

# Smaro Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies* at Twenty

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## Introduction: A New Set of Questions

*Paul Barrett*

Twenty years ago, Diana Brydon called on Canadian cultural critics to generate “a new set of questions” that might liberate us from a collective obsession with the “geographical fallacies, mating loons, and nostalgia for lost Edens” (14) that had dominated Canadian critical imaginaries for decades. For Brydon, the critical work of the early 2000s reconceived of Canadian writing through the lenses of race, diaspora, and Indigeneity in a manner that unsettled old paradigms of CanLit. This forum echoes Brydon’s call to generate new questions by returning to Smaro Kamboureli’s *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* (2000) twenty years after its publication.

Kamboureli begins *Scandalous Bodies* by noting, “This book could be seen as the other of the manifesto on ethnicity that I wanted to write but never did” (1). The false promise of the manifesto, Kamboureli argues, lies in its “messianic message” and its attempt “to rise above history. It is intended to take us beyond the cultural predicament of historical repetition, to defy determinism. Its historical value is posthumous, for a manifesto wants to be judged by the future it announces” (7). While Kamboureli refuses the “power and seductiveness” (7) of messianism and manifesto, her work has announced a future of sorts: a future for thinking about nation, citizenship, and literature against the “hold that nativism has on Canadian literature” (8). Twenty years after the book’s publication, this forum collects eight critical engagements with *Scandalous Bodies* in the

interest of thinking through the challenges that Kamboureli confronts, the difficulties and provocations of her text, and how looking back might help us understand our present moment.

This historical work is particularly relevant for our field of Canadian literature. When Alicia Elliott rightly asks, “How is CanLit continually making the same mistakes?”, part of the answer is that too often Canadian cultural criticism neglects its own history. In particular, we forget the histories of artists and critics who have resisted racism and white supremacy in CanLit in order to challenge, reject, or transform the field. M. NourbeSe Philip, for instance, laments the debates and controversies of the past few years, particularly as

[t]here was no reference to that earlier debate that had raged across Canada’s literary community; indeed, there was no attempt to contextualize the discussions within the relatively recently lived history of the Canadian literary community itself, further cultivating even greater erasure around socially important issues, particularly those related to racism. (104)

The eight pieces assembled for this forum mark a small effort to return to that “recently lived history” by reflecting on *Scandalous Bodies*’ achievements, limits, and continued contributions. How have our articulations and readings of ethnicity, race, diaspora, and Indigeneity transformed in the twenty intervening years? Do we see anything redeemable in CanLit? Where Kamboureli sets her argument against a vision of settler “nativism” at the turn of the century, how does her focus on diasporic and ethnic subjectivities conflict with Indigenous expressions of nationalism? How do we read Kamboureli’s eclectic selection of texts, her movement between the texts of government policy and literature? Why does she not include a conclusion? How have changes in the labour market transformed how we think of intellectual labour, particularly as many of our brightest minds are excluded from these discussions by virtue of their tenuous employment?

Each of the contributors to this forum marks, in their own way, the import of *Scandalous Bodies* to their thinking. Kit Dobson and Libe García Zarranz note the prevalence of scandal in the present time of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with the emergence of new biopolitical regimes. For Zarranz, Kamboureli’s use of “negative pedagogy . . . driven by the ethical imperative to practice responsibility” offers a model for criticism

and teaching alike. In his contribution, Dobson reflects on the etymological and theoretical relations of scandal and embodiment to expand Kamboureli's framework to non-human animals and the environment. My own contribution to this forum echoes Dobson's and Zarranz's critique while investigating the relationship between ethnicity and race as well as the political efficacy of discourses of scandal.

Andrea Davis and Asha Varadharajan consider the values of Kamboureli's engagement with multiculturalism via the language of ethnicity. For Varadharajan, the violent police killing of George Floyd, and the killing of many other Black men by the police in Canada and the US, indicates the limits of an engagement with the politics of identity and multiculturalism. In what ways, Varadharajan asks, do the discourses of identity fail to challenge the necropolitics enacted against George Floyd, Albert Johnson, Andrew Loku, Dudley George, Colten Boushie, and many others? For Andrea Davis, Black women's writing provides a compelling archive that challenges CanLit's imaginary as well as the community of others implicit in Kamboureli's "ethnic" community. Davis seizes on the prevalence of the discourse of ethnicity, rather than race, in Kamboureli's text to insist on the singular contributions and criticisms by Black women to Canadian literature.

Malissa Phung considers her own ambivalent relationship to CanLit: she wants to contribute "to finally extinguishing CanLit's 'dumpster fire'" even as she "never want[s] to abandon the liberating and affirmative, even if highly sedative, possibilities of foregrounding . . . different bodies and texts in the study of literature in the Canadian academy." In a related fashion, Sarah Dowling reads Kamboureli's attention to bodies, and her use of the figure of the angel of history, as emblematic of a particular critical vision wherein we "retroactively grieve the vulnerability of particular bodies" and "lament the violence of history." Both Dowling and Phung consider what it means to write critically in a manner that does not "abstract ourselves from the wreckage" of our field and history, but, rather, writes from within the "cultural and political syntax of our communities" (Dowling).

Finally, in her conversation with Smaro Kamboureli, Myra Bloom explores *Scandalous Bodies'* method, its goals, and how Kamboureli reads it today. Bloom's reflection opens up the analysis of the text's legacy into a

broader conversation about the field of CanLit. Together, Kamboureli and Bloom explore “the trend of sociological approaches to literature” and the import of close reading to contemporary criticism. Their conversation also marks a rare opportunity to read two critics in CanLit engaged in serious, sustained discussion of the field and their work.

This forum is a small gesture towards historical thinking in Canadian literature and an effort to connect today’s debates and concerns to the work of the past. *Scandalous Bodies* is an important text, but my hope is that this conversation leads to discussions of equally important works: Daniel Coleman’s *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (2006), Rinaldo Walcott’s *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (1997), George Elliott Clarke’s *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (2002), M. NourbeSe Philip’s *A Genealogy of Resistance* (1997); the list could go on. To quote Brydon again, “[t]he questions proliferate, and there is thinking to be done” (25).

I would like to sincerely thank Myra Bloom, Andrea Davis, Kit Dobson, Sarah Dowling, Malissa Phung, Asha Varadharajan, Libe García Zarranz, and Smaro Kamboureli for their careful thinking, wonderful writing, and important provocations in this forum. Their contributions open new pathways and raise important questions; the strength of this forum is a result of their excellent work. Thank you also to Christine Kim and everyone at *Canadian Literature* for making this forum possible.

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## New Correspondences

Paul Barrett

**S**maro Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies* begins with the chapter "Critical Correspondences: The Diasporic Critic's (Self-)Location." This chapter is the "other of the manifesto on ethnicity" that Kamboureli "wanted to write but never did" (1). She describes feeling that "[her] study was in search of a different author" (2), partially because both the genre of the manifesto and the content of her ethnic study prove impossible in her political and critical milieu. Describing the Canadian critical scene of the 1990s, she experiences "the various events and debates of those years as if they belonged to a 'revolutionary moment,' yet [she] also felt suffocated by the tendency of the sides involved to reduce them to 'brutal simplicities and truncated correspondences'" (2, quoting Stuart Hall). Kamboureli's struggle to resist these simplicities, to read the present historically, and to embrace the productive power of turbulence while refusing essentialisms, strategic or otherwise, is familiar to us today.

In the shadow of her manifesto on ethnicity, we get a different mode of criticism, one which reads the articulation of diasporic identities and cultural differences as "not a simple joining of two or more discrete entities" but a continued "transformative move of relational configurations" (Brah 110). Kamboureli employs her own "Diasporic Critic's (Self-)Location" to challenge the pervasive "denial of complexity" (2) of identity, enunciation, representation, location, text, and interpretation. This mode offers relief to her (and our) "personal and academic weariness" that results from "the seemingly tangible gap that separates academic discourse from social reality" (2). Her opening chapter is thus a self-reflexive navigation of her own complex positioning as critic and public intellectual that begins by posing the questions to scholars and writers alike: "[W]ho are we? Whose interests do we represent beyond our own academic interests? Who do we write for, and why?" (2).

These difficult questions are still with us: how do critics, particularly in the field of Canadian literature, use their training to not merely discuss and describe but to intervene in public life without resorting to reductive

simplicities or polysyllabic posturing? Thinking about our field today, how do we offer complex and historically minded analyses of CanLit that are attuned to the necessary critiques of the past few years? Part of my interest in Kamboureli's work, twenty years after its publication, lies in her struggle to find a way out of this bind through her diasporic framework of "critical correspondences." Rather than surrender the signs of Canada or CanLit, she rewrites them through a series of "transformative move[s]" (Brah 110) that break "the hold that nativism has on Canadian literature" (Kamboureli 8) and instead inscribe diaspora, ethnicity, and difference as frames that render the project of CanLit both legible and unfamiliar. Reading her work today, I ask: How do we position ourselves in relation to the critical discourses and debates of the past? What forms of "Relational Knowledge" (168) and kinds of correspondences have Canadian critics taken up in the twenty years since *Scandalous Bodies* was first published and how do we self-locate today? How has the lexicon of our criticism transformed and how does that change the stakes of our critical engagement?

*Scandalous Bodies* is the product of an era, and one detects the assumptions and possibilities of that era in the text. Kamboureli writes from a position of institutional security that is simply not a reality for many of today's critics. As I read, I wonder; who is not speaking and how have neoliberalism and precarity silenced the correspondences of generations of critics? Similarly, Kamboureli's method, a sort of philological approach that reads texts socially and society as text, maintains a critical distance that may be less common in today's more activist-minded criticism. She thus describes Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* "as a complex text that gave me both the distance and the proximity I needed to read Canadian multiculturalism" (21).<sup>1</sup> Does this simultaneous distance and proximity still appeal to us or do we, feeling the effect of living in perpetual "emergency time," eschew critical distance in order to attend to the urgent political questions that animate Canadian criticism today?

In many ways, *Scandalous Bodies*, along with a number of other texts, helped to break the hold of two dominant trends in Canadian criticism, what Frank Davey in 1992 identified as the "aesthetic/humanist ideology" (13) of Canadian criticism and a competing "nationalist" (13) ideology. For instance, Sam Solecki, writing *one year* before Kamboureli, attacks what he calls the "soft or postmodern multicultural attitude," namely the view that "all value

judgments are relative . . . and all cultural artefacts are equally important or of equal value and relevance. No centre, no margin, no majority, no minority, everything and everyone of equal value and significance” (24). Solecki’s coded defence of a white vision of Canadian literature is precisely the sort of nonsense that subsequent critics have challenged.

I have been in correspondence with *Scandalous Bodies* since first reading it in the early 2000s. Indeed, one of the first things I realized in my present rereading was the extent to which my own criticism of Canadian multiculturalism is indebted to Kamboureli’s thinking. I was also struck by Kamboureli’s adroit movement between the texts of government policy, journalism, theory, public debate, and literature. Yet I also notice that the discursive aspects of Kamboureli’s “texts” appear overdetermined; Kamboureli wants discourse to do *a lot*. I wonder how a more materialist approach to the events of the Writing Thru Race conference, the Oka standoff, or the history of residential schools might have pulled Kamboureli’s analysis away from the discursive.

Diaspora is a key term for linking, disseminating, *corresponding to* a range of voices that enables Kamboureli to unravel the Gordian knots of identity and articulation, discourse and action. Less a mobile army of metaphors and more a framework of comparative difference, she theorizes and practises how the “constant disjoining and relinking of the chain of events that constitutes diasporic experience” (38) transforms not only diasporic subjectivity but also seemingly stable conceptions of nation and ethnicity.

Yet Kamboureli’s opening discussion of Benjamin’s angel of history and her rereading of that figure in *Wings of Desire* needs to be tempered by recent analyses of the import of place and the continuing power of nation to structure diasporic and national imaginaries alike. What spectral logic links the Janus-faced figure of diaspora with the resiliency of nationalism? When Gilroy argues (*Against Race* 2000) that diaspora “offers a ready alternative to the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging” (123), he resists, like Kamboureli, the grip of “nativism” on culture and identity. Yet, in the twenty years since *Scandalous Bodies*’ publication, Indigenous attention to the importance of place and “rooted belonging” postcolonial assertions of other, resistant modes of nationalism, as well as differentiation between voluntary and forced migrations, have challenged the focus on hybridity and the mobile subject.<sup>2</sup>

Further, for a book concerned with bodies, Kamboureli is primarily attuned to the body as discursive, symbolic, imaginary; the language of ethnicity that pervades the text obscures the differences between racialized bodies. She draws on Fanon, for instance, to interpret the white supremacist gaze depicted in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, yet we must also consider the differences between how Black and Asian subjects are imagined within that scopic frame. Fanon is not describing the act of diasporic or "racial interpellation" (Kamboureli 187) in a general sense but, rather, the corporeal alienation, the "amputation," "excision," and "hemorrhage" of Black embodiment experienced within the "racial epidermal schema" (Fanon 112). As the activism of Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and a range of recent scholarship have all shown, diasporic and racialized bodies are managed, disciplined, and attacked according to how they are racially imagined within a white supremacist schema.

While the language of ethnicity in *Scandalous Bodies* does not fully develop how settler colonialism and white supremacy function complementarily in Canada, the text does provide a compelling framework with which to think about how citizenship is embodied and racially differentiated. Kamboureli has mapped the terrain that has made many subsequent analyses of race and white supremacy in Canada possible. Further, if the "scandal" of embodied ethnicity has shifted in recent years, there remains a continued "effort to force the national imaginary to confront multiculturalism through body images, images already racialized and ethnicized" (Kamboureli 89). How, then, do today's politics of inclusion and diversity, so readily co-opted by capital and government alike, reinforce the "sedative politics" (82) that Kamboureli discerns?

A return to Kamboureli's analysis of the "sedative politics" of multiculturalism, and the continued scandal around race in Canadian writing, historicizes today's emergent fascism to reveal its roots in past polemics against the inevitable failures of multiculturalism. The angry voices that accused multiculturalism of silencing a white majority now find their views reflected in calls to "Take Canada Back" and in more extreme articulations of xenophobia and racism. Yet, Kamboureli is also carefully attuned to the productive power of official and critical multiculturalism to both manage difference and to reframe citizenship and nation from the margins. We see that productive power when Kardinal Offishall insists "I

am multiculturalism” or in Maestro’s “Black Trudeau,” where he rewrites the script of Canadian identity from the vantage of the Black diaspora. Thus Kamboureli’s careful reading of both the productive and repressive power of multiculturalism goes beyond simplistic conceptions of “the facade of equality and multiculturalism” (Wang 149) or the “lie” (Walcott 396) of Canadian multiculturalism.

Kamboureli’s analysis of “scandal” is also helpful for us today, particularly as scandal itself has become something of a routine mode of engagement in contemporary criticism (fuelled, no doubt, by social media). The rise of the discourse of scandal suggests a shift away from once-vaunted critical distance towards immediacy and timeliness, or is it presentism? Certainly the scandals of Canadian literature are real; they are significant and they merit extensive analysis and material change in our critical, professional, and personal practices. Scandalous criticism has demonstrated its capacity to call out, to identify, to demand change. But how far can a criticism of scandal take us? How can it resist being erased by yet another scandal or being co-opted by institutions via public acts of symbolic repentance? What avenues of transformation or reconstruction are closed off when scandal or outrage become our default modes of engagement?

In this respect, perhaps one of the most provocative and promising aspects of returning to *Scandalous Bodies* is to query scandal as a critical mode and to refuse to surrender the sign of CanLit to a singularly scandalous reading. Kamboureli’s philological, “elliptical” (Beauregard 145) approach enables her to carefully attend to the subtle, conflictual, and productive dimensions of CanLit as signifier and discourse. For instance, in her analysis of criticism of Frederick Philip Grove, she acknowledges that while “the development of Canadian literature *as* Canadian has been integral to the political and cultural discourses constituting Canadian identity,” it is also “this kind of negotiation of imperial and colonial signs, of complicity *and* resistance, of metropolitan aesthetics *and* cultural differentiation, that refuses Canadian literature the immutability” (35, emphasis mine) of a fixed signifier.

In place of the singular reading of CanLit as scandal, her analysis predicts Karina Vernon’s recent comments that “[n]ot only is there a genealogy of struggle in CanLit, there is a genealogy of struggle *as* CanLit. What I mean is Canadian literature *as a critical discourse*” (14, emphasis

original). The criticisms of the past few years have demonstrated the many failings and scandals of CanLit, yet the work remains to uncover this genealogy of struggle. Joshua Whitehead offers the image of CanLit as “a collection of mirrors that have amalgamated into a reflective system spelling out nationalism—a whole thing rather than a web of fractures” (164). This is certainly one formation, but the critical task implied by Vernon, Kamboureli, and others is to dispel the illusion of the mimetic or “reflective system spelling out nationalism” and instead uncover the “web of fractures” that lies beneath.

If *Scandalous Bodies* marked, for many of us writing today, one beginning of how to read Canadian literature against the grain, centring racialized writers and bodies while gesturing towards work that remains to be accomplished, then how might we continue to read the “genealogy of struggle as CanLit”? Another way of thinking about this is if CanLit truly is in ruins, we might see those ruins as also “the threshold of what Canadian literature has become since those ‘strangers within our gates’ took it upon themselves to cross the boundary separating those who are silenced, who are written about, from those who give voice to themselves” (Kamboureli 132). If we are on such a threshold, then how do we develop a critical practice that historicizes; that reads the world textually, but not just as text; that puts race, diaspora, Indigeneity, land, gender, and embodiment into troubled dialogue while also recognizing the partiality of one’s own view and the need to listen and learn? Kamboureli offers one model, via the experience and framework of diasporic dislocation as an eclectic method of engagement that refuses strategies of containment and instead pushes beyond the “Manichean delirium” (Fanon) of the nation and diaspora, CanLit and its other.

#### NOTES

- 1 The protagonist of Dionne Brand’s novel *Theory*, Teoria, insists that “[a]ll my life I’ve sat at an angle, observing the back and forth of other people’s lives. . . . I excelled at finding just the right distance from actions and conversations” (6). Brand’s satirizing of academia, and theory in particular, undercuts scholarly fascination with “finding just the right distance.” Brand’s book is such a fantastic trap for academics that any interpretation inevitably renders us the punchline of her joke.
- 2 See, for instance, Pheng Cheah’s *Spectral Nationality*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance,” Daniel Coleman’s “Indigenous Place and Diaspora Space,” Rey Chow’s *Writing Diaspora*, or David Chariandy’s “Postcolonial Diasporas.”

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## *Scandalous Bodies* at Twenty: An Interview with Smaro Kamboureli

Myra Bloom

The following interview took place over email between September 28 and October 8, 2020 in Toronto.

MYRA BLOOM: You begin *Scandalous Bodies* by describing your struggle to position yourself as a Greek Canadian scholar within the political/disciplinary landscape of Canadian culture and criticism. This is a question you revisit again, through an explicitly decolonial lens, in your introduction to an issue of *University of Toronto Quarterly* (vol. 89, no. 1, 2020) that you recently co-edited with Tania Aguila-Way. There, you explore what you call the “aporia of solidarity: affirming, enacting, and living in solidarity while respecting the incommensurability of differences and engaging with the persistent and resistant politics that render some losses grievable and others ungrievable” (“Introduction I,” 7). I want to ask how (whether?) this formulation has helped you address your own questions of self-identity, and how your self-understanding (as a scholar, citizen, diasporic subject) has evolved in the intervening years.

SMARO KAMBOURELI: Let me start by expressing my gratitude to Paul Barrett, Kit Dobson, and to the other contributors, for revisiting *Scandalous Bodies*. It’s gratifying to know that a younger generation of colleagues finds it relevant today. And my thanks to you, Myra, for the opportunity to reflect on it and my thinking in the intervening years. So, about my identity as a Greek Canadian framed in terms of my writing then and now. I don’t know where to begin, but here it goes. The aporia of solidarity may be a recent formulation for me, but my sense of the incommensurability of identity differences has always been part of my thinking, even when I was not yet able to put it into words. I was writing *Scandalous Bodies* in the middle of a period—the 1990s debates—that was as tumultuous and mind-changing as the one we live in now. That “moment” had a formative impact on me. By that time I had already gone through the shock of discovering that I was an other in the eyes of others, and had developed a very sharp sense of the

difference and tension between being and becoming, of the “nervous state” (to echo Homi Bhabha) embodied in hyphenated identities. Perhaps the most important thing I got out of that period was the realization that I had to reckon with my ethnic whiteness and its ambivalences in ways that I had not done before. So, in one word, it’s unbelonging that defines me.

MB: Can you talk specifically about how your Greek heritage has shaped this sense of “unbelonging”?

SK: Being a Greek in the diaspora carries the brand of being an Orientalized white, for modern Greek identity is inflected by the ambivalence of being a part of and apart of the West. Greek modernity has always had to contend with the heritage of ancient Greece, the four hundred years of colonial history under the Ottoman Empire, and the European construction of Hellenism. I was conscious of this before I came to Canada, but in the course of my research for *Scandalous Bodies* I came across James Woodsworth’s *Strangers Within Our Gates*, where Greeks were described as “parasites.” That put things into perspective, which was further complicated by my accent. Funny, isn’t it? I’m stating this in the past tense, but it’s a condition that persists. I’m a white woman who can pass as a “normative” Canadian until I open my mouth. Not much has been written about the burden of accent. Rey Chow is a notable exception. She writes about Derrida’s embarrassment about his French accent—not a proper French accent apparently—and talks about how the linguistic impurity of an accent can place the speaker right on the border of discrimination.<sup>1</sup> I always pause because there is no box I can check to declare how my accent others me in the ears of others.

More specifically about my Greek background, unlike many diasporic scholars who are embedded in their communities, and whose work often revolves around these communities, I’ve never had a close relationship with the Greek Canadian diaspora, never felt the need to belong this way. Not that I disavow my cultural background but my sense of not belonging in the Greek diaspora is mutual, for in the eyes of the Greek communities I tried to relate to in my early years in Canada, I was not a good fit either. So, who I have become as an immigrant comes from my affiliation with different communities and through friends—people of colour—whose activism has taught me, and continues to teach me, a lot. That’s how I’ve learned the rewards and discomforts of solidarity—by unbelonging, being “there” but

not being one of them. I suppose this is one thing I mean by the aporia of solidarity: how to come to terms with the fact that I share a ground with others even though I know I tread on it in different shoes, that I belong, yet all the while knowing that I could be asked to step back because of my white body. So, by the time I had started writing *Scandalous Bodies*, I was profoundly aware of the pitfalls of essentialist notions of identity, of ethnic absolutism.

At the time, multiculturalism had already become an entrenched policy, one whose presumably egalitarian agenda was already belied by how it had been instrumentalized as much by politicians as by writers and academics. I found it ironic that all of a sudden virtually everyone was writing about what we then called ethnic authors, that the ethnic other, in all its pathologies and incommensurabilities, had become a beloved topic, while little was done to address systemic problems. It was this recognition—the scandal of it—that got me writing *Scandalous Bodies*.

So, that was then. Where do I find myself now? Hard to say in a few words. I find this moment to be similarly scandalous, and my sense of unbelonging remains equally pronounced, albeit in ways that are inflected somewhat differently. I believe, wholeheartedly so, in the urgency of the issues that have galvanized the field recently, but I feel I'm outside the fray of things partly because I'm not on social media and partly because I resist the righteousness that often characterizes some of the recent debates. I'm troubled by the name-calling, the rushed way people pass judgment, the implications of the new social and academic protocols that are meant to address racism, sexism, settler culture, but which often only help advance white liberalism or a culture of containment and intimidation.

MB: In *Scandalous Bodies*, you railed against the gap between academic theorizing and lived realities, and in his essay in this collection, Paul asks, “[H]ow do critics, particularly in the field of Canadian literature, use their training to not merely discuss and describe but to intervene in public life without resorting to reductive simplicities or polysyllabic posturing?” (Barrett 124-25). His question is rhetorical but I'm wondering whether you have an answer.

SK: I tried to figure out this issue by writing an essay about “Public Intellectuals and Community,”<sup>2</sup> an essay in honour of Roy Miki. Perhaps not surprisingly, the trope I used in that essay, one I borrowed from Alphonso Lingis, is also about unbelongingness. I deploy his notion of a community

of those who have nothing in common to uncouple identification from community, idealism from solidarity. You see, I'm leery about idealism, about any certitude as to who might hold the right answer, or what that answer might be, to the issues that call for action. I agree with Chow that idealism has a history of violence, a violence akin to fascism: not as in Nazism but in the way Foucault describes it in his Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*—"the fascism in us all" (xiv) is how he puts it—the desire to dominate even though we set out to act against domination. One thing that I know for sure is that the dichotomy between theory and lived reality is false. Theory is not to be understood only as an abstract system of thought; action is already embedded in it. Perhaps it helps that I'm Greek and thus cannot but hear the word in Greek. Theory from *theorein*, a verb, means to look at; a *theoros* is a spectator. For me, then, theory is already about bearing witness, which I take to be the first step toward solidarity and action. I'm not suggesting that all scholarship is activist, but rather that what we do within the academe, even on the page, can be activist, a manifestation of solidarity. One space we all share as scholars is the university. This is our shared lived reality, and, God knows, there is still a lot of work to do within our institutions, though scholars and poets like Len Findlay, Lillian Allen, Rita Wong, Stephen Collis, and Larissa Lai exemplify, each in their own distinct way, how academic citizenship can extend beyond the university.

MB: The Canadian critical landscape has been transformed in recent years with the dumpster fire metaphors, the publication *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*, and other events you have referred to elsewhere as "CanLit's scandalous zeitgeist" (Kamboureli, "Introduction I" 18). Do you think the politics of scandal have lost their efficacy in "the age of outrage"? How does your writing/academic practice envision a different mode of critical engagement?

SK: Outrage is the right word, but I think we need to hear it as a polysemic sign. There is no shortage of things that provoke, should provoke, outrage. So, no, I don't think scandals have lost their efficacy; if anything, they've gained more critical purchase. I think the way I define scandal in my book—as a sign at once of excess and transgression, of violation and indignity—still stands. What has shifted, at least in my understanding of things vis-à-vis CanLit, is that often the response to scandals is scandalous

itself. Call me old-fashioned but I believe that, no matter how we think of CanLit, it is first and foremost about books. The Niedzwiecki case was about Indigenous writing, but most of what is associated with the CanLit scandals as of late has to do with bodies, with the behaviour of particular individuals. I'm uncomfortable with today's tendency to metonymize individual bodies with CanLit. And to me it's highly ironic to call CanLit a dumpster fire at a time when it's never been more inclusive, indeed more hospitable to debate. Not to mention that reducing CanLit to scandals, and doing so in the name of solidarity, has become a way of gaining cultural capital while foreclosing other, perhaps quieter but more productive, ways of seeking solidarity and making a difference. In other words, I think that there are alternative framings than that of dumpster fire, and I resist the assumption that any single movement, no matter its media currency, has a monopoly on the ethics of CanLit.

MB: It's interesting that you still see books as the main substance of CanLit—lately this has felt less and less the case to me: even the sign “CanLit,” which once primarily denoted a literary corpus, has shifted to signify a “field of cultural production,” to use Bourdieu's phrase.

SK: I'm not denying for a moment that CanLit has to be understood as an institution or as a field of cultural production. I've written extensively about this, the need to undiscipline the discipline, to recognize how its political unconscious is imbricated in how we profess the profession. I've mentioned books as just one example of why I'm troubled by some of the recent developments. Books are themselves the result of discursive processes, and they have their own materiality. If the argument that CanLit is in ruins today is based exclusively on the aberrant behaviour of some individuals, then something elemental is missing there. I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It's one thing to respond to a particular incident and another to conclude from such an incident that, because a CanLit author has done or said something offensive, the entire field, or their own work, is tainted. Unethical actions demand to be addressed, justice has to be served for all involved, but I don't think this imperative can materialize by weaponizing CanLit against itself.

CanLit may very well be implicated in all this, but there is, at least in my mind, an undecidable relationship between the lives of texts and the lives of those who produce them. My role as a reader is not to police or

authenticate the person behind the signature on a book. As far as I'm concerned, there is an irreducible relationship between who I am and what I do as a reader *and* how I behave alongside and beyond this relationship. To eliminate this gap would bring about closure, would deny the liminality of both subject positions and of texts, would mean operating from a totalizing understanding of both literature and subjecthood. If we stick for a moment longer with the lexicon of today and of my twenty-year-old book, it would be scandalous of me to respond to the compelling force of an event by relinquishing this undecidability; I would respond, yes, but I would do so not necessarily wearing the hat of a CanLit scholar.

MB: In the disciplinary context, it feels to me like the trend of sociological approaches to literature has made close reading a rare commodity. I therefore found it especially refreshing to revisit *Scandalous Bodies*, which scaffolds its arguments on extended engagements with specific texts such as Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* or Kogawa's *Obasan*. I want to ask you about your methodology in that book, which you've taken some flak for. Some reviewers were unhappy with its eclecticism, calling it "unsystematic" (Christine Wiesenthal) and "a personal reading of texts" (Joseph Pivato). Paul's essay posits that a less discursive approach would have been more effective in grounding your analysis in material conditions, including the lived experience of racialized subjects (Barrett 127). How do you answer these critiques?

SK: I'm a literary scholar, an interdisciplinary literary scholar who doesn't want to lose sight of textuality, be it literary or critical. As to the reviews of *Scandalous Bodies* you mention, I can understand why Joe would find some aspects of my approach to be personal. That was when self-location became politically *de rigueur* for the first time. The personal elements, though, are mostly evident in the opening chapter, whose focus is on the diasporic critic's (self-)location. As for Christine's comment, she's right. I make it clear from the start that, "strictly speaking, this book lacks a cohesive syntax," that it doesn't "present a single argument," that it doesn't "adhere to a single method of reading" (*Scandalous* xiv). I deliberately resisted a single "theoretical model or systematic approach" in order to "let specific texts give shape to my readings" (xiv). So, close reading is "the single privileged approach" (xv) in the book. But I also clarify that the kind of close reading I practise there is "not the kind that views a text as a sovereign world, but one that opens a text to reveal the method of its making, the ways in

which it is the product of an ongoing dialogue between different realities” (xv). This is what I mean when I refer to the undecidable, irreducible relationship between the literary and the non-literary. Hence my contextualizing Grove and offering a close reading as much of his *Settlers of the Marsh* as of his lecture tours, and doing so alongside my discussion of the prison system and [Clifford] Sifton’s immigration policies at the time. That was my way of taking a canonized author outside of the canon’s domain, outing him as an ethnic writer while exposing in the process (at least I hope I did so) CanLit’s complicity. I considered that to be a useful methodological intervention that turned on its head the desire to be part of the canon at the same time that we put this canon down. And talking about multicultural fatigue and sedative politics, or engaging with the genealogy of “yellow peril” in the chapter on *Obasan*—these were similar critical gestures. That was how I engaged with racialization and racism.

So, I think that book has a lot to do with what Paul refers to as the material realities of racialized bodies—obviously not in the way that meets his parameters of an engaged approach, but in my own way. As for close readings, I love close reading as much as I love theory. I think close readings are a great and useful antidote to theory. In my essay “Reading Closely” about Asian Canadian writing, I reflect more extensively on the productive work that I think reading closely can do. That essay, too, got me some flak, but this is absolutely okay by me; this is how we can have a healthy debate. A colleague who criticized that essay was surprised that I greeted him warmly when I ran into him at Congress. I was taken aback by his surprise, for when I write a critique, I critique a text, not the person who wrote that text, and I guess I expect the same from others. Some of the CanLit arguments today are so personalized and so absolutist about what constitutes justice, they foreclose dialogue, they sour personal and collegial relationships, they muffle any dissent from their position. I’m troubled and saddened by this. Only once in my life I kicked a lit author out of my house who attacked me on CBC, but I was in my twenties and didn’t know any better.

MB: Curiously, *Scandalous Bodies* closes with an analysis of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* but does not conclude in a traditional sense. Kit Dobson suggests in his essay that the silence left by the book’s abrupt ending leaves space for the reader to initiate their own critique of dominant historical and cultural narratives. Can you talk about your decision not to write a conclusion?

SK: I must confess that what is curious for you and other readers comes naturally to me. I hate conclusions. I find them redundant and boring. And because I hate them, I find it hard to write them. Conclusions are closures; they foreclose interpretive possibilities. I'd rather leave it up to my readers to reach their own conclusions. So, Kit is right about the silence that he says comes after the chapter on *Obasan*; it is a silence that awaits the speech of others.

MB: In *Scandalous Bodies*, you draw inspiration from Walter Benjamin, who writes that “our task is to bring about a real state of emergency” (“Theses” 257) if we want to create meaningful political intervention. Speaking as we are in the middle of a pandemic, climate catastrophe, and huge mobilizations against anti-Black racism, the rhetoric of emergency certainly feels germane. Do you feel optimistic that our responses to these crises can bring about meaningful social change?

SK: Benjamin also says, in his essay “Critique of Violence,” that violence resides in the foundational moment of nation-states, that it is a product of both nature and history. This suggests to me that we cannot run away from violence. The thing is, the emergencies we're confronted with today are not new; they have a long genealogy. I remember Yeats' “Leda and the Swan,” a poem I used in my teaching to talk about how violence can change the course of history, how it gives birth to a new era by destroying another. It's a beautiful poem about a horrible myth. But there came a moment when I couldn't bear it any longer, never mind that I approached it through what I call in *Scandalous Bodies* negative pedagogy. That the rape of Leda is seen as serving the purpose of ushering in an epochal shift is not the kind of mythic or historical paradigm I can stomach. Zeus, the ruler of gods and humans, was a murderer and a serial rapist. It was a terribly unsettling and instructive epiphany, for I had grown up with these stories; they were my fairy tales.

This is a roundabout way of saying that it's very difficult to try and put in perspective, let alone engage with, meaningfully so, all these crises, which reminds me of something Zygmunt Bauman said, that crisis is the normal state of humanity. I don't know if it's the pandemic that has exacerbated my sense of what we're up against, but these days I'm not very optimistic. The murder of George Floyd, that of Ejaz Choudry, and all the other killings of Black people and people of colour by the police on both sides of the Canada-US border this past summer, the fact that such acts have long become

habitual occurrences, that most of us experience the tragedies they cause and the responses they elicit only as media spectacles—all this is hard to bear.

Under lockdown this summer because of COVID-19, I felt like that woman in Dionne Brand's *Inventory* who watches global violence unfold on her TV screen. I wanted to reread that book but couldn't; it was, still is, at my office where I haven't gone since mid-March. What makes it hard for me to be optimistic is the recognition that often what we learn from a particular crisis is not necessarily or easily transferrable to solutions that might avert another, that perhaps crisis has a way of both shocking us into action and numbing our responses. But crisis can also be extremely generative. The momentum that Black Lives Matter has garnered over this summer is a good example of this. But I recognize, too, that it's very hard to sustain this momentum. It takes its toll; it can burn you out. Still, I don't think we can afford to give up just because there is no end to the catastrophes surrounding us. This is where solidarity comes in.

MB: If you were writing *Scandalous Bodies* now, what other writers would you be considering? What texts do you see intervening in the debates about Canadian literary culture and national identity in important ways?

SK: I don't think I would write a book about diaspora alone. Because diaspora has become so diasporized, because it's no longer a marginal/ized field, I would put it into dialogue with Indigeneity. This is how I frame diaspora in the essay I recently wrote on the topic for the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia for Literature*, specifically through Lee Maracle's (Stó:lō) poem *Talking to the Diaspora*. I'm interested in the intersections between diasporic and Indigenous narratives; in other words, in sites that produce literary solidarity, sites that emerge when we read these bodies of work alongside or through each other.

To answer your question more directly, there are three books I'm particularly interested in: Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*, David Chariandy's *Brother*, and Thomas King's (Cherokee) *The Back of the Turtle*. My interest in Hage's novel comes from my understanding that it goes against the grain of diaspora studies, particularly its primary concern with belonging. His protagonist is not the kind of other that elicits sympathy or empathy; he's sexist, manipulative, a thief, a kind of misanthrope. How can you love or identify with a character of this sort? Not easily, if at all. And, yet, I love that character; I love him because of his resistance to belonging. So, I guess we're back to where we started, my sense of unbelongingness.

And this is precisely one of the things that fascinates me about Gabriel in King's novel, that he's marked by a similar unbelongingness for reasons that complicate the unbelongingness in Hage's text, not to mention that what plagues Gabriel's consciousness is the ecological catastrophe he feels responsible for. Gabriel embodies disaster, yet, true to his name, he also announces hope. At the end of the novel he's home but not at home, and the community he moves in and out of is one that includes a fascinating assortment of characters, including a Taiwanese family. As for Chariandy's novel, I would look at it from the perspective of the figure of the artist, for it announces an important shift in CanLit. The figure of the artist has traditionally been a white figure. Of course Dionne Brand [in *What We All Long For*] has given us Tuyen, but Chariandy has given us Jelly. So, I'm interested in the figure of the artist as a Black DJ, as a hip-hop artist, who may also be queer, who says precious little in the novel, who's virtually homeless, but who can make community happen. The moment when he goes grocery shopping and comes back to cook a meal is so poignant. I love Jelly. So, that would be my challenge, how to bring together this cast of characters, not in the sense of "reconciliation" but in a sense that might offer some answers to the aporia of solidarity. I would go about this with Garry Thomas Morse's (Kwakwaka'wakw) line, "the myth of being *clean*," as my guidepost.

## NOTES

- 1 See Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (2014).
- 2 See Kamboureli, "i have altered my tactics."

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## The Powers of Representation and Transgressive Fires: Reflecting on the Impact of Smaro Kamboureli’s *Scandalous Bodies*

Malissa Phung

**W**hen I first became aware of myself as a diasporic subject, in both the object and subject sense of the term, I was a young, naive English undergraduate student enrolled in the only Asian ethnic literature course offered by the University of Alberta’s English department in the 2000s. Until I took that Asian American literature course with my

first mentor Teresa Zackodnik, it never occurred to me that members of my ethnic and diasporic community could produce a body of literature that was worthy of scholarly study. Actually, it had never occurred to me that such a body of cultural production even existed. I, of course, always knew that a canon of Asian writers existed in Asia. But diasporic writers writing in English outside of Asia that looked like me? Asian American writers like Maxine Hong Kingston, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Monique Truong, and David Henry Hwang? Or Asian Canadian writers like SKY Lee, Larissa Lai, Rita Wong, or Kim Thúy? That was never on my radar. And it's not that I never aspired to write any literature of my own. Almost every young, bright-eyed English major aspired to do so. It's just that if I had conceived of myself as a writer, it was always as a writer or a woman writer but never as a diasporic writer.

On the advice and encouragement of my first ethnic literary studies prof, I went on to feed my latent hunger for Asian diasporic writing by working with her mentor, the late Donald Goellnicht, in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster. It was here that I trained in the fields of critical race and diaspora studies through a transnational, postcolonial, and Indigenous studies framework that freed me from following any single scholarly approach or disciplinary methodology. Even though my doctoral project read Indigenous and Asian relations through the works of Asian diasporic writers situated in Canada, it was never framed first and foremost as a "CanLit" study. Theoretically informed by crossing the disciplinary borders of CanLit, my research was situated comparatively within and beyond Asian Canadian studies, and unapologetically so.

I provide this bio to situate myself as a diasporic settler scholar who has always worked in and around the institutional boundaries of CanLit, yet never fully fit well within the field. I also offer this bio in order to contextualize the scholarly kinship that I feel with Smaro Kamboureli's 2000 book *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Published twenty years ago, *Scandalous Bodies* was one of the first critical studies of ethnic writers in Canada that focused on their diasporic contexts. And it did not offer a singular unified approach to do so. Nor did it select a buffet of diverse ethnic and diasporic voices to form a multicultural survey of Canadian ethnic literature that would have just ended up reifying their marginality, or worse, re-commodifying their difference. Much like how

ethnically diverse communities demand careful attention to their own cultural, historical, and ideological specificities, Kamboureli adopted a “negative pedagogy” (*Scandalous* 25) by opening her analysis to a wide range of literary and cultural texts that informed and shaped her approach to studying diasporic literature and subjectivity in Canada, ranging, surprisingly, from a 1987 German film, Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire*; to a 1925 classic CanLit novel, Frederick Philip Grove’s *Settlers of the Marsh*; to representations of multiculturalism during the 1980s and 1990s in Canadian media, state policies, and the philosophical work of Charles Taylor; to literary anthologies of ethnic writers published in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s; and concluding with a classic Asian CanLit text, Joy Kogawa’s 1981 *Obasan*. In each of these close readings, Kamboureli incisively demonstrates a method of reading ethnic texts not as mere reflections of an ethnic writer’s identity but as autonomously transgressive and excessive (xv) representations borne out of politically lived contexts and unequal power relations that often solicit competing knowledges about how we have come to understand and reproduce ethnicity and difference.

During the 1990s, at the time of her writing, there were very few adequate models for analyzing diasporic cultural production in Canada; or at least from Kamboureli’s perspective, there were very few effective scholarly treatments available in CanLit that would also do so without reproducing the problems of ethno-essentialism or re-entrenching the asymmetrical power relations of the Canadian state and its multicultural others. But since the publication of *Scandalous Bodies*, her work has helped to transform the practice of literary and cultural criticism in Canada, foregrounding the critical importance of studying race, ethnicity, diaspora, and gender in the field of CanLit even as its academic and mainstream publishing institutions were, and remain to this day, epistemological and corporeal spaces that overwhelmingly privilege systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and (settler) colonialism.

If CanLit continues to burn in a raging “dumpster fire,” a phrase that Alicia Elliott (Haudenosaunee), Jen Sookfong Lee, and countless others (see McGregor, Rak, and Wunker) have used to describe a recent period of political scandals in the late 2010s exemplified by moments such as the Steven Galloway and UBC Accountable affair; CanLit’s #MeToo movement; the blazing fall of Joseph Boyden; *Write* magazine’s despicable Appropriation

Prize; and Rinaldo Walcott's very public break-up with CanLit (see Kamboureli, "Introduction I"; and van der Marel), then what is a diasporic non-white settler critic such as myself to do? To riff on The Clash, should one stay or should one go?

Reflecting on the scholarly and cultural impact of *Scandalous Bodies* at the close (or renewal?) of this past fiery decade has left me leaning with much ambivalence towards staying in CanLit, even if I only ever held one foot in the field. Aside from the contributions that it has made to render race, ethnicity, diaspora, and gender legible and worthy of study in the Canadian literary establishment, what makes Kamboureli's book relevant in our current political climate are the questions that it raises about the politics of self-location, the imperative placed on all critical thinkers, but perhaps now more so than ever on racialized, diasporic, Indigenous, female, and non-binary gendered critics, to position ourselves in relation to our critical practice and objects of study. What is the answer to finally extinguishing CanLit's "dumpster fire"? How can we work to make its academic and publishing institutions less oppressive and exploitative for the current and future generations of scholars who teach, write, study, and publish critically and creatively in this field? Is it ever enough to include and foreground differently excessive bodies and texts in our academic and public institutions? Or will such acts of inclusion always remain part of a slow and incessantly futile diversity project given all of the systemic racial, colonial, and socio-economic barriers that have and may continue to keep the CanLit student body and professoriate overwhelmingly white and/or economically privileged (see van der Marel)? These are intersecting neoliberal concerns that we must consider and challenge more than ever as we await the full societal and socio-economic brunt of the present COVID-19 pandemic on the academic-industrial complex.

Twenty years ago, *Scandalous Bodies* profoundly revealed how institutions of all kinds inevitably find ways to co-opt and manage difference, that is, questioning if difference could ever gain any sustainable visibility and meaningful inclusion. These mechanisms can be highly "sedative" (82), as Kamboureli warns us, especially for those of us who have come to represent or study such bodies and texts in the academy, and particularly if we are not careful in how we read and locate these differences. Yet two decades later, history seems to keep repeating itself:

unequal power relations between and amongst subjects and their social contexts appear more entrenched than ever. However, as much as I have grown wary of the raging “dumpster fire” that has become—or has always been—CanLit, I would never want to abandon the liberating and affirmative, even if highly sedative, possibilities of foregrounding and including the cultural production of different bodies and texts in the study of literature in the Canadian academy. It is what seduced me to join the discipline back when I was a young and clueless undergraduate English student in the late 2000s; it effectively seduced me enough to pursue a precarious academic career in the humanities that incurred unsustainable levels of debt for most of my twenties and thirties. But if we are to move forward and continue to find ways to thrive in this field of study, perhaps one way to do so would be to fight for the right to not be contained, to find and advocate for more flexible, autonomous, and transgressive ways of reading and thinking and producing critical works within and beyond institutional boundaries, much like the methodological approach to studying and theorizing ethnicity and difference that Kamboureli so insightfully developed in her book at the turn of the millennium.

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## Which Scandalous Bodies? Black Women Writers Refuse Nation Narratives

Andrea A. Davis

**W**e mark the twentieth anniversary of Smaro Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies* (2000) in the midst of a global pandemic and demands for racial justice. It is difficult to ignore these conjoined moments as we re/consider the location, function, and impact of diasporic literatures in Canada—an increasingly diverse and complex body of work that by necessity is involved in border crossings, moving both within and outside the nation-state. While Kamboureli's formative text was motivated by a discrete set of questions about the place/displacement of ethnic literatures within specifically national conversations about multiculturalism, a consideration of how the terrain of Canadian literature may have shifted in the years since its publication and the provocations that remain unaddressed provides a timely opportunity to rethink the relationship between diasporic literatures and the Canadian state. Specifically, I am interested in the ways in which Black Canadian literature as a particular cultural intervention, and its modes of interrogation, what Sylvia Wynter calls "counter-signifying practices" (268), allow us to identify a set of paradigms that exceed both the category of ethnic literatures and the limits (physical, ideological, and political) of the nation-state. How might a discussion of Canadian ethnic literatures need to shift to account for Black women as writers and critics? In attempting to provide a preliminary response to this question, I draw on NourbeSe Philip's introduction to *Black* and Dionne Brand's "An *Ars Poetica* from the Blue Clerk," both published in 2017, the sesquicentennial of Canadian Confederation.

The 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, although an expansion of previous policy, was only twelve years old at the time of the publication of *Scandalous Bodies*.<sup>1</sup> The passage of the Act, as Kamboureli demonstrates, generated significant media and academic responses throughout the 1990s about the nature and place of cultural diversity in Canada. I read *Scandalous Bodies*, therefore, as an attempt to situate Canadian ethnic

literature less as a product of its global origins and entanglements and more firmly within a corpus of Canadian literature, culture, and politics. While eschewing the role of literary historian, Kamboureli nonetheless presents an important twentieth-century survey of Canadian ethnic literature, moving from a discussion of F. P. Grove's European universalism in the mid-1920s, to the function of anthologies and anthologizing in the mid- to late-twentieth century, and ending with a reading of "history as a montage" in Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan* (1981).

I find Kamboureli's reflections about the possibilities and limits of Canadian multicultural policies in making space for diverse literatures in Canada particularly useful. Identifying multiculturalism as "sedative politics" that recognizes diversity while keeping intact "the conventional articulation of the Canadian dominant society" (82), she critiques Canada's official policy as primarily a social and political tool meant to control the terms of cultural diversity and difference. With multiculturalism written into official law, Canadians could oscillate between practices of "disavowal and scandal" (83)—on the one hand pretending that the "problem" of diversity had effectively been "managed" while treating moments of perceived multicultural excess as scandalous. This critique of multiculturalism was not new, appearing in such works as Philip's essays in *Frontiers* (1992), Rinaldo Walcott's *Black Like Who?* (1997), Roy Miki's *Broken Entries* (1998), Eva Mackey's *The House of Difference* (1999), and Himani Bannerji's *The Dark Side of the Nation* (2000), published in the same year as *Scandalous Bodies*.<sup>2</sup> Kamboureli's early intervention, however, specifically sought to locate a critique of multiculturalism alongside a consideration of the history and reception of diasporic and ethnic literatures in Canada to disrupt an "Us and Them paradigm" (xiv) and articulate the means by which it might be possible "to learn to live with contradictions . . . without fetishizing difference" (xv). She seeks a "mastery of discomfort" (130), a kind of "negative pedagogy" (25), which recognizes the "failure to know the Other" as an opening into new forms of relationships (130). The use of the word failure, she clarifies, is a means to eliminate "the yoke of the capital 'O' . . . to release ethnic subjects from their condition of marginalized Otherness" (130).

What her work never quite makes clear, however, is the identity of the privileged or unified national subject she both invokes and critiques:

“It is because I think *we* still have a long way to go that I do not speak in emancipatory or messianic terms” (130, emphasis mine). Does the invocation of a “we” as knowable subject supersede the “Us and Them” paradigm she is seeking to disrupt, and in such a scenario, when does one cease to reside among “them” on the outside or margins of the nation and come to occupy the space of the *we/us*? Who are the “we” who have the power to finally release the ethnic subject from her “condition of marginalized Otherness”? Unlike Kamboureli, who can choose to resist a “politics of self-location” (6), Black women as writers and critics are always already located in their work, not as a function of self-representation but as a product of history. Their virtual erasure from Kamboureli’s critique of multiculturalism and recording of Canadian ethnic literatures signals the extent to which practices of making history *and* literature function in service of nation-state narratives that cannot adequately account for Black women’s presence and imagination.

It is indeed difficult to decipher where Black Canadian literature fits within Kamboureli’s definition of ethnic literature, or even what she means by ethnic. Her goal, she argues, is not to “define ethnic diversity” but “to problematize difference,” refusing to join the “debate about the semantic and political differences between diaspora and ethnicity” (xiv). While she mentions some well-known Black Canadian writers tangentially, like Dionne Brand and Austin Clarke, and includes Lorris Elliott’s *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada* (1985) and Ayanna Black’s *Voices: Canadian Writers of African Descent* (1992) in a list of ethnic anthologies, Black Canadian literature does not figure as a category in her discussion.<sup>3</sup> While this was clearly not the project she set out to do, it is important to point out that thinking through race, and Blackness specifically, differs from thinking through ethnicity. Since Black Canadian literature is both multi-generational and immigrant, it must account for the presence of a long tradition of Black writing in Canada going back two hundred years, including slave narratives as well as contemporary writers like George Elliott Clarke and Sylvia Hamilton, who are at least seventh-generation Canadians. Black Canadian writing is also informed by a different set of questions/problematics than those emerging from other ethnic groups, including the legacy of slavery and complexity of Black identities marked by repeating experiences of fragmentation—not just hybridity. Neglecting

race as a mode of thought and community, thus, elides possibilities beyond a critique of multiculturalism.

When we understand Black Canadian literature as being both within and exceeding nation, reading and thinking with this literature opens up questions that are not merely about its location within the Canadian literary canon, a critique of cultural marginalization, or a desire to transcend marginalization. Black Canadian literature has work to do in the world because of the unfinished project of freedom. Rather than simply demarcating marginality, it is interested in how one acquires agency, freedom, and even humanity. In the face of what Walcott calls Black diasporic “catastrophe” (“The Black Aquatic”) and Philip names *Maafa*, from the Kiswahili word for “terrible occurrence” or “great disaster” (*Bla\_ck* 33), Black Canadian literature must continually interrogate the deep ruptures caused by colonialism even in the absence of a language that can articulate the depths of such a catastrophe. Black people “cannot, try as we might, cauterize the wound of colonialism: it suppurates, bleeds sometimes, extrudes pus, sometimes appears healed but aches always” (Philip, *Bla\_ck* 16). How does one speak or write this kind of injury?

In “An *Ars Poetica* from the Blue Clerk,” Brand invokes Christina Sharpe’s notion of “dysgraphia” to mark the limits of language and narrative in enunciating the weight of suffering that has accrued from transatlantic slavery and its aftermaths. As Brand argues, narrative attempts to respond to this dysgraphia of disaster necessarily reproduce and import the very language of the dysgraphia: “We are people without a translator. The language we use already contains our demise and any response contains that demise as each response emboldens and strengthens the language it hopes to undermine” (60). As a result, “the Black body in narrative is always spectacular, always spectacularised, marked. The dysgraphia, of dominant and of dominating narratives, unwrites, and makes incoherent, Black presence as presence” (60). Exceeding Kamboureli’s too-easy category of ethnicity, the Black body as a particular kind of “scandalous body” becomes lodged in the archives of a narrative history that is unable to transmit or sound “a tomorrow, beyond brutalisation” (59). Brand argues that it is in poetry—“with its capacities to deposit and unearth plural meanings, with its refusals of a particular interrogative gaze” and its undermining of the roles of the reader/critic—that a Black female writer

may better locate the possibilities for “a grammar in which Black existence might be the thought and not the unthought; might be” (59).

These concerns about language, content, and form repeat in Philip’s chapter. As she explains, “I continue to be plagued by working with language that was fatally contaminated by its history of empire and colonialism, and having no language to turn to in order to hide or heal” (Philip, *Bla\_ck* 32). She finds herself perpetually hunting, searching for the words that do not exist in Canada’s official languages of English or French to translate Black experience and thought. Like Brand, it is primarily in poetry that she finds the rudiments of a new grammar of Black being: a tool that enables her to understand her “own theorizing about the why, how and what I write” (32).

Looking back at her long career as a writer of Trinidadian descent in Canada, Philip further identifies her location in relation to the nation-state through metaphors of unfixity and disappearance. In recognizing her multiple locations as “Black, African-descended, female, immigrant (or interloper) and Caribbean,” she discerns the ways in which these identities precipitate “hostilities within the body politic of a so-called multicultural nation” (13). As a result, she writes “on the margins of history” and “in the shadow of empire,” forced to function “against the grain as an unembedded, disappeared poet and writer” (13). Yet, while Canada—a place in which she counts herself as “among the ‘unbelonged’” (15)—is one of the two places she calls home, she neither desires nor seeks attachment to a nation-state: “Labels remain, but I am now considerably older and embrace the idea that while indigenous to the world, I remain exiled, possibly permanently” (15). The project of thinking and writing Black existence as “the thought and not the unthought” (Brand 59)—of thinking against the impulses of the nation—positions both Philip and Brand as diasporic interlocutors and wayfarers. Commenting specifically on her relationship to the settler-colonial state during Canada’s celebration of its sesquicentennial, Philip asks: “Can one ever be/long on what is essentially stolen land? Even if not stolen by you. And if there exists no word to describe one’s state or condition in relation to where one lives, is one permanently erased?” (*Bla\_ck* 34). Echoing a critique of the politics of multiculturalism, she chooses to enter “the idea of Canada” not through Kamboureli’s “negative pedagogy” or in search of some kind of reconciliation with the state, but “through the land” (34). Such an entrance opens up the “possibility of being in a relationship of

integrity and truth” with Indigenous peoples while also recognizing that in a world “in which we have all been uprooted from ourselves . . . belonging must begin to embrace the idea of fluidity and movement” (34-35).

In the search for language and resistance to the idea of the scandalous/spectacularized Black body, Brand and Philip refuse the easy containment of nation narratives and their articulation of a “we” as unnamed and, therefore, unchallenged subject. They are ultimately less concerned with a national struggle between “Us and Them” and more committed to the project of reimagining their freedoms in all the places in which they may live. Likewise, as a diasporic reader/critic, I see my role as both attending to the dysgraphia of catastrophe and dreaming different futures with the writers who have sustained me in this country.

#### NOTES

- 1 The entrenchment of Canadian multiculturalism in Canadian law took place over a seventeen-year period following the 1971 introduction of a federal policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework. Multiculturalism was subsequently recognized in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 and a new policy of multiculturalism was enshrined into law with the passage of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988.
- 2 Critiques of multiculturalism have continued to proliferate. For additional perspectives see Barrett, Davis, Fleras, and James.
- 3 Kamboureli also references Makeda Silvera’s *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* (1991), which includes work by well-known Black women writers, like Dionne Brand and Audre Lorde, but it is not an anthology of Black or Canadian literature exclusively.

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## Justice, Not Identity: What a Woke Multiculturalism Looks Like

Asha Varadharajan

You say you believe that 'all lives matter'  
I say I don't believe the fuck you do  
—Stevie Wonder, "Can't Put It in the Hands of Fate"

**A**n anyone who leafs through *Scandalous Bodies* or who ponders its memorable moments twenty years after its publication cannot help but be overcome by a profound déjà vu. Smaro Kamboureli's elaboration of multiculturalism's logic of containment rather than of tolerance, accommodation, or indeed hospitality; her attention to the production and representation rather than the definition of difference; her diagnosis of how ethnicity comes to oscillate between sanctioned exoticism and dangerous excess; and her affirmation of a "mastery of discomfort" (130) in refusing to assimilate or appropriate the Other's differences continue to resonate in our all-too-discomfiting present.

But reliving the pleasures of her book's idiosyncrasies and insights also made me squirm—has so little changed that multiculturalism continues to

sedate rather than emancipate? Kamboureli describes her book as shaped by the rift between discourse and action—her argument reveals that the Multiculturalism Act’s “rhetoric of normalization” (102) serves not to guarantee the aspiration to equality and dignity but to regulate difference (101). Kamboureli’s keen awareness that the legitimation of ethnicity lapses all too readily into taming its incommensurability motivates her to reject “the futile promises of a utopian project” (xv); instead, she advocates learning to live with contradiction and asymmetry, “shuttling between centre and margin while displacing both” (130). Her modest claim for her book, therefore, is that it seeks to interrupt rather than alter the present it inhabits (6).

The normative embrace in which multiculturalism encloses the ethnic subject, Kamboureli demonstrates, must be characterized less as “force or violence” (102) and more as the insidious operation of hegemony, of power that defines Canadianness and effectively demolishes resistance to such conformity and homogeneity. The dominant discourse of multiculturalism, in Kamboureli’s view, simultaneously disavows and fetishizes difference; that is, ethnicity must signify transgression and contamination for the politics of recognition to seduce and sedate. The law, in Kamboureli’s scheme of things, exercises a disciplinary function in reconstituting the body politic and narrating nation.

The title of her work, however, alludes to the corporeal and the material rather than only the discursive and the symbolic, while remaining attuned to and troubled by the problematics of mediation and enunciation. In this regard, Kamboureli asserts that the word “scandal” is a sign “also of violation and indignity” (xv). I take my cue from this assertion because recent events such as the Tyendinaga standoff and the protests and toppling of monuments in the wake of George Floyd’s death indicate that the need of the hour may be less about the politics of identity and difference and more about what Walter Benjamin would call the relations among law, violence, and (in)justice. Kamboureli cites Amy Gutmann’s comment that dominant narratives of multiculturalism could be assessed in light of their implementation of justice (Kamboureli 101-02; Gutmann 176), but does not develop this argument except to indicate that neither social cohesion nor cultural relativism resolves conflicts. Put another way, our attention needs to shift from the rhetoric of normalization that renders ethnicity both undifferentiated and essentialized to the necropolitics of extremity. George Floyd’s “I can’t breathe” searingly

illustrates the meagre superfluity of a life for which “nobody bears the slightest feelings of responsibility or justice” (Mbembe 37-38). In the context of the routine and casual violence and the threat of incarceration that Black, Indigenous, and mentally ill bodies and persons suffer, “constructive dialogue” (Kamboureli 129), necessary as it is, is unlikely to suffice if only because the boundaries that circumscribe the other (129) are, precisely, impermeable. In light of Floyd’s suffering and humiliation (he is, of course, representative rather than alone in his plight), Kamboureli’s comment about how Naomi’s body in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* both “bears the stain” and “dissolves under the weight” of history becomes even more poignant and apposite (187).

I chose Stevie Wonder’s lyrics as my epigraph because they deploy enunciative position to such startling effect. Kamboureli discusses enunciation in the context of critical responsibility and the ambivalences of positionality, but my interest is in what enunciation makes politically possible. Like Kamboureli, Wonder is skeptical of “emancipatory gesture[s] in the name of homogeneity and unity” (Kamboureli 101). The enunciative position of Blackness refuses to suspend disbelief in the expansive gesture that includes “all lives,” illuminating the exclusion that makes such largesse possible. Kamboureli struggles with the determinism of historical repetition despite or perhaps because she refuses to speak in messianic terms; for Wonder, change is too important to leave “in the hands of fate.” The rift between discourse and action may never be sutured; nevertheless, “expos[ing] the contents of history” acquires meaning and momentum when it serves “also to change history’s shape” (Kamboureli 221).

I want to conclude by turning to Kamboureli’s discussion of “the striptease of our humanism” (117) that Frantz Fanon undertakes. Her critique of Charles Taylor’s misreading of Fanon is well taken and, I would add, Taylor’s failure to feel unsettled by Fanon’s determination, as Sartre describes it in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, to root out “the settler which is in every one of us” (qtd. in Kamboureli 117) is telling, to say the least. But Fanon’s scathing denunciation of Europe, that never ceases speaking of Man while murdering men wherever it may find them, is also a cry of rage and disappointment in the failure of humanism to live up to its vaunted ideals. When this suspicion on my part is juxtaposed with Mbembe’s poignant depiction of a superfluous life “whose price is so meager that it has no equivalence, whether market or—even less—

human” (37-38), I want to interpret both humanism and universalism counterintuitively to account for Floyd’s exclamation “I can’t breathe,” his embodiment of worth in and as breath, as life itself. In this moment, Floyd dreams simply of being human, equivalent to anyone and everyone else.

How might the discourse of multiculturalism affirm its responsibility to life without disciplining or commodifying difference?

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## Grief, Bodies, and the Production of Vulnerability

*Sarah Dowling*

I’m not sure when I first read Smaro Kamboureli’s *Scandalous Bodies*, but in revisiting it to write this piece I’m struck by certain groupings or affinities that I hadn’t previously noticed. The groupings that I’ll address here position *Scandalous Bodies* within scholarly discussions that take place outside of the field of Canadian literature, or that stretch across any number of bodies of humanistic scholarship and into the realm of activism. Without suggesting that a move away from the disciplinary specificity of Canadian literature is a move toward a literary-critical big kids’ table, and in acknowledgement of Kamboureli’s “desire to release [her]self

from the hold that nativism has on Canadian literature” (8), I’d like to consider some of these alternate groupings as one way to assess the ongoing utility of *Scandalous Bodies* upon its twentieth anniversary. This book can be located within a broad-based critical interest in melancholy, haunting, and grief that takes place at the turn of the millennium; Kamboureli’s engagement with Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940) places her work among a diverse array of theoretical and literary-critical texts that seek to prioritize the work of affect—most particularly grief—in the interpretation of history, doing so in order to question the still-dominant idea that progress and perfectibility structure the passage of time. In addition, and perhaps more obviously, *Scandalous Bodies* participates in the preoccupation with bodies in academic discourse, activist debates, and everyday speech evident in the last quarter of the twentieth century and enduring through to the present. This ubiquitous emphasis on bodies—as opposed to, say, subjects or persons—emerges from an imperative to question the colonial, racist, and patriarchal foundations of subjectivity as well as the legal formalism of personhood and citizenship in ways that highlight vulnerability as both a general condition and a grounding political priority.

I’d like to consider how *Scandalous Bodies* participates in these two discourses in order to question what seems to have become a critical consensus: that our role and enterprise as literary critics (or, perhaps more broadly, as humanists) is to retroactively grieve the vulnerability of particular bodies and to lament the violence of history—the “wreckage,” to use a term of Benjamin’s (257). My goal in asking this question is not to critique Kamboureli or her important volume, still less to suggest that those who’ve suffered don’t deserve mourning, nor to imply that history wasn’t *all that bad*. Instead, my hope is that examining Kamboureli’s unique engagements with these still-powerful paradigms might prompt some metacritical considerations: Does it still make sense to employ the agency-denying “bodies” terminology? Is it accurate or sensible to imagine our relationships to the histories that we are interpreting through the image of Benjamin’s angel—a grief-stricken but immobilized and ultimately disconnected observer? I’ll examine Kamboureli’s engagements with the “grief-and-bodies” discourses, if I may use that phrase, and I’ll suggest that what remains useful about *Scandalous Bodies* is how it sits astride these two

critical paradigms, endorsing and expressing some degree of reservation about both in ways that clear a path for more politically engaged scholarship.

Let's first consider scholarly uses of Benjamin's well-known essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," a text which gained prominence in anglophone criticism around the turn of the millennium for those seeking to contest progressivist historical narratives—I'm thinking of Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999), David Eng and David Kazanjian's volume *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2002), and, no doubt most famously, Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), to offer only a very few examples. In a series of numbered paragraphs, Benjamin rejects any approach to history in which the past appears as a unified whole, wherein it is possible to know how things *really* were, and in which history is imagined as a progress narrative. In an especially well-known passage, he describes Paul Klee's 1920 monoprint *Angelus Novus*, interpreting the cartoonishly innocent angel in the picture as a trapped and stricken witness to the unfolding of history. From the angel's perspective, history is not structured as a linear narrative of improvement but as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin 257). Wings pinned open by the wind, the angel cannot turn away from this devastating but undifferentiated vision; the angel is propelled into a future he cannot see, and is forced to survey the mess of the past. We, however, are not angels: Benjamin claims that the past cannot be grasped as a totality; instead, we only "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). Speaking in the most general terms, what scholars have drawn from Benjamin's short piece is an invitation to rethink "subjectivity, time, and the writing of history in the context of a politics of social marginality," as well as a process for "restructuring tradition, discovering other moments, [and] finding new kinds of time in which other voices can be heard in official national historical narratives," to borrow a couple of representative phrases from Dinshaw (17, 18).

It hadn't previously occurred to me to put *Scandalous Bodies* in a category with other turn-of-the-millennium critical works that engage with Benjamin's writing or with other affective approaches to historical interpretation. Perhaps this was simply because the nation-based framing of most literary

criticism—even a work like *Scandalous Bodies*, which troubles national frameworks by attending to ethnicity and diaspora—artificially separates texts with similar critical frames. In addition, whereas many of the scholarly works that engage closely with Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” seem to adopt the angel’s affective state and, at least implicitly, its perspective, Kamboureli expresses reservations about identifying too closely with Benjamin’s angel, whose position is “too precarious for a mere human, and an academic at that, to mimic” (7). While the sad reality is that almost nothing is “too precarious” for an academic today, Kamboureli’s circumspection about scholarly identification with the angel of history remains crucial: “We may empathize with his predicament . . . but we live in the midst of the debris that he only gazes upon from afar” (8). She therefore engages more substantively with the angels in Wim Wenders’ film *Wings of Desire* (1987), angels who wander around, who engage, who love, learn, and interact. What I draw from Kamboureli’s interlocution with Benjamin is a certain scholarly humility, as well as a reminder of our own embedded positions and the necessity of writing from “inside the cultural and political syntax of the communities in which [we] participat[e]” (21). From this position, the refusal of linear, progressive narratives and the embrace of the brief, particular flash not only makes good sense; it is all that is possible. In its structure and its examples, *Scandalous Bodies* continues to demonstrate the validity and the excitement of this approach.

Now let’s consider a second theoretical corpus within which *Scandalous Bodies* might be situated. Art theorist Marina Vishmidt has recently analyzed the “‘bodies’-centric discourse” of the past few decades, explaining that the ubiquitous emphasis on “bodies” seen in critical theory and its related discourses specifically flags “the vulnerability of growing numbers of the population” (34). In other words, the terminological emphasis on “bodies” underscores “the prioritization of vulnerability, or, more generally, life, materiality and affect which constitutes the parameters of basic political analysis today” (34). Evidently, *Scandalous Bodies* fits well within this discourse: indeed, the terms “body” and “bodies” are used hundreds of times throughout the book. With a little help from the CTRL+F function, it’s easy to trace where these terms are most densely clustered: relatively infrequent in the introduction, nearly absent in the chapter on F. P. Grove, and appearing only a handful of times in the chapter “Sedative Politics:

Media, Law, Philosophy,” the recurrence of these terms intensifies as the book goes on. With just over a dozen appearances in the third chapter on “ethnic” anthologies, they achieve their fullest saturation in the final chapter where, taken together, “body” and “bodies” appear well in excess of a hundred times. Why is this notable? The final chapter, as most readers will know, discusses Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* (1981), reading its Japanese Canadian protagonist, Naomi, “as a character embodying history” (176). Perhaps this extreme emphasis on the body at the moment when the text most extensively considers a representation of a racialized woman substantiates Robin D. G. Kelley’s recent critique of the “bodies” discourse: “In the argot of our day, ‘bodies’ . . . increasingly stand in for actual people with names, experiences, dreams, and desires.” Put differently, the recourse to “bodies” terminology runs the risk of entrenching dehumanization by reducing those to whom it is applied to figures similar to Benjamin’s angel; immobilized by forces beyond their control, “bodies” lose capacity for action (or even complexity) and become mere “cipher[s] of sorrow” (Vishmidt 40).

But Kamboureli attends to the *production* of bodies in a way that Vishmidt claims is rare. Vishmidt, following Kelley, suggests that the terminological emphasis on bodies tends to ontologize bodily vulnerability, unwittingly describing it as a pre-political condition. This, they both suggest, prevents inquiry into how suffering is produced. Kamboureli is instructive here. In fact, it’s notable that the terms “produce,” “reproduce,” and “product” occur thirty-three times in her final chapter. They intersect with the “bodies” terminology, enabling Kamboureli to argue that “racialized sexuality is the product of master discourses; it shows hegemonic systems to operate as desiring machines in which desire signifies at once libidinal force and administrative intention” (203). Indeed, at various points in *Scandalous Bodies*, she explicitly discusses the production of “multicultural bodies” through “the mandate of the multiculturalism policy” and public understandings thereof (91). While my own reading of *Obasan* differs from Kamboureli’s, what stands out most to me in rereading *Scandalous Bodies* is its insistence on problematizing the production of difference in law, media, and other discourses, and its focus on analyzing how this difference is attached and attributed to particular bodies.

An emerging generation of literary scholars is pushing this emphasis on the production of vulnerability—and, indeed, of difference—in new and

important directions. Moving beyond the familiar realm of textual analysis to connect literary studies and literary production with concrete instances and patterns of state violence, the scholars I'm thinking of might not be classified as working in *Canadian* literature due to the sophisticated ways that they discuss the state's involvement in producing vulnerability. Yet I hope that their growing corpus of work will be as influential to scholars of Canadian literature as Kamboureli's has been. As Kelley writes in reference to a group of graduate students at his own institution, so I wish to write in reference to the emerging scholar-activists connected to our field:

[They] are demonstrating how we might remake the world. They are ruthless in their criticism and fearless in the face of the powers that be. They model what it means to think through crisis, to fight for the eradication of oppression in all its forms, whether it directly affects us or not. They are *in* the university but not *of* the university. They work to understand and advance the movements in the streets, seeking to eliminate racism and state violence, preserve black life, defend the rights of the marginalized (from undocumented immigrants to transfolk), and challenge the current order that has brought us so much misery. And they do this work not without criticism and self-criticism, not by pandering to popular trends or powerful people, a cult of celebrity or Twitter, and not by telling lies, claiming easy answers, or avoiding the ideas that challenge us all. (Kelley, emphasis original)

As Kamboureli says so clearly, we misunderstand our position and our role as critics if we pretend to abstract ourselves from the wreckage. If we take seriously her invitation to write from within the cultural and political syntax of our communities, then it is the work of these emerging colleagues that will refine and sharpen our sense of scandal.

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## The Scandal of Bodies: *Scandalous Bodies* at Twenty

Kit Dobson

**A**s I took out my pen and paper and began drafting (which is my distinctly embodied practice of writing of late), I was struck by just how scandalous bodies have become. At home in the midst of the global pandemic, the body has been banished from the body public or politic: we are confined to our individual spaces, our bodies separated, cordoned off, restrained. This is not to erase the very real and materially impactful differences between our bodies. The definition of “home” is multivalent, for one, and it is not one that I can assume we share. The importance of embodied differences is resurfacing in street movements like Black Lives Matter, in political discord, and in the vital analyses of how different bodies are impacted by this moment. Yet, perhaps it is the attempts at a broad, supposed flattening of these various differences that constitutes the scandalous nature of bodies in this moment. I am disturbed, shaken at these prospects.

The changes—or, really, intensifications—have happened for important reasons: the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed upon humankind a virus that has as yet, at the time of my writing in the late summer of 2020, no remedy, only treatments for symptoms. Many bodies—surpassing one million as I write—have succumbed to this virus. The temporary state of exception that has separated us from one another is extending into a long emergency with little relief in sight.

What are we to do in these circumstances? I find myself returning to my mentor Smaro Kamboureli’s 2000 monograph, *Scandalous Bodies*, for a reminder of the ways in which the body itself marks a site of scandal. For Kamboureli, the gendered, racialized body is an unruly vessel. The nation-state endeavours to contain it, yet it slips, leaks (to invoke Elizabeth Grosz), edges out past the genteel constructions and constrictions that are erected in order to hold it in place. Foucauldian biopolitics meet Achille Mbembe’s analysis of the necropolitical in a macabre arena with very real, material consequences that are, for many, being witnessed and felt today in disembodied virtual spaces online.

What a time.

Even being able to write this piece entails bodily scandal, regulation, and a modified experience of challenges that Kamboureli identified twenty years ago. I am writing from home, from a home office recently transformed in order to accommodate the daily working rhythms of four humans and the companionship of one dog. My copies of *Scandalous Bodies*—both the original 2000 Oxford UP edition and, I thought, the 2009 republication from Wilfrid Laurier UP—were locked in my office. At present, faculty members at my home institution of Mount Royal University in Calgary are not allowed to work from campus. Our leaky bodies are possible vectors for a disease that can hardly be contained—indeed, a disease that so far manages to escape all containment.

In order to retrieve my books, I had to file for permission. At length, I was granted a narrow window of time to visit my office. This is a space in which I normally spend many hours in a given work day, coming and going between classes, meetings, and the library. Instead, the campus is now shut down, emptied out, and sterilized. I had to wear a mask in order to get there; I had to sanitize myself in order to enter the building. I had to get in, retrieve *Scandalous Bodies*, and then get out. My own body had become a scandal. All of this is by now banal, commonplace—yet it would have been unthinkable mere months ago.

I pause at that “yet.” The particular scandal of my own body in this instance is, at most, a very small one. Elsewhere, between the fires and the floods, those whose bodies are marked by difference have experienced this moment in deeply, traumatically intensified ways. To say that the body is scandalous is to note both the necessary contingency of embodiment, but also the very real, variegated impacts of this moment on bodies across the globe.

Once I arrived in my office, I found that my 2009 edition of the book had wandered off, as books seem to do every now and again. So I found myself working between my 2000 edition in print—the copy that I purchased as a graduate student at the University of Toronto in the mid-2000s—and an online e-book of the 2009 edition that I accessed from my university’s library. The book, too, had become disembodied.

How can the body itself be a site of scandal? Are we not all embodied? Would this not render each of us a scandal? Feminist thinking around embodiment and performance, as well as critical race theory, must

be starting points to unpack this problem. Here Kamboureli's work is instructive. In *Scandalous Bodies*, the organizing terms are ethnicity and diaspora, but the book's careful study of F. P. Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* (and its critics), of media representations of multiculturalism in Canada, of multiculturalism as law and political philosophy, of ethnic anthologies, and of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* all entail careful elucidation of how the body is discursively enmeshed in a Canadian context, controlled, regulated, and—in Kamboureli's apt phrasing—sedated.

And, in my rereading, I set aside any sense of scandal as a means of unpacking my own experiences during this time. I think of all of the work done in literatures produced in the place currently called Canada since the year 2000—I think, in particular, of the tremendous work done in Indigenous literatures in this period—and I anticipate necessary shifts that are yet to come in the work of future criticism.

I move on to think etymologically. The word “scandal” has a long history, tracing through the Latin *scandalum*—the cause of an offence—to the Greek *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον). The Greek word means a snare or a stumbling block. The body is a site at which one stumbles. At the moment, we stumble in our separation; we are ensnared by invisible two-metre buffer zones, points of no contact. The *OED*'s definition of a scandal as an “offence to moral feeling or sense of decency” lands in full force at this juncture. Here is how Kamboureli discusses the title of the book:

“Scandal” and “body” are equally polysemantic in this study. “Body” refers to corporeality, but also to the body politic; it is what I focus on, more often than not, in order to examine the politics of identity. The body's desires, its traumas, its abuse are all contingent on the body politic and its various manifestations. Similarly, “scandal” is a sign of excess and transgression, but also of violation and indignity. (ix)<sup>1</sup>

Bodies become scandalous, perhaps more than ever; they are sites of moral and legal governance, “violation and indignity”: shifting prescribed and proscribed behaviours of the now counter-balance physical health and social and emotional well-being. The body, too, is a site of general public outrage over many moral offences: from yet another act of racialized police violence; to the dispossession of the most vulnerable as the “she-cession” unfolds in waves of job losses; to the ongoing crises of the displaced.

If there is a path to an equitable future to be found in this long crisis, it is to be found in the very nature of the scandalous body. What does it take to

prioritize bodies—the material body, the body politic, the body of the earth itself, the body through which we and our kindred species suffer, love, exult, and grieve—as sites of radical change? Each of these bodies is different; the differences between these bodies must be emphasized. And, so, how might the stories we tell affect the ways in which bodies become scandalous or sacred? Working in concert with the critics of identity whose works precede hers, Kamboureli considers these challenges. At key junctures throughout *Scandalous Bodies*, Kamboureli inserts moments of political critique and urges a path forward. She hopes “that the future will be less coercive than the history we have known until now” (x); she argues for “practising responsibility” through a pedagogy of understanding power and its (re)production (26); she situates her analysis against the seductions of “the disciplinary and homogenizing control of the dominant society” (80); she invokes the “goal” of mastering “discomfort, a mastery that would involve shuttling between centre and margin while displacing both” (130); and she observes that “we aren’t going to get” anywhere progressive “by embracing a multicultural ethos modelled on a postmodernism” that is not truly radical (174). These statements are all hortatory: they urge readers to critically consider the body and the limits placed upon it by systems that remain in play today. Yet Kamboureli also writes that “it is because I think we still have a long way to go that I do not speak in emancipatory or messianic terms” (130). There are cautions, in other words, about embracing the idea of an emancipation that is about to come, rather than one that remains deferred.

All of these moments lead up to the book’s concluding statement: in her analysis of Naomi in Kogawa’s *Obasan*, Kamboureli argues that what is “brought to light . . . is the double imperative not only to expose the contents of history, but also to change history’s shape” (221). The book ends, it has always seemed to me, quite suddenly. We have been reading, to this point, an attentive analysis of *Obasan*, one that probes the seeming dichotomy in the text between speech and silence in order to historicize, unpack, and problematize prevailing literary approaches to the text. Kamboureli’s final imperative, however, is not merely a conclusion to her analysis of Kogawa’s book. It is also an *envoi* from *Scandalous Bodies* itself: the imperative remains to expose the contents of history. This point remains as true now as ever, when misinformation, disinformation, and obfuscation confront us at every turn. It remains key to shift the shape of history itself, moving from

a recounting that comes from the enfranchised, the vocal, and the “winners” of history. The importance of sustained, granular analyses of texts, public policy, media reports, films, and anthologies for the push-and-pull between dominance and dispossession remains as urgent as ever.

At twenty years, *Scandalous Bodies* remains a vital work. In his 2009 foreword, Imre Szeman writes that Kamboureli’s is “a must-read book for anyone involved in the ongoing scholarly and public discussions about ethnicity, diasporic communities, and multiculturalism,” noting that it was written during a period of intense contestation (ix). The snares and stumbling blocks that were with us then continue. In a very recent piece—her introduction to the *Literary Solidarities / Critical Accountability: A Mikinaakominis / TransCanadas Special Issue* of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* (vol. 89, no. 1, 2020), co-edited with Tania Aguila-Way—Kamboureli returns to some of the concerns that animate *Scandalous Bodies*. She does so, in particular, by asking fraught questions about solidarity framed by the question, “Should I be here?,” which she analyzes via the question’s appearance in Wayne Compton’s 2014 book *The Outer Harbour*. Building indirectly on the ways in which the introductory chapter of *Scandalous Bodies* analyzes, critiques, undoes, challenges, and discusses the importance of the practices of critical self-location, in her new article Kamboureli argues that “[w]hat is at stake in declaring and practising solidarity is the validation of alterity, not the production of a common identity” (5). Bodies continue to be in fraught, tense relationships that are not easily negotiated when we are able to commune in person, let alone in the fractured, fragmented ways that the present moment necessitates. The challenge remains, to think with Kamboureli, of how to emerge into a new frame, one of justice and an ethics to come.

#### NOTES

- 1 Although the 2009 republished edition begins with a new foreword by Imre Szeman, the pagination and contents of the main text are the same as the 2000 edition.

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## 2020 and All’s Well: On Positionality, Transtemporality, and *Scandalous Bodies*

Libe García Zarranz

2019 and all’s well

—Larissa Lai, *Automaton Biographies*

[W]e need to learn how to live with contradictions, and to do so without fetishizing difference.

—Smaro Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies*

It is 2020 and all is *definitely* not well. The ironic words of Larissa Lai’s racialized automaton, rachel, in the first epigraph could not be more timely to fathom this “age of turbulence” (Mbembe 185). A global pandemic hit the world on March 11, dramatically affecting the lives of millions of people and intensifying social, economic, and political inequities. In the words of Danielle Peers, Canada Research Chair in Disability and Movement Cultures,

[i]f this pandemic has clarified anything, it is that eugenics is not in the past: ableist triaging of medical supports; coerced DNRs; herd immunity strategies; and the immense precarity of those we have institutionalised (e.g., long-term ‘care’, prisons, detention centers).

Given how systemic ableism is intimately intertwined with ongoing colonialism and increasing racism, as Peers aptly contends, the livability of racialized peoples is always at stake.<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that Indigenous, Black, and diasporic writers of colour in Canada are making extensive use of print and digital platforms to publish their work, often positioning intersectional approaches to race and ethnicity at the centre of creative inquiry. The relentless work of

book publishers such as Arsenal Pulp Press, for example, is remarkable in this regard. In the current historical juncture, “the hegemony of the twitter feed . . . white backlash, [and] government by troll” (Lai, “Insurgent” 91) coexist with the unpredictable force of collective protests and racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Black Trans Lives Matter, and others. This continued paradoxical sense of despair and possibility, polarization and alliance, where contextual, institutional, critical, and creative impulses cannot be de-linked, remains at the heart of Smaro Kamboureli’s influential *Scandalous Bodies* (2000).

Writing her book within the textures of the mid-1990s, Kamboureli defines this decade as one of “vociferous advocacies” and “global upheavals” (1). This is the time when some of the last residential schools were still operating, demonstrating the force of ongoing colonialisms and expressions of assimilation; the time of *Writing Thru Race: A Conference for First Nation Writers and Writers of Colour* (1994), which many found scandalous at the realization that “whiteness is not paradigmatic” (Kamboureli 91); a time before 9/11 but after the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) when the poetic and critical wordings of Lee Maracle, Dionne Brand, Hiromi Goto, and many others were transforming the contours of the literary traditions produced in Canada, counteracting the pernicious “sedative politics” (82) of official multiculturalism that Kamboureli persuasively articulates. These writers, whose work had appeared in the anthology *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (1996, rev. ed. 2007), were revolutionizing stifling conceptualizations of diaspora and multiculturalism beyond “symptom[s] of difference” and “sign[s] of cultural excess” (Kamboureli 132). Instead, as Kamboureli contends, anthologies in the 1990s began to problematize the representation of ethnicity as “relational knowledge” (161); a knowledge that is relational between hegemonic and minoritized positions and thus imbued with rupture and contradictions but also open to alliances and transformation. This relational epistemology challenges nostalgic impulses and essentialist origins while being firmly situated historically. In my view, Kamboureli’s meticulous attentiveness to the “vagaries of temporality” (Freeman 9) becomes indeed a *transtemporal methodology*—that is, a critico-ethical course of action for the contemporary literary critic and teacher invested in examining how diasporic politics and poetics operate across multiple temporal frameworks simultaneously.

As someone who is currently based in a department of teacher education in Norway, who *also* teaches literatures in English with an accent, I found Kamboureli's grounding of her study on pedagogical questions crucial. Her extensive reflections on positionality, regarding not only background and identity but also epistemological and methodological frameworks, help situate *Scandalous Bodies* in a space where contradiction and unpredictability become critico-ethical navigational tools. Drawing on diverse traditions in oppositional and radical pedagogy, Kamboureli locates her study within a "negative pedagogy" (25) which is driven by the ethical imperative to practise responsibility and to assume that knowledge systematically creates gaps. As Kamboureli puts it, "negative pedagogy is relevant to a multicultural society because it may enable us to begin to address history and the historicity of our present moment *responsibly*—without, that is, maintaining the illusion of innocence or non-complicity" (25, emphasis original). Hence, pedagogical and ethical concerns must be understood as asynchronous, discontinuous (Freeman xii), transtemporal assemblages where questions of positionality need to be scrutinized.

In the prominent study *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (2009), Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux educational scholar Margaret Kovach devotes a chapter to the question of self-location and purpose for Indigenous researchers. Kovach also touches on the commonality and importance of reflective self-location within feminist methodologies, where "researchers are encouraged to locate themselves, to share personal aspects of their own experience with research participants" (110). Kamboureli's insistence on the contradictions and tensions intrinsic to the situatedness of critical research marks an important contribution concerning self-location to literary studies in Canada. As Cree-Métis literary scholar Deanna Reder puts it, Kovach's emphasis "that scholars identify the purpose of their work is nearly unheard of in literary studies. At no point in any of our training are we ever asked to articulate why we are drawn—on a personal level—to do the work we do" (15). I would add that the ethical imperative to clearly disclose the purpose of our work as literary and critical scholars is also key in queer and transgender literary studies, particularly from those examining and learning with racialized authors. As I argue elsewhere (see García Zarranz), the contemporary work of trans writers and artists of colour, such as Kai Cheng Thom and Vivek

Shraya, and by Two-Spirit Indigiqueer authors, such as Joshua Whitehead, is revolutionizing diasporic lexicons by providing readers with novel paradigms that offer accountable and transtemporal ways of seeing, acting, and being in the world.

Discussing critical questions on temporality, Kamboureli contends that it is “imperative to address ethnicity . . . in the context of our present place and time” (140) while regarding historical legacies of racialization (84). This transtemporal logic is often erased from public discourse, as was the case both during the so-called multicultural wars in the 1990s and often in our current post-truth moment. Strategies of “verbal terrorism” (Kamboureli 85) continue to saturate the media and institutions such as the university, where freedom of speech is, once again, appropriated by dominant voices as a banner to justify the spread of hate. In this sense, it is remarkable how Kamboureli’s discussion of Gina Mallet’s 1997 article in *The Globe and Mail*, “Multiculturalism: Has Diversity Gone Too Far?,” resonates with the current historical juncture. Mallet, for example, complains about how “[f]reedom of speech is called racism” (qtd. in Kamboureli 85). See, in turn, the letter published in *Harper’s* on July 7, 2020, where such signatories as Margaret Atwood and J. K. Rowling mistake having the right to open debate with holding no sense of accountability for one’s actions.<sup>2</sup> This scandalous conflation has dire consequences for minoritized writers who are subjected to racism, sexism, transphobia, and other violences on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup>

Let me close these notes on positionality, transtemporality, and Kamboureli’s trailblazing book, *Scandalous Bodies*, by circling back to the beginning: 2020 and all is *not* well. This is why it is vital to envision what the unexpected may bring and to be attentive to the “emergent insurgencies” of the world (Lai, “Insurgent” 98), together with the critical and aesthetic labour of the literary imagination, to counter racist structures and forge more ethical futures. After all, to borrow the words of Nova Scotian filmmaker and multimedia artist Sylvia D. Hamilton, “we will always have music and poetry, they endure.”

#### NOTES

- 1 The term “racialized” is a contested one as Tewelde (2020) aptly contends. The formulation “marginally racialized” would convey more accurately the argument I make in this essay.

- 2 For well-crafted responses to this letter see, for example, Hannah Giorgis in *The Atlantic* or Jessica Valenti in *Gen*.
- 3 See Lai and also McGregor, Rak, and Wunker for in-depth discussions of the numerous recent scandals in the Canadian literary and cultural scenes.

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