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"Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees": Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars*

Introduction: "a strange and bitter crop"

Cecily Nicholson's 2014 documentary long poem *From the Poplars* takes up the history of Poplar Island, a small island in the Fraser River delta off the shore of the City of New Westminster,[1] which over the last 160 years has been subject to various permutations as regulated by colonial governments: federal, provincial, and municipal. Since contact, the territory known as Poplar Island has been cast as reserve land for its original stewards, the Qayqayt peoples; as a smallpox quarantine for Indigenous peoples from across the Lower Mainland; as a shipyard for munition building during the First World War; and as a commercial logging and milling site in the mid-twentieth century (Wilkinson). It currently sits as a protected park through the colonial legal instrument of Crown land designation.[2] This brief, procedural account of the 160-year history of this small island offers a microcosm of relations between Canadian colonial settlers and Indigenous peoples. This outline of events is front-facing and stamped by this nation's colonial governments, which have altered Poplar Island's purpose to suit the state's own economic needs with disregard for Turtle Island's original inhabitants and their connections with its natural environment. The metonymic promise of colonial legal writing makes it "lawful for the Corporation of the City" (Nicholson 47) to rule over every inch of New Westminster; however, as this paper will argue, Nicholson's *From the Poplars* stares down this authoritative stance by launching an unsettling critique

of the impetus behind the "terms" of the Canadian project—terms buoyed by racist underpinnings of a presumptive past, and yet which continue to demarcate the movements of certain people in physical space into the present. In looking out onto this island in its present state, adorned with second-growth poplar trees, the poet-speaker is aware of the spectres veiled by the mirage of this now uninhabited park. The island is currently being marketed to real-estate investors of the Lower Mainland as providing a serene vista for a rapidly gentrifying shoreline (Stern 300); however, Nicholson's poet-speaker asks readers to look deeper.

One of the primary arguments of Nicholson's text is that Poplar Island has been in the wrong hands for over 160 years. Nicholson's arguments are in line with claims for the restitution of Indigenous lands. For example, the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) calls for a "fundamental reallocation of lands and resources" (Canada 2); however, its authors also state that "Aboriginal people do not expect to obtain full restitution: they do not want to push non-Aboriginal Canadians into the sea or to deprive them of their backyards, as the recent history of land claims settlements makes clear" (2). Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred extends RCAP's findings into the present: "The need to restore our lands to our nations was true in 1996 and it continues to be true today. A notion of reconciliation that rearranges political orders, reforms legalities and promotes economics is still colonial unless and until it centres our relationship to the land" ("It's All about The Land" 13). Mi'kmaw legal scholar Pamela Palmater similarly argues that the return of Crown land to its rightful stewards—regional Indigenous populations across this nation-state—would provide the necessary restitution of land without requiring full-scale irredentism. However, irredentism is favoured by some more radical groups, such as the LANDBACK movement, which serves to activate citizens of broader Turtle Island towards a future "where Black reparation and Indigenous LANDBACK co-exist . . . where collective liberation is at the core" ("LANDBACK"). *From the Poplars* upholds that the Crown land of Poplar Island should be returned to the Qayqayt peoples. The text's onus on "collective liberation" hearkens to radical coalition building, which could eventually lead to more extensive reparations.

Another spectre resides in this text. The Canadian colonial project has caused unimaginable suffering, dispossession, genocide, and violence towards Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, through both the sword (i.e., conflict and disease) and the pen (i.e., the weaponization of inscribed law and policy to force spatial dislocation and divide families). The harrowing effects of colonization for Indigenous peoples of Canada/Turtle Island are ongoing. As a self-described "mixed, light-skinned black Canadian citizen" (Nicholson, "In Dialogue" 71), Nicholson is part of an identity group that has also experienced racism, trauma, murder, and both structural and physical violence under Canadian law and policy for over four hundred years. As Audre Lorde famously writes, "There is no hierarchy of oppression" (220). In *From the Poplars*, there is no hierarchy of suffering wrought by the condition of perpetual "second-class citizen status" (Thornhill 324) bestowed upon certain bodies in the Canadian state. Nicholson's text draws together the long-standing pain and abjection of two of Canada's historically marginalized groups—Indigenous and Black peoples—through a shared nexus of grief (Nicholson et al. 75).[3] Recent scholarship in Turtle Island seeks to find relational affiliations between these historically separated groups.[4] This work is urgent but remains complicated due to differential and particular historical events (McCall 57) and their ensuing social and psychological effects. Nicholson's text signals to such an impasse as expressed by Tiffany Lethabo King: "What happens when Blackness docks, gets twisted, and entangled in genocide and, encounters the Native/Indigenous subject? What grows, takes shape, and emerges at this place?" (207). *From the Poplars* does not profess to answer all of these pressing questions; however, it draws attention to the shared grief of these two groups by way of providing a textual space through which to spark the building of an "affective public" (Papacharissi) between them and thus to ignite the radical potential of their connectivity. In a recent conversation with Aisha Sasha John and David Chariandy, Nicholson states, "I will spend the rest of my life catching up on grieving. Grieving we know is necessary. That's something, unfortunately, that Black and Indigenous communities share" ("Conversations" 75).

While Nicholson's appropriation of the legal documents that have functioned to dispossess Indigenous peoples comprises the bulk of the appropriated text in *From the Poplars*, another text, while cited less

frequently, performs a crucial sleight of hand as part of Nicholson's intervention into the Canadian state's unwillingness to admit and atone for its anti-Black racism. Ultimately, the key intertext for analyzing *From the Poplars* through the intersections of Blackness, settler colonialism, and Indigenous solidarity is American blues singer Billie Holiday's version of the song "Strange Fruit" (first recorded in 1939). I read the sparse and coded citings of "Strange Fruit" in the text as echoing Robyn Maynard's critique of the paucity of literature addressing state violence, which she describes as harms caused by government or government-funded institutions and policies that include the criminal justice system, social services, and immigration (6-7). Such laws and policies culminate in the "global devaluation of the Black body" (Maynard 17). Black people living in Canada, according to Wayde Compton, have experienced "ad hoc racism" (89). That is, while Indigenous peoples, for instance, have been subject to overt official segregation policies, Black people have experienced unevenness with respect to prejudice being encoded in official laws and policies.[5] Yet, scholars of Black Canadian histories and futures assert that anti-Black racism as exercised through social, legal, and extra-legal measures has persisted since the arrival of Black people in the territories known as Canada and continues to this day.

This essay will argue that the Poplar Island represented in *From the Poplars* symbolizes the shared grief of Black and Indigenous peoples in the territory known as British Columbia due to their unjust and violent treatment at the hands of the white supremacist Canadian state. The island's currently perceived emptiness of Black and Indigenous presences is actually an "optical illusion" (Compton 105)—*From the Poplars* brings these "strange fruits" into view. Just as Holiday's "Strange Fruit" instigated waves of protest and stoked anti-segregation movements in the United States,[6] *From the Poplars* as political ballad signals new and radical futures for Black and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. *From the Poplars* thus diasporizes the space of Poplar Island by recasting the text as an affective public that serves as a site for "remembering and perceiving . . . the networks of exchange that have developed between . . . diasporized black communities . . . [and] Indigenous peoples" (Vernon, *Black Prairie* 8). The text looks to a shared future "based on Black and Indigenous freedom, self-determination, and one that

continually generates Black and Indigenous life" (Simpson 77), a future whose novel "undisciplined" grammars are still being written (Sharpe 13), but whose promise is evident in Nicholson's poet-speaker's deconstruction of the colonial language that previously controlled, dismissed, and violated Black and Indigenous presences across Canadian/Turtle Island geographies, both diminutive and vast. Nicholson's poetic methodology builds upon Sarah Dowling's analysis of appropriation as "bound up with the logics of property undergirding settler colonialism" (104). By crafting a text based on records of the colonial appropriation of the lands of New Westminster, with a focus on Poplar Island, Nicholson's form and subject seamlessly align. However, Nicholson's appropriation serves to *repossess* rather than *dispossess*, by activating readers towards reconciliatory and anti-racist political action. The following will offer an intertextual analysis of *From the Poplars* and "Strange Fruit" through both political and formal lenses.

I come to this work as a settler scholar. I was born on the territories of the Qayqayt peoples, currently called New Westminster. This place is, in the words of Eugenia Zuroski, as inspired by Minelle Mahtani and Katherine McKittrick, "where I know from," where my knowing begins. I looked out onto Poplar Island from the New West Quay as a child: I watched the log booms snaking up and down the Fraser, but failed to see the racism and violence that was all around me due to my family's own challenges coupled with my early education in white supremacist Canadian institutions. *Knowing from* expands into another of Zuroski's provocations: "What is your intellectual work for?" I sit here writing these words now in Toronto, Ontario—another Canadian space haunted by racist, colonial histories and presents. My intellectual and social justice work is fuelled by my commitment to allyship and to naming and attempting to correct injustices when I see them, and to striving to excavate the white supremacy within me (Wngz).

Politics: "Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck"

> Being a witness has other responsibilities to it . . . I think about that these days as an uninvited guest on these territories. I don't just want to thank people. I don't just want to name who I am and what I think I'm up to . . . I feel that way foremost embodying black and femme experience, realizing violences of state and border, I want to be relevant.
>
> —Cecily Nicholson, "In Dialogue with Michael Nardone"

Nicholson's commitments are located "in the urban, in defense of land, based in community" (Nicholson "Conversations" 72)—a community comprised of different social actors with unique identities and causes. Nicholson's commitments to people and place illuminate Winfried Siemerling's claim that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we're positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (13).[7] In *From the Poplars*, the poet-speaker is figured as someone curious about Poplar Island's legal and social histories: this speaker provides narrativized accounts of their visits to planning and heritage offices in their efforts to find out the "history that no one / holds" (24) and, predominantly, to uncover and critique the racist ideologies of the Canadian project that propelled the Qayqayts' displacement from their land. Nicholson's poet-speaker wants to understand the displaced histories: "a place (built over) at the southern end of Agnes Street // burial grounds (built over) of the present high school" (11). The poet-speaker's commitment to the Qayqayt peoples attends to both past and present: their removal from their land more than 160 years ago, and their continued fight to retain their land base. In a 2014 interview, Nicholson states, "*From the Poplars*, in breaking down the colonial settlement and the devastation wrought by industry on Poplar Island, and how that underpins New Westminster as a municipality now, requires connective threads in the work to necessarily stretch through the concrete and into the earth itself" ("Call and Response").

The poet-speaker's research uncovers the legal and policy documents that justify the dispossession of the Qayqayt peoples of current-day New Westminster and Poplar Island. Again and again, as evidenced in the volume of appropriated lines from these documents included in *From the Poplars*, legal and policy decisions were made without evidence or consultation. Their overwhelming aim was to foster a colony of white British settlers in the area. The basis for such vindications can be traced to unfounded, racist ideologies about Indigenous peoples' inability to make the land commercially viable, their mismanagement of land and resources, and their supposed propensity to criminality and sloth. Just as New Westminster continues to hold up the banner of "The Royal City"—thereby cementing its history to Britain and white colonial supremacy—nineteenth-century policy architects, too, believed in a social Darwinism that deemed certain settlers as superior in

mental and commercial acuity to the Indigenous inhabitants of the lands they colonized.

One such supremacist, Joseph Trutch,[8] became Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works in 1864. In Trutch's correspondences with the Prime Minister and other high-ranking officials, he called Indigenous peoples "utter Savages living along the coast, frequently committing murder and robbery amongst themselves . . . and on white people who go amongst them for the purpose of trade" (qtd. in Fisher 5). For Trutch, "[t]he Indians really have no right to the lands they claim, nor are they of any actual value or utility to them" (qtd. in Fisher 3). Trutch made it one of his primary mandates to discredit the policies of his predecessor, Governor Sir James Douglas, who sought to provide Indigenous peoples with reserve lands they chose themselves. Trutch ceased such reforms in order to achieve his goal of minimizing the quality and quantity of reserve lands so as to maximize white settlement and economic returns from public lands (Abbott). Nicholson's poet-speaker addresses the Qayqayt peoples—a "band landless" (31)—and invokes a series of deconstructions regarding the just stewardship of this land through the concept of a colony. Nicholson's speaker questions the "future" of those who inhabited the space of Poplar Island prior to the arrival of those with the hegemonic imperative to lay the "band of steel that completes the union" (22), those for whom resource extraction—"an economy of fur-bearing animals" (77)—was the name of the game.

Nicholson's poetics destabilize the supposedly logical and legal frameworks upon which a certain "colony" was guaranteed to prosper at the hands of another community's disavowal, frameworks with tautological re-combinations of legalese such as "doubts have arisen whether the said Act is effectual to vest the said lands in the said Corporation in the manner contemplated by the said Act" (*From the Poplars* 62). The opacity of such terms of service formed the status quo—for Nicholson's poet-speaker, the unreasonableness of such acts necessitates a contemporary reckoning. Nicholson's poet-speaker writes, "The City sold the island for $20,000 to Rayonier Canada / Forestry // for years the trees grew back tall and thin . . . the colony // had grown a sense of permanence" (45). After the island was sold by the provincial government to Rayonier Forestry in 1948, the entire old-growth forest was clear-cut. That these new anthropomorphized trees conceived that they were becoming a

colony, and that this experience offered only a "sense" of permanence (in the past tense) de-familiarizes seemingly straightforward concepts. For example, what does a sense of permanence mean in a place that is always subject to being re-constructed?

One of the justifications constantly weaponized to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their homes and prevent them from belonging to the new colony in nineteenth-century British Columbia was Trutch's sentiment that Indigenous peoples could not be of "any actual value or utility." One lens through which to analyze "Strange Fruit" and *From the Poplars* is that of the colonial correlations between an individual's ability to labour on the land and their subsequent recognition of full personhood or citizenship by the state. In "Land as Life: Unsettling the Logics of Containment," Mishuana Goeman defines "property," as a distinctly "European notion that locks together . . . labor, land, and conquest" (qtd. in King 23). As Tiffany Lethabo King elaborates in her foundational text *The Black Shoals*, "[w]ithin this Lockean formulation, Indigenous subjects who do not labor across the land fail to turn the land into property and thus fail to turn themselves into proper human subjects" (23).[9] In *On Property*, Rinaldo Walcott writes of a "different relationship to property" for Black people (12). According to Walcott, "the enslaved Black person literally had no autonomy or control over either their body or biological kin"—a fact that "has informed Black people's relationship to property ever since" (17). Building upon the Rastafarian tradition, and ignited by calls for abolishing the police in the wake of George Floyd's murder, Walcott argues that "Black people will not be fully able to breathe—a word I do not use lightly—until property itself is abolished" (11). Thus, while Black settlers to Canada have, too, been subject to the Lockean ideology of working the land as a sign of rationality and therefore personhood, their existence under conditions of what Christina Sharpe calls "the afterlife of property" (8) deepens intractable tensions between Lockean understandings of labour-citizenship and non-proprietary Indigenous and Black traditions of land stewardship and communality.

In her work on early twentieth-century Canadian immigration law, Esmerelda M. A. Thornhill analyzes how "Section 38(c) of the 1910 Act Respecting Immigration prohibited the landing in Canada of immigrants belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of

Canada" (329). Thornhill explains how "[t]he ensuing effect of this euphemistic invocation of 'climatic unsuitability' was that de facto, 'race was now legally designated as an immigration category'" (329).[10] At the 2017 Mikinaakominis/TransCanadas conference, Karina Vernon spoke to the premise and promise of Black pioneers' land rights in Canada as tied to their ability to farm the land grants on offer ("Making Things"). And yet, Vernon also points to the anxieties faced by Black people settling upon these lands: she writes of Black writers grappling with "difficult questions about what it means for black people to have territorialized in Indigenous nations on Turtle Island, and about how to make things right in the present" (*Black Prairie* 30-31). Thus, for Black people arriving in the lands currently called Canada—ones who were able to migrate as a result of specific legal and policy initiatives that occurred either before or after the 1910 Act, as an example—not only was their arrival fraught, but once here, they also faced additional waves of anxiety and grief: the former as a result of the discomfort arising from the displacement of First Nations peoples in Canada/Turtle Island, and the latter due to their own treatment by the Canadian state, in the forms of both institutionalized—for example, a segregated school operating in Nova Scotia until 1964 (Thornhill 328)—and ad hoc racism. Non-institutionalized and surreptitious racist acts include, for example, disproportionate evictions by way of urban renewal projects (Blomley), such as the erasure of a historically Black neighbourhood in Vancouver, Hogan's Alley,[11] as well as ongoing instances of racial profiling,[12] and heightened rates of incarceration and structural poverty. Statistics speak volumes here: Akwatu Khenti finds that between 2010-2011, "Black inmates accounted for 9% of the federal prison population although Black Canadians only comprise 2.5% of the overall population," a figure that "represents a 52% increase" in a single decade (190). Comparing the grief and suffering of two of Canada's most historically oppressed groups, Khenti's data shows similarly horrifying findings for the Aboriginal people of Canada, who "comprise 3.8% of the national population but 21.5% of the incarcerated population" (191).[13]

The longest quotation from "Strange Fruit" in *From the Poplars* occurs in the section on pages 68-69. Nicholson's poet-speaker cites three lines from the song—the three lines before the song's last line: "*for the wind to suck, for the sun to rot, for the tree to drop*" (69, emphasis original). In the opening

lines of this section, the poet-speaker states, "this intersection / hold this" (68), before enacting a critique of capitalist labour through such lines as follow:

> refrain from the fuck and hoard
> or sale and clunky big block glare
> of nothing that matters
> . . . . . .
> what is work, what is a living
>
> unarchival ones all labour
> in cycles immaterial
> this material is meaning what is said[.]

The poet-speaker also speaks of the writing of history in this section: of "apophenia" and a "whole history out loud" (69). Nicholson's poet-speaker's dense lines bring forth a critique of the labour required for colonial belonging and its promise of having one's history revered, known, seen, and heard. I read this section as Nicholson's effort to unite the differential grievances of Black and Indigenous peoples of Canada—through the microcosm of a small island in British Columbia—in a textual space that can foster a broader "affective public," which Zizi Papacharissi describes as a "formation that is textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread" (133), while "amplify[ing] the awareness of a particular feeling, the intensity with which it is felt" (118).

In *From the Poplars*, the "intersection" between Indigenous and Black grief is associated with the notion of "hold." One of the key conceptual frames for Christina Sharpe's groundbreaking *In the Wake*, the hold carries multiple meanings. Literally, it is the location in transatlantic slave ships where African bodies were held as they were transported across the Middle Passage. Sharpe signals the word's other reverberations as well: "continue to follow (a particular course); keep or detain (someone); a fortress" (*OED* qtd. in Sharpe 68). Sharpe's text poignantly argues that, while chattel slavery has officially ended, Black being continues to inhabit "the afterlives of that brutality that is not in the past" (99) and to "survive (and more) the afterlife of property" (18)—this is what it means to be *in the wake*. Thus, the original hold of the ship, which coded Black bodies as property, continues to propel such bodies in this particular course, and continues to detain (and brutalize) them under duress. Building on Sharpe, Tavleen Purewal mobilizes the

concept of the "hold" to express kinship relations between Black and Indigenous figures in Canadian/Turtle Island literatures, calling it "a spatial and epistemological condition for relations between Indigenous and diasporic subjects" (95). In my reading of *From the Poplars* as Sharpian "wake work" (Sharpe 17), Nicholson's poetics seeks to find new "form for this work" (Sharpe 19), through which she grapples with the ongoing violences towards Black and Indigenous people in this nation-state, by this nation-state. Nicholson enacts Sharpe's hopeful transmogrifying of "hold" to "beholden": "to hold by some tie of duty or obligation, to retain as a client or person in duty bound" (*OED* qtd. in Sharpe 100-01). *From the Poplars* therefore exemplifies Nicholson's working through of Sharpe's question: "In what ways might we enact a beholden-ness to each other, laterally?" (100).

Nicholson's poet-speaker infuses the particular "hold" of Poplar Island as one of shared emotional suffering as a result of being denied full-personhood status. Why labour, asks Nicholson's poet-speaker, since it achieves "nothing that matters" (68)—neither legal, social, status, psychological, cultural, or cathartic gains? Those who have written the extant official histories are compelled by selective apophenia. While Trutch's racism is overt, Stephen Harper's myopic notion that this nation has "no history of colonialism" (qtd. in Ljunggren) belies Canada's unwillingness to look at its past. What the poet-speaker *can* do is labour on the creation of a counter-history: in the text's epigraph, Nicholson's poet-speaker states, "I am writing a book of poetry. A minor purchase of property." This line is empowering in one light due to its insistence on taking back some space from the colony that has denied full entrance to certain aforementioned groups. However, its dual meaning also suggests Nicholson's poet-speaker's own anxieties about the writing of this text, anxieties that gesture to Vernon's stated aims with respect to trying to "make things right." In the writing of *From the Poplars*, the author makes a claim to a different reading of history, space, and social actors in the Canadian state—a claim that could be read as another act of violence or erasure.

Nicholson's poet-speaker cites the haunting lines from Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," which conjure a vision of both human and ecological loss: smallpox epidemics causing Qayqayt mass burial sites, the maw of deforestation. And yet, for Nicholson's poet-speaker precisely, when such

sights are encountered by diasporic "Blackness," what "emerges at this place?" (King 207). While landmark land claim cases such as Calder (1973), Delgamuukw (1997), and Haida (2001) have been won at the Supreme Court of Canada, the people of the Qayqayt First Nation continue to lack a land base, despite the tireless efforts of Chief Rhonda Larrabee, whose work has already restored fishing and status rights to her people ("Reclaiming Roots").

Black people in Canada face different forms of injustice in the Canadian state. Compton writes of conversations that he has with people he meets in his city: "There are no black people in Vancouver, people often say," to which he responds, "Twenty thousand-plus people are here and there—somehow unseen. This is a good place to begin . . . a subjective exploration of how and why this history matters" (105). Yvonne Brown similarly writes of feeling like a "ghost made flesh" (382) who is charged with reminding folks who fail to see Black presence and pain in Canada. Such an "optical illusion" (Compton 105) arises because "the realities of Black life in contemporary Canada remain shrouded behind a carefully curated national mythology of racial equality" (Maynard 50). Black abolitionist scholars, artists, and activists seek to educate the broader Canadian public that "[t]here can be no realization of the scale of the infliction of White pain on Black bodies without a sense of both the historical and contemporary displacement and dispossession of African bodies from their homelands in Africa" (Brown 379), as well as a sense of how this dispossession via transatlantic colonial capitalism leads to social effects such as structural poverty, the disproportionate incarceration and criminalization of Black subjects, and the "chronic psychological stress" and "humiliation associated with racial profiling" (Khenti 193), among other harmful effects. Canadian colonial leaders feel vindicated in perpetuating a myth of Canada's supposed moral superiority to its southern neighbour, but this myth is predicated upon their denial of slavery in this nation.

Revolutionary Forms: Protest Songs

Billie Holiday's version of "Strange Fruit" has been called "the first great protest song" (Lynsky). Nicholson's *From the Poplars* follows in this legacy. Abel Meeropol, who published under the pen name Lewis Allan, was a son of Russian Jewish immigrants. He composed his poem "Bitter Fruit" in 1930 after "seeing a photo depicting the lynching of two Black teens in Indiana"

(Fields). After publishing the poem in both education and Marxist political journals, he set it to music. Billie Holiday first heard of the song during her years performing at New York's first integrated nightclub, Café Society in Greenwich Village. Angela Davis writes of how "Strange Fruit" stood out among Holiday's repertoire of mostly love songs since it was a "song with urgent and far-reaching social implications" (210), a song that "almost singlehandedly changed the politics of American popular culture and put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture" (212). The song depicts Black bodies being lynched; however, for Holiday the song also spoke to the "daily routines of discrimination" (Davis 221) under which her own father passed (he died of pneumonia in a segregated hospital ward). Janelle Hobson writes that Holiday "link[ed] the lynching scene to her father's experience of racism, which literally killed him and which shaped her own struggles as a woman and an artist" (447).

"Strange Fruit" functioned as an "affective public" by creating communities of people and propelling them to action through the dissemination of passionate emotions.[14] *Time* magazine named it the "Song of the Century" in 1999 (Fields), likely due to its effect upon altering social consensus (Davis 224). *From the Poplars*' referencing of "Strange Fruit" indicates the linkages between the two works in terms of their abilities to call out social injustice and spark revolutionary action. The Canadian state has attempted to differentiate itself from the US through such notions as that it is not culpable for racist, demoralizing acts like lynchings and slavery. Yet, as Nicholson's collection unveils, in the territories known as Canada, racially motivated acts of genocide, violence, dispossession, and "daily routines of discrimination" (Davis 221) against Indigenous and Black peoples (as well as other historically oppressed groups) have occurred since the arrival of the colonizers and continue through to this day. The revolution on Turtle Island is only gathering momentum as Black and Indigenous artists, activists, and thinkers come together to stand against injustice.

Working within the broader context of the long documentary poem, *From the Poplars* calls upon poetic techniques of erasure, appropriation, and the "found" text. The use of appropriation is exceedingly apt in Nicholson's text in that appropriation formed the basis of core legal doctrines (e.g., the Doctrine of Discovery) that enabled the Canadian colonial government to

usurp control over the lands of Turtle Island (Dowling 104). Nicholson's text cuts up and reconfigures official records in order to highlight the absurdity of their claims and to demonstrate the racism embedded within the majority of legal, civic, and policy decisions made in the territories currently called Canada. Nicholson invokes the histories of Poplar Island through her intensive research in the New Westminster Archives, and also via conversations with locals and city employees. In her acknowledgements, she explains how "*From the Poplars* is influenced by a number of texts and many more conversations. The conversations were not documented and I have not quoted from them . . . The views presented herein are my own" (94). As opposed to the prejudicial history presented in the New Westminster Archives, Nicholson is not attempting to write *the* story of Poplar Island, but to demonstrate her author/speaker's own reconfiguring of this space through listening to oral histories alongside analyzing government records.

Nicholson's fusion of official records such as policy documents, correspondence from government officials, bills, and charters alongside her poetic speaker's own lyric lines underscores the author's genealogical debt to BC poet and activist Dorothy Livesay who, in her landmark essay "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre" (1969), asserts that such writing "creates a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" (267). Despite it being hailed here as a Canadian genre, this method functions to critique the underlying colonial sources and records of the Canadian state and therefore to uphold acts of revisionist history, as called for by postcolonial and decolonial scholars across Turtle Island such as Keith Thor Carlson. Carlson argues that non-Western sources, especially Indigenous sources, need to be taken seriously, "even if, as in the case of the myth-like stories, they cannot be corroborated by archival documents or western science" (199). For Carlson, such an approach "not only leads to scholarship that is inclusive and meaningful to indigenous peoples, it also helps us create and hopefully make more accurate histories" (199-200). In *From the Poplars*, Nicholson does not cite the oral sources from which she learns of Poplar Island's unofficial histories, focusing instead on privileging the "views presented herein [as] my own." This is not to say that oralities and non-Western sources are not of great import, but more so that the poet-speaker is self-reflexively engaging with the complexities of writing the

past as per the subjective stance of documentary poetry, as well as navigating her own potential complicity in terms of how to "make things right" without errantly erasing or misattributing another's version of events. As "wake work" (Sharpe 17), Nicholson's project faces an additional impasse: "How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?" (Sharpe 20).

As is the case with poetic forms, taxonomy is often at issue. Appropriation as a poetic tactic is most notably found within conceptual poetry; however, as Sarah Dowling points out, "it is just as common in documentary poetry, essay poems, and pastiches . . . The technique thus crosses with seeming ease between apparently opposed styles and schools" (98). Holding up *From the Poplars* as a documentary poem that deploys the techniques of appropriation, this essay aims to insert this text into a canon of post- and decolonial poetic texts by authors such as Jordan Abel, Layli Long Soldier, Rachel Zolf, Sonnet L'Abbé, Shane Rhodes, and M. NourbeSe Philip. Who does the appropriating—and how—has always been a contentious issue in studies of literary intertextuality (Hutcheon). Such debates have risen to a fever pitch in the wake of criticisms of acts of appropriative poetics such as the likes of Kenneth Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown" (2015).

From the Poplars is situated within debates in the poetic schools of the avant-garde—the "found," erasure, appropriation, and documentary poetry—due to its marked commitment to dissent and social activism via literary work. For instance, unlike Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown," Nicholson's *From the Poplars* does not replicate what Cathy Hong Park decries as "the delusion of whiteness" in avant-garde conceptual writing: wherein a poet can assert themselves as "post-identity," pick and choose from a seemingly endless array of source texts, and discount the identities and subjectivities for whom those source texts caused actual violence, potentially including harassment, surveillance, profiling, deportation, dislocation, biological warfare, and genocide. *From the Poplars*, instead, enacts an appropriative poetics that promotes shared grieving through the development of an "affective public" between Black and Indigenous peoples of Canada/Turtle Island. Nicholson achieves this feat, I argue, by building what Sonnet L'Abbé calls "contexts of anti-oppression" around the poetry (219).

Nicholson creates such anti-oppressive contexts through commitment to her poetry's ethical aims, as opposed to militancy to a particular form or

school of conceptual writing. Recently, writers from historically oppressed groups have questioned the need for labels and manifestos in conceptual writing—calling instead for the work's revolutionary qualities to be centred, as opposed to the poet's own purist and egoic tendencies. Park, for instance, critiques the avant-garde manifesto for "its tone of masculinist and expansionist militancy" and its enforcement of "an aggressive divide-and-conquer framework." Shane Rhodes, too, in his own anti-manifesto, deconstructs the obsession towards classification in conceptual writing with his practical assertion that "found poetry should probably be seen more as a technique with varying levels of application than a poetic sub-genre." As Rhodes conceptualizes it, found poetry exists along an expansive "axis that ranges from non-interventionist at one extreme . . . to the other end where the found text is doctored, and 'poeticized,' and, perhaps, included within a larger unfound structure." For Rhodes, then, what matters is not the codification of the level of the "doctoring," but rather the text's commitment to "dissent": "Today's found poetry thrives in counter-discourse—not just finding texts but speaking back to them with, and within, their own worlds." For example, Goldsmith's infamous appropriative act fails to contextualize Brown's autopsy report within its political and historical complexities and specificity. Although Goldsmith has since defended himself as an ally of the Black Lives Matter movement (Sandhu), his inability to reflexively self-position himself as a white, American male poet of privilege within the text of "The Body of Michael Brown" means that this act of appropriation primarily serves to "reiterat[e] hate speech" (L'Abbé 219). Conversely, Nicholson's poet-speaker is a figure in the text—one who questions, queries, reflects, and responds to the histories of Poplar Island. Moreover, this poet-speaker is someone familiar with the perpetual grieving (Nicholson, "Conversations" 75) of being a "second-class citizen" (Thornhill 324) of the Canadian nation-state and so can speak from the position of experiential affective embodiment.

Nicholson's speaker's *talking back* is crucial to the revolutionary potential of this work. Jordan Abel, whose conceptual writings represent some of the most impressive of Canadian twenty-first century poetics, writes, "Conceptual/literary appropriation . . . allows me to comment not only on the destructive mechanisms and outcomes of appropriation, but also allows

me to begin to explore pathways back through/out of appropriation" (292). Michael Nardone, in his essay "On Settler Conceptualism," also troubles the colonial imperative to name and quantify techniques at the expense of their functionality: "I am less dedicated to a taxonomical title, and more concerned with the compositional tactics they share." Nardone calls for conceptual writing that "confront[s] the various collective assemblages of enunciation that address particular structures of power . . . a poetics that document[s] the institutional voices of settler-colonial empire—its texts, processes, and performances."

Nicholson's *From the Poplars* enacts modes of dissent advocated by writers like Abel, Rhodes, Park, and Nardone. In a December 28, 1912 letter from gas plant executive John A. Lee to Premier of BC Richard McBride (1903-15), Lee describes his plan to remove a "Westminster Indian" woman, Mary Agnes Vianin, from her reserve land by offering her $2,500 (48). Nicholson appropriates and cites Lee's epistle in the following manner: "I might say, we are very anxious to get this little piece of ~~right of way~~ the reserve, as we propose to erect our Gas Plant (Municipal) and give the C.N. Rly. Co. a right-of-way through it" (48). Nicholson's addition of "~~right of way,~~" with the strikethrough, fills in the assumptions about who will best monetize the land. The repetition of the phrase with a difference also pulls it out of context and encourages readers to consider it as colonial doublespeak: Who in the Colony is entitled to the right-of-way? In the schema of the Canadian state, railways take precedence over human life.

Because appropriation "refers to legalized processes of taking, and to the sovereign power to do so," Sarah Dowling reminds scholars of poetics, "it is inextricably bound up with the logics of property undergirding settler colonialism" (104). Nicholson's speaker employs this process of deconstructing the colonial language that justifies land theft and human dislocation: "displacement: talking about what is not present in space / and time // recursive language about language / productivity: use of language to create language // capacity / for displacement recursively, and productivity in language" (75). Nicholson's appropriative poetics displace the diction of the master's language, wresting it from the contexts in which it supposedly *made sense*, and determining the illogical, racist premises upon which it was based. Indigenous peoples were written out of their land through the use of a

weaponized English whose power was not apparent to them; Black people in Canada face continued second-class citizen status in a nation that consistently congratulates itself for its supposed lack of anti-Black racism.

In a section that speaks expressly to the suffering inflicted upon Black and Indigenous peoples in the Canadian state, *From the Poplars* cites the song indirectly with the lines "each crooked strange fruit / every stoop (we had) / we were used to / *domination and death*" (82, emphasis original). Debates in intertextuality studies during the heyday of postmodernism often revolve around Julia Kristeva's two axes of intertextuality: Hutcheon interprets Kristeva's axis as "a horizontal one of the dialogue of the author with his/her potential reader, and a vertical one between the text itself and other texts" (Hutcheon 231). However, for Linda Hutcheon, developing upon Michael Riffaterre, intertextuality necessarily depends upon "the reader and his/her memory of other texts" (231), which means that it is "only the reader who can activate the 'intertext'" (Hutcheon 232).

Conclusion: Activation

In arguing that both "Strange Fruit" and *From the Poplars* constitute and produce "affective publics," I claim that these works activate readers towards political action. As Davis writes of "Strange Fruit," "Holiday's gift of aesthetic communication did not consist simply in her ability to render in song the profound emotions underlying her private woes . . . she also achieved a mode of expression that forged community even as it remained deeply personal" (222). Growing protest movements in Canada/Turtle Island, including Black Lives Matter and LANDBACK movements such as Idle No More and those in support of the Wet'suwet'en peoples, demonstrate publics activated by rage, grief, and compassion. The horrors of lynching are often portrayed as acts that happened *in the past* and *not in this nation*. However, by interweaving the intertextual references to "Strange Fruit" in *From the Poplars*, Nicholson's poet-speaker attempts to activate her readers to see not only that violent and murderous injustices towards oppressed and racialized groups are ongoing in the Canadian state, but also that their lack of representation in the public-facing accounts of Canada's imagined community[15] represents a further act of injustice. Deconstructing one of the core tenets of Anderson's concept, Lucia Lorenzi asks, "*How far are we willing—or forced—to go in order to defend it or*

suffer for [the "imagined community" of Canada]?" (80, emphasis original). At a recent event, Syrus Marcus Ware spoke of the new and urgent waves of protest beginning in 2020-2021. Rinaldo Walcott writes that "abolition has ignited imaginations in a manner that is essential for real change" (13). For many, it seems, the time is up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Christine Kim and my incredible anonymous readers at *Canadian Literature* for their brilliant guidance on this essay, in addition to this journal's outstanding copyeditors. This project is dedicated to and inspired by Karina Vernon's vital teaching and scholarship. It has been supported in various ways through additional mentorship from Christina Baade, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Kyle Kinaschuk, Pamela Palmater, Neil Surkan, and D. A. Trotz.

NOTES

1 The city of New Westminster, part of the Metro Vancouver Regional District, is home to approximately 70,000 inhabitants, four per cent of whom self-identify as Indigenous (Stern 305). New Westminster was named by Queen Victoria, and thus nicknamed "The Royal City"; the city was thought to become the capital of British Columbia, but it lost this title to the city of Victoria, located on the southernmost tip of Vancouver Island. The city's location on the Fraser River delta offered the ideal conditions for the transport of goods northwards up the British Columbia coast, as well as southwards to the United States, and across the Pacific Ocean to ports in Asia.

2 When the province of British Columbia wedded itself to the Dominion of Canada in 1871, section 92 (5) of the Constitution Act deemed that public lands–i.e., "land not legally transferred to individual owners or for reserves" (Barman 4)—fell under the control of the province.

3 Also see note 13 below.

4 See, for example, Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence, "Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada," and Pamela Edmonds, "Artefact: Landscapes of Forgetting," as well as many of the texts that I cite throughout and that appear in the works cited.

5 Esmerelda M. A. Thornhill's article provides a comprehensive overview of the legal and social treatment of Black Canadians in the land currently called Canada. For instance, she writes of how, in the interwar period, Black people were not protected by discrimination policies: "In taverns, restaurants, music halls, theatres, cinemas, and even in cemeteries, across Canada, Blacks were denied admittance and service. Law's clear priority was to protect the comfort level and interests of racially prejudiced White Canadians" (330). Thornhill points to evidence of the Canadian state enforcing "Jim Crow Policy during World War I by setting up the No. 2 Construction Battalion" (329-30), purportedly due to pressure from white soldiers. When the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP) appealed Viola Desmond's case, the judge concurred that the charge was a "'surreptitious endeavour' to enforce Jim Crow rule by misuse of a public statute" (Thornhill 332).

6 See especially Angela Davis' chapter "Strange Fruit: Music and Social Consciousness," in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

7 I owe this citation to Karina Vernon's essay "Beyond National Time." Vernon also remarks on the significant influence of Stuart Hall on Siemerling's thinking about identity.

8 In July of 2021, Vancouver City Council passed a motion to rename the Kitsilano street currently bearing Trutch's name with a Musqueam name (Dickson).

9 Brian Egan argues that the modern treaty process in British Columbia has served, in many instances, to entrench dominant colonial forms of property through continued disregard for Indigenous conceptualizations of land and ownership (33).

10 Here Thornhill is also citing from James W. St. G. Walker's *The Black Loyalists*.

11 Wayde Compton explains how Black people in the city called Vancouver were quasi-segregated in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood of Hogan's Alley. Black porters working on the Canadian Pacific Railway began to hang out and rent rooms in this neighbourhood. A white city planner [the "city planner" is Leonard C. Marsh, and he is not advocating this lack of welcome but—despite the problematic nature of his "plan"—describing it, as Compton makes clear] is quoted as saying that "many of [the Black people] could afford to live elsewhere, but it is too obvious that they would be unwelcome" (qtd. in Compton 89). In 1931, the area was re-zoned as industrial, which made it difficult for Black families living there to attain mortgages or loans for home improvements (Compton 90). By 1939, City Council began to pressure landlords in the neighbourhood to evict families under the guise of clearing the neighbourhood as a site of "squalor, immorality, and crime" (Stepler qtd. in Compton 91), but in reality the city wanted to build the Georgia Viaduct through the neighbourhood by way of connecting Vancouver's downtown with highway infrastructure to the suburbs.

12 Scot Wortley and Julian Tanner argue that, because the Canadian Black community is subject to much greater surveillance, they are also much more likely to be caught when they break the law than white people who engage in the same forms of criminal activity (200). Further, Canadian policing systems fail to racially disaggregate stop-and-search data, which prevents any meaningful change of these policies (200).

13 Khenti's respective sources for this data are Scot Wortley and Akwasi Owusu-Bempah, "The Usual Suspects" and Canada, Office of the Correctional Examiner, "Spirit Matters."

14 Angela Davis explains that, while public sentiment was beginning to shift during the Great Depression, lynchings were still occurring, despite there being fewer victims (215). First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt joined the NAACP in 1934 and began working on an anti-lynching law, which her husband subsequently refused to pass. Notably, lynching was criminalized as a hate crime by the US Senate only in 2018 (Viebeck).

15 In her contemporary update of the long-standing metaphor of the "imagined community" of the nation-state, Lucia Lorenzi points to a controversial tenet of Anderson's concept—namely, that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (qtd. in Lorenzi 80). Writing on the UBC Accountable letter and its ensuing fallout, Lorenzi questions the ramifications for the imagined community that is CanLit: "*What are the actual inequalities and exploitations that prevail within it? How is this 'deep, horizontal comradeship' constructed and upheld, and by whom? How far are we willing—or forced—to go in order to defend it or suffer for it*?"

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