

## “A VR Empathy Machine” Testimony, Recognition, and Affect on *Canada Reads* 2019

In this [book] you are right in there, like you are in a VR empathy machine, and you are able to see it with your own eyes.

—Ziya Tong, *Canada Reads* 2019, “Day Two”

The 2019 season of *Canada Reads* was labelled as the “One Book to Move You” edition. The affective resonances of the theme were strongly invoked over the four days of the live-streamed event—from references to books as “magic carpets that transport readers,” to the idea of a book as “a VR empathy machine”—as each of the five panellists passionately debated the transformative capacities of their chosen text. The panellists even took their arguments a step further, suggesting that because readers will feel immersed in the worlds of the books being discussed, the texts have the power to effect pressing social justice change by transforming readers’ positions on the issues they invoke. The panellists’ arguments, then, were guided by the affective theme of the show, and they debated literary texts as vehicles for both political efficacies and civic ethics. In this article, I approach this season of *Canada Reads* as a site of shared reading that is mobilized for ethical and political public debate. In particular, I focus on the discussions surrounding the two books that became finalists in the 2019 season—*Homes*, a memoir by Abu Bakr al Rabeeh (with Winnie Yeung), and Max Eisen’s memoir *By Chance Alone*—both of which were positioned in the show’s production and discussions as testimonial accounts that present urgent rights claims directed at readers as humanitarian subjects in both national and global contexts. In my attention to the debates revolving around the two memoirs, I examine the ethics of affective recognition modelled by the panellists and framed by the show. Contouring the potentialities and limitations of the season’s responses to literary testimony,

I suggest that while empathy-driven ethics may seem transformative, they simply mirror the deficiencies of political recognition and the cunning ways it functions to uphold the power asymmetries of the status quo.

My attention to *Canada Reads* is grounded in the show's consistently growing popularity, reflected, in part, by the phenomenon described by Danielle Fuller and Julie Rak as "the *Canada Reads* effect," "a way to name a spike in sales that turns the books on the show into bestsellers" (26). This effect has served to position the show as a significant agent in Canada's reading industry, one with cultural, economic, and political power. As a major agent in the nation's reading industry, and with testimonial accounts featured on the 2019 roster, the "One Book to Move You" season of *Canada Reads* offers a productive site for the exploration of "testimonial transactions," a concept theorized by Gillian Whitlock to account for the movements of testimonial literature in global markets and demonstrate how economic, cultural, and political agents shape the transformative capacities of testimony's calls for justice (*Postcolonial* 8, 68).

To develop my argument, I begin by discussing the pivotal role of affect-based ethical recognition in literary testimony, building on Whitlock's notion of testimonial transactions and how those shape and mediate the ethical responsibilities bestowed upon readers as witnesses. I then thread together discussions of the ethics of affective recognition in testimony with critiques of the politics of recognition in Canada, turning in particular to Pauline Wakeham's concept of "the cunning of reconciliation." Building on Elizabeth Povinelli's *The Cunning of Recognition*, Wakeham argues that reconciliation, grounded in political recognition, formulates a state-sanctioned framework to settle differences between "the Anglo-Celtic establishment and its 'others'" while maintaining "entrenched power hierarchies" (211). In my turn to Wakeham's theorization, I demonstrate how affective ethics of recognition mirror the cunning politics of recognition, effectively serving to render moot testimony's justice claims and its ethical demands of readers. Finally, I discuss *Canada Reads* as a produced site of shared reading and public debate, exploring how its design mobilizes testimony's justice claims and recognition-based acts of reading in service of a multicultural and humanitarian image of the nation-state. I thus conclude with a call to reconsider the models championed as honouring the responsibilities of reading as witnessing.

## 1. An Ethics of Recognition: *Canada Reads* and the Politics of Testimonial Transactions

The 2019 season of *Canada Reads* featured a combination of fiction, autofiction,<sup>1</sup> and non-fiction texts grouped under the thematic caption of "One Book to Move You," centralizing affective modes of reading as a means of social transformation grounded in nationalist ideals and designed for the betterment of the national community.<sup>2</sup> Of the five books featured in the season, three—the aforementioned finalists *By Chance Alone* and *Homes*, as well as *The Woo-Woo* by Lindsay Wong—were memoirs, while *Suzanne* by Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette (translated by Rhonda Mullins) was a work of autofiction, and *Brother* by David Chariandy was the only novel. In discussions centred on themes from heartbreak to love, hope, gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion, panellists championed the one book they believe all Canadians should read in distinctively affective terms. The panellists take their arguments a step further, positioning their affective responses to the books as transformative acts that contend with urgent socio-political ailments facing the nation—from a mental health crisis in *The Woo-Woo*, to women's rights in *Suzanne*, systemic racism in *Brother*, and a rise in xenophobia and anti-Semitism in *Homes* and *By Chance Alone*, respectively.

Though *Canada Reads* has been produced and hosted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) since 2002, it is only since its tenth season that the CBC's annual "Battle of the Books" turned to a site of debate explicitly informed by civic ethics and national politics. From the outset, the show has been framed as a *Survivor*-type game show for books, invested in producing belonging to a nation of CanLit and mobilizing its power to foster and promote a community of readers who imagine themselves as part of a multicultural, humanitarian, and reconciliatory nation. And though this is indeed still the case, a major change occurred in 2012 with the introduction of non-fiction texts, which served to shift "the explicit aims of the contest" (Fuller and Rak 29, 42). In their article "'True Stories,' Real Lives," Fuller and Rak demonstrate that because of "the close connection between truth claims and memoir reading," when *Canada Reads*' "True Stories Edition" series aired in 2012, the inclusion of memoir redirected discussion away from literary merit and towards "ideas about 'Canada,' citizenship, and truth telling," triggering "ethically motivated reading practices" (42). Subsequent iterations of *Canada Reads*, Fuller and

Rak note, “have taken up different aspects of the ethical agenda raised in the 2012 contest, both thematically and in on-air discussions,” pushing the format “toward issue-based reading” (42).

This shift is perhaps most evident in the 2019 “One Book to Move You” season, where the majority of texts were works of non-fiction and panellists mobilized the presumptive truth value of their books to interlace affect, national myths, and social justice claims. For example, even though she champions the only work of fiction on the list, former model and television host Lisa Ray presses the matter of *Brother’s* truth value and ties it to civic ethics. Pitching the novel on the first day of debates, Ray states:

We’ve all heard the headlines but *Brother* takes you beyond, into the struggles of single mothers, into systemic racism that occurs right here in Canada, into loss, grief, kinship. . . . [Chariandy’s] words grip you, they suck you into the story in such a way that all of our differences are erased and empathy grows. . . . What if the power of this book, *Brother*, to move you can actually change your perceptions and change your prejudices? (“Day One” 09:07-09:43)

Within the first sixty seconds of discussing the text, Ray mobilizes affect to evoke an ethical claim that transforms readers personally and collectively, moving from individual to national change. When *Brother* is voted off at the end of day three, and though she has continuously championed the novel’s literary mastery as “a great addition to Canadian literature,” Ray still presses the matter of *Brother’s* ethical urgency: “It’s a book that all of Canada should be proud of, and at the same time all of Canada should read it because there are certain things we need to fix in our own country, today, before we move forward and open our hearts and minds to other people from outside the country” (“Day Three” 42:55-43:22). Ray’s opening and closing statements, while driven by affect, suggest it is the truth value of *Brother* that invokes civic ethics—not as a universal humanist truth, but as a situated and historicized justice claim—positioning its readers as ethical subjects and agents of political change.

When Ray recognizes *Brother’s* truth, she does not merely address its portrayal of 1990s Scarborough; rather, she champions it as an urgent story of protest articulating a justice claim that Canadian readers must contend with despite its challenge to certain national myths they might hold, thus positioning *Brother* vis-à-vis the discourse of testimony. Testimonial texts can be defined as direct speech acts that activate autobiographical truth to

argue for an urgent justice claim (Yúdice 17), thus comprising a potentially transformative force whose agency is nonetheless finite, “limited by specific campaigns and era” (Whitlock, Postcolonial 5). Nuancing testimony as “the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression to a less oppressed other,” Gayatri Spivak highlights that the power and responsibility of mobilizing testimony for social change lies in the hands of the addressee who agrees to recognize the subject’s truth and its urgency (7). Spivak, Whitlock, and Yúdice, then, frame literary testimony as a discourse grounded in autobiographical truth but making a much more specific claim upon readers, invoking an ethical demand to bear witness and a responsibility to carry its truth to effect socio-political change.

Indeed, both truth and politics are invoked for all five texts featured in the 2019 season of *Canada Reads*, but three of the five contestants situate their texts not merely as “true stories” but rather as urgent accounts of injustice communicated to a more privileged other and pressing them to act for socio-political change, thus invoking the ethical responsibilities of readers as witnesses. From the outset, Ray mobilizes the discourse of testimony to position *Brother* as protesting systemic racism in Canada, calling Canadians to address the issue that resides in their own home before contending with other matters. Ray thus positions the novel *Brother* as invoking testimonial resonances, but it is only Abu Bakr al Rabeeah’s *Homes* and Max Eisen’s *By Chance Alone* that are situated in the competition as testimonies from the outset, as texts that bear witness to the effects of racism through humanitarian ethics. In other words, though Ray’s interpretation of the novel champions it as testifying to racism in Canada, the urgent claims for recognition and justice in *By Chance Alone* and *Homes* are directly and distinctly articulated as testimonial in the memoirs themselves, and are thus framed along these lines both by their celebrity champions and the production of the show.

This framing of the five finalist books on *Canada Reads* begins with one-minute book trailers that promote each of the five books in the competition, and that circulate approximately two months prior to the debates. They interlace video footage of the authors as they narrate the introduction to their respective books alongside enactments of settings and images invoked in the texts themselves, and for the non-fiction or autofiction books these videos are peppered with family photographs. But

in the case of *Homes* and *By Chance Alone*, the trailers switch to newsreel and archival videography that shift the form of their introductions toward reportage or documentary-like discourse, and end with the writers' direct message to readers. Abu Bakr al Rabeeah states that "[he] really want[s] people to know that we are kind of the same, there is not much difference between us," while Max Eisen shares his father's command that "if [you] manage to survive, [you] must tell the world what happened here" ("Day One" 13:13-13:19, 15:10-15:15). Chuck Comeau (who defended *Homes*), a member of the punk band Simple Plan, and Ziya Tong (who defended *By Chance Alone*), co-host of the Discovery Channel's *Daily Planet*, follow the lead of the authors whose books they champion. They openly call on readers as Canadian citizens to honour the books' messages, welcome refugees, understand human suffering, and stand guard against racially-motivated hatred. The book trailers and panellist pitches thus call on the show's audiences to recognize the memoirs' ethical claims and political implications which urge readers to act against racism and anti-Semitism, and provide a safe and welcoming haven to refugees.

The discourse of testimony, then, is not merely about truth, nor ethics; at its core, it is primarily about recognition—who are positioned as readers and granted the power to recognize; what claims readers are invited to contend with, and which ones they are willing to; as well as how readers are expected to express their recognition, and what models they are afforded to mobilize it. As "the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other" (Spivak 7), testimony is addressed to implied readers who, regardless of their individual positionings, are more privileged addressees. Testimony implores them to recognize the truth in testifiers' accounts of oppression *as well as* mobilize their privileges as ethical subjects and political agents who can change the structural conditions that cause others' pain. When acts of reading testimony are situated within a produced site of shared reading that is invested in a particular national imaginary, testimony's addressees are expected to enact their recognition as members of the national community. In the case of *Canada Reads*, particularly during on-air debates, panellists are encouraged to perform recognition as members of a multicultural, humanitarian, and reconciliatory nation.

This is why the shift from truth to testimony in *Canada Reads* 2019 matters. As testimonial acts formulate protest stories, they necessitate readers'

recognition of their claims for justice and bestow testimony's addressees with specific ethical responsibilities, which readers are most often expected to fulfill through an "ethics of recognition," performed via affective responses (Schaffer and Smith 3). Introducing *Homes* immediately following the book trailer, a teary-eyed Comeau describes it as a text that "will fill your heart with empathy and compassion," "make you believe in the power of love, hope, and family," and "feel grateful that your kids don't have to fall asleep to the sound of machine guns tonight," suggesting that this kind of book is "the best antidote to senseless hatred" ("Day One" 13:25-14:05). With these affect-driven statements, Comeau performs the predominant mode of an ethics of recognition, enacting affective response as an ethical fulfillment of readers' responsibilities to testimonies, "generating public debate, sympathy, and outrage" (Schaffer and Smith 3, 5).

Yet, though this mode of recognition formulates the performance of an ethical response, it does not, and cannot, fulfill the demands of testimony. An ethics of recognition purportedly effects social change by triggering affective responses that "unsettle private beliefs and public discourses about the national past" (Schaffer and Smith 5). However, affect-driven acts of recognition do not necessarily require a reader's recognition of their own power or their accountability for their or their nation's complicity in the unjust systems attested to, and thus in effect these acts offer an empty shell of recognition too easily co-opted to maintain existing prejudices and power structures. In other words, given the urgency and tenor of testimony's justice claims and its demand for the "advocacy, responsibility, and accountability" of its addressees (Whitlock, *Postcolonial* 9), relying on an affective ethics of recognition as the predominant mode of response, and equating that response with the fulfillment of the role of readers as witnesses, is far too risky. The stakes are too high.

Championing *By Chance Alone*, Tong's opening statement warns that "one in five Canadian young people doesn't even know what the Holocaust is," tying this statistic to a nation-wide trend, as "hate crimes have skyrocketed by up to 47%" ("Day One" 15:43-15:58). With these contemporary references, Tong ties the story of survival of Auschwitz in *By Chance Alone* with social realities in Canada today, and positions the memoir as pressing and relevant to Canadian readers. She acknowledges Eisen's justice claim—which she cites from the epigraph as "a reminder

to stand on guard against radical ideologies and never be bystanders”—and draws attention to the gap between Canada’s espoused humanitarian values and its current trends of anti-Semitism and racism (“Finale” 33:50-34:00). Describing the book as a “VR empathy machine” that transports and transforms readers (“Day Two” 36:38-36:43), Tong even calls on her fellow panellists to recognize and act upon their own cultural power now amplified by the show’s platform, because “[r]ight now, we have a chance to talk to all of Canada. We have a chance to inoculate this country, by giving them a better chance at what they read” (“Finale” 37:05-37:33).

This is where the dangers and limits of affective ethics of recognition lie, as Tong’s practice of reading formulates a mere performance of reading as an act of witnessing. She continuously invokes the empathic registers of Eisen’s testimony as “a vaccine for your brain” designed to stop hate spreading like a disease (“Day One” 15:58-16:01), and equates feeling empathy with personal and collective transformation, with the fulfillment of her ethical responsibility and testimony’s justice claim. Further, despite repeatedly referencing recent events, surveys, and statistics on xenophobia and anti-Semitism, Tong addresses neither historic nor current systemic anti-Semitism in Canada, nor any other racist policies that may have been fostering these trends. In fact, when addressing *Homes*, she even goes further to argue that while “Canada isn’t perfect,” “we have a country that is welcoming. . . . Year by year we are inviting more refugees, we are doing something right” (“Finale” 35:52-36:00).

Nonetheless, such modelling of an affective ethics of recognition is not Tong’s alone. Whitlock theorizes “testimonial transactions” to account for the ways in which literary testimony moves in both national and global public spheres; namely, such movements are “embedded in global networks of traumatic memory and witness, campaigns for social justice, reconciliation, and reparation,” and thus Whitlock treats testimony as a discourse that moves across cultures and markets to “record changing, historical thresholds of subaltern agency and dispossession” (*Postcolonial* 70, 8). These movements, Whitlock argues, demonstrate how the “visibility, legibility, and audibility” of testimony’s claims have been framed in “tactical, contingent, and constrained” ways, mediating testimony’s transformative capacities and thus shifting the responsibility to—and indeed the power over—testimony’s claim from the testifying subject to the



ones receiving it (8, 68). Such transactions thus highlight the gap between testimony’s transnational political aims and the highly-mediated realities of its circulation and consumption, shaping not only the survivor’s speech act but more so the scope of readers’ ethics of recognition.

Hence, while readers are certainly bestowed with an ethical responsibility to testimony’s justice claim, they are also afforded the privilege of recognizing given their presumptive position as the powerful party in testimony’s transactions. Here, the risks embedded in an ethics of affect-based recognition emerge to their fullest extent. The risk lies in the dynamics of recognition itself which centre the reading-witness rather than the testifying-subject, as “[t]he ‘rights’ that are attached to those who testify in human rights discourse, the emotional attachments created by benevolence and humanitarianism, and the humane recognition bestowed through empathic identification are privileges of the [reading] witness” (Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 9). The trouble, then, lies with the dynamics of recognition embedded in the transactions of testimony. What may seem like ethical and transformative affective responses serve to entrench the very structures that testimony protests.

## **2. The Cunning of Recognition: Ethics in Service of Politics**

The manipulative efficacies of privileging affective response as the fulfillment of the audience’s ethical responsibility to testimony’s claim for justice are perhaps best demonstrated by unpacking the transactions of empathic responses, “now framed as an affective ‘solution’” which embodies a humanitarian ethics of recognition (Pedwell 28). Attesting to the power dynamics between the Black survivor-witness and the white abolitionist advocate, Saidiya Hartman traces the colonial routes of empathy and demonstrates its insidious roots, arguing that enacting an ethical response to testimonial literature through empathic avenues merely serves to entrench the racist colonial structures that justice and rights claims seek to dismantle (21-22). Carolyn Pedwell contours how the same dynamics persist in contemporary Euro-American “mainstream liberal narratives” which “pose empathy as universal . . . [yet] routinely take for granted a socially privileged subject as potential ‘empathiser’ . . . [who is] never required to consider that the act of ‘choosing’ to extend empathy can itself be a way to assert power” (39). Given the presumption of empathy

and empathizers as universalized, a single act of recognition serves to strengthen the reader's perception of themselves as an ethical humanist subject, while concurrently allowing them to ignore their power over the testifier's calls for justice, and potential (albeit varied layers of) implication in the conditions that cause the other's oppression.

In fact, relying on empathy as the aim of ethical recognition serves to create a distorted image of the testifying subject and the reader-witness as different but equal. In so doing, an ethics of empathic recognition obfuscates the power dynamics embedded in recognition, ignoring any need to contend with complicity and thus denying any collective or structural political responsibility. This is exactly the trouble that unfolds in *Canada Reads* 2019. As Tong and Comeau warn of the alarming rise of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, they immediately move to position empathic acts of reading as the "antidote" or "vaccine" to the hateful epidemics they identify rising in Canada. But testimonial accounts are not magic solutions, despite being positioned as such during the third day of debates. Evidently, empathic readings of these books—even if they do function like VR empathy machines—have not magically solved any of these deeply-entrenched socio-political trends or the discriminatory racist structures they preserve.

In this sense, the power dynamics embedded in empathic ethics of recognition mirror the dynamics of political recognition, paralleling individual readers' power of recognition with that of the nation-state. In his critique of political recognition in Canada, Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard unveils its continuous strategic manipulation in service of maintaining the nation-state's neoliberal and colonial status quo, as what may seem like ethical and transformative responses serve to entrench the very structures that campaigns for recognition protest and seek to dismantle (437). Matt James further argues that the neoliberal logic of multiculturalism has been "transported and applied to the newly important terrain of historical redress," perpetuating a barter economy in which gestures of recognition serve governments to appease marginalized communities while making them "forsake more ambitiously reparative discourses and claims" (31, 41). Tracing the genealogy of contemporary state-driven reconciliation discourses through the paradigm of official multiculturalism from which they emerged, Pauline Wakeham draws on

Povinelli's critique of the politics of recognition. As she employs Povinelli's concept of the "cunning" dynamics of recognition in the context of the Canadian nation-state, Wakeham unveils "how the project of redressing injustices has been co-opted by the power bloc as a performance of white civility, an index of the supposed enlightenment of the Euro-Canadian establishment" (231).

The colonial roots and routes of political recognition campaigns also emerge in direct relation to Canada's foundational myth as a peacekeeping nation. Paulette Regan describes this myth as a strategic archetype—one that promotes the idea that Canadians and Crown policy established and sustained relations with Indigenous peoples in peaceful ways, formulating an antithesis to the American "frontier myth of regeneration through violence" (34-35). In contemporary Canada, Regan argues, the peacemaker archetype has contributed to the formation of the reconciliatory nation, and has been reincarnated in the deeply entrenched image of Canada as a humanitarian country with "an active role in the international peacekeeping arena in countries wrecked by civil war and ethnic violence" (107). The three myths—multiculturalism, reconciliation, and humanitarianism—are thus part of the same national mythology continuum, mobilized by the politics of recognition in ways that usurp the agency of communities in political justice claims, relegating claims to recognition as matters of the national imaginary. This is the cunning of recognition—publicly engaging with justice claims while situating justice as a cultural matter separate from the policies and realities of the state. Thus the gap between historic and continued realities of colonial violence is disguised and the values of the national creed are espoused, using the veneer of change in the nation to disguise the perpetuation of discrimination in the state.

When a cultural site like *Canada Reads* invokes testimonial discourse, the cunning of political recognition is then mapped onto the ethics of recognition in the transactions of testimony. As the site of public engagement with justice claims moves to cultural sites of public debate, the addressees of testimony become positioned as ethical subjects who enact recognition based on the values espoused by their national myths. In the case of *Canada Reads* 2019, testimonial transactions are performed through empathy and recognized vis-à-vis the mythology of Canada and

the positions of its readers as multicultural and humanitarian subjects. When discussing *Homes* and *By Chance Alone*, the intersection of empathic response and national mythology triggers panellists' perception of themselves as humanitarian ethical subjects who have the power and a responsibility to right a wrong. However, with the same stroke, the cunning nature of both political and affective recognition keeps the recognition and the reckoning of justice as fulfilled through individual empathy and personal transformation, without invoking any consideration of complicity or systemic change.

When asked how *Homes* can move readers to effect change, Comeau and actor Yanic Truesdale (celebrity champion of *Suzanne*) argue that "The war [in Syria] is still happening. People are still dying, and we could do something about it" ("Finale" 35:47-35:50). They suggest that readers of *Homes* should reach out to Muslim or refugee neighbours and colleagues, write and call their government representatives to inquire how they are responding to the war, and participate in electoral politics by voting to "make sure we don't bring in people that want to take [the act of welcoming refugees] away from this country" ("Finale" 36:09-36:20). Comeau and Truesdale thus situate reading testimony as an act that bestows readers with the ethical responsibility of bearing witness but push beyond empathy alone, demonstrating that to honour and fulfill their role of witnesses, readers must take further action. Nonetheless, despite warning against growing trends of anti-Muslim and anti-refugee sentiments, neither Comeau nor Truesdale challenge the myth, realities, or histories of Canada as a humanitarian and multicultural country. In fact, when invoking readers' power and responsibility as political agents, Comeau and Truesdale rely on this very image of Canada as a safe haven for refugees. Nonetheless, though they directly appeal to readers' civic power to pressure their elected representative to ensure that the country offers humanitarian relief, Comeau and Truesdale do not mobilize this same ethical appeal to suggest that readers should question whether and how Canadian governing and military institutions may be complicit in the very conditions that cause or sustain the Syrian civil war and the refugee crisis it triggered. Thus, even as Comeau and Truesdale indeed perform a more complex and layered ethics of recognition that invokes readers' personal complicity and civic accountability, by keeping things personal they still perpetuate the cunning routes of recognition.

To fulfill the ethical demands and transformative potential of testimonial literature, its transactions necessitate audiences' active response; and in many ways, the readings of both *Homes* and *By Chance Alone* are performed by five panellists who understand themselves as humanitarian and multicultural subjects, empathically recognizing justice claims and strongly advocating for their recognition by others. In so doing, panellists take responsibility for testimonies' truths as both national and ethical subjects, and demonstrate a form of accountability by addressing the tangible ways in which these texts are urgent, right here, right now. Nonetheless, concurrently, the debates showcase how, due to the cunning dynamics of recognition—as both ethics and politics—testimonies' calls for justice are partially fulfilled at best, or left unanswered at worst, as the modelled forms of recognition preserve Canada's humanitarian myth and celebrate its multicultural brand. As discussions honour calls for kindness, forgiveness, and acceptance, they resist recognizing anything that would challenge the status quo, containing the calls for political change within the confines of the national imaginary. Thus, though debates revolve around political and ethical issues, they remain in a non-threatening cultural register, relying on affective responses and civil debate to air grievances, and rendering the urgent social matters reconciled as the nation has been moved to change.

### **3. Producing Ethical Recognition: Witnessing and The Reading Industry**

Tong's closing statement highlights the power of panellists and the show to influence public debate "by giving [Canadians] a better chance at what they read" ("Finale" 37:27-37:33), and it is the audience's power that Comeau and Truesdale invoke when they urge readers to mobilize their civic privileges. But the power to mobilize readings of testimony for civic ethics is not entirely, nor even primarily, in the hands of readers alone. Whitlock's framework of testimonial transactions draws attention to the transformative power of testimony both as a privilege and a responsibility, as resting in the hands of the addressees—from publishers to editors, translators, educators, critics, scholars, marketing teams, social justice activists, human rights organizations, and other cultural agents—who mediate the circulation and consumption of testimony and thus frame its

claims, their recognition, and the models of ethical response. On *Canada Reads*, the models of affective and political recognition performed by the panellists are strategically mediated to audiences by the CBC and its brand.

As a product of the CBC, the show is tasked with performing certain cultural work and modelling particular reading practices in an attempt “to contribute to the development of a shared national consciousness and identity” (Canada, “Organization Profile—Canadian Broadcasting Corporation”). The show’s production thus frames testimony’s justice claims through the modes of recognition that the CBC seeks to foster for its target audiences, strategically navigating ethical demands vis-à-vis myths of the Canadian nation. Since its debut season in 2002, the show has been increasingly advancing its nation-building mandate through its formulation as a “mass reading event” (MRE). In *Reading Beyond the Book*, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo define MREs as operating on multiple mass media platforms to mobilize “the belief in reading as an individually transformational, educational, therapeutic, creative, and even ‘civilizing’ experience” (5, 3). Fuller and Rehberg Sedo demonstrate that *Canada Reads* is an MRE that interlaces several common features of reality television in a radio show, formulating a cultural product that mobilizes market powers to shape national public imagination and debate through the kinds of reading acts it models and their reliance on affect as the inherent value of reading. In this sense, *Canada Reads* embodies Lauren Berlant’s concept of an “intimate public” (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 34), one that I argue was particularly predominant in the “One Book to Move You” season when all five celebrity panellists continuously invoke the affective themes.

But the framing of affective reading models far exceeds the 2019 season’s theme or the panellists’ arguments. The show’s format itself serves to navigate the reading acts of its participants in an affective direction. The *Canada Reads* production team mediates both the texts and the reading acts they invoke to panellists and audiences alike: from the choice of celebrity champions, to the selection of titles sent to the panellists based on their expressed interests, the production of the book trailers, to the questions guiding debates, the number of debates and the time allotted to them, the daily elimination votes, the audience Q&A following debates, online chats with audiences during live-streamed events, and the “One

Book to Move You" theme which mobilizes a single pronoun to signal both an individual and a community. In fact, from the title of the show onwards, the production of *Canada Reads* identifies individual readers with the national community, strategically positioning them as the ethical subject and political agents with both the power and the responsibility to be affectively moved for the betterment of the nation.

The reading acts afforded to panellists, and thus modelled for audiences, are perhaps most transparently framed through the debate questions posed during the radio broadcast and live-streamed events. The range of questions during the 2019 season included: "How effective was *The Woo-Woo* in opening your eyes to a life experience or culture other than your own?" ("Day One" 17:25-17:35); "How effective is *Suzanne* at inspiring empathy and understanding?" (27:12-27:17); "What does *Homes* have to say about Canada today?" (30:06-30:11); "How immersive was the setting of *Brother*?" ("Day Two" 21:44-21:48); "How well written was *By Chance Alone*?" (18:02-18:04); or how the finalist memoirs inspire hope and why they need to do so ("Finale" 13:47-14:10). Such questions consistently thread affect-driven reading acts (which repeatedly result in teary-eyed or visibly emotional panellists) with the national imaginary, invoking both the personal and collective transformative capacities of reading. Yet, concurrently, the questions serve to direct attention away from the ethical demands and political efficacies of the texts, resonances that the panellists repeatedly return to and that the book trailers afford to both *Homes* and *By Chance Alone*. In this way, the questions guide the debate by positioning readers as agents of change while at the same time framing or signalling what kind of claims and change they should recognize.

As a competition promoted since 2006 with variations of the slogan "one book all Canadians should read" (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 93), *Canada Reads* is designed to *feel* like an intimate yet transformative site for individual readers and the national community alike. However, when the ethical and political efficacies of testimony are introduced to this site of performing national belonging, the transformative aims of testimonial accounts and those of an MRE clash. The tension between *Canada Reads* as a project of nation-branding and a site of political debate has been identified by Laura Moss as early as the show's inaugural season. Moss identified a dangerous "depoliticization of the literary works," and warned

against the guile of depoliticized debates which perform inherently political work for the nation (7). While the inclusion of life narratives on the show has brought ethical debate to the fore, as Fuller and Rak demonstrate, it has also unveiled the tension between the socio-political critiques pronounced in the texts and the depoliticized brand of the show (29). As the concept of testimonial transactions and the 2019 season of *Canada Reads* demonstrate, the political efficacies of life stories are often directly articulated by the authors themselves (e.g., Eisen), but are certainly shaped by the mediation and reception of life narratives (see the book trailers). With the introduction of testimonial discourse, the tension between non-fiction testimonies' urgent ethical and political claims and the show's nationalist aims are heightened further, and Moss' warning still rings true. From the championed texts, to their mediation on the show and their modelled consumption at the debates, the transactions of testimony on *Canada Reads* 2019 placate any political claims that may challenge the show's CanLit brand. After casting the deciding vote that eliminated *Brother* at the end of day three, fashion stylist Joe Zee (who championed *The Woo-Woo*) explains that he voted against the novel because it lacked hope: while "we have to tell different stories and uncomfortable stories to understand the society we live in," he notes, "we are at such desperate times, we are at such a crossroads in this country . . . and I feel like we do need to inspire some hope" ("Finale" 13:58-14:36). Though Zee indeed recognizes the testimonial claims that Ray identifies in *Brother*, and acknowledges their tenor and urgency, he mobilizes affect-driven ethical recognition to turn away from *Brother* and towards *Homes* and *By Chance Alone*. He does so not because their truths are more urgent or important, but because they offer the show's intimate public—and by extension the nation—the kind of hope he believes Canadians need. This is not hope that Canadians can challenge their country's oppressive institutions, but hope that people will survive inhumane hardships and reach safe havens, or in other words, hope for a humanitarian, multicultural, and reconciliatory nation.

Indeed, as Fuller and Rak argue, once truth enters the debate, *Canada Reads* is no longer merely a game—it has high real-life stakes with distinct ethical and political resonances (26, 42). But as testimonial claims are introduced and texts' justice claims become the driving force, and as readers become positioned as witnesses, the tensions of nation, justice, and recognition are



pushed to the limits, because the ethical demands necessitate a political debate that is directed at unsettling national mythology and dismantling systemically discriminatory apparatuses of the state. Yet, as the 2019 *Canada Reads* debates demonstrate, the tensions embedded in the transactions of testimony reveal how its justice claims and ethical demands are placated through shared reading practices that strategically mobilize empathic recognition, which in turn serve to depoliticize public debate. The reading practices enacted on the show thus delineate the very limits of affect-driven ethics of recognition and unveil the ways affective recognitions map onto shared readings as acts of political recognition.

The power dynamics that tilt the tense scale between testimony's calls for justice and the show's aims lie in *Canada Reads*' production. As an MRE which fosters a site of shared reading that is designed to *feel* intimate and authentic, it is nevertheless—in more or less visible ways—a produced site, mediating the role of readers as witnesses and the responsibilities that role entails, not solely through the testimonial account but also, and perhaps more so, through the models which agents of the reading industry present to them. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo define the reading industry as "the various social and economic structures that together produce contemporary cultures of reading," namely "the organizations, institutions, and businesses that produce a series of cultural artifacts and events . . . [whose] primary product is not books . . . but the artifacts, programming, events, and literary adaptations that represent books" (17-18). *Canada Reads*' role in the reading industry is evident in, among other programming decisions, its continuous choice of celebrity panellists who represent a general reader yet carry cultural clout, as well as the CBC's promotion of each season on other popular shows such as *q* months prior to a season's debut. Further, the show has inspired viewing parties in public libraries and community halls, mock debates hosted on podcasts or public libraries, and even provincial MREs like "Manitoba Reads" or "One Book Nova Scotia." Alongside the mediation of literary texts during debates (with the use of affective thematics, books trailers, and debate questions), the show's significant influence on shared reading practices across the country serves to delineate the roles and responsibilities of its readers as humanitarian, multicultural, and reconciliatory subjects who are individually transformed by reading and feeling.

As “the *Canada Reads* effect” demonstrates, the show’s brand is a major power in Canada’s reading industry, and with the inclusion of true stories of protest, it has also become a significant cultural agent shaping the mediation of testimonial transactions in the nation-state. Attention to this shift and its implications matters because as a mediator of testimonial transactions *Canada Reads* has the power to both frame and perform ethical modes of engagement with testimony’s justice claims in public debate, to model readers’ roles and responsibilities as witnesses to literary testimony and as ethical citizens of the Canadian nation and state. *Canada Reads*’ current modes of engagement with testimony fail the urgency and tenor of testimony’s justice claims, given its acts of reading are both driven by and enacted through the cunning power dynamics of affective recognition and mirror those of political recognition. Primarily mobilized through empathic response, the ethics of recognition fostered by the show’s production and performed during the debates merely formulate transformative facades, for both individual readers and the national community. And while the importance of affect should not be discounted as a vehicle that connects various publics with literature, reading, and political action, responding to testimony through an ethics of recognition that privileges affect as actual political change is not enough. Worse, it is cunningly dangerous because it moves to centre the national imaginary, without ever holding publics accountable for the histories and realities of the state. A push beyond empathy is thus urgently needed.

Writing this article in 2020 during a summer of local and global protests against systemic racism, at a time when, more than ever, Canadians are urged to “educate ourselves” on social justice and the gaps between espoused values and experienced realities, I see this shared reading site as both an obstacle and an opportunity for engagement with the ethical responsibilities of testimonial transactions. An obstacle because, in its current formulation, the public debates promoted by the *Canada Reads* brand merely operate as a mode of virtue signalling; an opportunity because a change to components of the show’s production can usher a shift in shared models of reading, a shift that accounts for the privilege and responsibility of being an agent in the transactions of testimony. Indeed, MREs both rely on and foster intimate publics, and yes, the game show format necessitates swift resolutions; but *Canada Reads* has demonstrated its adaptability twice

before—with the incorporation of interactive audience components first integrated in 2011, and the shift to “issue-based reading” following the effects of the 2012 “true stories edition” (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 93; Fuller and Rak 42)—and it may be time to change once again.

Since the problem with privileging an affective ethics of recognition lies in the power imbalances, dynamics, and structures it entrenches, then to responsibly and accountably bear witness to testimony, it is necessary to seek ways to foster practices of mediation and consumption that maintain agency—at least in part—in the hands of testifiers. As a site of re-mediating both the transactions of testimony as well as individual and shared reading practices, *Canada Reads* has the potential to do just that. Despite her reliance on affect as a transformative political solution, what Tong gets absolutely right in her championing of *By Chance Alone* is her commitment to Eisen’s call in the epigraph “to stand on guard against radical ideologies and never be bystanders” (“Finale” 33:50-34:00). The logic of Tong’s entire strategy is driven by Eisen’s directive and she remains true to the guidance of the memoir’s peritext. Like Eisen, the producers of testimony—from speakers, to editors, publishers, and marketing teams—often take great pains to mobilize the sites of negotiation encompassed in peritextual materials, to mediate testimony not as didactic strategies, but as historically, culturally, and materially situated contexts. *Canada Reads* is itself threaded in the epitextual fabric of Canadian literary texts. By mobilizing strategies that are already part of the show—from the production book trailers, to debate questions, audience participation, and other elements of the show—*Canada Reads* can push its intimate public and its CanLit brand beyond empathy. It can utilize the situated thresholds of testimony as entry points to testimonial transactions that do not stop at an ethics of affective recognition, but rather make space for affect, *while also* offering pathways to honour testimony’s demands in increasingly layered, socially responsible, and accountable ways.

The final question of *Canada Reads* 2019 posed by its host, comedian Ali Hassan, asked how *Homes* and *By Chance Alone* can move readers to effect change (“Finale” 34:47-34:50). This question matters here, now, not because Hassan may be asking too much of books, but because readers may be asking too little of reading practices and shared reading sites. As testimony bestows its addressees with the responsibility for active and accountable

ethical engagement with its justice claims, the transactions of these texts serve to define and mediate what readers will recognize, gloss over, and how we will perform recognition and mobilize it. But, for the readers of *Canada Reads* (to borrow from Fuller's 2007 essay title)—whether as general readers, cultural agents on the show, or beyond it—it is time to demand more, it is time to contend with reading as witnessing.

#### NOTES

- 1 The *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* states that the term autofiction, coined by Serge Doubrovsky, describes “fiction, made from strictly real events and facts” (Gratton 86). Along with its counterpart, biofiction, autofiction relies on the inevitable overlap between autobiography and fiction, and challenges distinct divisions between the truth value of autobiography and the representation of fiction, stressing that autobiography is always a performance and never a transparent medium (Gratton 86). In their discussion of autofiction, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson add that “[w]hile autobiographical storytelling employs fictional tactics and genres, however, autofiction uses textual markers that signal a deliberate, often ironic, interplay between the two modes” (259-60).
- 2 Fuller and Rehberg Sedo indicate that the type of books featured in MREs are “discussible,” hence selected texts “must never be too ‘difficult’ to decode in terms of their formal elements” and most often include “contemporary fiction in a realist genre” (48, 27). Since its debut in 2002, *Canada Reads* has almost exclusively featured novels, with the exception of five seasons that integrated non-fiction texts. The 2012 series was the first, and thus far only, season dedicated entirely to non-fiction. Following the 2012 “True Stories Edition,” several seasons’ short lists have featured combination of fiction, autofiction, and non-fiction texts, most prominently in the 2015 and 2019 seasons.

#### WORKS CITED

- al Rabeeah, Abu Bakr, with Winnie Yeung. *Homes: A Refugee Story*. Freehand, 2018.
- Canada. “Organization Profile—Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.” Government of Canada, 17 Nov. 2020, [appointments.gc.ca/prflOrg.asp?OrgID=CBC&dlang=eng](https://appointments.gc.ca/prflOrg.asp?OrgID=CBC&dlang=eng). Accessed 20 Nov. 2020.
- “Canada Reads 2019: Day One.” *CBC Gem*, 25 Mar. 2019, [gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-1/38e815a-010a5a1edff](https://gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-1/38e815a-010a5a1edff). Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.
- “Canada Reads 2019: Day Two.” *CBC Gem*, 26 Mar. 2019, [gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-2/38e815a-010a6f65ddf](https://gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-2/38e815a-010a6f65ddf). Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.
- “Canada Reads 2019: Day Three.” *CBC Gem*, 27 Mar. 2019, [gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-3/38e815a-010aa170188](https://gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-3/38e815a-010aa170188). Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.
- “Canada Reads 2019: Finale.” *CBC Gem*, 28 Mar. 2019, [gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-4/38e815a-010ae4b28ed](https://gem.cbc.ca/media/canada-reads/season-19/episode-4/38e815a-010ae4b28ed). Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.
- Coulthard, Glen. “Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the ‘Politics of Recognition’ in Canada.” *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 437-60.
- Eisen, Max. *By Chance Alone: A Remarkable True Story of Courage and Survival at Auschwitz*. HarperCollins, 2016.

- Fuller, Danielle. "Listening to the Readers of 'Canada Reads.'" *Canadian Literature*, no. 193, 2007, pp. 11-24.
- Fuller, Danielle, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*. Routledge, 2013.
- Fuller, Danielle, and Julie Rak. "'True Stories,' Real Lives: *Canada Reads* 2012 and the Effects of Reading Memoir in Public." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2015, pp. 25-45.
- Gouett, Katie. "How were the books selected as the final five? Did panelists read all in the long list and choose from that?." *YouTube*, livestream chat of "Canada Reads 2019: Day Two", uploaded by CBC, 26 Mar. 2019, youtube.com/watch?v=SRxB82dKXRw. Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.
- Gratton, Johnnie. "Autofiction." *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly, Routledge, 2013, pp. 86-87.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance." *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford UP, 1997, pp. 17-48.
- James, Matt. "Neoliberal Heritage Redress." *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, edited by Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham, U of Toronto P, 2012, pp. 31-46.
- Moss, Laura. Editorial. "Canada Reads." *Canadian Literature*, no. 182, 2004, pp. 6-10.
- Pedwell, Carolyn. "De-colonising Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally." *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 27-49.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. Duke UP, 2002.
- Regan, Paulette. *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. U of British Columbia P, 2010.
- Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed., U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and Circumfession." *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*, edited by Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe, Rodopi, 1998, pp. 7-22.
- Wakeham, Pauline. "The Cunning of Reconciliation: Reinventing White Civility in the 'Age of Apology.'" *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies*, edited by Smaro Kamboureli and Robert Zacharias, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012, pp. 209-33.
- Whitlock, Gillian. *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*. Oxford UP, 2015.
- . *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. U of Chicago P, 2007.
- Yúdice, George. "Testimonio and Postmodernism." *Voices of the Voiceless in Testimonial Literature*, special issue of *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1991, pp. 15-31.

