suspect that most would be on board with the notion that their writing resists. It seems to me that the compilation of this list, on a social media site, was the academic version of marching with placards—with brief signals of shared and expandable community and with CanLit in oscillating circles of concern. We came together to think constructively about the conjunction of politics and art. In a moment of grief and fear, we turned to the power of writing that resists, that says no, that interrupts and disrupts.

What happens if we join the “interruptive immediacy of naysaying” of the No! Conference with disrupting the “complacency that the happiness imperative demands” of the feminist killjoy? I think it takes us to a moment replete with CanLit killjoys, or at least people who refuse to be silent or silenced. I am ultimately an optimistic interruptive killjoy, mainly because I agree with a statement purportedly said by Noam Chomsky: “Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so.”

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I end with a return to *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* where Wunker quotes Ahmed once again: “[t]he future is both a question mark and a mark of questioning. The question of the future is an affective one; it is a question of hope for what we might be as well as what we might become” (qtd. in Wunker 97). With such hope, I turn to this Emerging Scholars 2 issue. We received so many strong papers in response to our original call for work by new and emerging scholars in 2015 that after we published *Canadian Literature* 226, the first Emerging Scholars issue, we decided to follow up with a second issue, and to make it a double. The articles in this issue exemplify a new generation of those who sometimes cultivate killjoy criticism in their engagement with Canadian writing. The articles range in topic from sexual violence to environmental policy, from the body in pain in the medical humanities to the CanLit corpus in digital humanities. Often this new generation of scholars says no to orthodoxies within their own work. The work of an issue like this is to initiate a space for the voices of scholars emerging into the field today to be heard.

NOTES

1 Huge thanks to Brendan McCormack, Mary Chen, and Margery Fee for weighing in on drafts of this editorial.

2 In an article entitled “I’m not an alarmist — but as a Muslim woman I am genuinely alarmed,” posted on the CBC website February 1, 2017, Arij Elmi explains how it is dangerous to be a Muslim woman in Canada today: “Many [Muslim] women have stopped taking the subway. Others have quit their jobs or don hats instead of hijabs. These were all choices they have had to make to remain safe in a country that is touted as being one of the safest in the world” (n. pag.).

3 A recent call for papers for a conference on “The Big No!” being held by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee focuses on the “interruptive immediacy of naysaying” and beautifully summarizes the range of possibilities that “No” can hold: “‘No’ can be a language of protest and overcoming. Its power operates across lines of disciplines and ideology, across modes of writing and the refusal to write. Negation can resist or avoid authority, or can identify and highlight forces which insist on forms of complicity and agreement. The lines between different forms—the conservative ‘no’, the creative ‘no’, the ‘no’ of the striker or dissident—deny the clarity of lines of ideology or identity. ‘No’ also brings about its own failures and dangers: of inaction, of regret, of retribution” (n. pag.).

4 Some members of Black Lives Matter (BLM), for instance, chose not to participate in the 2017 March on Washington (held in numerous cities) because of a lack of acknowledgement of the August 7, 1963 “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedoms,” a pivotal march for civil and economic rights for African Americans, and because of a lack of consultation with current members of BLM. Where, some people asked, were the masses of marchers during earlier BLM marches?
5 See, for example, the “Canada 150: Untold Stories of the Past 150 Years” Conference to be held in Dublin at University College Dublin in April 2017.

6 In 2001 Mordecai Richler published an article in The National Post entitled “Don’t Look to Writers for Morality Lessons.” He acerbically writes, “I must speak the truth, even at the risk of being ostracized by my fellow scribblers. In fact, anticipating their rage, I have already applied for a place in the Canada Council’s witness-protection program. This because, much as it pains me to turn on my kind, I fear the time has come to admit that far too many celebrated writers were outrageous liars, philanderers, drunks, druggies, unsuitable babysitters, plagiarists, psychopaths, parasites, cowards, indifferent dads or moms and bad credit risks.”

7 Thanks to the following colleagues for jumping in with examples of Canadian writing that resists: Jennifer Andrews, Veronica Austen, John Ball, Juliane Okot Bitek, Lily Cho, Stephen Collis, Marc André Fortin, Anna Gutman, Manina Jones, Sonnet L’Abbé, Larissa Lai, Christine Leclerc, Judith Leggatt, Tanis MacDonald, Sophie McCall, Hannah McGregor, Julie Rak, Deanna Reder, Duffy Roberts, Gillian Roberts, Karis Shearer, Heather Smyth, Rhea Tregenbov, Karina Vernon, Janice Williamson, Erin Wunker, and Lorraine York. Thank you also to Sarah Brouillette for answering my question about what she rails against.

WORKS CITED


Trudeau, Justin (@JustinTrudeau). “To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada.” 28 Jan. 2017, 12:20 p.m. Tweet.

