Junie Désil and Sharon Engbrecht

"the suitcase in the closet": Talking Zombi(e)s with Junie Désil (an Interview)

Introduction

Junie Désil's debut poetry collection, *eat salt | gaze at the ocean* (Talonbooks, 2020), explores the historical and present-day treatment of Haitians, Black bodies, and Blackness. Using the Haitian zombi, at times metaphorically and at other times literally, the poems connect Désil's search for her parents' unspoken histories to the discovery of cultural hauntings that give voice to the burden of anti-Black racism that Black bodies still bear today.

Désil's collection chronicles her research on and affective response to discovering the history of zombi(e)s and their role in her parents' silences and fear. In "A Zombie Manifesto," Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry make an important distinction between the Haitian spelling of *zombi* and the Western appropriation, spelled *zombie*. "The Haitian *zombi*," they write, is "a body raised from the dead to labor in the fields, but with a deep association of having played a role in the Haitian Revolution . . . the *zombie*, the American importation of the monster . . . has morphed into a convenient boogeyman representing various social concerns" (87). In her poetry, Désil uses the *zombie* spelling, only indicating a difference between the various cultural beliefs with such references as "*the back-home kind*" and "now mass-culture mass-consumption zombie" for the reader (8, 10). However, *zombi(e)* becomes a layered term in the writing, doubling as a whitewashed, appropriated term at the same time bodies are turned ashen through zombification and their labour is appropriated for white prosperity and imperialism. Désil's use of *zombie* also implies the tension between life and death in the Haitian zombi figure, as

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reanimation is both the zombi state and a release from this form of enslavement: "reanimated / leapt up   ran off toward their respective graves / reburying themselves. // free. / to finally die" (39).

Throughout our conversation, we use the above terms to indicate the difference between the Haitian zombi, the pop-culture zombie, and *zombi(e)* as the intermingling of and tension between various cultural beliefs through the acts of storytelling and mythologizing. As Désil expresses in her poems, the meaning of *zombi(e)* shifts depending on the location and context of the term(s) used to describe the state of being encapsulated in the animated-reanimated, possessed-haunted, dead-undead corpse-body. This in-betweenness is akin to what Paul Stenner describes as a liminal experience, where the subject as potential object exists "in an as-yet indeterminate condition whose present is defined by the fact that it is no longer what it was, but not yet what it will be" (6). Liminality resonates in both the figure of the zombi(e) as well as in the experience of Blackness, aspects of an identity defined by the past and its possible futures, none of which accurately captures the "as-yet indeterminate," and at times uneasy, present. Moreover, the term *zombi(e)* comes to occupy the same liminal spaces as the transatlantic slave trade's "human cargo." Each transatlantic, speculated origin of *zombi(e)* comes to contain a slightly different meaning and context for its liminal state of in-betweenness:

> ombres/z'omb'e (français) shadows jumbie juppy/duppy
> (West Indian languages) ghost zemis (Taíno) souls of the dead
> zumbi (Remosam/Bonda)   by way of Portuguese slave traders
> ndzumbi (Ghetsogho) cadaver
>
> zombie (American English)   consumed en masse
>
> (Désil 21)

The zombi(e) becomes a figure of the in-betweenness and otherness of Blackness, of the ways in which Black bodies, and narratives about Black bodies, have been animated by white, colonial histories. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai reads this process of white, colonial narrative animation—what she calls *animatedness*—as an effect of representing racialized characters. She likens animatedness to apostrophe, where, as Barbara Johnson argues, "The absent, dead, or inanimate entity

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addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic . . . [T]he speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness" (Johnson 218). The zombification of Black bodies operates through this kind of address. White, colonial accounts, in addressing Blackness, render human cargo, the cadaver, and the zombi(e) as objects that are "brought to 'life' as racialized characters by being physically manipulated and ventriloquized" (Ngai 12). Animating the body, creating a zombi(e), becomes a way of containing its potential as a threat. Moreover, through the animating process, "the person is 'made' uniform, accountable, and therefore safely 'disattendable,' at the cost of having his or her speech acts controlled by another" (93). But, at the same time, the animated body incorporates a "crucial ambivalence" where "the excessive energy and metamorphic potential of the animated body make it a potentially subversive or powerful body" (101). The animated zombi (always a Black body) is both an "object imbued with life" (92) and a potentially subversive and powerful body with the ability to be reanimated in the sense of coming back to life—taking back one's subjectivity—after succumbing to animatedness. Or, in contrast, the once-zombi returns to the freedom of their existence in death. The animated subject finds their way back to the grave, after being animated as a slave or escaping enslavement, by fleeing *to* one's death in the ocean.

Each section in the collection captures an instance of the "strange inheritance   one carries" when moving through the world as a Black body (4). While at times the narrative of the poems slips into colonial histories that misname and misrepresent Black realities, the poems also name the present historical moment where the poet-narrator calls out the violence of white privilege and systemic racism. Désil writes:

> it is exhausting to write about slavery, ongoing oppression
> as if that's my only history or point of interest   origin
> in fact it is *your* history   an interruption
> your attempts on our life (54)

Désil imagines the privilege of the white poet who basks in the luxury of being able to write "banal musings" (54), while by virtue of birth—"a *birthwrong*" (60)—she must always acknowledge her own haunting:

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"we are a haunting the haunted a spectre a ghost a revenant or a zombie / this is how you remember us as we re-member ourselves" (54). The process of Black identity-making always entails a piecing-together of cultural identity, of split and multiple selves, from the strange inheritances of the "monstrous" Black racial identities of white histories to the current anti-Black police brutality captured in "*I can't breathe*" (69). In naming these histories, Désil seeks to recover and remember the "names of **Black** people who had faces, who had stories, who had aspirations and hopes" as part of the cultural identity she too carries with her (70). The poems also reclaim space for these Black bodies to breathe. As Désil writes, "i write this Black body live" (77).

In April 2022, Junie was part of Verse Forward 3, *Canadian Literature*'s poetry reading series. After hearing Junie speak at Verse Forward, Sharon wanted to learn more about Junie's research for *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*, including the zombi(e) as a dystopian-apocalyptic figure with connections to Blackness, colonialism, and systemic racism. They spoke over Zoom on June 17, 2022,[1] and their conversation illuminates some of Junie's personal experiences and the discoveries she writes about in her first poetry collection.

The Conversation

Sharon Engbrecht: You start *eat salt | gaze at the ocean* with this idea: "how to write about what you carry but don't know" (4). In your memory, when did you first hear about zombis? Or, how did that become part of your identity as a possible Haitian mythology?

Junie Désil: When I was eight my parents were having a small gathering. One of our—my brothers' and my—favourite activities was going through my mom's suitcase. She had this weathered suitcase with her old passport from Haiti, [and] this cookbook that she hand-wrote when she was in home economics at school in Haiti. That night I was rifling through and I saw this *Enquirer*-esque newspaper. It had this scary . . . All I remember is seeing the eyes and an ashy face. And there was a big title, *ZOMBI*,

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but it was written in *créole*. I was kind of guessing what it said. I tried to ask my parents another day, and they freaked out—didn't want to answer. So, we never talked about it. I didn't make the connection that the zombies I would grow up with from movies like *Night of the Living Dead* were the same thing, or at least coming from there.

When I chose to write *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*, it was hard because I wanted readers to learn about zombi(e)s. I had a moment when I decided to write from the position of a zombi(e), but that got scary—the idea of inhabiting that space. I felt like I didn't know enough about zombi(e)s or my history. Instead, I just needed to keep it simple and write exactly how I felt about the subject. But I also felt, I can't help it, writing from a position of a Black Haitian woman who's never been to Haiti, who just has this imagination of what Haiti is, from my parents and what the media and the world say.

So, as I tried to allude to in my collection, you carry these things but you don't know—deep culture stuff that I would have understood if my parents weren't trying hard to assimilate and suppress aspects of their Haitian identities.

SE: The "suitcase in the closet" is an interesting metaphor because the collection talks about bones and skeletons (20), as in those hidden histories, and both the suitcase and those histories are "*ne touche pas*" (20). I sense there's a religious critique, especially because the loss of identity is the loss of Vodou[2] spiritualism and religion that gets caught up in the "racist image of a devil-worshipping, black-magic wielding, and uncivilized tradition imagined by Western popular culture" (Moreman and Rushton 2). Is that part of what you read into your parents' silences or their fear and skepticism of that history?

JD: Yes. I think there were many layers to their silence. There was certainly the religious element-slash-angle where Vodou, and many spiritual aspects of Vodou, diametrically opposed a fundamentalist Christian life.

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That was what I grew up with. We don't talk about certain things because it might mean *something*. More to the point, I grew up in a Haitian home where my parents did their best to not be . . . Haitian. I did not grow up with the typical cultural markers like music, art, or artifacts, nor did we celebrate cultural holidays or even visit Haiti.

But I would add that there was also an element of shielding us from racism and the racist assumptions people had of Haiti, including that Haitians were "backwards," Vodou practitioners, poor, et cetera. Growing up, all news accounts always started with: *Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere* . . . Then there was the AIDS scare in the eighties, where the origin of AIDS was initially blamed on Haitians. So, I think there were many layers to my parents not answering questions. As I got older, questions that touched more specifically on Haitian Vodou went unanswered or dismissed or were regarded fearfully. Asking those questions could have also meant that I was potentially interested in Vodou, in being a practitioner or dabbling. And that freaked my parents out. I also learned that I had to ask questions carefully; otherwise, I wouldn't have access to information for quite some time. And I only had this one narrative—my mom's narrative. But my mom would just shut down if I asked her too much or wasn't careful about how I asked about certain things.

As an example: When I was twenty-four, I travelled to Portugal, Morocco, and Spain and felt so proud of myself. I bought this beautiful red scarf, and I thought, "This will be perfect for my mom." When I got back, I went to visit her and gave her the red scarf. And she had this *look*. Her look didn't connect for me then, but I also noticed she never wore the scarf. Another time, she came to visit me, and my décor is *red*, Persian carpets, I had two black cats, incense burning. My mom thought I was a Vodou priestess, like deep into these things. I didn't know that red *could* be a symbol that you're involved in one of the Vodou societies. But I don't know—I *love* red! [*laughs*]

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SE: It's the colour of your soul! [*laughs*]

JD: Right?! But it is that tension: that my mom doesn't want to talk about her ideas of Haitian culture, doesn't want to explain what's good and bad, what we should and shouldn't do, so I'm bumbling around figuring things out. And I also don't want to rock the boat because she might panic and spend time figuring out why I'm asking questions, rather than answering the questions.

I remember saying, "Before I turn twenty-seven, I need to visit Haiti." Well, that never happened. But for a year—I cannot make this up—my mom called every other day: "So, are you going? Who's making you go?" She has such trauma around Haiti. And I get it; that is what she grew up under. And we just don't talk about it.

SE: And you wouldn't have known. You were haunted by the figure of the zombi but had no access to the Haitian cultural meanings because, I imagine, your mom doesn't even really understand it, in kind of an academic sense: *this is the cultural significance of the zombi in Haitian culture*. Which is a very sanitized kind of way of thinking about it—a way to frame the beliefs she has about the Vodou religion as someone who was converted to Christianity. I assume she was converted?

JD: Yes. Multiple times. The best way to explain the zombi's grip on the whole culture is when the senior Duvalier, the first president, was elected in 1957—for life.[3] [*laughs*] He ended up personifying and taking advantage of Haitians' fears. In Haitian mythology there are *lwas* and a god-creature called Baron Samedi who rules over the crossroad of life and death. His signature is to wear mirrored shades, a top hat, and suit. During his reign, Duvalier often dressed liked this figure, speaking in a nasal tone to mimic the god-creature, while his secret police wore uniforms and mirrored shades, reinforcing this idea that his whole army—what they called the Tonton Macoute—was an army of zombis at his beck and call.

SE: He weaponized belief. That's dangerous.

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JD: But, at the same time, you have to suspend a bit of judgment to be in the military and to follow orders. So, there's layers to this imagery of the army as zombis, and he took this cultural myth to the next level. People were terrified. People would go missing—my parents have traumatic stories of relatives disappearing during that political upheaval. What would sound normal, *political disappearance*, now becomes this extra layer of Vodou. That's the thing with Haitian culture. It could be a simple Western-scientific-medicine answer, *or* . . . But why do we need the concrete?

SE: I ask about religion because when you ask your dad about zombies, in the collection, he responds, "*I am a man of God. Don't pay attention to such things*" (Désil 8), and your mom is silent. There's an interesting play on superstition, and it's hard to make connections between what could be real and what's fabricated, as a possible cultural belief, if Christianity is the only thing that defines how you approach other kinds of spiritual practices.

JD: I've read medical articles that try to explain the science behind the zombi: "Well, it's the pufferfish."[4] I have a poem on page twenty-seven where I have the ingredient list that they [Vodouisants] would concoct and prepare. There's this debate that zombification is just superstition or when people appear to medically die but not really. But superstitions can be just as real as the real thing. They're a tool for creating social norms. And in Haitian culture, you don't mess with people, because they could turn you into a zombi!

My poetry collection has been described as "wake work"—and to a certain extent I am attending to our *deaths* in this collection.[5] I also wanted to explore what it is to live in this liminal space as Black folks in a world that is decidedly anti-Black—a space where we live at the crossroad of life and death. And so, this is why the zombi(e) as metaphor works: When you think of its origin story, the fact that salt reanimates it, and that the zombi(e) metaphor also works as a stand-in for enslavement . . . And, more to the point of how the fictional zombie has been appropriated in white culture, the zombi(e) does heavy labour and lifting as a stand-in for all of

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society's ills. And my whole point is that Black people have been operating as zombi(e)s.

This reminds me of one of the stories about my dad, since he's opened up a bit more about his experiences in Haiti. In the collection, I talk about how a relative of his said that he didn't look like a zombi anymore: "Uncle! your face! alive—no longer like a zombie" (23). Now, concerning my dad's zombification, my mom has this theory that dad was demon-possessed—and I allude to this when he goes to the airport and he's told that he needs a bath because he's dirty (23). But my dad was very confused—he didn't realize that he was basically being told he *was* carrying demons—and that the person was offering to help him, to clean that up by giving him a sacred Vodou ritual bath with herbs and incantations.

But my mom, in contrast, embodies some aspects of what we understand a zombie to be: she's a husk. I don't feel that she's quite alive, especially when it comes to her Haitian roots. My mother's fears, reticence, and, likely, experiences that remain a bit of mystery certainly influence how I approach researching and digging deeper. And with her silences and her fear, trying to ask her to tell me more and meeting resistance, I felt like I was circumnavigating the issue of who I was-slash-am.

A quick example: My mom would tell me not to receive gifts from people, even if they were people we knew—"Mother won't tell we know not to hug him or receive his gifts" (25). That made no sense. But, in our culture, if someone is jealous or wants to mess your shit up, they give you something that they've cursed. So my mom has all these stories—I call them urban legends because I've never met these people!—like the woman who borrowed a hat and went mad.

She's become this thing—she's been burdened with this knowledge—that's how she presents it, and she's punished for that, which is a kind of curse. Hence, her being a zombie. But it is interesting: She doesn't put salt in her food, so I want to tease her, "Oh, you wanna be a zombi(e), eh?"

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SE: Oh! But does she talk to you about zombis? Or no? That's still taboo?

JD: No. It's still pretty taboo. If I asked her, I would get this barrage of questions: "Why do you want to know? What's going on?"

It makes me think of Lindsay Wong's *The Woo-Woo*, where she talks about the intersection of mental health in her Asian family and all these myths. The myths explain things but also don't. In our family, it was the same thing. If you have mental health struggles or developmental delays, it was a powder you ate, someone's hat you took, or somebody you pissed off—

SE: Don't take gifts from strangers!

JD: —That's right. [*laughs*] That's what you get! Don't drink things. My mom has this saying, "Oh, they drank *a* poison." And I'm like, "A poison? What poison was this?" "A *poison*!"

And you're not immune from family members either. So, there's this other story: My dad wore this beautiful suit for his wedding, and his younger brother asked to borrow it for his wedding. (He was in medical school and couldn't afford a suit.) My dad sent it. Never saw the suit again.

When my dad tells the story, he says, "Oh? I don't know what my brother did with it," and shrugs it off. But when my *mom* tells the story: "*This* is the beginning of our problems!" Because you can curse someone from afar; you just need an article of clothing. So, that's my mom's story—that my dad's entire family are these card-carrying zombi makers.

SE: Is your mother a refugee?

JD: No, she actually immigrated. Both my parents immigrated but met in Montréal. But they were both looking to leave Haiti. They wanted to get out of there, and they would have immigrated just before "Baby Doc" [Jean-Claude Duvalier, the elder Duvalier's son and successor] left the country in 1986. I remember we were all glued to this thirteen-inch black-and-white TV, watching him flee the country—and be received, ironically, with open arms in France.

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SE: So at a time of political upheaval.

JD: Right. So my mom—don't talk to her about Haiti. But, in contrast, my dad has always wanted to retire and have a home there. Recently, he said, "I have a place of birth, not a home." And I started to see how my dad and I are similar, in that this has always been how I felt, despite being born in Montréal and having lived in various cities. I allude to that when I start the collection with "here" and I go on to say that it isn't the same ocean, but "ocean is / ocean" (3). The sense of being here—not from here—not from there-here. Again, another space of liminality, of in-betweenness.

So, it is that tension of what I'm trying to say in the collection: that if you are in the culture and you get it, you know what to do and what not to do. But my parents are here, in Canada, trying to be as Canadian as they can. So, all the things that would make sense there [in Haiti] did not make sense here.

SE: Your mom, in a sense, refuses to pass on what she's learned, which makes it harder for you to piece that knowledge together.

JD: I was worried that in writing *eat salt* . . . The tension that I feel that comes out of that fear, although I'm a grown woman—I still don't want to rock the boat with my parents. I don't want to invite any bad luck or bad juju. There were a lot of things that I don't . . . I didn't want to be that bumbling Westerner. I actually felt like that person, even though this is my culture. But because my parents were gate-keeping that knowledge—they were very serious religious fundamentalists—there was no room for that kind of thing.

I was also worried because I didn't want people to think I was an authority on zombi(e)s. There were these ideas I had, but I feel like I don't know enough. I don't know if I would be cursing an entire group of readers by using, for example, Haitian *vèvè* symbols.

SE: I'm interested in the connection between the figure of the zombi(e) and control. You write from the subject position of being zombified: "do/what/we're/told/to so we do // what we're told" (24). In "A Zombie Manifesto," Lauro and Embry discuss conventional

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zombie films: "To kill a zombie, one must destroy its brain" (95). The figure of the zombi(e) lacks, as Ann Kordas suggests, "all traces of intellect, volition, or self-awareness," and it feels "no anger or resentment" (20). But, at the same time, they always have the potential to be reanimated—or their ability to think, to become self-aware and act upon their resentment and anger, is always a potential threat.

JD: One of the things, as I got older, that fascinated me was finding out that people, like Haitian ex-patriots or Haitians in Montréal, would pay five thousand dollars to go to Haiti and be zombified.[6] I'm not sure if this is a real thing, but it's in my mind as a possibility —from a documentary I saw when I was maybe nineteen—that really impacted my ideas about my Haitian identity. I remember watching *The Serpent and the Rainbow* [Wes Craven, 1988], too.[7] And as I was learning about zombi(e)s, I was also learning about the things people would do to prevent zombis from wandering or a body from being used as a zombi. They would decapitate the person—when they're dead, of course [*laughs*]. Or they'd put beads on the body to distract the dead person, so they would be counting them instead of answering the call of the master who's now made you a zombi. Or, when they have the funeral procession, they would take a very confusing route. Then, if the body became a zombi, it wouldn't find its way back.

All the rituals were to prevent the dead body from being reanimated. The whole point being that your body was still useful even if you're dead. I think I was also trying to connect being a zombi(e) and being Black: the labour that the zombi myth makes—they're dead, and even when they're dead, the Black body, the zombified body, continues to labour.[8]

SE: So, zombis are real. They aren't just imagined or a metaphor. In doing these rituals, zombis are a real threat.

JD: Well, that's the thing. As far as we're concerned, they're real. You can make someone a zombi. That's what those adept practitioners of forms of Vodou do—the purpose is to have your body for labour,

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whether as payment for a wrong, real or perceived. Put this way, many of us may not actually believe that we'll have bad luck if we cross the path of a black cat or walk under a ladder or open an umbrella inside, but we still do the rituals in case. More importantly, who is deciding what is real or not? When high-ranking military officials were publishing books and pamphlets on Haiti and Vodou, they were imposing their own, Eurocentric cultural lens to explain phenomena they could not explain.

SE: Oh, I'm definitely superstitious. There's just too much we can't explain. But, that brings me to another aspect of the racialized zombi(e) figure. Lauro and Embry write, "The zombie is an antisubject, and the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of the individual remains" (89). In reading that, I thought, there's a privilege in having an identity that is perceived as being *beyond* race—as white—a privilege I've experienced. Lauro and Embry are writing from a subject position where the white individual gets to be an individual from the moment they're born. In contrast, you write, "i want to tell you what it's like to be born unloved already despised by / this world . . . DOA spells *B-L-A-C-K*" (46).

JD: When I felt *super* clever about using the zombi(e) metaphor, I loved that I could critique it as being this overused metaphor to the point that even the zombie's tired. But also—and I remember having this conversation with local BC writer Wayde Compton—the zombie is the one monstrous and mythical figure that is so malleable compared to the other monstrous figures. Even that is a sign of resistance and defiance. Zombi(e)s are also this weird in-between state. And for me, that is how I've always felt, being in-between, in-between cultures: there's one way to be at home, there's one way to be out in public. There is a dual consciousness towards Black people, towards me.

And my presence is already rebellious and defiant. I write, "this is not a poor us" (54), and I'm not sitting here going, "It sucks to be Black; it sucks to be me." I'm not a victim, even though it was hard to write this collection.

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SE: It's a really vulnerable collection, and I also think it's really important. To situate my own experience: I'm a white settler living on the lands known as Canada. So, reading this collection, there were times when I felt like I was invading, I was intruding on the narrative. But then there are moments when you call out the white reader, and I realized, I'm meant to read this. Lauro and Embry write, "The zombie does not attack other zombies. It seeks to transfer its burden . . . no zombie body is relieved of its condition by passing it on" (100). And I get the sense that *eat salt | gaze at the ocean* is a process of transferring the burden of being racialized.

JD: The collection is meant to be read by everybody, and different people will react. One of my friends wrote this beautiful heartfelt blurb for the collection. He's African American—and it's not like he hasn't heard these narratives—but I'm writing from the perspective of a Caribbean woman "stolen" here to Canada. That means I don't always fit that "Black" narrative—I'm kind of some weird settler. So when Steven read the poems, he said he let out this big "Black-ass wail."[9] I really felt seen when he said that because I think different people are going to have different reactions. I really want for everybody to understand that in-between place I feel.

I didn't realize that I was . . . I don't want to say that in some ways I was seeking approval from *the* Black community, but there are differences and there are similarities. Being a Black person in Canada isn't the same as being a Black person in America, unless you are from that early group that's been here for hundreds of years. I was more worried about what other Black people would say or feel or read. I felt like I was airing out some of our dirty laundry.

It makes me think of Danez Smith, a queer, non-binary African American poet. If you just listen to them read, it's powerful. But for their recent collection, they had two different titles: one [on the cover] that, as I like to call it, the gen-pop could say out loud, and inside, the title was for the community, what the community could say—they didn't want that word on everybody's lips. The front cover says *Homie* and the inside cover says *My* — [*Junie makes a*

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gesture to imply the N-word without saying it]. I thought that was an interesting, layered way for everyone to have access, but to also show that there's an inner crowd. I think as a more experienced writer, I'll be able to do that. My main concern was not to give away too many of our secrets.

And I don't think I was being as vulnerable as I could have been. At one point I was like, that's enough of that for today! We're just going to stop right there. [*laughs*] So there are times, you can see, I veer, I take a break—even in the book there are breaks, there are historical documents.

SE: I like how the poet [Smith] sets that boundary, and essentially says, "Because you haven't experienced the same kind of racist violence I have experienced, you don't get to say that." But that brings me back to the tension between how you are able to narrate these histories and how you recover them. You're not trying to tokenize your experience as *the* Black experience, because Black experiences are so varied. It makes me think of Audre Lorde, when she writes: "Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves" (123). There's that complexity and the layered nature of the histories you bring simply by being identified as a Black individual.

The whiteness of my skin allows me not to have those same kinds of histories; or, the histories that I embody are the slave-owner histories. So, I think it's important that you do have those historical documents in there, even if they're a break. They are authoritative versions of history, and there's a moral authority in them that you're seeking to break down, you're seeking to add to. They're often about rebellion—the moralizing of the Haitian rebellion and white loss—and the erasure of other diverse histories. And in contrast, you have, for example, "here's a story about dead men working sugar fields" (38). I'm wondering if you could talk about the tension you have between authoritative white histories and the stories, the other histories, you are uncovering.

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JD: When I first started writing the collection, I was reading all the "authoritative texts." The "dead men working sugar fields" is from William Seabrook's *Magic Island* (1929). It's about these zombie stories by ex-marines stationed in Haiti. That's how these weird colonial images of zombies ended up here. While I was researching, I remembered Zora Neale Hurston, who I knew was this African American anthropologist. I'd only known *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from my undergrad at UBC [the University of British Columbia]; she had gone to Haiti and Jamaica and collected folktales. From what I understand, she went full-on into learning about Vodou rituals and participating. They both took the same path, but Zora's is much more engaging; it feels a bit more respectful, even though she is still kind of a tourist. There were very few texts that were from the position of someone who had been there, was closer to the culture, and wasn't there to malign Vodou and the rituals.

You kind of see in my collection, in some ways, I'm sympathetic to the whole idea of being a zombi. That's what I'm used to, contrasted with all the nonsense you get to read and hear about zombies.

SE: You write, "punishment eternal mindless / toil   the curse zombie. // like current conditions / that hell is fresh" (40). You're talking about histories, but they aren't really histories. In the epigraph and then again later, you quote Ta-Nehisi Coates: "how do I live free in this black body?" I sense there is a conversation you're having with his collection *Between the World and Me* (2015).

JD: Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote *Between the World and Me* after those high-profile murders of Black men like Eric Garner had happened. He had a fifteen-year-old son at the time, and he's going through the process of how to talk to his son about this: "This is what it's like being in this world."

Sometimes I feel that being in this body, as a Black person, there's these constraints, visible and invisible. I am technically a free person, but *am I*? I kind of talk about it in being dead on arrival and the world being like the ship's hold (46). So my conversation

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was not just with Ta-Nehisi but also Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*. It felt like a conversation: How did you do it? How are you figuring this out, living in this Black body, under these conditions?

I also use the June Jordan reference, "to be this valuable / this hated" (qtd. 50), and her poems are raw, real, and some of them are like, "You went there? You said that?" But it is a conversation. The style is: "Hey, I'm talking to you all about this experience."

SE: After the second quotation [from Coates in *eat salt*], "it is tradition to destroy the Black body – *it is heritage*" (68), you bring history into the present. On the next page you write, "*I can't breathe*" (69), in reference to Eric Garner, George Floyd, and others' deaths. You're uncovering the dead bodies from the debris of history.[10]

JD: Figuratively, literally, there is that sense of not being able to breathe. But, also, we have to create the spaces for us to be able to breathe and survive. That's the struggle. What would be our little piece of paradise? Where would we feel free to breathe? I don't think I have the answer yet. It helps to feel away from it, and I know that's not a privilege everyone has.

You kind of have to protect yourself when you're going through the archives of your ancestors. I took a three- or four-month break when I was writing because I was reading all these narratives, and I was getting technical about how ships were built and what ships were better for transporting [*Junie pauses and is visibly uncomfortable*] human cargo. Nobody warned me about this. Always have a counsel of people who can advise and support you.

The other thing with Ta-Nehisi Coates, he had come to UBC as part of the Thinking Black series. I'd attended his talk; it was nice to hear him speak, as I was in the middle of fresh edits, and to think, "I'm on the right track."

So, I think I wanted to acknowledge the difficulty: "I'm aware, and here are the experiences." And, also, I feel little bits of joy. I have people who care about me and my well-being. At the end of the day, we're all in this crappy little world together. Yes, some of us have it better than others, but I also feel a little ice needs to be

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broken—I'm not trying to say who has responsibility for doing that, because that gets complicated.

My point is that I wrote the collection. It was hard. I cried. I never wanted to see it again. But, now, I'm like, "I wrote this thing." I'm proud, I can move on, I can write other projects. I'm not wallowing in how hard it is to be a Black woman in Vancouver, Canada.

SE: I did not, and could not, read it as wallowing! The collection reads as through you are sharing the burden. You don't lose the burden when you share it, but the more collective support you can have the better things will be. It's tapping into an important cultural conversation about how we—and here I'm thinking about of those of us who aren't the target of racism and racist violence—still envision racialized bodies.

You also bring up the Twitter hashtag #NotAllCops (73), which is a response to #BlackLivesMatter and, in part, a denial of discrimination against individuals who are *made* marginalized, as you might say, by the system. I'm interested, then, in the way the collection calls for accountability. Further down, you have a line, "the intersection where cops police," then a line break, followed by "Indigenous and Black youth" (73), but I thought that choice, to have a pause, allows the reader to fill in what the cops police. In that hesitation, I read, "the intersection where cops police race."

JD: I wrote that in a moment when I was hanging out with a Métis friend of mine and we saw this interaction where several police officers surrounded a Black man, took him to the ground, and then held him down. We were like, "This is us." We were both wondering, "Should we step in? Should we do something?" But we are the people who are the target.

There were multiple weird layers of responsibility. Yes, I do feel there's an overall responsibility. We live in this system: all of us are complicit in some way, shape, or form. Also, the multiple ways that even those of us who are part of those communities that are targeted—once we become "comfortable," the further tension of having to decide: Do you step in?

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SE: If it's systemic violence, if it's systemic racism, *whiteness* plays a significant part in creating the system. It's not just the government; it's not just the right or the left. And this whiteness includes every single person who benefits from, or interacts with, or is part of that system. We all need to share that burden and share the responsibility, but there is a specific way in which white people—people who experience the privilege of whiteness—need to step up, need to take on more of that burden and responsibility.

JD: Have you read Robyn Maynard's *Policing Black Lives*? She went through the history of policing in North America and what the purpose was. Worldwide the purpose was to maintain settler interests. There is no protecting us from crime. Logically, they don't [protect us] because they show up after the fact or escalate things. So, with #NotAllCops, I wanted to point out that even nice cops are part of the system.[11]

You can't just read a history book or an account and say, "Well, that happened and we're good here." Everywhere, everyone is complicit, so we do have to take responsibility even when it's hard. People like to see a direct line between an action and a consequence: "I did this, so therefore . . ." But we all consume culture, we sometimes bumble unaware, and this is an opportunity to learn—after reading this, you can't be unaware.

SE: You're asking readers to share the burden and take responsibility—to learn about histories of colonization and cultural genocide—and that can sometimes be uncomfortable.

JD: People don't have to be out on the front line—I do really think we all have our own talents and ways to dismantle the system. It doesn't all have to look one way, but we all can't just turn on the TV and ignore everything that's happening. We are all responsible for this and we can't pretend. And a lot of these poems, [for example] where I write, "this probably made your heart lurch" (51), are literally to get a reaction. I want people to feel how horrible it is.

Wayde Compton would ask, "So, you're calling for a revolution?" And I would say, "Yes . . . ? *Yes*!" That is exactly what I'm calling

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for; burn it all down! We all have to realize this doesn't work for everyone; let's tear this down and rebuild.

SE: I get that sense from the collection. And I'm curious, then, about the title: *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*. The ocean seems to represent passage, but also death, freedom, and memory entangled with the traumatic histories of Black, colonized subjecthood. But the ocean is also cyclical, enduring: past, present, and future. It represents the magnitude of the history you are drawing on.

JD: The title comes from what are considered cures for being a zombi. If you've been zombified, one of the things you can do is stare at the ocean. Again, this is the interesting thing where you don't know what is true, what's fiction. When you think about the foods that enslaved people were given, it's usually the unsalted scraps. In Haiti, the slave owners decided they wouldn't salt the food because then the zombis would become reanimated and run away.

I have a little story where that apparently happened: "those dead folks working the sugar-cane fields like it's 1820" (39). It's a fairly big story, or myth, where the slave owners saw all these Haitian workers for this Haitian American sugar company. The person in charge of them took them to the market and gave them peanut brittle but forgot there was salt in it. So, then, the zombis got reanimated and ran back to their graves.

SE: Freedom in death? Which is another interesting thing that's going on in the collection.

JD: That's right, and I play with it in ways that are a bit dizzying. Because I thought, "Huh, whenever we go to the doctors, they always tell Black people that we eat too much salt." But we need good salt—sea salt. Salt is a major part of our bodily composition. We need a balance of salt.

As for gazing at the ocean, I love sitting by water. There is something to be said about that because of how I got here. My parents had to cross the ocean; our ancestors crossed the ocean, willingly or unwillingly. The ocean became this important metaphor both as a healing property and also as our watery

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grave—our liberation and freedom. And what the ocean does to memory, to artifact—I talk a bit about how there are all these shipwrecks, "five hundred / to a thousand / wrecked five found" (64), but only two have actually been recovered. You know, it's money and work; I know *National Geographic* did a special on all these folks who have voluntarily trained to dive and look for slave ships.[12]

So, for me, I love water, the ocean; it's where I feel calm and at peace. But it's also this powerful nexus.

SE: The ocean, in the way that it allows you to remember, it's also a very effective tool for forgetting, for losing things.

JD: And that's why I talk about swimming in the ocean, in the memories.

SE: You end *eat salt* with an implied question: "can i undo the zombie curse" (78)? There's that distinction: the Haitian zombi and the zombie curse—the Western imagination of the zombie curse the "i" needs to undo. Even as you are working through these traumatic images of how Black bodies are treated in history and in the present, you write in a way that "breathe[s] life into Black Lives" (69).

JD: I know that people read it and it feels heavy, but it's not intended for you to wallow in it. We have to create the spaces for us to be able to breathe and survive. I think with the collection, I wanted to create that space of exhalation and letting go.

Notes

1. Our two-hour conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.
2. We follow Christopher Moreman and Corey James Rushton's advice, "with Vodou being the preferred spelling of the religious tradition, and Voodoo reserved for sensationalistic, horrific, or racist depictions of it" (3).
3. François Duvalier (b. 1907) was President of Haiti from 1957 until his death in 1971.
4. An example would be Gino Del Guercio's "From the Archives: The Secrets of Haiti's Living Dead," which explores different scientific hypotheses for the "living dead" phenomenon in Haiti.
5. "Wake work" here draws on Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe investigates the multiple meanings of *wake* as a path, a state of

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mind, and "a problem of and for thought" (5). In thinking about death, Sharpe also considers the way "Black deaths [being] produced as normative . . . leaves gaps and unanswered questions for those of us in the wake of those specific and cumulative deaths" (7), which includes thinking about how Black people's lives "are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (8).

6. Ann Kordas argues that the figure of the zombi was not always negative:

> According to Haitian belief, zombies could take many different forms. A zombie could be a soul stolen from a living person by a magician to be used to bring luck or to heal illness. A zombie could also be a dead person who had willingly, at the time of death, given his or her body to the Vodou gods to use as a receptacle. Finally, a zombie could be a reanimated, mindless, soulless corpse taken from its grave to serve the master who had awakened it. (16)

 Kordas tracks down instances where zombis are also represented as "helpful spirits, Vodou gods, or heroic slave leaders" (18), representations that disappear after the widespread popularity of Seabrook's *The Magic Island*. Kordas goes on to argue that the figure of the mindless, defenseless, racialized zombie appeals to "white anxieties concerning African Americans . . . linked not just to fears of potential black violence but to white resentment of the new control over their own labor now exercised by African Americans" (19).

7. Craven's film is based on ethnobotanist Wade Davis' *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist's Astonishing Journey into the Secret Societies of Haitian Voodoo, Zombies, and Magic* (1985).
8. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison writes about the ways in which Black bodies are used to construct literary whiteness where language can "powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering'" (x). She describes the Black body as a trope, as "a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and mediations on ethics and accountability" (7). Even when we don't see or recognize the Black body as a part of whiteness, or in the zombi(e) motif, it is still present. This presence empowers it "to enforce its invisibility through silence . . . allow[ing] the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (10).
9. A shortened version of Steven Dunn's endorsement appears as a blurb on *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*'s back cover. With Dunn's permission, here is the full, unedited text of his endorsement:

> After experiencing Junie Désil's *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*, I didn't know what to do with myself but moan/wail the Blackest, deepest lament/celebration of death, life, and healing. Désil offers us more than a book here: this is a field where we're invited with her to do the work of turning the soil, rooting out, cultivating, and growing. These feelings I have right now are so big and impossible that my words feel insufficient, and I have to return to my Black-ass wailing, which sounds like my grandmother's. Thank you Junie, for opening me up and giving me a space to connect with the deep parts of myself and my people.

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10. This idea is adapted from *Language and Historical Representation*. As Hans Kellner writes, "history is not 'about' the past as such, but rather about our ways of creating meanings from the scattered and profoundly meaningless debris we find around us" (136-37).
11. Junie referred here to Dave Dickson, a former Vancouver Police Department Constable. He was awarded a BC Achievement Award upon his retirement in 2006 for his "significant contribution to the vulnerable citizens of the Downtown Eastside" ("Dave Dickson").
12. The six-part podcast series is called *Into the Depths* and hosted by Tara Roberts.

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Junie Désil is a poet. Born of immigrant (Haitian) parents on the traditional territories of the Kanien'kehá:ka on the island known as Tiohtià:ke (Montréal), she was raised in Treaty 1 Territory (Winnipeg). Junie's debut poetry collection, eat salt | gaze at the ocean *(Talonbooks, 2020), was a finalist for the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize. Junie currently lives on the traditional territories of the Homalco, Tla'amin, and Klahoose, where she is currently working on a novel and a poetry manuscript.*

Sharon Engbrecht (they/she) is a PhD Candidate in the Department of English Language and Literatures at the University of British Columbia on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm *(Musqueam) people. They are also currently a white-settler guest on Treaty 7 land, the traditional territory of the Blackfoot, Tsuu T'ina, Stoney Nakoda, and Métis peoples of Alberta. Their work focuses on contemporary British and Canadian literature, with a special interest in writing produced by women. They explore feminisms in the wake of Virginia Woolf, as well as narratives that critique what Sara Ahmed describes as "straightening devices."*

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