

Pro Pelle Cutem: On the Subject(s) of Extraction in Fred Stenson's The Trade

In an early scene in Fred Stenson's historical novel *The Trade* (2000), where the fur traders gather at York Factory in 1822 to celebrate their profits, the visceral charge of human flesh—the bodies' "devil faces grinning," "the skin puckered," "a dead eye look[ing] disinterested in whatever excited the living one," and a nose "slit on one side [with] the flap remain[ing] unjoined" (8)—alerts us to the brutality of the physical and emotional experience of the "working stiff[s]" of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) on Canada's western plains (5). Foreshadowing the disaster of the Bow River Expedition of 1822 and its tragic consequences for the novel's central characters, the affective imprint of the opening episode delineates the extractive axis along which the HBC organized its colonial activities in relation to Indigenous ecologies as well as white and Indigenous subjects. The figure of the skin highlighted in Stenson's description of the labourers' bodies has important implications for recognizing how the HBC's extractive economy built its wealth by means of the ontological division between living and non-living matter, on the one hand, and the racial division between white and non-white subjectivities, on the other. Congealed in the novel's use of skin as a trope of extraction and economic and affective transactions is the collision, conflation, and confusion of systems of value, through which *The Trade* traces the colonial appropriation of Indigenous ecologies and the rendering of human and non-human bodies into "sacrifice zones" (Miller 19).

The trope of skin has played a pivotal role in organizing the HBC's commercial and ethical imaginaries, as testified in the Company's Latin motto *pro pelle cutem*, which roughly translates as "a pelt for a skin"

("Pro Pelle Cutem"). The conceptual agency of the skin metaphor here mirrors the ambivalence that surrounds the Company's own cultural remit as an agent of commercial and territorial expansion. Charles II's extension of a royal charter to the newly founded HBC in 1670 stirred Britain's commercial instinct to try out capitalist modes of appropriation and accumulation in the contested spaces of North America's colonial economies, to the point that, as Stenson observes in an interview with Herb Wyile, the Company "was the form of government, and the only kind of law and order was whatever it chose to manifest" (*Speaking in the Past Tense* 191). From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the European craze for otter, muskrat, and beaver pelts propelled the HBC into launching new commercial circuits of frontier commodity exchange and mapping new routes of colonial invasion. Keyed to the political rivalry between the British and the French (and later also the Americans), the economic stakes of the fur trade were tethered not only to the diplomatic channels of cross-cultural commerce and the rescaling of priorities in the shift from merchant to industrial capitalism, but also to the material ecosystems at home and abroad, whose mutual entanglements gave the HBC the confidence to treat its colonial outposts as lucrative "frontiers of possibility" (Evans et al.).

The epidermal focus of this axiology, as spelled out in the HBC's motto, literalizes the logic of extraction that continues to destroy certain forms of life for the sake of nourishing others. Figured as "a pelt for a skin," the motto displays the transactional principle that transformed the skins of living creatures into commodities. Yet what the structural tension between the Latin words *cutis* and *pellis*, which refer to living and flayed skin respectively (Connor 11), continues to mask is that this scene of exchange also recalibrates human skin as a bearer of signification, both social, ontological, and ecological. Within this field of "semiotic control" (Goldie 192) over resources and representation, the Company's desire for profits meets up with the settlers' need for identity, which can only be gained through what Terry Goldie calls "indigenization," "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" (194). Ultimately, by screening off the acts of mutilation and mutation inflicted on colonial and colonized bodies, the Company realizes skin as a site of what Elizabeth Povinelli has called "geontological power": "a set of discourse, affects, and tactics

used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife” (4). As a consequence of these extractive and violent logics, skin expands into a *milieu*, Steven Connor’s term for the skin as an ecosystem of transfigurations and affective becomings “where inside and outside meet and meld” (27); this tropology also brings to mind Verónica Gago’s thinking about human entanglement in the environment as *body-territory*, the shared site of more-than-human struggle and expropriation under imperial extractivism (85). Read as a work that centres skin as geontological body-territory, *The Trade* shows us how, throughout the nineteenth century, as the Company expanded its colonial business venture into a settlement-driven enterprise, it gradually depleted the numbers of beaver and otter to the point of extinction at the same time as it dismantled the polities of the Indigenous peoples with whom the HBC traded, denying them their sovereignty, identities, and means of survival. In so doing, as Graham Wynn’s account of fur-trade economics in Canada suggests, the fur trade provided an ecological structure for Canada as an imagined community: “Focused on the beaver of the northern woodlands, channelled through the two great northern entries to the continent, and extending along the rivers that led into them, the fur trade ultimately defined the boundaries of the nation” (232-23).

Significant as it is, Wynn’s historical argument does not shy away from romanticizing the fur trade and leaves open a line of inquiry which would address the conceptual links between Canada’s settler colonialism, as “an integrated program of elimination” (Wolfe 9), and the calculative logic of capitalism underlying what Jason W. Moore calls “world-ecology” (85), a geontological technology of producing world order by “join[ing] the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the production of nature as an organic whole” (97). Given Stenson’s concern for the ecological scales of colonial memory, in which the HBC features as a metonym of imperial conquest, I examine how *The Trade*’s aesthetic refiguration of colonial commerce brings to light the interlocking appropriations of material, social, and somatic resources as constitutive of colonialism’s extractive project. In this, I heed Glen Sean Coulthard’s call in *Red Skin, White Masks* to rethink “the colonial relation of dispossession as a co-foundational feature of our

understanding of and critical engagement with capitalism. . . [in] a more ecologically attentive critique of colonial-capitalist accumulation” (14). Commensurate with the novel’s historiographic tenor, my reading also draws on Hortense Spillers’ and Kathryn Yusoff’s thinking about racialized bodies in the global geographies of extractivism, calling attention to the ethical drift of *The Trade*’s narrative structures that mediate the asymmetries of power in nineteenth-century frontier politics. Like Spillers and Yusoff, I attend to the significance of “body,” as non-identical with subjectivity, to highlight the material dimension of colonial violence enacted through enslavement and extractivism as well as to call attention to the corporeal sites of resistance and memory, all of which work against the epistemic categories that have denied racialized subjects their agency. Figured through the tension between solid and liquid matter, social processes of exclusion and assimilation in *The Trade* assume the forms of cannibalism and alcoholism, dramatizing the narrative’s concern for the visceral impact of extractivism on colonial ecosystems. The fluidity of capital, highlighted in the tropological links between the hunted animals, the dispossessed Indigenous peoples, and the Black bodies enslaved on the Caribbean plantations, converges in the novel’s figuration of rum, which, by interconnecting disparate geographies of violence, problematizes the racial, spatial, and ontological divisions at the base of the Company’s moral economy. *The Trade*’s use of the Windigo trope, in particular, re-examines the possibilities for Indigenous agency in the conditions of rupture, gesturing towards the need for a more nuanced understanding of colonial trauma and subjectivity and highlighting the elusive labour of the flesh, whose “seared, divided, ripped-apartness” exceeds the contours of the skin as a source of the extraction of meaning (Spillers 206).

Extracting Properties: Solid and Liquid

The Trade’s integration of archival documents, both real and imagined, into its metafictional frame of remembrance has raised important questions about the ethical integrity of the novel’s critical labour, eliciting divergent views on the absences, silences, and elisions that complicate the novel’s commitment to the exposure of the colonial injustices associated with the HBC’s commercial policies throughout the nineteenth century (see

Durnin 76-86; Venema 12-17; Aspenlieder 108-15, 127-29). On the one hand, the novel's intervention into historical discourse aligns with the narrative self-awareness characteristic of "postmodern historiographic metafiction" at the same time as it problematizes the conception of the historical novel "as simply an aestheticizing transformation of historical material into a purely textual entity with no referential relation to the material past" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 58 and passim; Wylie, *Speculative Fictions* 22). In this respect, Katherine Durnin's highlighting of how Stenson's use of "letters, ledgers, reports, post journals, novels, history books, and magazine articles" stages a metafictional interplay between the documented past and its imagined possibilities serves an important insight into the textual nature of historical truth and the promise that *The Trade* makes to "suggest an alternative truth-to-meaning for established truth-to-actuality" (73, 86). The ethical commitment to truth-to-meaning, which "accepts a certain opacity in existing historical evidence, as well as a skepticism about what registers as historical evidence in the first place" (Aspenlieder 11), however, poses its own constraints for the formal strategies Stenson employs in his attempts to unsettle the epistemological coherence of the fur trade accounts. This is particularly true of the novel's juxtaposition of the well-documented perspectives of the HBC's officers to those of its labourers, whose silence both in the archive and in *The Trade* has given literary scholars reason to dispute the ethical rigour of Stenson's fiction. While Durnin concedes that the "marginal presences in the novel must remain marginal if the existing record is to be respected" (86), Kathleen Venema argues that by refusing narrative voice to the Company's labourers, the novel "re-entrenches and justifies the brutal hierarchy it ostensibly deplores" (9). Indeed, by showing how it uses the conventions of Gothic fiction to convey the social, gender, and racial hierarchies of the fur trade, Venema's reading demonstrates *The Trade's* obliviousness to its own "pernicious distrust of mixed-blood characters generally and a dangerous misogyny specifically against Aboriginal and mixed-blood women" (6). Framed this way, the novel's revisionary impulse gets replaced in its trade-off with history by a structure of affect that can fulfill neither Stenson's ethical nor his aesthetic agenda.

Yet, given that revisionary work is never complete, *The Trade's* dramatizing of colonial history may also shed light on the entangled structures of cognitive, social, and ecological violence which dismantled

Indigenous ecosystems and gave rise to new social formations and subjectivities under the banner of empire. Refocused through a geontological lens, the novel's internal contradictions regain their moral credit by bringing into relief the interruptions in the traffic of meaning, conceived, in Erin Aspenlieder's terms, as a dialectic of *value* and *worth* in the space of colonial trade (109). *Value* here is understood as the HBC's currency of "made beaver" that regulates the exchange of goods, while *worth* "indicates the perceived quality of the thing or person being traded" (110). At the juncture of these epistemic regimes, as I hope to show, the novel's material tropes work to shift the boundaries of bodies and subjectivities, magnifying the complex fluidity of ethical agencies, human and non-human, which haunt the HBC archives and Canada's cultural memory.

Set in the wake of the HBC's merger with the North West Company and spanning the years of 1822 to 1867, *The Trade* uses the fictionalized letters of the HBC labourer William Gladstone to frame the narrative. In writing the novel's central characters, Stenson has drawn on the real-life figures of the trader Edward Harriott, his Métis wife Margaret Pruden, Chief Factor John Rowand (a.k.a. One Pound One), and Governor George Simpson. Beyond these diegetic boundaries, however, the novel employs two other epigraphic framing devices: a map representing the HBC's fur trade territory in the period of 1822 and 1850 and an extract of a poem by Charles Mair celebrating the Company's glory. While highlighting the link between the empire's cartographic and commercial ambitions saluted in the poem, Stenson's use of the map also calls our attention to its disciplinary power to organize territory and produce subjectivity circumscribed by the political ecologies of settler discourse. In her deft analysis of early English Canadian literary cartographies, Sarah Wylie Krotz reminds us that "[i]n early Canada, places and territories were far from settled constructs" (8), and surveyors drew maps that "carved up land into tracts of property, displacing Indigenous peoples and transforming ecologies as they sought to define settler space in stark opposition to a shrinking wilderness" (9). As both a perceptual tool and epistemological mechanism that "created the lines of colonial occupation" and "gave Canada its shape" (9), the novel's HBC map visualizes what Moore calls the "remaking [of] the world in the image

of capital” (86), where the “appropriation of frontier land and labor” is enacted through the epidermal register of Indigenous ecologies (114). Stenson magnifies this appropriative process in the novel’s image of the “brown and water-stained” chart, “minutely covered with spidery rivers, lakeshores and mountains” (12).

Orienting our reading of the characters’ movements along the old and new trading routes of the Western frontier, the map presses forward Patrick Wolfe’s observation that writing on settler discourse means writing “on landedness, however covert the inscription” (19). Considered in relation to the novel’s figuration of trade, the Company’s mapping of the land has several important effects. While it performs epistemological labour, registering the conceptual coordinates of trade as settler discourse on Indigenous ecologies and their value as colonial capital, it also redefines the ontological categories through which the Indigenous subjects of the prairies were also recoded as property. Seen through this critical lens, One Pound One’s thinking about “min[ing] for gold in California” and the Governor’s “[d]reams of a castor El Dorado where dams like mirrored staircases rose up every watery defile, and every beaver lodge crawled inside with life-stuffed skins” are indicative of the imperial desire to consume the natural world in the name of the “[e]conomy without mercy and no exceptions” (Stenson 318, 13, 12). The epidermal premise of the Governor’s cartographic fantasy is commensurate with his calculative ethics in the administration of colonial lands: his “ability to cleanse these rivers and forts of their human debris” and his keenness to use the lash to punish “[p]ilferage and waste” make the Governor a political asset in the space marked by enhanced cross-cultural conflict and social precarity (11, 12). But his inexperience and incompetence, to say nothing of anger and ambition, are also metonymic corollaries of the beaver trade as a knowledge enterprise, in whose service the map enlists the living bodies of the HBC traders and Indigenous vendors, rendering long-inhabited and -navigated geographies of pre-contact North America into “blank” spaces, per the Company’s cartographic vernacular. As the Governor reflects on his launching of the Bow River Expedition, the narrative emphasizes the economic prerogative of his mission: “Revenue, meaning the supply of beaver, was the Governor’s weakness” (12).

Against the Company's extractive ethos, the novel continuously invokes the physical beauty of the natural world to highlight the destruction the traders wreak on the western plains during their quest for beaver skins. In a passage that exemplifies the narrative's ecological thrust, we see "[t]he land beyond the stream [rise] in hills, all naked and tawny and fleshlike, as if an animal of bizarre musculature were swelling the skin from beneath" (32). Stenson's use of similes in the description of the land throws into relief its figuration as living flesh, which pushes against the geontological distinction between life and non-life: "The land ahead looked rich and velvety, the grass like the fur backs of animals, dimpling rhythmically" (30). In contrast to this lively prairie vegetation, the narrative casts the traders' harvesting for animals as an act of extraction, whereby they "cut the prairie open in the shape the fort was to be" by using up timber so that "only a few of the nearby trees were left standing" (21).

A similar sense of loss resonates in the disappearance of the buffalo, which "were long gone except for the odd ancient bull, the hunters having scorched the earth to every horizon of all other hoofed beasts" (74). As Eric Jay Dolin reminds us in *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, "Each year fur traders, farmers, and settlers killed tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of buffalo for food, sport, or by displacing the buffalo's habitat with crops, livestock, and expanding towns" (302). In Stenson's novel, the traders' harvesting for beaver is likewise conveyed in extractive terms, with the saddlebags of each officer carrying "a vial of castoreum, carefully wrapped" to preserve the "[l]ove juice of the water-loving beaver" while their steel traps leave "the gullies [running] with dust" (30).

For the Company, the loss of animals, as well as the larger environmental devastation, provides a further incentive for commercial expansion, with the Governor voicing the political implications of the colonial trade in Britain's rivalry with the US. In the "longer view" he shares with One Pound One, the HBC is to "take every skin [they] can" and "temporarily ruin the beaver grounds south and west of the Columbia" so as to "injure the future industry of the United States" (112). Though One Pound One has misgivings about the Governor's plan, reckoning that "[e]very principle of husbanding a beaver ground was confounded by what the Governor had just

said" (111), the grotesqueness of this "longer view" extends into the later expeditions investigating "the Lac La Biche route to the Athabasca" and the route to the Pacific along the Fraser and Thompson Rivers (86, 168). However, the Bow River fiasco, which comprised several attempts by the HBC to reach into the South Saskatchewan and Missouri River basins for beaver, remains the central axis of the novel's ethical reappraisal of the legacy of the fur trade.

One way to think about the Bow River Expeditions in *The Trade* is through the lens of what Rosanne Kennedy calls "multidirectional eco-memory," which links "human and nonhuman animals and their histories of harm, suffering and vulnerability in an expanded multispecies frame of remembrance" (268). Contesting the illusion of human cognitive autonomy, multidirectional eco-memory cues the body to a horizon of multispecies enmeshment, where remembering assembles itself from the semiotic work of solid and liquid matter (268). As an instance of such mnemonic entanglement, the Bow River Expeditions in Stenson's novel heave into view the ways in which the human infrastructures of social mobility and political governance are dependent on the material world, laying bare the physical and epistemic violence that belies the Company's narrative of economic triumph. At the figural level, this is made evident in the tropological links between animals and the Indigenous people, as in the episode where during the first Bow River Expedition the Indigenous traders retrieve the bodies of drowned buffalo, "harvesting what they could while the white men looked on stupidly" (Stenson 20). If we accept Arjun Appadurai's observation that "things-in-motion . . . illuminate their human and social context" (5), then the material tracks of beaver pelts gain the capacity to bring to light the extent to which the HBC's operations changed the lives of the Indigenous peoples, exacerbating the existing tribal rivalries and creating new precarities in the form of alcoholism, European diseases, and land dispossession.

In equal measure, too, the Company's commercial transactions expose the fragility of its own existence in the New World. When the prairie catches on fire in the winter of 1828-1829, for example, the perishing of the buffalo weighs heavily on the HBC's metrics. As *One Pound One* reflects, "By the time the snow put out the fires, the

grass was gone. Where there's no grass, there's no buffalo. No buffalo, no Indians. No Indians, no trade" (Stenson 172). When Piegan traders bring "four hundred beaver" to Chesterfield House, they point to "the Fur Mountains and the Missouri" (50), reviving the Company's expectations regarding a new source of furs. However, after the HBC traders return barely alive, with faces "caved in against their teeth" and no progress in the negotiations with their Piegan neighbours (44), the Company assigns Harriott to lead another expedition on foot to entice the Piegan to reveal their sources of beaver stock. Thus the third Bow River Expedition begins.

Stenson's focus on Harriott, the novel's elusive ethical centre, opens the Company's history to a more critical reflection on the workings of the fur trade, giving us access to the internal structures of subjugation and liquidation that applied both to the labourers—trappers, traders, negotiators, translators—and their Indigenous counterparts, in their trade in beaver and their taste for rum. Carrying only "two bags of grease" as food provisions and "tobacco and rum" to trade (53), the expedition is no less than a death sentence imposed on Harriott by vengeful superiors who lack his understanding of the regional Indigenous languages and cultural protocols. The traders' rescue by the Piegan exposes the network of relations which bring Indigenous political ecologies into the orbit of the Company's affairs. The ambivalence of this network resonates in Harriott's assurance that the "Company wishe[s] to continue trading with the Piegan, on whom they relied greatly for buffalo meat, pemmican and beaver pelts" (64), even though Jimmy Jock Bird, a former trader who has chosen to live with the Piegan, has no illusions about the Company's colonial strategy. He warns Harriott: "Remember that the Company tried to kill you. The Piegan let you live. But if you come back here, I'll kill you myself" (69). Linked to the dynamics of settler colonialism and Indigenous resistance, Harriott's decision to keep back "the number of beaver skins he'd seen in tents and stretching on hoops in Jimmy Jock's camp" (79) from his report to the HBC is of a piece with his choosing to mislead the Company about the possible revenues and "give [it] no excuse to try to kill him again" (78).

In ethical terms, Harriott's relationship with Jimmy Jock also problematizes the Company's role in bolstering the racial regimes of property and setting up a new social order on the western plains.

Like many traders, the two men intimate the anxieties inherent in *indigenization* (Goldie 194), i.e., settlers' attempts to legitimize their identity in the New World. While Jimmy Jock, the ex-governor James Bird's Métis son, can choose "to live with the Piegan Indians, where he marrie[s] a Piegan woman and acquire[s] some fame as an interpreter and a warrior" (Stenson 301), Harriott can only claim a comparable degree of cultural legitimacy through his relationship with his Métis cousin and lover Margaret Pruden, who gives him reason to dream that he "could become an Indian [him]self if [he] stayed in the country long enough" (57). One Pound One's thinking about Louise, his Métis country wife, as a metaphor for Canada, betrays a similar impulse to derive identity from the land: "Watching her go, a bulk that filled the door frame and blocked the light, he said to himself, *that's* the kind for this country. Tough as whalebone. No love talk. You put a roof over her, babies inside her. See to it she isn't slack in feeding you. *That's* enough to venture" (97). The figurative basis of One Pound One's tropes is hardly surprising: the weight of the animal simile keeps afloat the conception of marriage as a business transaction, in which the Métis woman validates and reproduces the settler's claim to land and cultural identity. At the opposite end of this attitude stands the Governor's injunction to the HBC's labourers to abandon the Indigenous women with whom they formed local unions known as "country marriages" (Bown 121): "Be a buck to your heart's content but return to the bachelor herd when the breeding's done" (88), lest the "all-too-bounteous crop of Halfbreed spawn" upset the racial hierarchy upon which the Company relies (87). Indeed, the Governor himself gets rid of his "favourite mistress," a Métis woman called Margaret Taylor, "whose children he acknowledged as his own" (88), as soon as he understands that he needs a white wife to move up through the Company's ranks. He tells One Pound One: "If I'm to be Governor of two departments, I must have a wife who can adorn and dignify my court. A *white* wife, you see" (113).

The Governor's order that HBC workers dispense with their Indigenous wives is but one example of how Stenson reanimates the HBC's motto and adds to the skin's tropological weight a geontological dimension, whereby the tension between life and non-life becomes homologous with the dialectic of *value/worth*, articulated across the

ethical threshold of racialized and animal skin as “sacrifice zones” (Miller 19). Even though few of the white labourers “credited Indians with being human” (Stenson 23), at least some of the officers ignore the Governor’s instruction: Harriott marries Margaret Pruden, Colin Robertson wears “all manner of beads” his Métis wife puts in his hair (87), and One Pound One thinks nothing in Canada is “more useless than an English wife” (113). Hugh Munro, who acts as an interpreter during Harriott’s first expedition to the Piegan, not only “[takes] a Blackfoot wife and learn[s] her language”, but also “[wears] his hair in two long braids” and is rumoured to bear on his skin “a two-holed scar in each breast where bone skewers had been inserted” (34). The epidermal register of the body’s signifying power here scales up the material ground of identity, troubling the cultural codes which define Munro’s loyalty and worth in the Company’s eyes. As Aspenlieder astutely observes, “Munro’s body is marked by a confluence of signs: his white skin ensures he will be read by the Company as loyal; the hair, clothing and scars allow his body to be read as a site of negotiated identity” (124). The same may be said about Jimmy Jock, whose white skin prevents the Governor from recognizing how the Métis man disrupts the Company’s operations and how the variations on his name—Jimmy Jock, Jamey Jock, and Jemmy Jock (28)—correlate with other people’s varying perceptions of his identity. Like the skin of all the Métis characters in *The Trade*, Jimmy Jock’s becomes receptive to confusing investments—material, cognitive, and affective—none of which captures the essence of the man or does justice to the ambivalence of his actions.

On the figural plane, this ambivalence partakes of the novel’s motif of solid bodies exposed to the pervasive effects of liquids like rum, which magnify the erosion of the ethical ground of colonial trade. Rum’s Jamaican provenance, which Harriott comments on in conversation with the missionary Robert Rundle (265), inscribes it with a metonymic significance that forges a conceptual link between North America’s Western frontier and the Caribbean slave plantations, from which it originates as a by-product of sugar milling (Tsing 149). As Stephen Bown notes, “although the Company had opposed the indiscriminate sale of hard liquor since 1670, believing it was bad for business, in the 1800s it

too began to peddle its own variation of ‘brandy’ and ‘rum’—gin tinted with iodine or tobacco juice” (289). Given that the Governor used to be “a sugar broker in London” and “brought a sugar broker’s meticulousness” to the HBC (Stenson 11-12), the novel’s troping of rum expands the figural scope of the trade to include also the traffic in enslaved Black people, whose coerced labour on plantations correlates with the Indigenous dispossession on the prairies. Embedded as rum is in material scenes of oppression, it evokes Spillers’ thinking about captive bodies as distinct from the flesh, “that zero degree of social conceptualization” (206), which exceeds the body in its capacity to turn damage into defiance. Shuttling between humans and territories, the novel’s rum, too, crosses the threshold of the skin to amplify the ambivalence of the labour of lacerated flesh as the ontological anchor of subjectivity.

As a medium of trauma in *The Trade*, rum conflates referential contexts, rendering flesh a shared site of both violence and resilience across different terrains of colonial extraction. For Harriott, for example, rum becomes a means to grieve for his wife Margaret, who goes mad after an altercation with the Governor, as well as a way to endure the Governor’s plan to starve him and his men out of business after forbidding them to trade with anyone but the Piegan. Driven to despair, Harriott drinks rum to be able to look at the Company traders’ faces, which grow “gaunt, the cheek flesh sucking in against the jaws and teeth . . . becoming skull-like as they went partway down the road towards death” (219). He gives rum to both white and Indigenous traders: “The rum given to the Indians forestalled the end. The rum taken by his men hastened its arrival” (219). Rum is also the currency that ensures the Piegan choose Harriott’s fort over any of the Americans, as Harriott tells Reverend Rundle, the Company’s Methodist missionary: “These Indians can trade with the Americans or us, as they like. If we stopped the trade in liquor, they’d soon abandon us” (265). At the liquid end of things, rum becomes coeval with blood, exacerbating the ways in which the flesh, both human and animal, is made to bear the ethical brunt of frontier politics. The labour of the flesh and the trade in beaver enfold into the same extractive economy, as epitomized in the Governor’s employment of Peter Skene Ogden, notorious for “a nasty fondness for blood” (111), whose task is to “take the life of every beaver,

male or female, in or out of season, adult or kit” and “to slaughter every other kind of animal he finds” (111).

Framed in terms of “multidirectional eco-memory” (Kennedy 268), the social grammar of extraction and death here illuminates the logic of racialization inherent in the novel’s flows of rum and beaver skins in a way that shares its geontological argument with the novel’s imagery of bones. In an episode where Harriott travels to an Assiniboine camp, two elders bring him “a length of bone the colour of dried blood” found in a cliff on the Red Deer River (Stenson 136). The metonymic links between the fossils and the racialized bodies on the western plains and on the Caribbean plantations, which highlight the shared vulnerability of embodied life, recall Yusoff’s reading of geology as a mode of extracting subjectivity through an ontological rupture in living matter, which enables the “proximity of black and brown bodies to harm in th[eir] intimacy with the inhuman” under the aegis of settler colonialism (xii). In reconceiving geology as a racial formation, Yusoff demonstrates how colonial subjects were cut away from their land and reinstalled “into a category of geology that recoded them as property” in dispossessive economies of extraction (31). Figures of deep time, the fossils in *The Trade* similarly cast into relief the collision of systems of value. Harriott’s suggestion that the large bone may have belonged to “such a big animal, with so much meat on it,” that it may have been hunted to extinction by the ancestors of the Cree or Assiniboine is consistent with the Company’s relentless extraction of capital from human and animal flesh (Stenson 137). Both Harriott’s Assiniboine and Cree hosts find his hypothesis disappointing. Two Cree elders suggest it is a buffalo bone from “a time when all creatures were larger, men and buffalo both” (137), while the Assiniboine onlookers “believe[] that a race of giant animals had lived here once and then moved away. Either they had moved to a place without people, or they had moved so far that the Indians here had never met or heard of the people among whom the animals now lived” (137). The Assiniboine and Cree men reject Harriott’s view of extinction because, contrary to the HBC, they think that “[t]he people would take care not to kill that many of an animal this useful” (137).

Stenson’s tropological association of the Indigenous people with the land and its animals props up the novel’s ethical insight into the

white traders' racialized logic, in which the prairie Indians' imagined fondness for "dismembered bodies, robbed graves, scattered bones, cannibalism" works in tandem with the Governor's view of Métis women as "pretty specimens" and "bit[s] of brown" (260, 113, 188). But *The Trade's* troping of the flesh also calls into question the racialized logic of exclusion, showing us how the Company's predatory assaults on the most decent of its white officers leave them crippled: physically, like the "scarecrow" Robertson (223), who is refused retirement even after having suffered a stroke, or spiritually, like Harriott, who lives (in the narrator's view) like "a certain kind of sea creature," lying "open as if saying, go ahead, stab me to death" (209). Possibly the most ironic instance of extracting flesh in *The Trade* concerns One Pound One, whose anonymous ossified presence haunts the Prologue that precedes the narrative proper. The episode features "[a]n old woman cook[ing] the flesh from the trader's bones for pay" (1). Deprived of skin and preserved in a keg of rum, the bones, which, we only learn later, belong to One Pound One, find their final resting place in Montreal. In a twist of a darkly comic mishap, however, they end up travelling "across to Hudson Bay and over the ocean to England" (341), and only then to their destination in Canada. While offering a haunting metaphor for the Company's toxic legacies, the bones' journey reverses the scales of extractive power, aligning the Chief Factor's remains with the Company's liquid assets. In so doing, the Prologue raises important questions about what Stenson's revisionary ethics suggest about subversive agencies, especially of Métis women, whose contribution to the history of Western Canada refigures the fur trade as a narrative of material and affective interdependencies.

Extracting Personhood: The Windigo and the Indigenous Subject

The spectral quality of the bones, both animal and human, complicates the division between life and non-life in Stenson's reimagining of the HBC's business affairs. Of particular significance here is the novel's use of the Windigo trope to highlight the Company's material and cultural consumption of the Indigenous world, refiguring the etymological ground of *company*—from *cum panis*, "with bread"—into a striking metaphor for colonial extractivism. The alimentary

dimension is central to Basil Johnston's explanation of how the Anishinaabe associate the Windigo with selfishness and excess, which drive the cannibalistic monster's "never-ending hunger" and always imminent starvation (221). Also known as "*Wendigo, Whitiko, Feaster, Boiled Face, Hair Eater or Skin Walker*" (Henzi 469), the creature is a recurrent figure in Canadian literature, and particularly in the works of Indigenous authors in Canada, like Drew Hayden Taylor's *The Night Wanderer: A Native Gothic Novel* and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, where, as Sarah Henzi points out, the Windigo "puts into question any given assumptions about what divides physical, spiritual, historical, and imaginative worlds" (470).

The structural ambivalence that Henzi attributes to the Windigo ties in with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theorizing about monsters as a category slip, reinforcing his point that "[b]ecause of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes" (6). In Stenson's novel, Harriott's thinking about the trade as "the god that made us" and "the Company feeds on us," (Stenson 203), creature-like, also recalls Marlene Goldman's argument that Windigos "should more properly be understood as disaster narratives that register the impact of imperialism and colonization" (167), with their cannibalism providing a metaphor for the excesses of greed and power. In contemporary Indigenous writing, especially, the Windigo embodies "the trauma that lurks in the homes and in the minds of survivors and their children, of post-traumatic distress, of the cycles of abuse that are reproduced, and of the breakdown of families" (Henzi 477). Unsurprisingly, then, as a metaphor for settler colonialism, cannibalism in *The Trade* runs parallel to the narrative figuration of extraction, setting up structural homologies between the consumption of nature, alcohol, and human beings. In so doing, the violence that the Windigo harbours is shown to be an issue of colonial institutions, rather than "only a 'Native' issue," for as Henzi rightly points out, "[v]iolence both begets and harms indiscriminately" (477).

A key instance of *The Trade*'s rethinking of colonial violence is the Governor's use of Métis women in the extraction of sexual pleasure, at the end of which he pushes the women from his bed, claiming his right

to “be alone afterwards to feel his satisfaction properly” (Stenson 11). His meeting of Margaret Pruden, however, challenges the Governor’s expectations that “the cowardly fathers [will] pimp their daughters to him” (98), even though Margaret’s father does wonder “if it was not better for his girl to be the Governor’s mistress than a poor cousin’s wife” (104). Defying the Governor’s lust, which the narrative figures as a cannibalistic urge, Margaret turns their sexual encounter into a socio-economic transaction, reminding both the Governor and Harriott of her right to self-ownership: “You can’t trade me. But I can trade myself” (127). Margaret’s use of the language of trade recalls Aspenlieder’s observation that trade in the novel figures both “a material system of economic exchange and . . . a symbolic register of how people negotiate for positions of greater authority” (105). This dual function brings to light the interruption in the relation between *value* and *worth* which underpins the Governor’s treatment of the Métis in the novel.

The distinction between *value* and *worth* is useful to our understanding of the ethical ambivalence of Margaret and the Governor’s sexual encounter. While valued by “the colonial representatives” (Aspenlieder 109) as a means of establishing alliances with Indigenous people and gaining trading privileges, Margaret’s worth derives from the Governor’s aesthetic appreciation of her appearance, for the sake of which he delays his trip to England and sends both Harriott’s and Margaret’s families away so he can make an undocumented visit to the fort. The ethical crisis produced by the clash of *value* and *worth* perspectives here recalibrates the agency of the female flesh made manifest through Margaret’s refusal to submit her body to the Governor’s lust. Instead of giving in, she demands to trade herself in exchange for Harriott’s promotion in the Company. Her claim to selfhood is also continuous with similar transactions performed by other Métis women, among them One Pound One’s wife Louise, who saves his life on the road in exchange for his assent to marry her and “never beat her or their children, nor make them work more than was fair” (326). The scene, in which Louise rescues a stranded and injured One Pound One, “bathe[s] the wound and splint[s] him with a stick,” “[gets] him up on his good leg, [hops] him over and [drops] him on the back of her cart” (326), makes

a larger point about the social agency of Indigenous women and their vital role in the HBC economy, to which they contributed as “guides, interpreters, and intermediaries” (Brown, *Strangers in Blood* 64).

In this respect, *The Trade* does not see Margaret only as a victim either. Surprised by her refusal to accept his sexual advances, the Governor finds a “Bay Company dagger . . . pointing up at him, the tip an inch from the tender purple of his cock” (142). The comic measure of this exchange reveals the fragility of the imperial hunger: responding to the threat of a knife, the Governor is barely able to pull up his trousers and run away. Importantly, though, the language of the flesh also exposes the narrowness of Harriott’s view of Margaret’s agency and his own responsibilities. Uncertain about Margaret’s ability to withstand the Governor’s charms, Harriott abandons his traders on the prairies and gallops back to Fort Carlton, ruining in the process his horse, reputation, and any chance of promotion.

Margaret’s trauma of sexual abuse echoes the logic of extraction, whose compound effects *The Trade* gathers into its troping of hunger and cannibalism. In the winter of 1849-1850, we are told, the Indigenous people “starved like dogs and the trade was so bad it went backward. At Carlton, they were eating their own oxen” (318). Margaret’s fear of going Windigo on account of family history and her own beauty (57) complicates Harriott’s own desire to have her “in case it harmed [her]” (58). Predictably, then, in the wake of the Governor’s visit, Margaret stops laughing and speaking, develops a taste for “raw meat and stinking rotten meat” and even “threaten[s] to kill herself, then Harriott” (161, 163). Metonymically, her self-destruction recalls the story of her great-uncle, who was bitten in the face by a rabid wolf while sleeping in a camp and “became a Windigo, and his sole desire was to return to his camp and eat the people he had left there” (134). Like her uncle, who starves himself to death rather than give in to the cannibalistic urge, Margaret withdraws into herself, “harken[ing] elsewhere, to some drama of her own” (161). Ultimately, even giving birth to her and Harriott’s daughter cannot save her: “Something woke Harriott in the night and it turned out to be his baby daughter crying and writhing against his back. Margaret was gone” (190). What remains as a sign of her presence in the wilderness is her “beaded dress hanging in a

tree" (196), completing her narrative arc as "the smiling spectre . . . that never failed to walk with [Harriott] or to shine life-size in his mind" (24).

For Venema, Margaret's disappearance is of a piece with Stenson's Gothic troping of the beautiful Métis woman, who remains "a pawn in both the governor's misogynist system of power and the masculinist twenty-first century account that ostensibly seeks to give her voice" (17). Yet her vanishing may also be read as an act of resilience, whereby Margaret re-enacts her great-uncle's self-exile from the community to strengthen its capacity for healing. The ambiguity regarding the boundaries of selfhood inherent in the Windigo's cannibalistic desire also reminds us that the monster figures the fluidity of the flesh defined through the opposition "between a civilized 'us' and savage 'them'" (Guest 2). If we accept Jennifer Brown's point in *Cannibalism in Literature and Film* that "[c]annibalism creates ambiguity because it both reduces the body to mere meat and elevates it to a highly desirable, symbolic entity" (4), then *The Trade's* figuration of the Windigo obscures the relay of ethical agencies in its conflation of colonial extractivism with the consequences of its trauma. This resonates not only in Margaret's clash with the Governor, but also in the episode where Jimmy Jock saves Harriott and his men from starvation and death, above, as well as where he executes revenge for the murder of a Gros Ventre chief during a parley with white fur traders. The symbolic freight of the tribal name, which translates as "Big Belly" in English, lodges the cannibalistic appetite in the Company's stomach, recasting the growing numbers of Indigenous people dying from smallpox, scarlet fever, and tuberculosis as part of the morphology of extraction that the novel attributes to colonialism's corporate Windigos. With Nancy, One Pound One's Métis daughter and Harriott's second wife, doomed to die from consumption, it is hardly surprising that Harriott wonders why nobody sees "how much death likes [his] company" (200).

Making a point about how the HBC's extractive activities gradually destroyed its own officers and labourers, Stenson's pun pushes against the racial and geontological imaginary underpinning the fur-trading enterprise. The officers fail to acknowledge their complicity in the Company's (self-)destructive work, with One Pound One arguing

that a trader would no more kill an Indian than a farmer would kill “his milk cow” (251), and Harriott insisting that the Indigenous vendors’ addiction to rum is a sign of its value as “medicine” (265), a view that troubles our sense of Indigenous resilience to social and environmental disruption. Yet the voice of the flesh *The Trade* allocates to its Indigenous characters uses the language of violence to insist on the humanity that the Company’s extractive activities have denied. The most graphic episode involves a Cree couple, who bring their dead baby to Harriott’s fort only for the husband to kill his wife with a dagger and then commit suicide with a Company musket (229). The visual horror of this scene casts in relief the material weight of the collective trauma caused by colonial trade, whose attritional logic is both deployed and defeated in the Cree subjects’ fatal measure of the worth of their life. Recalling Margaret Pruden’s use of a Company knife in her confrontation with the Governor, the Cree man’s despair is also shown to be part of the Company’s cannibalistic hunger, yoking the “Indians [who] starved like dogs” to the libidinal passions of the HBC officers and the precarious complicity of its “distracted and weak” white labourers (318, 74), who “all but worshipped [the officers] for half killing them” (74).

The affective register of history, which *The Trade* exposes to the critical pressures of imagination, dovetails with the novel’s refusal to offer closure to the narrative of trauma and capitalist extractivism. Yet in remaining equivocal about the ethical agency of Indigenous people, the figural compressions through which the novel works to probe the conceptual premises of colonial trade run the risk of reinstalling the intellectual ecologies put up in the service of the HBC’s commercial enterprise. Jimmy Jock’s new sobriquet “Jimmy Jug” (342), a subtle reference to the rumour that Jock has joined the newly emerging whisky trade, reloads the narrative’s alimentary tropes with a marked ambivalence about the extent to which the novel’s Indigenous subjectivity emerges through complicity in, rather than opposition to, the structures of colonial assimilation. Yoking the material effects of whisky and rum to the figuration of cannibalism, enslavement, and disease, the impulse of extractivism in *The Trade* ultimately dissolves into a host of avenues of ethical responsibility, submitting the novel’s

own frame of remembrance to further critical reassessment and epistemological revision.

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