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Ash-Memory, (M)other Tongues, and Spectral Poetics in Erín Moure's *The Unmemntioable*

Born in Canada, Erín Moure is a multilingual poet and translator of French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Galician. Moure's work is often meta-poetic, exploring themes of identity (*O Resplandor*), embodiment (*O Cidadán*), and memory (*Kapusta*). The lingering presence of the Holocaust also dominates much of Moure's work; while Moure's father was born in Canada, her maternal family emigrated from western Ukraine in 1929, with the threat that became the Shoah. Natalie Harkin, the Narungga poet and theorist, has proposed the term "blood memory" as a concept that fosters a link between the collective present and ancestral heritage (6). However, in Moure's poetry it is ash—not blood—that forms this link. Moure's thirteenth book, *The Unmemntioable* (2012), brings ashes to historical ashes. A personal, poetic, and genre-bending text, *The Unmemntioable* investigates the limits of language in the face of illness, death, and loss. Moure moves between multiple languages to invoke the Ukraine's troubled history, subsequently drawing attention to the overwhelming absence of certain voices in dominant historical narratives. *The Unmemntioable* seeks to re-people history, asking whether it is possible to embody the language of one's forebears. Is poetry a means of processing and preserving cultural memory? If so, how does the poet testify?

The Unmemntioable is a book that begins with the remainder. At its centre stands the present-absent body of Moure's mother, a ghost who haunts the text. Her spectre makes the book possible, just as the poet's words make her

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presence possible; chronologically, the book can only exist after she is gone—a work of memory, mourning, and remnants. In the opening pages of *The Unmemntioable*, the poet (E.M.) returns to the Ukraine to bury her mother's ashes in her ancestral homeland, "in the grove where once a latin church stood" (14). By evoking history's palimpsestic traces, Moure brings the present into a dialogue with the past, where "[o]pening the earth" becomes an act of remembering, crossing the line from passive memory to evocation (Moure 14). The village, Velyki Hlibovychi (Великі Глібовичі), is situated in the Lviv Oblast of western Ukraine. As part of the disputed borderlands between Poland and the Ukraine, Velyki Hlibovychi lies in an area of historically shifting borders (Brown 1). Already a place of demographic upheaval and lingual fluidity, the first half of the twentieth century saw these borderlands transition into a zone of war and destruction: World War I, famine, collectivization, deportation, the "Eastern Front," and the Holocaust. During the multiple occupations of World War II, entire communities in western Ukraine were murdered, often on "the basis of an / accent" (Moure 7). This reading thus grows from theories of intergenerational and historical trauma. The term "intergenerational trauma" first appeared in the 1960s, after the Canadian psychologist Vivian M. Rakoff and his colleagues documented psychological distress among many children of Holocaust survivors. Similarly, the research of psychoanalyst Dori Laub has shown how traumatic events may affect an entire generation. As *The Unmemntioable* confronts the past, a polyphony of voices emerges: other tongues and mother tongues return to haunt the present.

The Unmemntioable is made possible by the absent presence of the poet's mother. It is no surprise then that the first poetic shape of the book begins with an absent referent:

> Like the cataclysm's first name.
> Like chagrin's first companion, error.
> Dreamed all night of _ _ _ _ _.
>
> Held out the crevasse of my hands for water. (3)

These two anaphoric instances of "like" immediately signal similitude—a linguistic event that deflects signification by gesturing elsewhere. In a simple simile, the vehicle points back to what it is compared with and the poetic

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formula forms a closed loop (*x* is like *x*). Theoretically, there is nothing to stop similitude from forming a never-ending chain, just as the *trace* performs the process of endless deferral within language. Yet the instances of "like" that appear in this poetic shape are neither a closed loop of similitude nor a chain. Instead, the function of "like" is subverted by the absence of an antecedent. If there is a chain, every other link is absent: the lines are rendered incomplete and the simile becomes opaque. However, perhaps similitude is not subverted at all but rather gestures to something that is unrepresentable in language; the similes may also lead forward to the third line, to the dream's absent referent. Represented by five underscores, this untethered likeness performs its own absence—in this case, the absent name or word. The absent referent becomes a marker of absence itself.

The subjects of each line are compared with an ontology of absence: "The cataclysm's first name" is "like" absence, as is "chagrin's first companion, error" (3). However, meaning is still opaque. Cataclysm's first name is not given, nor is it clear how error is the first companion of chagrin. The nouns deflect designation, while the lack of verbs lingually deprives them of any agentive potency. This lack of verbal action also causes the two lines to exist statically yet suddenly, an effect emphasized by the sharpness of the *k* in "like," as well as by the finality of the periods that enclose each line. In fact, the similes seem to come from out of nowhere: a cataclysm. The word "cataclysm" can refer to a sudden event either in the natural world or in the political order, but it always implies violence. A cataclysm shocks the existing state of things and changes them irrevocably. However, here "the cataclysm's first name"—the specific ruptural event—remains undefined, and the antecedent that describes it is absent (or *is* absence). The cataclysm thus prevents itself from being delineated, mimicking the effects of trauma upon language. In his book *After the End*, James Berger writes that "[t]rauma is what returns . . . The traumatic event is always reconstructed in retrospect; when it occurs, it is only a silent or screaming gap, wound, or void" (79). By eliciting gaps, trauma disrupts the representational surface of language. It is a remnant—the trace of an original referent. In *The Unmemntioable,* "the cataclysm" functions in the same way; it gestures to a specific traumatic event in the past, yet lingers as its effect in the present. "Cataclysm" is both sign and index of the event.

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When the verb "dreamed" appears two lines below the cataclysm, it indexes a subject's private interior. However, the body itself is occluded, as is the object of the verb. Language is displaced from the body and, without an object, the verb has nowhere to settle. Where the syntactic object would conventionally appear are five underscores (an orthographic character originally found in a printer's drawer). Typographical features are often used unconventionally in Moure's book, highlighting the artifice of their presence. Italicized words give the impression that they are from elsewhere, while semi-transparent text imitates a palimpsest; the writing inside a curved bracket marks its difference from that contained by an angle bracket; Latin graphemes twist into Cyrillic. In *The Unmemntioable,* typographical markings serve as reading directions, mapping tonal shifts and moments of dissonance where the spectral voices of the book's transhistorical, translingual, and transgeographical ghosts interrupt and rub up against one another. This spectral poetics requires an engagement with differential reading forms, to elucidate the other voices afloat in each sign.

Each underscore on page three calls attention to a gap, as a site of polyvocal possibility. Like learning to read a corrupted manuscript (the lacunae of Greek papyri or the fissures in a Roman epigraph), the reader is prompted to pause and imagine a single sign in each typographically marked space. Each underscore (and thus gap) marks something singular, shown yet not shown, present yet absent—a coded singularity. In this cipher, a secret is sheltered, simultaneously readable and unreadable, like the unspeakable memory of a violent event: could _ _ _ _ _ mark the place of "a s h e s"? As an index of absence, these underscores require decoding. Here is what *is* and is not a remainder—ash. This typographically ashen ontology echoes the lingual indeterminacy of the previous lines, where the metonymic cataclysm gestures backward to its absent antecedent. By evoking the ruptural nature of trauma, the cataclysm is entangled with the poet's grief, and the underscores become despairing dashes of speechlessness.

Below the five underscores, there is a blank space, that takes up roughly half of the codical surface. It is as though language has dissolved entirely, transitioning from a marked absence to the complete departure of graphemes. However, this empty space is interrupted by a single line, in the bottom third of the page: "Held out the crevasse of my hands for water" (3). This is also the

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first time a personal pronoun appears in the poetic material of *The Unmemntioable*. The proximity of "my" to "hands" reattaches a disappeared body back to language; where previously there were only agentive traces, the hands metonymize a body—yet one that remains textually absent. Although what occurs between "dreamed" and "held" is not articulated, there is a sudden shift in representation (opacity to transparency, in a metonymically activated body). The act of using one's hands to scoop up or catch water also implies containment, but the line trails off into empty space once more. When two hands are used as a vessel for water, there is always some liquid that escapes through the crack in the two palms. Here, language performs its meaning graphically: the body's hands cannot contain the water, just as the poet cannot contain the unrepresentable non-language of trauma, which seeps through the barrier of normative syntax. Moreover, this fluid non-language gestures back to the cataclysm—a word etymologically derived from the Greek *katakluzein*, "to wash away, to overwhelm." The cataclysm is metonymically indexed by "water," which simultaneously represents the very absence of representation. Speech turns to simile and simile to metonymy, but metonymy still points to absence, all the way down.

On page 5 of *The Unmemntioable*, the past seeps to the codical surface as a broken, testimonial voice:

> They burned those Polish houses, and drove them away.
>
> Who this them was. This they. They/this/them.
> (rain)
> (silence of rain)
> (we walk behind the woman who is not speaking)[.] (5)

Although the first instances of "they" and "them" are indeterminate, a division is clearly disclosed between two groups of people. The plural pronouns also occlude the singular person, and this lack of grammatical specificity creates an ambiguity—bodies are absented, but whose exactly? Who is the object of this violence? Who are "they?" Where is "them?" A multiplicity of absences looms. While it is ultimately violence that erases the singularity of the individual, the edge of each body is also blurred over time, dissolving into the language of testimony. Giorgio Agamben has pointed out the difference between the two Latin terms for "witness:"

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testis and *superstes*. The former refers to a third-person witness, who stands outside the immediate experience of an event, whereas the latter refers to the witness who has lived through the experience (149). Here, there is a *testis.* Testimonial language is also signalled by the presence of a verb in the past tense: "was" makes it clear that the burning has already occurred. However, after an interlinear pause, the testimony becomes scrambled. The relative pronoun "who" at the start of the line indicates a question, yet the punctuation swerves into statement. The line then continues in fragments, punctuated by three periods. None of these fragments are full clauses; language gets stuck on the deixis and never reveals its referent. Eventually the space between words disappears altogether, a hyper-attenuation scored by the violence of three slashes. Something haunts this moment of remembering—a spectral presence shifting in the staccato of "they/this/them." Testimony ceases where the parentheses begin, yet the silences that linger on the page hum with polyvalence.

Thus, in its opening pages, *The Unmemntioable* signals its key poetic concerns, namely the complexity of representation after a traumatic event. How does language represent trauma, when the symbolic order is ruptured? How does one *read* ashes? In Moure's book, ashes carry the memory of the people and landscape that felt the barbarism of the twentieth century most keenly. By representing the remnants of the mother, a church, and houses "made of wood" alongside other textually present-absent bodies, the ashes in *The Unmemntioable* remember multiple fires (8). This ashy polyvalence also points to the presence of what is noticeably absent in the book's pages: the Holocaust. The Shoah stands as a dark shadow behind the text—the ultimate absent antecedent and the "limit case of representation in general" (Berger 62). Velyki Hlibovychi lies only seven kilometres to the southwest of Bíbrka, home to the Bíbrka ghetto, from which Jewish people were sent to the gas chambers at Bełzec; bones rattle under the Ukrainian soil. Geographically and historically, the Holocaust is necessarily lurking in *The Unmemntioable*'s textual ashes. As Jacques Derrida writes, "[ash is] what remains without remaining from the Holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration" (*Cinders* 43). But ashes are also what remain *by* remaining—a ghostly presence, an ongoing echo, both index and sign. By recalling the fire of history, *The Unmemntioable* signs its ash-memory.[1]

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In 1982, Jacques Derrida published his short work *Feu la cendre*, which appeared in a bilingual French and English edition in 1991 as *Cinders*. It is a haunting and poetic work, concerned with what language carries within itself. Derrida theorizes that—like the endless deferral of the *trace*—the glowing heart of a word keeps burning and so can never be burned. This conception of language as both endless and un-burnable makes it the ideal means for the transmission of cultural memory. Yet Derrida's theory is immediately complicated in *The Unmemntioable*'s twentieth-century Eastern European context, where entire communities were ostracized, exiled, and murdered. Accompanied by this physical violence were regimes focused on the erasure of tradition and language through cultural amnesia. Nevertheless, when asked what remained of "her pre-exile European identity," the philosopher Hannah Arendt replied, "What remains? The language remains" (Weissman 142). Arendt was Jewish, yet retained her native German through years of exile in Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, and Portugal, before eventually settling in the United States. Arendt was by no means unique. Numerous exiled writers continued to write in the language of their homeland, even when "home" no longer existed. For some, this language was the same tongue of those who displaced them; for others, it was the language of a loved one's killer. For many, their writings are all that remain—ash-memory, lingering in language.

However, as time goes on, the tenuous threads that connect the past and the present begin to vanish. As those who survived the war grow old and die, their language is lost. What darker silence comes after their voices are gone? Is it possible to testify on their behalf? These questions are highlighted on page 13 of *The Unmemntioable*, which elucidates the problems underlying writing, memory, and record:

> Relationships written down instead of remembered, cuts the tie.
>
> When the relationship burns so does memory as this was passed to writing and the content of a writing burned can no longer be handed back to memory, for writing abolishes memory and as what was written can no longer be passed down, it has no Author in the old sense: no ability to *act as proxy to, to verify on behalf of*. (13)

Once memory is written down, it gives itself over to record and becomes volatile: "writing abolishes memory." In other words, inscribing memory in an external location invites the possibility of deferred remembering. If both

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memory and record perish, the ashes that remain will be authorless and indecipherable. Without "the content of a writing burned," there is nothing to verify the truth of testimony, and without an author there is no testimony to verify the event. Ash-memory vanishes. And yet, writing does exist—this book, *The Unmemntioable*, remains "*to verify on behalf of.*" However, testimony is complicated by Giorgio Agamben, who asks, "What is language as a remnant? How can a language survive the subjects and even the people that speak it? And what does it mean to speak in a remaining language?" (159). While this question properly refers to *a* language (such as Arendt's German), it also implicates Moure's testimonial poetics. The effects of trauma upon language have already been evidenced within *The Unmemntioable*: after a traumatic event, the language that remains to testify is broken and the symbolic order ruptured. It is a paradox, yet the book exists. How then does Moure's book access this "remaining," burning language? Where does it sign its own ashes?

Circling back to page five, there is a clue: "To *enfant* book and word. The word that can be lost and burned. The word that cannot <shibboleth>. The very birth of language" (5). What cannot "be lost and burned" is a *shibboleth*—a polysemous, enciphered sign. The word *shibboleth* derives from the Hebrew word *shibbólet*, which literally means an ear of grain, or less commonly, a river, stream, or flood. (Encased in its multiplicity of meanings, *shibboleth* already contains an echo of "the cataclysm.") However, in the Hebrew bible *shibboleth* also transformed into a password, both in meaning and effect. Derrida recounts this biblical story in his book *Sovereignties in Question:*

> [*Shibboleth*] was used during or after war, at the crossing of a border under watch. The meaning of the word was less important than the way in which it was pronounced . . . Now the Ephraimites were known for their inability to pronounce correctly the *shi* of *shibboleth*, which became for them, in consequence, an *unpronounceable name*. They said *sibboleth*, and, at the invisible border between *shi* and *si*, betrayed themselves to the sentinel at the risk of their life. They betrayed their difference by showing themselves indifferent to the diacritical difference between *shi* and *si*; they marked themselves with their inability to re-mark a mark thus coded. (22-23)

This usage has carried over into semiotics to describe the non-linguistic aspects of a culture. A *shibboleth* is a word, but also a silent mark of belonging or alterity, like an ichthys etched in the sand. "The word that cannot" (5) be burned is a flood, a password, a code, and a mark that permits

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entry from the non-linguistic to the linguistic. Enclosed in its angle brackets and italics, *The Unmemntioable* signs and simultaneously performs its *shibboleth*, permitting entry into the "remnant language." As a sign situated inside *superstes* testimony, yet simultaneously outside experience, the *shibboleth* lies on an impossible threshold. "<shibboleth>" thus carries the poet over the "invisible border," into the voice of those already depa(o)rted—those silenced by time and war. Testimonial language is allowed passage from the void of trauma back into the symbolic order. Speak, ash-memory.

Yet there is also the geo-historical context of *The Unmemntioable* to consider, where language is doubled, tripled, and ripped apart—the "invisible border" itself criss-crossed by shifting thresholds. Part of the Lviv Oblast in the Ukraine, the village of Velyki Hlibovychi (Великі Глібовичі) was subject to the turbulent politics of the area, where even the names of places were burned, buried, and resurrected. Founded in the mid-thirteenth century, Lviv was the administrative centre of the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia, which lies within what is now western Ukraine. Polish control was established in 1349 (when the city's name was changed to Lwów), before it was invaded by the Cossacks in 1648, followed by Sweden in 1704. In the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Galicia became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the city was renamed with its German appellation, Lemberg. From 1873 Galicia became an autonomous province of Austria-Hungary, during which time Lemberg was an important cultural centre for Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish people. Yet not long after the beginning of World War I, Lemberg was occupied by Russia (1914-1915) and Lviv was resurrected. Lviv then became the governmental centre of the West Ukrainian National Republic, until Poland regained control in 1923 following the Polish-Ukrainian war. Galicia was formally recognized as part of the Polish state: Lviv to Lwów. Then in 1939, the Soviet Union invaded, and Lwów became the capital of the Lviv Oblast in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Germany occupied Lviv (Lemberg) in 1941, but the Soviet Union re-established power in 1944, after which it annexed the Ukraine.

Lviv, Lwów, Lemberg—a city of many names.[2] As names changed and borders shifted, so did language, which roamed everywhere. However, during the mass deportation of national minorities from the Soviet Union, deportees were identified based on a set of artificial definitions, predominantly language. This resulted in difficulties. As one Soviet inspector

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tasked with identifying national minorities in the Ukraine recorded, "Ukrainians and Poles hardly differ from one another in their material existence beyond their conversational language—however, language too is problematic because the local Polish sounds very much like the local Ukrainian" (Brown 32-33). The inspectors discovered that much of the population was also bilingual due to the requirements of social life and trade. In *A Biography of No Place,* historian Kate Brown points out that "[w]hen asked to state their nationality, many peasants replied simply 'Catholic' . . . Other peasants said they spoke *po-chlopski,* 'in the peasant way,' or 'in the simple way' (*po-prostomu*), or 'the language of here' (*tutai'shi*)" (39).

Moure explores the implications of this lingual complexity when she writes,

> In the fields where people were once murdered on the basis of an accent. By asking locals the names for food, *pyrohy* or *pirogy*, they knew which language led at home, which is to say, at the table.
> . . . .
> Yet there was another name for the people of this place.
> тутещні. *Tuteshni. Tutejszy*. "The ones who live here." Local. (7)

Physical violence is immediately linked to language, as an accent becomes the difference between life and death. Once again, language functions as a *shibboleth*, yet now phonetic values are used to distinguish two groups by a third group, for violent purposes. However, this is resisted in line six, by two words that simultaneously bind to and separate themselves from the other: *Tuteshni* and *Tutejszy*, both of which mean "local" (in Ukrainian and Polish, respectively).[3] On the one hand, each word signals the negative implications of being "local" (necessarily excluding those who are not); on the other hand, the two words evoke the peasants' responses to the Soviet inspector when asked to state their ethnicity, revealing their understanding of belonging-together, regardless of dialectal difference. As locals, they speak "the language of here" (Brown 39). People do not come from Poland, the Ukraine, or Galicia, but from a place determined by a subjective reference—language is linked to place and place to identity. "When asked who they were," Brown elaborates, "villagers answered in a way that incorporated the complexities of the hybrid culture in which they lived. For them, identities were local, rooted in the soil of a particular river bed, forest, or valley" (40).

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To deport someone from "here" dislocates all referents, which pivot around a central deictic marker. Without "here," there is no identity and thus no "I" to testify. The relationship between numerator (a village name, a personal name, language) and denominator (place body, person body, tongue) is cleaved. Stripped of language, the "I" vanishes, becomes spectral. Where then, is the *shibboleth*? Where is the "language of here"?

In *The Writing of History,* scholar Michel de Certeau summons the absent figure of history—the "forever silent" dead who have themselves lost the ability to speak (2). Certeau writes that this absent figure is necessarily a mute presence, a phantasm continually indexed by the historian for whom they are a subject: "[D]ead souls resurge, within the work whose postulate was their disappearance and the possibility of analyzing them as an object of investigation" (36-37). The writing of history, as Certeau states, is a "representative labor that places both absence and production in the same area" (5). Historical narrative favours round figures, which systematically erase the individual—the absent figure becomes ontologically multiple and risks being subsumed *by* history, its face rubbed blank by time. In other words, history is studded with gaps. Yet for Certeau, the absent figure is also a voice —an *Infans* that does not, strictly speaking, speak (2). "This is the sound that arises from the lacuna," an impossibly loud murmur that cannot be captured with dates or names, nor platformed in the official discourses of history (Agamben 38). Instead, the voice comes from the place of "non-language" behind the text, beyond the mediation of a human tongue.

The Unmemntioable problematizes this notion of a historical narrative grounded in erasure, and instead lingers in the gaps. The book demonstrates that where the historian does not listen, the poet does. But *where* exactly does the poet listen? And what does she listen for? Where does language go when displaced from the bodies that speak it? Realising that her connection with the mother tongue ends at the mother, E.M.'s unsettled poetics pivot away from her ashy outline to seek out the other absent figures who haunt the text. These are the figures who mix with the mother in the black earth of Velyki Hlibovychi—spectres with their own tongues. The *shibboleth* (without which the poet cannot collapse testimonial positions, cannot correct the historical record) does not end with the mother, but can be traced back to these historically absented others. Following Certeau, the absent figure is

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voice, is tongue, is *shibboleth*—a chain of ghostly metonymy for the poet to follow. Mute, the absent figure calls out from the lacuna:

> Marked by that foreign word, marked too by imperial consequence
> and time, peeled from the mud of labour, s_rr_w too harvested of v_wels
> f_r tr_ut[.] (Moure 9)

As in the first poetic shape of the book, gaps are marked by underscores, which index a missing sign. However, in this instance the skeleton of each perforated word is present and thus still able to be read following the insertion of a single vowel: "s*o*rr*o*w," "v*o*wels," "f*o*r" and "tr*o*ut." *O* rises slowly to the surface of hearing. The letter *O* is a presence that circles its own absence, which it swaddles and draws attention to, a haunted form that—like a spectre—always gestures elsewhere. *O*, a letter that is a number. A shape that is a mouth. A silence that is a sound. *O*, the site of "elsewhere" or the genealogical "here." As a figure of absence, it is only natural that the absent figure be glimpsed within *O*'s frame. What then, does the poet do with the displaced *O*—this moving centre of silence?

While *O* is mute, it also attempts to carry the sound of "Oh" off the page. *O* performs vocality, a "strange androgynous intonation" that the gaps make present (Derrida, *Cinders* 18). Where there was previously an opaque barrier between the poet and the non-language behind the text, there is suddenly an opening from which affect spills out. With a polysemous cry, a ghostly body is inscribed into literate space, in the ricocheting "Oh!" that reacts to physical and emotional stimuli, or in the "O(h)" of a direct address. "Oh!" is a sound the body makes involuntarily, interrupting the flow of breath. It is an utterance that conveys affect, rather than "meaning," and might signify surprise, anger, pleasure, shock, or pain. Affect is drawn from its source and into the space of sound, thus fastening a bodily subject to language (*O* is a letter that looks like a body part). "Oh!" cries out to communicate a violence done to the body, a body "harvested of v[o]wels"—that is, silenced (Moure 9). The repetition of this stolen "Oh!" also creates a staccato that punctures the surrounding text, a silent pulse highlighting the absence of an audible one. Breath stops and the heart stutters, so that death is the language of the body.

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The *O* of apostrophe ("Oh" as opposed to "Oh!") announces a direct address. This "Oh" calls out *to* someone, extending beyond the boundaries of the body. Although "Oh" remains bodily in its source (the mouth), the intention of the utterance is to pass beyond—to escape—the body of the speaking subject. After the "Oh!" comes the "Oh," which spreads out from the affective centre. A narrative of suffering begins to materialize, lattice-like, inserted into the skeletal words that have been "harvested of v[o]wels." The absent figure cries out for help again and again, five times—five circular stamps of desperation. But the cry goes no further: no one responds to the address, which halts at the edge of *O* and is left unresolved. This is reminiscent of the dying body of the poet's mother, where language transforms into sound: "I remember the last sound my own mother called out in the city of my birth, in Calgary. A sigh, an interpellation that refused to articulate its word" (Moure 45).

The sigh that refuses to articulate evokes the breathy *O* of an address that does not settle, a final bodily sound. Death is the language of the body and death speaks. It is not uncommon to hear death—a "death rattle" that may manifest as a soft moan, splutter, or gurgle. In *Autobiography of Death,* the Korean poet Kim Hyesoon instructs her interlocutor (fellow poet and translator Don Mee Choi) to "listen to the body's speech—you hear the hiccups, coughs, phlegm bubbling up" (100). Vowels are the grammar of the body and the grammar of dying, which death eventually censors. In the excerpt above, E.M. also draws attention to Calgary—her place of birth, but not her mother's—to rearticulate the tenuous link between language and place. Here, the body is doubly harvested of vowels, both in death and displacement. Visible in *The Unmemntioable*'s gaps, *O* performs as a multiple link between the humanimal body and the lingual. When language is wounded, so is the humanimal and vice versa. *O* reconnects the body to language, delineating the lingual as the difference between life and death; there are no vowels without a body, no *shibboleth* without a tongue. In five *O*s, *The Unmemntioable* entangles rupture, affect, muteness, and the body to represent the indefinite threshold that troubles the line between silence and testimony.

Without stable ground, language becomes genealogical, a matter of blood. The first language a child learns to speak is often that of the mother, rather than the one spoken by the wider community. While identity is linked to place, this can be as local as home, as the table around which a family speaks. A sense of lingual belonging can thus be traced through the mother, to her

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own sense of "here." The importance of the mother, as the wellspring of language, is foregrounded in one of *The Unmemntioable*'s ghostly epigraphs:

> What would it be, Mother: wellspring or wound
> if I too sank in the snowdrifts of Ukraine?
>
> Was wär es, Mutter: Wachstum oder Wunde-
> versänk ich mit im Schneewehn der Ukraine? (73)

This is the second epigraph taken from the work of Paul Celan, who flits in and out of Moure's oeuvre; he appears as a character in the translation mystery *O Resplandor*, the subject of a poem in *Expeditions of a Chimaera,* and the reference inscribed on a train ticket stuck to a sock monkey's hat in the poem-play *Kapusta*. Born in Romania to German-speaking parents, Celan immediately indexes the violence of the twentieth century. Like Moure's own work, his poetry addresses both the émigré experience and the complicated status of his mother tongue. By writing primarily in German (his mother tongue), Celan attempted to speak the unspeakable with the language of his mother's killers. Here, Celan's mother tongue follows the translation like an echo—mother and mother tongue repeatedly stamped on the codical surface. Moure and Celan pull the mother into their orbit, as the absent presence that makes their language possible. Historical and poetic looping also takes place; Celan's mother was murdered in the Ukraine during World War II after being forced to leave her home, while E.M.'s mother is returned to western Ukraine as ash, after her family left their homeland for Canada to escape the rising threat that became the Holocaust. In this epigraph, the two mothers are resituated in death—displaced from "here," back to "here," but never quite sure where "here" is.

When E.M.'s mother does speak, her inability (or refusal) to name this genealogical "here" becomes apparent:

> Everyone comes from somewhere, Mom.
> No, донечко, not everyone. Some people come from nowhere.
>
> You came with a passport, мати, long before; you came from somewhere.
>
> When there was no one left, it became nowhere. There were no more letters after the w[.] (76)

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In this excerpt, E.M.'s mother underscores the tenuous relationship between community, language, and place. The past is erased as "here" becomes a matter of now: now, here—nowhere. Moreover, as *The Unmemntioable* makes clear from its beginning, the mother tongue—the tongue of the mother—is *already* ash. What is a mother tongue when mother comes from "nowhere" (Moure 76)? What is a mother tongue when mother is ash? Phonetic articulation depends on the tongue, which is the most important of the seven articulators in the human oral cavity. Without the tongue, spoken language cannot take place. Yet a tongue is also metonymic, pointing back to the body of which it is a part. When the word "tongue" is prefixed by "mother" it performs a double metonymy. As the organ of speech and speech itself, "mother tongue" signs both the body which produces language, as well as the language which depends on it: language is a piece of the body.

In *The Unmemntioable*, this double metonymy links language to the site of a *specific* body—a tongue which has already been silenced (the cataclysm has already occurred, the referent is already absent). Death grips the body:

> Shibboleth? [can't hear you.]
> Ear of corn? [can't make out the word.]
>
> She coughs. The body's own water pools in the crevice of her clavicle.
> The wind ripples the lake so shallow now that no fish can winter there. (47)

The word "crevice" signs back (while chronologically signing forward) to where it appears on page 37, as E.M. remembers burying her mother's ashes: "I should have stayed in Ukraine, in the wound or crevice where I found myself, in the grove at Великі Глібовичі, a spoon of ashes, river" (37). There is a layering of metonymic bodies, with "crevice" homophonically echoing the hand-crevasse on page 3; the living body is superimposed over the landscape to which it will soon return. This lexical layering, pointing forward to the body's transmutation into ash, causes the same body to become spectral—both present, yet already absent. The body indexes the future event of its own death. Even when the body of the mother (and thus the mother tongue) is textually resurrected, language seems to halt at its edges. The body may still be present, but it has begun to lose what makes it an individual—its language, with which it signs its "I" and "here."

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The square brackets function as a typographical barrier between speaking and hearing, or the space between two languaged bodies. The two questions that precede each pair of brackets evoke the polyvalence of the word *shibboleth* ("ear of corn" being one of its dictionary definitions). However, it is also worth noting that the word appears unitalicized. This typographical choice signals *shibboleth*'s change in status, which is also performed by the two questions. Listing "ear of corn" after *shibboleth* negates the latter's performative-password status. The mother tongue is the gatekeeper of the *shibboleth*—the marker of an invisible, yet audible, difference between one lingual community and another ("shi" depends on the position of the tongue). Therefore, *shibboleth* is a metonymy test; with the tongue is produced the consequence of one's identity, that is, the difference between murder and survival. But when the mother-tongue (a hyphenated form to represent the doubleness of the sign's metonymy) is mute, there is no conversation and the bodily link to a larger lingual community is severed. Without the tongue, the body loses its connection to the site of a singular *shibboleth.*

Muteness is gestured to by the title of the book itself: *The Unmemntioable.* This title is given to a poem embedded within the seventh section of the book, which also carries the same title. The seventh section concludes,

> i sew the alphabet shut too
> a to b, facing
> ab to cd, facing
> o to a, facing
> i to u, o, un
> faced
>
> e
> the unmemntioable (98)

Sewing necessarily begins with the body; however, the act of sewing described here seems to distort the body by twisting its vowel sounds into one patchwork. An imagined needle forces vowels to merge and consonants to jam, until the mouth is bent around the force of the unspeakable and sewn shut. The word "unmemntioable" requires the mouth of an English speaker to form unconventional sounds; the consonant cluster "mnt" is not normally permitted in English phonology, while "oable" causes the mouth to slide from a closed to an open-vowel sound. It is also difficult to

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look past the visual and oral similarities between "unmemntioable" and the word "unmentionable," which are rooted in their shared prefix and adjacent bilabial *m* (in fact the word "unmentionable" does appear below "unmemntioable" earlier in the poem, on page 93). By indexing a phantom word within itself, "unmemntioable" trips the tongue of an English speaker: "unmentionable" is invoked, not only in form, but also as an adjective to describe "unmemntioable." Furthermore, the word "unmemntioable" retains the "un-able" affixes, which stopper both its own edges and those of its phantom double. Where other letters are scrambled, the affixes remain stable, subsequently underscoring the notion of inability.

But there are other phonetic shadows lurking within "unmemntioable." When the alphabet is sewn shut, it becomes denser: vowels are layered over other vowels, words lodged inside other words. For example, "memory" can be glimpsed in "mem," which is subsequently transformed into "unmemory" by the "un" prefix. This neologism signs "unmemorable," yet also the "un*re*memorable" of troubled testimony. Furthermore, in "mem" there is also a version of "Mom"—of being "un-momed." Unremembering only deepens this state of unmomness. The "ti" sound in the middle of "unmemntioable" also supplies the whisper of a "shh," which glides into an *o* and *a*: Shoa(h). The phonetic polyvalence of "tioa" secretes the historical context that haunts *The Unmemntioable,* so that even the book's title is a performance of the spectral presence-absence that permeates its pages. "Tioa" condenses ghosts, history, place, and violence into two ashy syllables. Finally, embedded in the middle of "unmemntioable" is E.M.: undone, unEMable. When all that remains of memory is the presence of its absence, and when the testimonial mother tongue that connects self to place and place to history is severed, E.M.'s identity enters a state of un-ness. Un-em, un-me. In the sewn layers of its letters, "unmemntioable" thus signs traces that point elsewhere, forming a tenuous genealogical link to the harvested vowels of history. As E.M.'s un-ness and unmomness are linked to the unmemory of unspeakable violence, "unmemntioable" becomes a palimpsest of signatures.[4]

The imprint of the poem on page 98 is also slightly fainter than the text on the preceding pages, hovering at a mid-point between printed text and blank page—a textual whisper, rather than a fully inked articulation. This textual ghostliness draws attention to the relationship between the page surface and

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processes of printing. For example, if the text were printed in reverse on the recto side of the codex with wet ink and then the two sides of the codex were pressed together, the imprinted text that appeared on the verso side would be slightly fainter, a ghostly reflection of the original text. "Ghostly" is a fitting adjective, as the traces of this process inscribe transferral and repetition in the text, just as a ghost is only an echo of what it was when alive. Representation turns spectral, ashy. This method of printing would also "sew the alphabet shut" (68) by pressing the two pages together, causing the graphemes to repeat themselves. Wet ink, doubled marks, an alphabet stuck stubbornly in the oral cavity: the mother tongue haunts the mouth.

In its stylistic figurings, *The Unmemntioable* thus discloses a spectral thread, linking E.M. to her mother, her maternal village, and to the language required to testify. Typographical markings underscore moments of dissonance where disembodied voices rub up against one another, while semi-transparent ink performs the book's ghostliness. Gaps, polyvalence, and representational opacity also reveal the limits of language in the face of the unspeakable—the trauma that encircles the forced emigration and death of the poet's mother, as well as the disembodiment experienced when severed from one's lingual community. The scholar Karen Grumberg has written extensively about "the poetics of exile," emphasizing the *unheimlich* nature of being displaced from one's home (383). Yet, it is also the *unheimlich* (the uncanny and spectral traces of the past) that connect body to place and place to language—the unique signature of a specific tongue. Through its maternal narrative of exile and ghosts, a memory of home returns to haunt *The Unmemntioable*.

The image of a white shirt is evoked three times in Moure's book. Lifeless, it hangs without an occupant, on the wall near the back of a church (36). Later, this church wall is transformed into "the museum wall: the vertical field where sky and earth touch so deeply" (41); later still, in the final pages of the book, the poet reconciles this incongruity: "In the room that protects the wooden church, I seek out the shirt. It's spread on the wall now in an elaborate cross with the neck rounded stiffly" (104). As the book progresses, the image becomes clearer: the church is housed in (and sheltered by) the museum. As earth and sky intersect along the wall's vertical axis, so do the past and present. The museum frames the church, which in turn frames the white shirt. Unpeopled, it is all that remains of the church's congregation:

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a ghostly figure, or a body without blood. By displaying this phantasmal garment in the formation of a cross, History remakes the shirt as a symbol of sacrifice, simultaneously eliding the individual in the universal. Yet the poet asks us to look beyond the shirt's iconicity, to the person who wore it—a single body, a lingering absence.

NOTES

1 In Moure's bilingual work *Kapusta* (2015)—a self-described "play-poem-ash, a cabaret"—ashes are also used to represent the people who were murdered in their villages during the Holocaust. Two particularly chilling lines read, "I'm simply skin and ash / ash of a charred house" and "[w]e moved into the air as ashes of our houses!" (54, 63).

2 Erín Moure (sometimes Erin Mouré, other times E.M., Eirin Moure, Elisa Sampedrin) has altered the spelling of her own name several times, as she searches for her name's "proper" form. The city's polynyms thus evoke those of the writing subject and another body mapped onto the historical landscape.

3 Moure has also written about the implications of this term in her essay "Tuteshni," originally published in *Unbound: Ukrainian Canadians Writing Home* (2016). In this essay, the subjective (now)here of her mother becomes a name she "can pronounce out loud" (91). More of Moure's critical writings on language and citizenship can be found in *My Beloved Wager: Essays from a Writing Practice* (2009). See especially "*Re*-çiting the Citizen Body" (217-21).

4 The link between muteness, language, and violence threads its way through Moure's oeuvre. While such themes are present in her citizen trilogy (for example, the violence of borders upon the languaged body in *O Cidadán*), they culminate in *Kapusta* (2015), another book full of ghosts and silent figures. In fact, nine of the twelve listed cast members in the "play" are inanimate or mute objects, among them a marionette mother, a sock monkey, a plush lion, and four figurants. Even MIM (the mother and mother tongue) refuses to testify. Instead it is the figurants who speak—a symbolic inversion of muteness that emphasizes the inevitable lacuna in Holocaust testimony. In *Remnants of Auschwitz,* Agamben points out that in the Nazi death camps "naked corpses piled in common graves" were unable to be referred to as such by the SS; "under no circumstances were they to be called 'corpses' or 'cadavers,' but rather simply *Figuren*, 'figures,' 'dolls'" (50-51). *Kapusta*'s figurants etymologically recall *Figuren* but complicate and invert this allusion. In act 2, four figurants enter carrying Malenka Dotchka (the sock monkey) and the other plush animals. The figurants then "give voice to their creatures" (33) in no particular order, spitting out phrases in "a cabaret of fitful language" (35):

> ANY: "But the bush firing trenches"
> "It was necessary to put an end to consciousness."
> A monument of cement in the forest."
> "the grave robbers!" (35)

Thus, the figurants who evoke *Figuren* give voice to the plush animals, who are (quite literally) *Figuren.* In this figurative doubling, the historically absent are given a chance to testify.

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