

# A Note—Doing the Work with Metonymy

## Three Insights from Canadian Theatre

Currently, we're collectively mourning the loss of a CanLit—and a Canada—that was always an idea instead of a lived reality. It's fine to mourn, of course. It's natural. But we can't just stand around and complain about the dumpster fire in front of us forever. Eventually we have to grab some fucking fire extinguishers and put that fire out. In other words, we have to sit down, assess the criticism, and do the work to fix the problems.

—Alicia Elliott, "CanLit Is a Raging Dumpster Fire"

**B**uilding on Alicia Elliott's exhortation to "do the work" (97), I approach doing the work by pursuing the metonymic after the metaphoric. The dumpster fire metaphor has gained a lot of traction for good reason: it offers catharsis (through a kind of dark humour) and convenience (through the reduction to a pithy phrase of a complex set of issues). With this traction, the dumpster fire metaphor has helped to mobilize people around the work. So mobilized myself, I came to the following conclusion when I tried to follow the metaphor into the work: ideally suited to this mobilization, the "dumpster fire" is less suited to helping people conceptualize the practical steps of doing the work.

The metaphor "dumpster fire" takes the place of the field of relations that creates the conditions for controversies and crises. In contrast, metonymy is contiguous: its readability depends on showing conventional, assumed, or actual relationships. As Hugh Bredin points out, "[w]e must *already know* that the objects are related, if the metonymy is to be devised or understood" (57, emphasis original). Or in Sebastian Matzner's terms, "they are not *being* linked, they *are* linked" (81, emphasis original). They are already linked, Matzner explains, because metonymy operates within "[a] semantic field [which] is constituted by a set of words defined by semantic proximity and joint occurrence" (50). "Metonymy," he continues, "is thus predicated

not on an abstract logic, but on pragmatically determined association” (52). In contrast, metaphors *are* predicated on abstract logic. Matzner explains that “metaphorical meaning is contained within the metaphorical compound, within its logic of analogy and similarity” (74). They “can therefore usually be isolated from their wider context and still function” (74). But in metonymy “tenor and vehicle have no such internally negotiated and stabilized relationship” that would allow them to be “isolated from their context and still function” (74). While metonymy operates within a signifying field, a field of pre-existing relationships, metaphor generates meaning outside of such a field of relationships. While metonymy shows us relationships, metaphor suppresses difference and distance via abstract logic. “Dumpster fire” refers to any emphatically negative situation. This generalizability means difficulty for deciphering what “dumpster fire” means in this particular context—as opposed to the diverse other contexts people use it in. As Laura Moss and Brendan McCormack point out in their editorial introduction to the *Meanwhile, Home* issue of *Canadian Literature*,

Metaphors are helpful and necessary to think through, but they are not neutral and they shift in meaning and application along with the tenor of the real world; like fire, they are sometimes generative, sometimes damaging, and always doing different work at different times for different people. (8)

It’s unclear what kind of work the dumpster fire metaphor calls on us to do. As Moss and McCormack also note, “for many, the idea of CanLit burning isn’t tragic. Indeed, it might be the goal” (8). Alternatively is Elliott’s own message: “Eventually we have to grab some fucking fire extinguishers and put that fire out. In other words, we have to sit down, assess the criticism and do the work to fix the problems” (97). Whether one thinks one ought to let the fire burn or put the fire out, this metaphor positions those who could do the work outside the dumpster fire, able to decide what to do with the burning trash that we are not. But if CanLit is a dumpster fire, then we who are part of CanLit can’t put it out with fire extinguishers or turn our backs to let it burn. If CanLit is a dumpster fire, we are in the dumpster fire. Though those working with this metaphor do not position themselves outside of the problem, that’s where the metaphor’s logic puts them. Arguments using the dumpster fire metaphor engage with the context necessary for doing the work, but the metaphor pulls away from that engagement. An abstract logic carries the potential to undercut the specific argument. As I said at the outset, I don’t mean to suggest that I think people are wrong for using “dumpster fire” to discuss CanLit: it offers catharsis and convenience, two important tools,

especially for mobilizing people to work together. But because this metaphor is so dominant in this conversation (because it is so persuasive), it is doing a lot of work, sometimes working against the work it is involved in.

Metaphors aren't suited to every kind of work, and metonymy is better suited to working with associations within a signifying field. In "On Not Refusing CanLit," Moss engages the associations within the signifying field of CanLit. She "refuse[s] to read Joseph Boyden or Margaret Atwood as metonymic of CanLit" (146), thus moving away from a certain pattern of relationships those names activate. In the same essay, Moss notes that the term "CanLit" functions as a synecdoche (a particular kind of metonymy) for writing in Canada and the industry and academy engaged with that writing. Such attention to "CanLit" as a metonym is what I see as the fruitful counterbalance to the prominence of the "dumpster fire" metaphor.

Metonymy works as this counterbalance because it makes available the network of associations in a signifying field. However, Moss proposes that "CanLit" stands in for two distinct signifying fields: "I pause here to disentangle 'CanLit' as a noun synecdoche of all that is broken in the writing industry and the academy from 'CanLit' as a short-form term that refers to the history of writing in Canada" (146). While one can choose one's metonym (like not using Atwood or Boyden to refer to Canadian literature), one can't choose which sets of relationships a given metonym calls up. Even if one wants to call up only the history of writing (even just for the sake of clarity in an argument totally committed to the full context), the metonym "CanLit" necessarily calls up all that is broken in the writing industry. This is exactly what I think is so powerful about metonyms. Metonyms reject disentangling. Metonyms work by conventional or literal association within a signifying field: One can choose the metonym, but not the relationships it's embedded in. That "CanLit" can be used as a metonym for the larger field of the writing industry and the academy says something else about CanLit: its borders do not end at literature. In fact, "CanLit" has an even larger signifying field including Canada as a nation. In contrast, the dumpster fire metaphor, as Elliott notes, refers to Canadian literature: "Maybe, for those who still very much want to feel proud to be Canadian, it's simply easier to call CanLit a dumpster fire. That way, you don't have to call Canada itself a dumpster fire" (97). Unlike the dumpster fire metaphor, metonymy precludes this selectivity. If the associations exist, metonymy calls them up.

For these reasons, I'm thinking here about what metonymy can add to discourse about doing the work in CanLit. I'm thinking with three recent

Canadian plays that use metonymical strategies: Daniel MacIvor's *Who Killed Spalding Gray?* (2017), Jess Dobkin's *The Magic Hour* (2017), and Marcus Youssef and James Long's *Winners and Losers* (2015). My strategy is metonymical like "CanLit" is: I read each play for an insight it might offer as a metonym for the signifying field of CanLit, which includes Canadian literature, culture, and nation. Each play is about the work theatre does, and each play uses metonymical strategies to do this institutional work. These autobiographical, fourth-wall-breaking plays each engage the present audience and the real lives of their playwright actors. All three plays emphasize literal contiguity between actor and character and between actions in the play and actions in the world outside of the play. In short, they draw attention to the pre-existing relationships they work within.

In *Who Killed Spalding Gray?* Daniel MacIvor's character Daniel has a spiritual entity removed by a psychic surgeon, who calls this process "The Work" (21). This removal coincides with the suicide of Spalding Gray, an American performer known, like MacIvor, for telling autobiographical stories, and the play seeks to understand the connection between these two true events. As Daniel puts it, "I look for significance where I can find it" (22). In this play, "The Work" is mysterious. Daniel doesn't quite trust the psychic surgeon to whom he will pay a large fee to do The Work that is never explained to him and somehow occurs while the surgeon appears to sleep in front of him. Without really believing in The Work and its abstract logic, Daniel commits to its potential significance out of a sense of desperation. Grappling with the resulting coincidence of this work and Gray's death, Daniel thinks about Tim Burton's *Big Fish*, the movie Gray saw the day he died. Daniel impersonates one of the film's actors to explain its ending: "At the end of *Big Fish* we come to understand that a person may tell their stories over and over again and in doing so they will become their stories. And because those stories live on after the teller, the storyteller, in effect, becomes immortal" (48). In this film, the dying father magically becomes the big fish of his tall tales, thus establishing the significance of his lifetime of far-fetched stories. While this movie suggests that finding lasting significance entails telling stories that can take your place as metaphors for you, MacIvor questions this mysterious substitution, connecting the film to Gray's death and calling it, in contrast to reviewers, "heartbreaking" (27).

Daniel suggests that his attempt to find significance through The Work might have killed Gray via mysteriously linked energies, but the play also doubts The Work that must keep itself mysterious, especially if it obfuscates

the relationships between individuals. Instead of committing oneself to the mysterious Work, this play suggests committing to actions in specific contexts. For example, near the end of the play, Daniel emphatically absolves the audience of fault, repeating “[i]t’s not your fault” “until,” the stage directions read, “*everyone in the audience who needs to be freed of fault is freed of fault*” (53, emphasis original in all stage directions). Daniel’s work has resonance precisely because it is not a mysterious sharing of energies. Instead, Daniel builds this audience work on a relationship he sets up at the play’s start when he invites an audience member on stage for a substantial improvised conversation in which he asks, “*Where are you from? What do you do? Why did you come here?*” and any other questions that result from these initial ones (3). Daniel then “*talks about the women in his life, those he has lost. He asks the audience member if they would share with him the name of a woman that they may have lost, someone they loved*” (4). Later in the play, a character with this same name appears. MacIvor builds the work of forgiveness on this unscripted portion of the play in which Daniel engages with a member of the audience long enough to make a context for the loved woman. The significance is in all this work, the steps that don’t necessarily make anything happen on their own but that shore up a context—not in a single mysterious act of freeing from fault. The loved woman, as a metonym for the audience members’ relationships, makes available to the play a signifying field outside of which Daniel sharing his absolving energies could only be metaphorical (that is, outside of the pre-existing relationships making up audience members’ lives).

In contrast to “The Work” that he finds so mysterious, MacIvor shows specific work as it operates in a signifying field. Outside of the CanLit context, Kenyan academic Keguro Macharia writes a “note” published at *The New Inquiry* about “the work.” He cites Audre Lorde’s self-description as “a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours?” and then asks his own questions:

I have been confused by multiple claims about “doing **the** work.” Those making those claims seem so sure about **the** work. So sure that I have tended to refrain from asking what **the** work is. I am asking. What is **the** work?

What is the relation between **my** work and **your** work? What is the relation between **my** work and **the** work? What is the relation between **your** work and **the** work? What is the relation among **my** work, **your** work, and **the** work?

I am asking. (emphasis original)

As is “The Work” for MacIvor, “**the** work” for Macharia is mysterious because it is generalized. In contrast, Lorde prioritizes the context of

her work as the contexts of her self. There is no “the work,” only many contiguous works, built in specific contexts out of specific tasks.

Insight one: the work need not be mysterious, replacing actual work with its ostensible significance, like the story for the life or *the* work for actual work. MacIvor’s play suggests the importance of showing the work behind the work so it comes in clear relationship to the rest of one’s life and in specific context, including other work and other people.

As with *Who Killed Spalding Gray?*, Jess Dobkin’s *The Magic Hour* engages ritual, this time to rework convention. Like MacIvor’s, this play, according to its online description, is “asking us to consider who we are beyond the stories we tell about our lives” (“The Magic Hour”). *The Magic Hour* features the character Jess in a solo multidisciplinary performance that plays with conventions of the magic show, stand-up comedy, burlesque, academic lecture, and more, to explore, as Dobkin explains in an interview with Laura Levin, “*how to perform experiences of trauma*” and “*why sexual violence is framed as a story*” (199, emphasis original). She rejects sexual assault as a story “about who I *am* . . . I’m thinking about it in a feminist frame—how many things that become personalized are really social ills” (201-02, emphasis original). She doesn’t want a story that stands in as her, making the context invisible. Denying the conventions of “testifying” to the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, Jess doesn’t deliver on these or the conventions of any performance genre her play engages, instead disrupting or reworking the conventions of each (199). She performs performance to make conventions visible. For example, the stage directions indicate that “*The lobby is dressed in costume, performing the role of ‘LOBBY’*” (177). Jess says as much to the audience: “this is the performance art presentation of a theatrical convention—where we break the artifice and spoil all the fun” (177). Her work is magical, but not mysterious: she shows all the work so that it is possible to rethink the conventions.

The performance takes place with the audience in a circle, and Jess pulls them into the performance in many ways, using physical cues to bind them together. Eventually, she tells the audience they will help her perform a re-enactment of her childhood, implicitly clear this will be a re-enactment of sexual abuse. Though she assigns roles to individual audience members via vintage toys from the 1970s era of Jess’ childhood, the re-enactment instead involves a parachute the toys attach to, which the audience members open and then use in a game before it transforms into a series of other props that Jess uses until the play’s conclusion. At this point, Jess delivers a monologue in which she asks a series of questions. For Dobkin, “Asking questions is also

part of ritual: something that is communal” (“Interview” 201). When the audience leaves for the lobby, it has transformed into a 1970s party where two nine-year-old girls “*tenderly slow dance together*” (198). Dobkin explains to Levin, “In my mind, it’s the audience that conjures the final moment with the two girls dancing in the party room. It’s through coming together in ceremony, and having us imagine an alternate world, that we’re able to move toward it” (“Interview” 203). Jess invites audience members to stay for a drink and a dance. The final stage direction is “[t]he audience can leave or stay to mix, mingle, and make something for themselves in the space” (198).

Insight two: the work is a communal ritual; change occurs through shared repetition. By definition, conventions can’t be changed individually, but rather only in context and with others. Metonymy points to the signifying field in which literal or conventional relationships exist and it mobilizes these relationships. Dobkin calls up fields of significance in which performance conventions and testifying conventions operate to make meaning; she denies the conventions through a communal ritual that generates a new field of significance out of the failures of other genres and the actions in the theatre space.

In *Winners and Losers*, Youssef and Long play characters Marcus and Jamie in a partially improvised game: name a person, place, or thing and debate whether it is a winner or a loser. Marcus and Jamie also win or lose, each ringing a bell when he believes he has successfully proven his stance. This winning and losing foreshadows the heightened stakes that develop when Marcus and Jamie make themselves the subjects of the debate, each assessing the other as a loser. In her introduction to the play, Jenn Stephenson notes that “their assessment of what constitutes a winner turns primarily on whether or not the person or issue presented is autonomous, self-directed, and capable of having significant impact” (xi). Explaining the discomfort of watching this “brisk capitalist reduction” (xi), she argues that “[i]n the short term, in the space of a snap judgment, there is no way to really know if all your work made any difference at all” (xv), a point A. H. Reaume has recently made about the effects of CanLit activist work (see “On Re-Fusing CanLit”). In the play, Marcus and Jamie judge each other’s work harshly, with the reductive logic of winners and losers. Marcus reduces Jamie to a loser caught up in his own story of himself as a streetwise, self-made survivor, suggesting that Jamie neglects his family for his work. Jamie reduces Marcus to a loser whose privilege makes him a fraud, citing his inheritances from his immigrant Egyptian father—an expected monetary

inheritance that will make him wealthy and the ethnic inheritance that Jamie suggests Marcus superficially exploits for further profit in his work.

Marcus and Jamie call each other out as artists who seek social justice through art. Calling out is a tool to confront those who misuse their power, but Marcus and Jamie use calling out to win. Asam Ahmad argues that the call out is sometimes misused as “a public performance where people can demonstrate their wit or how pure their politics are” that serves to “immediately render anyone who has committed a perceived wrong as an outsider to the community,” “to banish and dispose of individuals rather than to engage with them as people with complicated stories and histories.” This is to use the substitutive logic of metaphor—winner and loser replace the people involved—rather than to engage with the complexity of larger contexts. Writing about the events in CanLit beginning in 2016, Kristen Darch, in her conversation with Fazeela Jiwa in *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*, argues that “there were no winners; for the first time, CanLit wasn’t about winners. . . . It was about complicity, accountability, self-reflection” (182-83). Calling out to win implies the absence of complicity.

Insight three: the work can’t be judged in terms of winning and losing. Like the dumpster fire, the approach of winning and losing encourages an idea of a position outside of complex power relations.

I’ve derived three insights from these plays: one, show the work behind the work; two, create new conventions in communal action; three, place work within complicity. All three insights point to the same awareness: the work occurs in context. I’ve found thinking with metonymy useful because metonymy foregrounds context. While no one saying “CanLit is a dumpster fire” argues for decontextualized work, the metaphor’s logic leads away from context and evokes the reductive logic of winners and losers. The dumpster fire metaphor is efficient and satisfying, especially for engaging the aftermath of a series of blow-up events, but I propose the benefit of the additional presence of metonymy in framing and promoting the kinds of work we’ve been discussing in the field and beyond.

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