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Christine Kim

Methods, Objects, Fields

What is Canadian literature? The question of how we might define Canadian literature has often been debated through discussions about, for example, canons, institutions, and most recently settler colonialism. But as I return us to this question, I want to pose it differently by approaching the field of Canadian literature as problems of methodology and object. In doing so, I hope to reflect upon how we understand Canadian literature as a category or Canadian literary studies as a field, and, moreover, what work we see them as performing. In reflecting upon how our methods and objects define the field of Canadian literary studies, my intention is to ask questions about how we approach it, the kinds of analytics we employ, and the questions we chase. And as critics working within the field, what do we read? Or to put it another way, what have we conventionally gravitated towards as a proper object for Canadian literary studies? In presuming that others lie beyond the bounds of the field, what moves are being made about how we map geographies and write histories? How does that speak to the histories of Canada and which relations it has been willing to acknowledge?

The field has undergone a key paradigm shift in response to the important work being produced by Indigenous scholars and their incisive critiques of settler colonialism. In the short space of this editorial, I want to highlight one particular intervention with the intention of extending this line of thought to see how it might prompt further re-evaluations of Canada and the field of Canadian literary studies. One way to reframe Canada from the perspective of Indigenous peoples is to understand how, as Audra Simpson writes of the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke, “they have survived a great,

transformative process of settler occupation, and they continue to live under the conditions of this occupation, its disavowal, and its ongoing life, which has required and still requires that they give up their lands and give up themselves” (2).

Simpson approaches settler colonialism in part by examining Indigenous sovereignty and the challenges it poses to settler states, and also by advocating refusal as an alternative to the politics of recognition (10-11). Drawing on the examples of how Haudenosaunee passports are not always recognized and the challenges of deciding membership in Kahnawà:ke, she highlights how Kahnawà:ke struggles with the pressing problem of “how to be a nation, when much of one’s territory has been taken. These processes also bring into question how to proceed as a nation if the right to determine the terms of legal belonging, a crucial component of sovereignty, has been dictated by a foreign government” (10). And while Simpson argues that sovereignties can sometimes be embedded within each other, she also draws our attention to the uneven relations of power that shape them as it is impossible to overlook how

one proliferates at the other’s expense; the United States and Canada can only come into political being because of Indigenous dispossession. Under these conditions there cannot be two perfectly equal, robust sovereignties. Built into “sovereignty” is a jurisdictional dominion over territory, a notion of singular law, and singular authority (the king, the state, the band council, tribal council, and even the notion of the People). (12)

Simpson highlights how control of territory lies at the heart of the settler-colonial project and makes itself known through conflicts over sovereignty. I want to hold onto her point and use it to open up ways of recognizing how deeply embedded problems of territory, sovereignty, and nation are within Canadian literary studies. To be more precise, there exists in the field a central contradiction in that, even as parts of Canadian literary studies work to reframe the ethical, legal, and political foundations of Canada by engaging with settler colonialism, the field continues to operate under the working belief that Canada is a nation whose sovereign borders determine its limits. In other words, concepts of territory, sovereignty, and borders continue to drive how

we conceptualize the field. This is clearest in how we often define Canadian literature as a body of literature that is written by authors in Canada and/or texts published in Canada. And it is an assumption that also became the basis of debates over literary canons that took place in the late twentieth century and resulted in the inclusion of BIPOC writers such as Austin Clarke, Joy Kogawa, M. G. Vassanji, and Thomas King. The guiding assumption was that these writers were also Canadian because they lived or had been born in Canada, but hadn't been recognized as such because they were not white. To be clear, I am not contesting the importance or validity of those interventions in the slightest. I am, however, interested in asking how we can think about BIPOC writing in relation to power and justice in ways that destabilize rather than reinforce the sovereignty of nation-states.

To think through this possibility, I turn to the literary anthology, a vehicle that is often used to engage with the politics of national representation by expanding the range of included texts as well as reframing conversations for classrooms and other readers. Karina Vernon's *The Black Prairie Archives: An Anthology* carefully interrogates how we imagine the prairies as well as those who live and write there. Situating her project in relation to other prairie writing, she notes: "Of course, the prairies has been imagined into being by other writers too, but the 'realist' tradition is the one most often taught, anthologized, and read as representative of the prairies' regional essence. Significantly, the 'authentic' prairie subject that emerges from this archive is rarely gendered, never raced, and definitely not black" (Vernon 2). Vernon intentionally produces a different narrative about the prairies by showcasing an archive of underrecognized writers that returns us to nineteenth-century writers such as Daniel T. Williams, Alfred Schmitz Shadd, and Mildred Jane Lewis Ware and takes us to the contemporary moment with Roland (Rollie) Pemberton, Frank Fontaine, and Miranda Martini. In order to sketch out the kinds of social spaces that Black writers create and live in, Vernon directs our attention "toward the geographies black prairie writers are connected with, including other parts of Canada, the US, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Africa" (3). As an archive of the prairies that makes visible "its relation to the black world, including the transatlantic slave trade and resulting cultures and networks of the black Atlantic" (3), Vernon's anthology expands Canada beyond its borders and complicates its relations to territory

while still keeping in view Canada's colonial dimensions. Peter James Hudson's work on the histories of finance and racial capitalism also helps us to think about the relations between Canada and the Black Atlantic as it traces the expansion of US banking as intertwined with colonial expansion. While primarily concerned with tracing the expansion of US financial institutions into the Caribbean, he also reminds us that as American bankers sought to realize their ambitions, Canada already had a presence in the region: since the mid-nineteenth century, Canadian chartered banks had

dominated the financing of the North American trade in the British West Indies and the Spanish-speaking islands. US bankers had lagged behind. Their European and Canadian competitors were quick to seize on the region's shifting needs for capital, brought on by both the end of slavery and the emergency of nominally free populations of African and [I]ndigenous workers and peasants, and by demands for capital by independent postcolonial states seeking to fund their modernization projects. (Hudson 6)

Vernon's and Hudson's projects situate Canada within networks of racial capitalism that extend nations far beyond their borders.

We can also reframe inclusion within the nation as a question or problem rather than a simple premise or assertion by routing it through the work of migration scholars such as Kornel S. Chang and Radhika Mongia, who remind us that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, borders were created in response to migration, not threatened by it. Speaking of the Pacific Northwest during this time period, Chang addresses the contradictions of borders by pointing out, "The imperatives of a 'white man's country' that justified settler expansion and the exploitation of markets and labor abroad also at once rendered national boundaries at home inviolable and racially exclusive" (4). He focuses on Chinese labour migration during this period, noting,

The US-Canadian boundary became the primary site of this struggle with Asian ethnic labor recruiters, white labor activists, East and South Asian migrants, and local civil servants locked in protracted struggle over the

permeability of the border. The rapid circulation of people, goods, and resources kindled a countermovement to harden national borders in the Pacific Northwest even as these movements integrated the region into a larger Pacific world. (13)

Flexible to the extent that Canada desired access to markets and cheap labour but rigid when it no longer required the bodies that drove them, borders become both signifiers of imperial privilege and racialized exclusion.

Moving through a different part of this archive of Asian migration, Mongia further complicates the relations between Canadian borders and migrants. By tracing a “colonial genealogy of the modern state” via Indian migration, Mongia provides insight into how technologies such as the passport were used as the globe shifted from empire-states to nation-states (3–4). Noting that while the movement of indentured Indian labour was facilitated by state-controlled systems, the movement of non-indentured Indians received a very different response as white-settler colonies like Canada sought ways to prohibit this movement (2). Like Chang, Mongia demonstrates how “territorial borders did not emerge first, only later and incidentally to be policed, monitored, guarded. Rather, borders are produced and experienced in specific forms and become porous or impassable with respect to certain subjects conceived in historically specific ways” (148). The passport, like the head tax, literary tests, and Continuous Journey regulations, was one of many mechanisms designed to restrict migration as it drew together discourses of race and nation (116). In guiding us through these histories, Mongia interrogates “[t]he historical nationalization of migration . . . where certain migrations, at particular moments, come suddenly to provide the framing of identity in national and nationalist terms, or to catalyze the introduction of nationality as an institutionalized category into migration law, or to produce unforeseen eruptions of fervent nationalist claims” (6).

The point I am trying to make by moving through migration scholarship is that Canada has long understood itself in response to migrants, and that this fiction of the nation has worked to naturalize a set of borders and a sense of identity for the purpose of excluding migrants. The nation can be conceptualized differently, not by assuming the sovereignty of borders but rather by understanding

Canada as produced by global forces and movements. Such a reframing lets us see Canada less as a static, given entity and more as a contingent formation that is produced at particular moments for certain reasons. And by extension, for those of us situated within the field of Canadian literary studies, we might also ask of particular writers or texts why one is legibly Canadian at a particular moment. What larger projects do such logics enable or obscure? Such queries prompt us to rethink the field of Canadian literary studies and the kind of work *Canadian* performs.

We might also take such an approach to other global sites and historical moments in order to interrogate Canada's relationship to them. For instance, as Yves Engler's *The Black Book of Canadian Foreign Policy* details, Canada was involved in many Cold War activities throughout the globe and profited handsomely from them. While the narrative of Canada as a peacekeeping nation encouraged people to focus on how it welcomed refugees from Southeast Asia in the 1970s, what has often been overlooked is how Canada was also active in the creation of the conditions that devastated countries and forced people to flee their homes. As a junior partner to the global imperialism of the US, Canada benefited in innumerable ways from Cold War imperialism.

Y-Dang Troeung's memoir *Landbridge* and monograph *Refugee Lifeworlds* lay out her story as a Cambodian refugee and also provide us with a critical lens to engage with refugee lifeworlds. As she sketches out complex personal and familial histories, Troeung also offers a critique of the long imperial relations between Canada and Cambodia that have been disguised as benevolence. Even as she describes media attempts to turn her into the figure of the grateful refugee who had been welcomed into Canada, Troeung also reminds us of the labour that was extracted from her parents as they worked long hours in factories and picked worms at night with her brother, all for low wages. Reframed in this way, refugees become a reminder not of the benevolence of Canada but rather of its ongoing practices of exploitation within and outside its borders. This is a necessary, but in some ways more familiar, kind of critique that the field has become used to hearing and making, one that identifies the ethical shortcomings and contradictions of the nation. It is a kind of critique that bears repeating over and over again. But Troeung also calls out what we might recognize as a different set of problems of borders and

surveillance, one that hits a little close to home for scholars. In *Landbridge*, she writes of her scholarly manuscript being rejected by an editorial board as not being scholarship worth publishing. The board deemed Cambodia too minor a subject for a monograph, the work not academic enough, and concluded that Troeung, “as an author, could not claim to be an expert on the subject matter—that is, on [her] own history” (24). Similarly, *Refugee Lifeworlds* describes the challenges of having refugee knowledge be recognized as legitimate. For instance, she describes watching people ask her parents about their experiences in refugee camps, curious about this part of their lives but not about the years before. In noting this phenomenon, Troeung highlights how refugee lives only come to hold meaning as they encounter the Global North, how “the refugee becomes legible only when whiteness enters the frame as an adjudicator of the refugee’s humanity” (ix). Vinh Nguyen has also written on this problem of being devalued as a scholar who is part of the community that he writes about, thus producing unconventional research: “It is not objective, scientific, and detached in its quest for absolutes (that is, truth and universality), which are the hard stuff of knowledge” (470). Troeung and Nguyen highlight an important problem of knowledge production as they point to how, typically, one can either be a scholar writing about a problem or a local informant who represents the problem. It is, however, very difficult to be legible as both simultaneously. In drawing attention to the limited space for refugees producing scholarship about refugees, Troeung and Nguyen compel us to recognize how scholarly fields are configured and who they continue to imagine as their readers and peers.

To rethink the field in relation to the various genealogies I’ve outlined in this editorial is hopefully to further destabilize *Canada* and *Canadian* as fixed signifiers. My hope is that we might reframe *Canada* and *Canadian* not as terms or categories that anchor the field, but rather as problems to be thought through in relation to and via particular archives, literatures, histories, theorists, sites, and creative practices. The articles in this general issue also contribute to our rethinking of Canadian literary studies as they collectively ask us to rethink the relation between Canadian literary studies and other fields, literary as well as from other disciplines. They also ask, in their respective ways: What constitutes a Canadian way of reading or a Canadian object? Moreover, who is a Canadian literary reader or audience? Naava

Smolash's "'The False Fronts Haven't Seen the Prairie': Sinclair Ross' *As for Me and My House* Reread as Settler Text" offers one way of doing this work as she provides a critical settler-studies approach in rereading Sinclair Ross' *As for Me and My House* in relation to Maria Campbell. Kelly Baron's "'The Trick Is That the Dancing and Singing Are Unrepeatable': Empowering Improvisations in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*" also offers a rereading of a text that has become a staple of many Canadian literature syllabi by approaching it through memory-work and more recent work in trauma studies.

Jade Crimson Rose Da Costa's "Theory Is Not a Luxury: Literary Studies, Sociology, and Minoritarian Critique" offers a different kind of re-evaluation as it engages with the potential of literary studies and sociology to further analyses of race, Indigeneity, gender, and sexuality. Similarly, Pierre-Luc Landry and Zishad Lak's "For Whom Does the Water Flow: The Politics and Aesthetics of Eeyou Istchee's Water in *Blue Bear Woman* by Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau" and Andy Weaver's "Black Heterotopic Space in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" engage with texts that open up pathways between Indigenous studies, Black studies, Canadian literary studies, and many others. And finally, Kit Dobson's forum on literary biodiversities assembles a thoughtful group of scholars who offer interventions on the intersection of literature and science.

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Kelly Baron

“The Trick Is That the Dancing and Singing Are Unrepeatable”: Empowering Improvisations in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s Fall on Your Knees

My mother’s cells, my mother’s sorrow.
— Marsha Lederman, *Kiss the Red Stairs*

Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* (1996) is an intergenerational saga of interethnic familial trauma occurring at the beginning of the twentieth century in Nova Scotia. Following the lives of James Piper and Materia Mahmoud—and, later, their daughters and granddaughter—the novel begins with explicit memory-work in the form of family photos. An unnamed narrator, whom we later learn to be Lily Piper, Materia’s granddaughter, describes photos of traumatic family events without providing the traumatic context: she describes the picture of Materia on the day that she killed herself as one where “you can’t see her face for the oven” after she “had a stroke,” as “the doctor put it” (2); she focuses on a picture of James after his stroke as he told Frances, his daughter, what happened to Kathleen, her older sister, but she describes only his hair and armchair; then, Lily recalls Ambrose, her twin brother who was accidentally drowned mid-baptism by Frances, not by a picture of him—“there wasn’t time for that”—but by a picture of “his crib still warm” (2). And Lily notes a photo of Frances, taken moments before Ambrose drowned, in which Frances is holding a “dark wet bundle” that she clutches to her chest by the creek (3). Kathleen, the focus of much of the novel, is notably absent in these descriptions; all of the pictures of her were “destroyed,” and her absence is rationalized by her talent: she “sang so beautifully that

God wanted her to sing for Him in heaven with His choir of angels,” Lily narrates, so “He took her” (4).

Family photographs have famously been analyzed by Marianne Hirsch in her 2012 *The Generation of Postmemory*, a foundational work in arguing for the concept of intergenerational memory. Hirsch’s work proposes that, through the passing down of photographs and stories in the familial sphere, it is possible to pass down memories to a future generation. While she does not suggest that a literal transposition of memories is possible, she believes that, through such familial memory-work as that of stories and photographs, an event in the familial life can live on in future generations. As she writes, post-memorial work “strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression,” meaning that “less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone” (33). Lily’s descriptions of the photos in the opening scenes of *Fall on Your Knees* perfectly demonstrate the shortcomings of Hirsch’s analysis of familial photographs and memory. In Lily’s depictions, significant events of familial trauma are alluded to but left unexplained until later segments of the novel. As Michelle Coupal notes, the photos exemplify the central traumas of the novel but are presented in such a way that “the reader cannot possibly decipher [the events] until the novel’s conclusion,” such that they represent “facts but not the truth of what happened” (174). That photographs can represent the facts of trauma, but not the truth of traumatic events, is just one way in which photographs obscure past memories of trauma; indeed, every photograph is the result of significant distortions such as authorial intent and framing, ensuring that their representation of reality is stylized and chosen by the photographer, rather than factual. Beyond the issue of photographic framing, photographs are still and unchanging, and they do not reflect the way in which intergenerational trauma becomes mediated through the memories and experiences of the family.

Photographs, then, have the ability to reflect a single moment in time, as stylized through the perspective of the photographer, without conveying the context of the traumatic event or the tendency of such events to be repeated. Indeed, all of the photos that Lily describes,

without the familial and cultural conditions of the trauma they depict, could simply be family photos, much like how the photo Hirsch analyzes of her parents, without the historical setting of the Holocaust, looks like a typical photo of a couple that seems happy on a busy street. Thus family photographs simultaneously erase elements of family memories as they preserve them: Hirsch's parents appearing happy without a Jewish star in the midst of the Holocaust effectively erases the cultural and physical trauma that they were undergoing during the period. The Piper family photos perform a similar work of erasure in that the stylized photos recall a family life that is not characterized by trauma, even though the lives of the Piper women are inflected by experiences of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of their father. As a result, MacDonald, in calling attention to the novel as memory-work through the narrative framing of family photos, addresses the limitations of family photographs in intergenerational memory; they distort reality and are silent and unmoving, allowing for the perpetuation of traumatic silences in a family history if left unaddressed.

The novel's resulting representation of memory-work is then not through photographs, but instead through music, film, and performance. *Fall on Your Knees* covers Materia and James Piper's familial life together during the early twentieth century, which coincides with the rise of popular music and silent motion pictures. Materia becomes a pianist, providing the musical accompaniment for a vaudeville group during World War I, and Frances, her daughter, becomes a performer at a speakeasy after Materia's suicide. In her recent edited collection on musical improvisation and subjectivity with Ellen Waterman, Gillian Siddall suggests that the songs used by Materia and Frances in *Fall On Your Knees* do more than simple memory-work: by "interpolating fragments of popular and classical music in ways that not only subvert classical musical forms but also subvert, or at least disrupt, prevailing power relations that privilege white, male heterosexual identity" (201), Materia and Frances are able to use music in their performances in a way that is highly experimental but also dialectical, in which the subject performing the improvisations later becomes defined through such improvisations. I follow Siddall in using improvisation as a term that signifies co-creation, by which the Piper women, during moments of their performances, partially give up their agency to become open to new possibilities for both their performances and their futures. In this

context, the memories of their past, when negotiated through musical improvisations, are cast aside for more empowering futures, showing the ability of Frances in particular to disrupt her family's cycle of intergenerational trauma.

Contemporary understandings of trauma, as I have recently demonstrated in my work on Rawi Hage, have shown an increasing sensitivity to forms of cultural, structural, and intergenerational trauma (Baron, "But How?" 139). Although trauma theory became more widespread with the works of 1990s scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, these early scholars were interpreted as advocating for individualized forms of trauma due to their reliance on the Freudian repetition compulsion in their derivations of the theory. Caruth, in particular, was deeply criticized by scholars such as Stef Craps for what is commonly perceived as her focus on the individualized traumatic event, a perception of her work I've argued against elsewhere (Baron, "Coleman Silk" 67). Misguided as these criticisms of Caruth may be, they have led to passionate exhortations arguing for the need to include a focus on collective trauma. For example, at the Decolonizing Trauma Studies conference held at the University of Northampton in 2015, Stef Craps argued against the Eurocentric hold over the theory, advocating instead for trauma scholars to consider the intergenerational impacts of the trauma of colonialism, for example (Craps et al. 907). Other excellent work in the field includes that of Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, who has noted the erasure of "the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities" when arguing for the need to include the collective in trauma theory (Craps and Buelens 3–4). Even more recent are works like Marsha Lederman's *Kiss the Red Stairs: The Holocaust, Once Removed* (2022), which considers the intergenerational impact of the Holocaust on the second generation of survivors, and, although considered a memoir, operates almost as an encyclopedia of scholarship on intergenerational trauma.

At this point in time, then, the scholarship has expanded well to include a focus on collective and intergenerational forms of trauma. My inquiry in this article is not to prove that intergenerational trauma exists in *Fall on Your Knees*—that, I believe, is obvious, as a recurring thread in much of the existing scholarship on the novel attests—but instead to consider how intergenerational trauma is depicted through the novel's memory-work. I propose to show how music and film in

the novel participate in a form of memory-work that both influences subjectivity while carrying an ethical dimension that memorializes trauma to the next generation of the family. In so doing, I extend past scholarship—in particular, Gillian Siddal's work on improvisation and music in *Fall on Your Knees* and Candida Rifkind's analysis of film and sexuality in the novel—to consider how different elements of media are able to contribute to ongoing discussions of intergenerational memories of trauma. I develop this argument by analyzing the character of Frances Piper, focusing on her use of improvisation to develop a persona that connects her to her mother after Materia's suicide, resulting in a form of remediation in which music and film become transcribed into Frances' persona.

Improvisation as Resistance: Materia and *Let Us Have Music for Piano*

A breadth of scholarly work on *Fall on Your Knees* has considered theoretical insights related to stylization, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis, among others. Siddall comments upon the scenes of violence and trauma related to musical improvisation in the novel, while Coupal writes on the novel's stylization of trauma through an analysis of aesthetics and performance of trauma in the text. Other scholarly work, such as Pilar Somacerrara's comparison between the novel and *Jane Eyre* and Gabrielle Paro's work on interracial relationships in the novel, considers the neo-gothic elements that mark MacDonald's text. Still others, including studies by Atef Laouyene and Hilda Staels, focus on elements of racial and psychoanalytic difference. Regardless of whether these past scholarly works focus on trauma, the neo-gothic, or elements of psychoanalytic or racial difference, scholars have centred their inquiries through a focus on scenes in the novel that are stylized by musical performances or musical diction.

Music is a central element of Materia's life with James Piper; they meet when James is tuning her family's piano, and when their early life together quickly becomes unhappy, it is an unhappiness that is marked by music. As a fourteen-year-old Lebanese girl who marries eighteen-year-old James Piper without her family's consent, Materia is ostracized from her family and culture and sent to live with James in a town that will eventually become New Waterford, Nova Scotia.

Materia rejects James' expectations for his new wife—cooking, cleaning, and an interest in starting a family—and this tension coincides with the rise of her improvisations on their piano. In their early, happy days, Materia would play and “they’d sing their way through the latest *Let Us Have Music for Piano*” (20), but Materia soon becomes unhappy with her distance from her family and turns to improvisation: “mixing up fragments of different pieces in bizarre ways, playing a hymn at top speed, making a B-minor dirge out of ‘Pop Goes the Weasel,’ and all with the heavy hand of a barrelhouse hack” (23). Staels notes that Materia’s improvisations “transgress[] the limits prescribed by James” (328); indeed, James “[finds] them disturbing, unhealthy even” (23), and he yells at her for the first time when she plays “The Maple Leaf Rag,” a carnivalesque piece with a fast tempo, after he asks her to play something nice (24). When she becomes pregnant with Kathleen, she “pound[s] on the piano keys in the middle of the night” (24), a series of musical improvisations described as lacking in wit and equivalent to “[t]antrums,” and James then locks the piano (25).

His silencing of her musical improvisations, the result of her unhappiness at losing her family and becoming married and pregnant at fourteen, is directly connected to his expectations of her as a wife. As he tells her, “I’m not cooking anymore and I’m not cleaning. You do your job, missus, ‘cause Lord knows I’m doing mine” (25). Siddall notes that he views her music as a “discordant manifestation of childish anger,” whereas, for Materia,

this playing marks the beginning of her move to a very different ethos of meaning-making from James’, one that eschews linear, notated music and instead explores a highly physical relationship with the piano—she is pounding on it—a fragmentary and dissonant approach that juxtaposes fragments of preexisting musical forms in an experimental manner. (204)

Her use of pre-existing music in her improvisations corresponds with the desire to narrativize traumatic experiences; frequently, memories of trauma will appear fragmented or disjointed, and the therapeutic process is one that works to reformulate the fragmentary, traumatic memories into a cohesive narrative. By appreciating its similarities

with traumatic memory-work, we can recognize Materia's use of pre-existing music in her improvisations as a method of resistance in *Fall on Your Knees*.

It is no surprise, then, that when James allows Materia to get a job, thinking that she will become a maid or a cook in another household, Materia uses this freedom to become a pianist and return to her music. Playing the musical accompaniment for silent motion pictures, Materia has found her dream job; the narrator notes that Materia "can't believe she's getting paid for this" (16), and that soon she is "playing for local ceilidhs and travelling vaudeville troupes" (47). Her initial playing matches the films—"villain struggles with virgin in a macabre waltz, Strauss turned Faust" (46)—but when she turns down an invitation to tour with the Blackville Society Tap Twizzlers through Europe, knowing "better than to ask" James (53), she begins improvising once again (53). Her music transitions to include what she describes as the "occasional embellishment": "now and then a locomotive sped towards the audience through 'I Love You Truly,' and ran over them to 'Moonlight Sonata'; 'villains struggled with virgins to 'The Wedding March' and tenors saved the day to 'Turkey in the Straw'" (53). The audience loves her improvisations, thinking that her chuckling while playing was a sign that she was a "bit loony" (53), but in the context of viewing musical improvisation as a method of disrupting the early-twentieth-century heteronormative expectations for a young wife, her playing takes on a more sombre note. Materia's musical improvisations are both a reaction to a lost opportunity to tour with the vaudeville group and a method of recalling her past oppression by James. Silence follows music under James' control, and when he is angered by a shopkeeper who thought that Kathleen's musical talent came from her mother after Materia becomes popular around town as a pianist, he demands that she quit her job. In Materia's grief at the loss of her music for a second time, she wanders the cliffs near the ocean, slowly letting "her mind ebb away" (56).

Heritable Improvisations: Frances Piper, the *Dabke*, and "Goodnight Irene"

Improvisation is essential to Materia's sense of self because it becomes a method for her to disrupt the many expectations of the white,

heteronormative society in which she lives. When her ability to improvise is taken away from her, so is her sense of self, along with her ability to narrativize her life experiences in a way that could provide her with a future beyond her trauma. It seems logical, then, that later in the book, after Frances and Mercedes are born and James has left for World War I, Materia teaches her daughters to improvise. After Camille, Materia's sister, sneaks her an Arabic record with a watercolour of Beirut by night, Materia teaches her daughters to dance the *dabke*, a traditional Lebanese dance. In so doing, Materia stresses improvisation: "the trick is that the dancing and singing are unrepeatable. Once you know this, you're ready to start learning" (90). The performances of music and dance become a form of memory-work, one that allows Materia to pass down her Lebanese heritage to her daughters and becomes her manner of teaching her daughters improvisation. This lesson of improvisation is one that Frances takes to heart, as it is one of her only happy memories with her mother before Materia commits suicide after Kathleen dies in childbirth, when Frances is still a young girl. Frances inherits her mother's gift for musical improvisation; although James teaches Mercedes how to play piano "up to grade seven according to the Toronto Conservatory . . . he [gives] up on Frances early on," as "Frances prefers to play by ear, but only when [James is] out working" (185). Her preference to avoid playing when he is near is, presumably, because of his violent outbursts at improvisation. I read James' violence in the face of improvisation as a recognition that it functions as a method of dissent, disrupting the patriarchal status quo within his household that he seeks to uphold, whether it be through an insidious form of violence, such as locking up the piano to prevent Materia from playing, or through the sexual violence of raping Kathleen after finding her in a lesbian relationship. Frances choosing to play by ear rather than by sheet music signals her early preference for improvising as a method of unsettling James' control in her family life.

A key scene involving Frances' musicality in relation to James' control comes when James beats Frances in their shed. Frances is at home with her sisters, and Mercedes has taken out Kathleen's photo, placing it on the piano as she plays "Oh My Darling Clementine" for Lily. Lily has her face painted black with coal because she has been performing a "minstrel show" with Frances in the basement (259), recalling Materia's short career as a pianist through the reference to

minstrelsy. When James sees Kathleen's photo, he becomes quietly enraged, getting "whiter" while the "blue part of his eyes [heats] up," and Frances diverts attention from Mercedes, asking in an insincerely "helpful tone of voice" if Kathleen was a "slut" (261). Although James doesn't make an explicit connection between Frances' question and his rape of Kathleen, it surely recalls the moment of his incest, and he becomes "all lit up like an Easter candle" (261). James takes Frances to the shed, and his domestic abuse that follows is narrated through musical terminology, presenting the beating as a performance:

On Water Street, the outside walls of the shed thump now and then like a bass drum with a foot pedal at work inside it keeping the beat. In the shed the performance has begun. The upbeat grabs her neck till she's on point, the downbeat thrusts her back against the wall, two eighth-notes of head on wood, knuckles clatter incidentally. In the half-note rest he lights up her pale face with the blue wicks of his eyes, and the lyrics kick in *con spirito*, "What right have you, you have no right, no right to even speak her name, who's the slut, tell me who's the slut!" The next two bars are like the first, then we're into the second movement, swing your partner from the wall into the workbench, which catches her in the small of the back, grace note into stumble because she bounces, being young. Staccato across the face, then she expands her percussive range and becomes a silent tambourine. Frances gets through this part by pretending to herself that she's actually Raggedy-Lily-of-the-Valley, which makes her laugh and provokes his second verse, "I don't want to hear you speak her name," accidental note to the nose resolves into big major chord, "Do—You—Understand—Me?" We've gone all stately; it's whole notes from here on in. She flies against another wall and he follows her trajectory, taking his time now because we're working up to the finale. One more clash of timbers and tissues and it's finally opera, "I'll cut the tongue right out of your head." She sticks her tongue out at him and tastes blood. Cue finale to the gut. Frances folds over till she's on the floor. Modern dancer. (262–63)

The musical metaphors reinforce and explicate the nature of the violence in the scene. There are, of course, explicit references to the abuse Frances endures: “the upbeat grabs her neck till she’s on point, the downbeat thrusts her back against the wall”; the workbench “catches her in the small of her back”; she “flies against another wall”; when she “sticks her tongue out at [James],” she “tastes blood.” The aftermath of the violence is more explicit: the “swelling makes Frances look even younger than sixteen,” and this is perhaps why Mercedes brings Frances her dolls to “comfort her” before cleaning her face (263). For the most part, the perpetrator is missing from this description of violence. James is not the subject attacking Frances, but the “upbeat,” the “downbeat,” the “two eighth-notes,” the “staccato” that hits her across the face. Music and memory become implicated with Lily’s narration of Frances’ assault, recalling James’ earlier violence against Materia, which was spurred by her musical improvisations.

A further issue that this scene raises is the blurring of narratorial subjectivity. I view Lily to be the narrator of the novel due to the narrative frame of Lily telling Anthony about his mother; that narratorial perspective results in a blurring of subjectivity in this scene and also calls attention to Lily’s confabulations about her familial past. If we accept Lily as narrator, then many of the moments in the novel are imaginative reconstructions filtered through Lily’s persona—all of the plot that occurs before her birth, of course, but also scenes such as Frances being beaten by James in the shed. This scene is partially Lily’s memory—it is at her request that Mercedes plays “Oh My Darling Clementine,” the musical piece that begins the scene—but she is not present while James beats Frances, and so the violence that follows consists of memories passed down from Frances, imaginatively reconstructed by Lily. The integration of second person in “swing your partner” recalls Materia’s instructions to the girls when teaching the *dabke*, while the grammatical first-person plural of “we’re” and “we’ve” shows a blurring among Lily, Frances, Materia—and we, the readers, as the audience to the scene of violence—effectively moving away from the literal, grammatical use of the first-person plural to instead focus on the overall affective experience of the violence.

Although James is largely missing from the assault, Lily-as-Frances is active and present.¹ While Coupal registers Frances as “los[ing] her humanity,” rendered as a “‘silent tambourine,’ a dissociated instrument” (183), it is worth considering how exactly Frances could

have the “percussive range” to silence a tambourine. To produce a quiet sound from a tambourine requires great control: the instrument must be held flat, using gravity to avoid the jingles striking each other, and the performer must strike the edge of the tambourine with only their fingertips, held in a similar position as if they were about to snap their fingers. The technique is used for rhythmically challenging musical pieces. In this context, Lily-as-Frances is not wholly passive, but instead shows her agency by embodying a musical technique used to execute control for challenging rhythms. Frances as a “silent tambourine” becomes a powerful metaphor for subverting her father’s abuse through her enduring connection to her mother. The challenging rhythm she encounters is James’ violent interference in matrilineal relationships, which has resulted in the intergenerational trauma experienced by the Piper women. This reading aligns with Siddall’s analysis of Frances as engaging in “discursive resistance” in the scene, suggesting that she is, “in a way, participating in this improvised performance” (212). As she writes, even the phrases unmediated by musical diction—“she flies against another wall”—“use[] the active rather than the passive voice and make[] her the subject engaged in action, rather than the object on whom her father’s violent actions are imposed” (212). This contrasts with James, whose subjectivity is replaced with musical diction and pronouns without an antecedent. Siddall draws attention to this replacement to suggest that Frances has a “counterintuitive notion of agency whereby Frances cannot escape the violence enacted on her, but can disrupt it in this complex musical and discursive performance” (212). Lily’s unnerving integration of musical diction into Frances’ assault centres both her and Frances’ connections to Materia in a scene that continues the links between memory, music, and trauma in the novel.

But Frances engages in more literal performances than the stylized beating she endures at the hands of her father when she becomes a stripper at a local speakeasy owned by her mother’s sister and brother-in-law. As Siddall writes, Frances’ stripping at the speakeasy “echo[es] her mother’s improvisatory performance style” (210), suggesting that with improvisation, performers and audience become “autonomous individuals rather than . . . performers of socially scripted roles in an unequal power dynamic” (212). Indeed, this method of improvisation, in presenting the performers and the audience as equivalent in agency, recalls Materia’s early improvisations that interrupted James’

expectations of her as a young wife. Frances continues her mother's commitment to improvisation in her work at the speakeasy, thereby preserving her mother's memory. Consider, as an example, Materia's work as a pianist and Frances' performance of "Goodnight Irene" at the speakeasy. Materia's performance is what Siddall refers to as a "co-creation with her audiences, in that she eschews the formal separation of performer and audience and instead engages the audience in the production of her music, very much in the style of burlesque performers of that time" (201). She uses their steps, marking the rhythm of the performance, as a sign for her improvisation, integrating elements of Italian opera with popular music alongside their dancing. By engaging with the audience and the other performers, she subverts power relations of the period, presenting a co-creation between a predominantly white audience, Black performers, and a Lebanese musician. In comparison, the segment of Frances engaging in musical improvisation during her brief career as a speakeasy stripper shows her rejecting her audience's participation—her monotone singing brings on a "chorus of boos," yet she is unfazed and continues with the performance (343)—while continuing to subvert power relations: as Siddall notes, Frances "[parodies] conventional representations of sexualized female bodies under the male gaze" (201). While Materia uses her improvisatory performances as a means of defying racialized power structures of the period and to reject male expectations of her role as a wife, Frances uses it to both attract and dismiss the masculine attention inherent in her clientele at the speakeasy. Her position at the speakeasy involves stripping for the purpose of attracting male clientele, and yet her performance is one that dismisses their interest and input. And so, while the form of the two improvisations changes—Materia uses the feet of the vaudeville dancers to guide her piano, whereas Frances sings against the boos from the men in her audience—the function of the improvisations remains the same.

The similarity in the function of both forms of improvisation calls attention to the role of musical spontaneity: for Frances, improvisation functions as a method of memory-work, keeping the spirit of her mother's memory alive in her work at the speakeasy. Improvising at the speakeasy recalls her mother's lessons when teaching the girls the *dabke*; specifically, Materia's lesson that the "trick is that the dancing and singing are unrepeatable" (90). As a teenage girl engaged in

stripping and sex work, Frances experiences her performances as socially stigmatized but empowering, as they do recall one of the few happy moments of her short time with Materia. Recognizing that improvisation recalls her familial past provides insight into Frances' decision to improvise the lyrics of "Goodnight Irene": the original lyrics are that the singer will "see you in my dreams," not that they will "REAM YOU IN MY DREAMS" (343). Her song choice is deeply resonant for the scene, as it calls attention to pedophilia through the original song lyrics:

I asked your mother for you
She told me that you was too young
I wish dear Lord that I'd never seen your face
I'm sorry you ever were born. (Belly)

That Frances rewrites them for her immediate experiences of being too young to be a sex worker in a speakeasy links her contemporary, underage sex work and her family history: Materia, Kathleen, and Frances were all sexually abused by James. Materia was a child bride and became pregnant with James' daughter far too young to have been able to give consent; Kathleen was raped by James at eighteen, although his sexual feelings for his daughter began pre-World War I when she was at most twelve or thirteen years old; Frances is sexually abused by James much earlier than either her mother or sister, as her abuse occurs after Kathleen dies in childbirth when Frances is only five years old. Suicide appears as a closing theme in the song, and while the only suicide in the book is Materia's, it is worth noting that when James leaves for World War I, he leaves without what he refers to as either a desire to live or die and frequently risks his life to save lost soldiers during the war (110). Frances' decision to rewrite a song with themes of pedophilia and suicide to include vulgar slang that refers to intercourse in the final line of the chorus is a rewriting that recalls her, her mother's, and her sisters' sexual trauma at the hands of James, but it is also a rewriting that functions as a method of resistance through recalling Frances' memories of Materia.

What is unique in this understanding of music as memory-work is not that music can recall past memories. Pickering and Keightley outline as much in their 2016 monograph *Photography, Music, and Memory: Pieces of the Past in Everyday Life* when they write that

“recorded music facilitates a powerful evocation of the past only when it has long since acquired personal meaning and had invested in it some strong affective and symbolic value as well as biographical significance” (11). Frances’ approach to improvisation counters Pickering and Keightley’s position, as it is not the specific song that recalls her past trauma and Materia’s abuse at the hands of James; rather, it is the nature of her improvisation that functions as memory-work. Frances choosing to improvise a song that includes themes of sexual abuse and pedophilia allows her to co-create a performance that narrativizes her familial life in a manner that provides her with agency. In this context, performances at the speakeasy rewrite the typical expectations of a teenage girl working as a stripper. Instead of succumbing to the male gaze, her performances give her a degree of agency and empowerment that she is unable to attain in her home life. Frances’ performances also provide her with a connection to her mother through musical improvisation while allowing Frances herself to defy the power relations of the period, found both within her audience and through her rewriting of a song that recalls her abuse at the hands of her father.

A Co-Created Sense of Self: Frances and Louise Brooks

As much as Frances is deeply influenced by the memory of Materia, preserved through her continuation of Materia’s musical improvisations, she is equally influenced by the silent films of the period and, in particular, the actor Louise Brooks. Candida Rifkind writes on the role of cinema and sexuality in *Fall on Your Knees*, suggesting that MacDonald “disrupts the dominance of the written word by incorporating songs and visual images” into the novel (29), later arguing that the visual imagery, developed primarily through the incorporation of allusions to Brooks and her films, “comes to mediate between the subject’s history and its representation in the present” (30). Frances uses music and film to both preserve her mother’s memory and commitment to improvisation while also developing her own subjectivity, one that is highly mediated by the modernity heralded by silent films and the iconic Brooks bob.

Prior to taking her position at the speakeasy, she tells one of the nuns at her school that she wants to become a “cabaret parasite” when

she grows up, and the narrator explains that Louise Brooks has “usurped Lillian Gish in Frances’ heart” because she is the “best and the worst girl in the world” and “also the most modern” (245–46). Frances, accordingly, wants “to be sold into a ‘life of sin,’ forced onto the stage and into ‘houses of ill fame’ where life is tragic but so much fun” (246). As Rifkind notes, Frances’ cravings represent a desire to become Louise Brooks, and the narrator’s explanation alludes to Brooks’ performance of Lulu in *Pandora’s Box*, a film that “thematizes” a number of the “sexual transgressions (incest, androgyny, narcissism, lesbianism, prostitution) that occur within Frances’ family but are suppressed by its members at the level of representation” (36). Frances instrumentalizes the silent films of Louise Brooks to perform her familial trauma. In becoming Louise Brooks—by cutting her hair into a Brooks bob (289), fashioning her dresses to mimic Brooks’ style (246), and taking the job at the speakeasy, mirroring Brooks’ performance of Lulu in *Pandora’s Box*—Frances takes on a persona that allows her to perform her familial trauma through her sex work. By mediating Frances’ subjectivity through film, MacDonald presents Frances as actively and repetitively working through her familial trauma, but it is a repetition with a difference, defined by Frances being influenced by the silent film star.

Much like how Materia and Frances use improvisation as a method of unsettling the power relations of the period, Rifkind notes that Frances’ speakeasy performance also transgresses borders (37). As Rifkind writes, Frances

crosses genders in her dress and travels across nationalities in her choices of dance and music; she blurs distinctions between adult and childhood sexuality to both titillate and deflate her admirers; and, her choice of song lyrics introduces an oblique and grotesque commentary on her suppressed family life into her public exhibition. Frances’ wickedness—her deviance and her humour—complicates her burlesque act so that she inflects the performance with her own subjectivity. (37)

Frances’ mediation of her subjectivity through a desire to reach the modernity espoused by Brooks is thus consistent with her use of improvisation to maintain her mother’s memory. Both function as

methods of transgressing power boundaries of the period; both unsettle the audience, effectively allowing Frances to play *fort-da* with the male gaze: she strips to gain it, and then improvises to cast it away. Her use of film adds to her persona, inflecting her subjectivity with new meaning through the allusions to Brooks, a famous figure of female modernity, while signalling her past familial trauma; her use of songs directly evokes her mother's memory through improvisation. Silent films mark Frances' subjectivity as one that interrupts and transgresses boundaries of the period.

Frances' character reveals the role of silent films and musical improvisations as dialectical, in that the subject engaging with film and music both preserves the memory of others while also working to develop her own persona. Her identity becomes more complex when considering her relation to silent films and to improvisation. By engaging in musical improvisations at the speakeasy, her performances become memory-work, preserving the memory of her mother. The performance of music thus expands as memory-work in the sense that it is not just a specific song inflected with meaning that can recall the past, but also the nature of the musical performances themselves that memorialize her mother. For Matera, improvisation becomes a method of disrupting the typical power structures of the period while also effectively operating as her lifeline in an otherwise abusive and miserable household.

But Frances moves beyond musical improvisations when she allows her memories of her mother to become inflected with the influence of silent films; by being "bad" and styling herself after Louise Brooks, the "best and worst girl in the world" and "also the most modern" (246), she provides herself with a coping mechanism for surviving her abusive household. It is useful, here, to recall what exactly Frances strives for by developing her subjectivity based on the "most modern" girl in film: Jonathan Flatley, in his monograph on the melancholic affect of the modern period, connects modernity directly to loss, noting that modernity "signals nothing more or less than the impulse to declare the difference of a present moment in respect to the moments that preceded it, to perceive the specificity and difference of one's own historical moment" (29). For Frances, to become modern is to reject her past, to declare that her future will be different from the trauma that she has endured; however, becoming modern also recalls her past, as modernity's constitutive link to loss recalls the losses of

Frances' nephew, Ambrose, her sister, Kathleen, and, most importantly, her mother, Materia. This triggered recollection ensures that her use of film and music to negotiate her subjectivity is one that recursively negotiates memorializing her past with casting aside the past for her future, a future that she imagines separate from the repressed nature of her familial trauma.

In associating herself with Brooks' role of Lulu in *Pandora's Box*, Frances becomes more open and communicative than the silences inherent in her familial past. The future that she looks toward is one that rejects the silences so inherent in traumatized individuals. Styling herself as Lulu is a repetition of her familial trauma, albeit one that pursues a world without the repressive silences of her homelife. Such a repetition becomes emblematic of the recursive nature of memory in the novel: she desires to be modern—to be open, communicative, and to work through her familial past—and such a possible future is so radically different than her present that it represents a disjuncture, a severing from all that came before. In becoming modern, she does not forget her mother, but rather preserves and revives her mother's legacy of improvisation.

Memory, Media, and Trauma: Conclusions

Through her relationship to film and music, Frances shows how expansive a role such mediums can play when navigating memory and subjectivity. Frances' character evolves through her borrowing from Louise Brooks, and her use of improvisation becomes more significant when recalling her mother's early childhood lessons. Silent films and music then operate as memory-work in a method that extends far beyond the concept of postmemory Hirsch finds in family photographs. Materia's commitment to improvisation lives on in Frances, but instead of simply preserving her mother's memory for future generations, Frances revitalizes this commitment to improvisation and tethers its affects to her own subjectivity, allowing it to evolve and respond to her contemporary needs. While Materia was influenced by her audience and the dancers on stage, Frances rejects all audience participation; in so doing, she is able to reject the male gaze. For Frances, becoming Brooks-as-Lulu is a performance that recalls her mother, emphasizes her own commitment to modernity,

and casts aside the silences of her past; it is also a performance that informs us of the formal function and dynamism of music as memory-work. Frances' use of improvisation allows us to consider how memories of intergenerational trauma can change when inflected with film and music.

MacDonald's use of film and music throughout *Fall on Your Knees* is telling. Memory studies has moved beyond what is typically referred to as narrative or declarative memory; in the context of traumatic memories in particular, there is an emphasis on the sensory details of a traumatic scene, what has since been referred to as "sensorimotor memory" following scholars such as Bessel A. van der Kolk and Rita Fiser. By incorporating music and film into the memory-work of the novel, MacDonald ensures that multiple sensory faculties are engaged. In film, there is an emphasis on the visual; in music, there is an emphasis on the auditory. MacDonald's inclusion of these mediums into the memory-work in the novel is not a sign that music and film are more liberating mediums than literature, but is instead a focus on how the mediums come together. Each adds a further sensory element to the improvisatory performances that Materia and Frances engage in throughout the novel; the interplay of the media through improvisation is surprising and new, casting aside the repetitive traumatic experiences of the past.

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Notes

1. I use the phrasing of "Lily-as-Frances" to foreground Lily's role as narrator in this scene; although Frances is the one who is beaten in the shed by James in the family history, the scene itself has been creatively reimagined and narrated by Lily.

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Kelly Baron is a SSHRC-funded PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, where she studies representations of trauma in contemporary Canadian genealogical novels. She's a regular reviewer for Canadian Literature and the Literary Review of Canada, and is the former publisher of the literary magazine The Ex-Puritan.

“The False Fronts Haven’t Seen the Prairie”: Sinclair Ross’ As for Me and My House Reread as Settler Text

“I stopped and looked up Main Street . . . the night encircling it so dense and wet that the hard gray wheel-packed earth . . . was like a single ply of solid matter laid across a chasm. I hesitated a moment and went on dubiously, almost believing that when we reached the darkness we would topple off” (Ross 186). These words, spoken by Mrs. Bentley, the notorious protagonist of Sinclair Ross’ Canadian novel *As for Me and My House* (1941), suggest something unexplored in a book often celebrated for what it “would both confess and conceal, say and not say” (Kroetch 238). While Ross’ novel was initially canonized as a quintessential garrison novel during the cultural nationalist period (Atwood 34; Stouck, Introduction 3), it is a text that has always, in the words of one reviewer of the New Canadian Library edition, “reward[ed] frequent rereading” (McMullen, Introduction).

How, however, might such readings shift in the third decade of the twenty-first century? I propose that resituating Ross’ novel within its settler-colonial context, listening to the voices of Indigenous scholars such as Maria Campbell, Emma LaRocque, and Janice Acoose, suggests that the famous representations of land in *As for Me and My House* are shaped much more than has previously been surmised by the unacknowledged subtext of colonization. Mrs. Bentley’s perception of the settler town as resting on a “single ply of solid matter laid across a chasm,” and her sense that the settler characters could “topple off” the edge, exemplify a disconnect from the land with which neither the novel nor its critics have grappled. For while early canonical interpretations of *As for Me and My House* viewed the land

as incomprehensible—or, as Ross puts it, as “an indifferent wilderness, where we may have no meaning at all” (141)—the knowledge that Okanagan Elder and matriarch Jeannette Armstrong shares might allow readers to understand, instead, that “the land constantly speaks” (“Land Speaking” 176).

Rereading *As for Me and My House* in its context of colonization, and specifically in juxtaposition with depictions of land in Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, lends new significance to the stark physical disconnect between town and land in Ross’ novel. It also reveals the pull of the narrator’s senses against her settler consciousness, which generates a fascinating and unexplored tension in the novel. For while the settler context at work in Ross’ novel naturalizes an attempted erasure of the land, rereading *As for Me and My House* alongside works by Cree-Métis authors such as Campbell reveals that the land in *As for Me and My House* refuses to be suppressed, which brings a previously unexplored subtext into sharp relief.

Revisiting Subtext

Reading subtext in Ross is, of course, nothing new. Ross’ novel is famously “opaque” (Moss 138). Narrated by Mrs. Bentley, whose first name readers never learn, the novel proceeds as a series of diary entries. Across these entries, we learn of Philip Bentley and his wife’s arrival in the prairie town of Horizon, where Philip is to serve as the new minister (Ross 10). We learn of the small town’s petty, narrow-minded community (28, 42), see the harsh prairie environment take its toll on the characters (141, 160), and learn of the Bentleys’ eventual departure in the wake of an affair and the near breakdown of their marriage (222, 230).

In his afterword to the 1989 edition of the novel, Robert Kroetsch writes, “In refusing to ‘name’ Mrs. Bentley, Sinclair Ross teaches us to read the greatness of his novel, *As for Me and My House*, in the splendid dance of its evasions” (239). Even as critical focus has shifted and changed, reception of the novel over the years has consistently turned on that which goes unsaid (Stouck, Introduction 16). From an early psychological emphasis on the mirroring of characters with the town and its false fronts (Daniells vi; McMullen, Introduction), to the nature of Mrs. Bentley’s character (Cude 78; McMullen, Introduction),

to discussions of the influence of modernism on the text's creation and reception (Godard; Moss 139–40; Hill 252), to, after Ross' death, discussions of the novel's queer subtext (Fraser 45–66; Cramer; Raoul), the interpretation, and appreciation for the sophistication, of this work has long emphasized that which goes unsaid, that which takes place just under the surface of a novel in which "the obvious is forbidden" (Ross 125). Indeed, this examination of subtext in *As for Me and My House* might rightly be considered a national pastime, if only for Canadian literature scholars.

The mutually constitutive role of, on one hand, *As for Me and My House* as novel and as subject of critical apparatus, and of settler imaginings of Canada, on the other, lends significance to this rereading. That is to say, a novel like *As for Me and My House* not only depicted and was interpreted through, but also helped to produce, the settler worldview that came to be considered quintessential in early Canadian literature and culture. From its publication in 1941, to its canonization in the 1957 New Canadian Library edition, to the critical responses to the novel in the 1960s and 1970s, interpretations of *As for Me and My House* offered what was for decades considered emblematic imagery not only of the prairie, but arguably of Canadian literature *tout court* (Stouck, "Continuing" 695; Daniells x). These conceptualizations of the novel, which are the way I first encountered it as a white, non-Indigenous student in the undergraduate classroom of the late 1990s, situated it within debates over the nature of Canadian culture cemented during the cultural nationalist period, strengthened by Northrop Frye's 1965 conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* and Margaret Atwood's 1972 *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Literary Criticism*, which founded ideas of Canadian literature within a naturalized settler-colonial worldview. Critical interpretation of the imagery of land in this novel thus came to stand in for the self-imagination of the settler society dominant through the early period of Canadian literature (Daniells x): the hostile and indifferent wilderness that forces the Canadian psyche into close social relations (Frye 224; Atwood 34; Corse 2). Kroetsch emphasized this relationship between novel and national culture when in 1989 he argued that Mrs. Bentley "gives us a self-portrait that is a central fascination in the larger story of the Canadian imagination" and proposed that one can view *As for Me and My House* as "the beginning of contemporary Canadian fiction" (235).

Even in 2024, Penguin Random House Canada still depicts *As for Me and My House* as “an essential Canadian work—a precise and compelling portrait of our culture [and] our psyche” (“Excerpt”). The centring of something called “our” culture and “our” psyche continues to presume a cohesive Canadian self who can read a novel like *As for Me and My House* in a unified way, flattening the significant differences between readers in the context of Turtle Island, who of course may not all identify with the settler nation-state that Canada seeks to assert in these lands (see, for instance, Simpson 9). Furthermore, this critical paradigm through which Ross’ novel was canonized, I propose, significantly limits how the text can be read, masking tensions in the text that mark moments of resistance to this naturalization.

Even as the paradigm of the garrison mentality has receded in critical conversations, its hegemonic cultural underpinnings continue to shape what has and has not been noticed about the novel. As Aubrey Jean Hanson writes, a “decolonizing approach to reading” entails reading “within the context of relations of domination in North America” (15). Such a reading practice, I argue, has not yet been articulated for *As for Me and My House*.

As mentioned previously, then, canonical readings of Ross that helped contribute to and were also shaped by this conception of the national emphasize the natural world as “indifferent” (Ross 141) or “hostile” (Corse 2) and situate the town as a garrison (Frye 224; Stouck, Introduction 3). Mrs. Bentley describes the sensation of being trapped in the shrunken social world of the settler house or town many times, as when she writes: “The wind . . . [has] made the house a cell. Sometimes it’s as if we had taken shelter here, sometimes as if we were at the bottom of a deep moaning lake” (Ross 103). What I wish to highlight in rethinking the novel as settler text is to demonstrate that the safety the settler characters both seek and resist relies directly on their own disconnected and dislocated understanding of the land, and that it is the characters, not the land, who are “laid across a chasm.” In other words, the land is speaking, but the characters do not know how to listen.

Un-erasing the Métis Presence in *As for Me and My House*

As Mrs. Bentley lies awake at night in the room of the “neat half-breed girl called Annie” who works as a cook at the Kirbys’ ranch (131), she

names an anxiety that reveals a previously unexplored aspect of the novel. Lying in Annie's bed during her visit to the ranch, in a section of the novel often otherwise discussed as a turning point, Mrs. Bentley ruminates: "there's always the thought of the dispossessed Annie sleeping in the kitchen on a makeshift mattress" (134–35). These words, which invoke not just the displacement but the dispossession of the only identifiably Métis character in Ross' novel, reveal a fulcrum with which readers can pry open and critique the text, and invite a rereading that revisits the question of the unspoken in *As for Me and My House*.

Annie is the only overt indication of any Cree, Métis, or other Indigenous presence in the novel's depiction of the prairies. So little of Annie is shown in the text that, beyond her presence, not much can be known about her. Annie's family and kinship ties are not depicted in the novel, and she speaks only twice (131, 146), but her resistance comes through in the ways the text allows. In her own way, Annie resists the racial hierarchies that structure the relationships in the novel, for example in the response she gives to Steve, the boy whom the Bentleys have temporarily adopted, and who is outraged at being "ordered . . . out of the kitchen. No halfbreed, he says, is going to talk like that to him" (132). Annie "glares" when Steve attempts to boss her around (131), and although she does grudgingly agree to make him coffee as part of her paid work, her manner is far from subservient. When Mrs. Bentley indirectly suggests that the children at the ranch need bathing by offering to wash them, Annie responds "shortly," her refusal to be pressured into additional domestic roles clear: "suit yourself . . . I do the cooking here" (131).

Annie has largely been overlooked in scholarship on this novel, perhaps because she functions as a foil for the white characters situated at the centre of the narrative. However, the stubborn and resistant presence of a Métis character, however distorted within this white settler text, allows one entry point into the novel, as it points to voices that were and are speaking about the land, namely the voices of Indigenous scholars and writers who share a very different understanding of place than that naturalized through the early settler worldview. Reread alongside Indigenous voices and the knowledge they share, the land in *As for Me and My House* appears richly present, if distorted through the senses of a settler protagonist who is unequipped to understand what she perceives. In other words, Mrs. Bentley's vague unease about Annie's dispossession and the elided but

present voice of Annie reveal tensions in the novel, and raise questions about what is said and unsaid about the place in which *As for Me and My House* is both written and set.

Canonical interpretations of the novel do not situate the characters' famed inability to comprehend the land as a function of colonization. When Mrs. Bentley describes the land around the town of Horizon through vague sweeping images devoid of detail, commenting on "the vacancy and stillness of it, the bare essentials of a landscape" (82), or when she depicts Philip's paintings as capturing the "still expanse of prairie" akin to a "lunar desert" (117; 112), when she describes "the wilderness outside of night and sky and prairie, with this one little spot of Horizon hung up lost in its immensity" (33), or expresses a sense that the characters might "topple off" the edge of town if they dare venture too far (186), these depictions point to and foreground a relationship that can be unpacked between the fact of the settler context and the near-total lack of knowledge of the land on the part of the characters.

When this context is taken into account, considering both the Depression-era settler farming practices that were destroying the land (Ross 198; McLeman and Ploeger 308) and the attempt to dispossess the Métis people by means of the earlier homesteading laws that profoundly altered the land (Campbell, *Halfbreed* 4, 7), Ross' characters, the psychological interplay between them, and the town of Horizon itself can be understood more fully as embedded in a process of settlement, disruption, and attempted dispossession. Part of the logic of this process is to situate the land as inanimate, there to be managed and subdued. The land in the novel, in turn—and thinking with Armstrong ("Land Speaking" 178)—can be heard to be speaking back.

Resituating Settler Worldviews: Reading Ross with Maria Campbell

It is perhaps not surprising that a naturalized settler worldview would shape an early Canadian novel. Rather, what is fascinating to revisit is the way in which Ross' novel both elides and reveals its settler context and the voice of the land. Indeed, while significant critique has focused on influences such as the ways modernist alienation shapes and makes possible a novel like *As for Me and My House* (Hill 252; Stouck, Introduction 3), a crucial, unnamed additional condition also

informs the novel's creation. As I will explore further, the very possibility of a town like Horizon, in a book like *As for Me and My House*, is produced by settler laws and ideological practices that Ross does not name because they are so taken for granted in his work as to be naturalized, but that Métis author, scholar, playwright, teacher, and Elder Maria Campbell describes in detail in her now-canonical memoir *Halfbreed* (4–7).

Campbell's memoir, as Cree-Métis critic Deanna Reder argues in *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimowina*, is part of and an expression of what Reder names as a long tradition of autobiography in Cree and Cree-Métis culture (11, 18), contrary to previous assumptions that erased, distorted, or obscured this tradition (18–19). Reder notes that in Cree and Cree-Métis cosmologies, telling “one's story is not a way to take centre stage as much as to share and visit together” (9), and that autobiography in this context “is an act of autonomy in that it expresses the values of one's own story while at the same time an act of generosity, of sharing, that contributes to the history of the community, often in the face of colonial narratives determined to either erase or undermine nêhiyaw presence” (18). Campbell's writing, in turn, is rooted in a Cree-Métis worldview in which the land is a relation, and is thus a place of safety. As Campbell writes in “We Need to Return to the Principles of Wahkotowin”:

Wahkotowin meant honoring and respecting . . . relationships. They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us. (5)

The intimate knowledge of land in Campbell's work speaks from within a worldview, then, in which the land is not inanimate at all but is part of a complex web of relations (“Conversation” 3:58). This understanding of land, in turn, sheds light on the way the land is portrayed, and its relationality distorted, in *As for Me and My House*.

Rereading *As for Me and My House* while listening to writers such as Armstrong, Campbell, Acoose, and Reder allows a response to this

erasure of context, this minimizing and decontextualizing of both Annie and of the land within a white settler narrative. As Acoose observes, “[F]ew, if any, non-indigenous writers and scholars have had extensive first-hand knowledge of our ways and thus were and are unable to correctly represent our distinct social, political, and economic ways of life” (Acoose, “Halfbreed” 139). As Acoose further notes, a “culturally specific” understanding “reveal[s] possibilities for the interpretation of Indigenous literatures” (“Halfbreed” 217). In contrast, while *As for Me and My House* notes Métis presence, such precise representations appear to lie beyond its range as a settler text.

A careful reading of representations of land in Campbell’s *Halfbreed* can help situate what is missing and erased in Ross’ depiction of the prairie. Acoose observes that Campbell’s perspective on land as a Métis woman, and her representation of her Cheechum’s Cree worldview, when listened to, can shape how one reads. Acoose writes:

As an Indigenous woman, Cheechum’s knowledge, values, and belief system . . . [were] derived from a closeness to the land. As a result . . . Cheechum has tremendous insight into human relations, as well as a rich understanding of plants and animals. (144)

Métis characters in Campbell’s memoir know how to hunt, fish, and trap, and how to find food in the bush (11, 35), and they are able both to feed themselves and to sell food to the desperate settlers (13). When danger comes in Campbell’s memoir, it comes not from the land but from the settler towns, which are dangerous due both to invasive “dryland farming” practices that contribute to the destruction of the topsoil (McLeman et al. 419, 422, 427; McLeman and Ploeger 308), and to the earlier settler homesteading laws, cultural and legal constructs through which the settler society sought to dispossess the Métis, and which set the stage for the dustbowl. As Cree poet Beth Cuthand’s poem “Four Songs for the Fifth Generation” makes clear, it was the homesteaders who “tore up the land” (229), and suffered, as well, as a result.

The land in the novel is only figured simultaneously as hostile to human life, and as indifferent and incomprehensible, as a result of the erasure and ignorance of the Indigenous worldviews that might better shape the relationship to the land. In *When the Other Is Me*, Métis

scholar and poet Emma LaRocque observes that even when colonization is not overtly named, visions of land in Canadian literature are shaped through Europe's "colonizing master myth" of "civilization encountering savagism" (39–40). As LaRocque notes, unlearning settler stories is fundamental to changing settler-Indigenous relations; LaRocque emphasizes this relationship between land and story in her discussion of the 1991 BC Supreme Court case *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*. In this ruling, which was later overturned, the judge employed European narratives of Hobbesian savagery to deny Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en title to their lands. This European storytelling of the land generates a justification for the attempted "disinheriting" of Indigenous peoples (LaRocque 45). Campbell speaks similarly of the interdependence of land, language, and story in her discussion of the emergence of her book *The Road Allowance People* (Gingell 189), a relationship that also shapes depictions of land in *Halfbreed*.

In contrast to *As for Me and My House*, *Halfbreed*, which is partially set in an overlapping time period, conveys a rich and subtle perception of life—human, animal, plant, spirit—on the prairies. These representations stand in stark contrast to Philip's "lunar" prairie landscapes that appear to lack any detail (112). This difference in representation is about more than their somewhat different, if overlapping, settings in time, and speaks to the different understandings of land available within the narrative voices of each of these books. As Cuthand's poem observes, "Back in the thirties, / things weren't so bad for us / as it was for the homesteaders" (229). The voices that shape each of these books in fact perceive and depict the prairie in strikingly different ways.

A novel like *As for Me and My House*, then, not only depicts but also produces the settler worldview by which the settler society sought to justify an attempted dispossession. The homesteading laws and the process of destroying the land that Campbell describes are elided and naturalized in Ross, even as they produce the dustbowl society that allows Ross' novel to come into being. It is these naturalized—yet highly artificial and colonial—processes that help generate the vivid dustbowl setting for which the book became famous. What is surprising is not so much that a settler worldview shapes Ross' novel, but that the novel appears to both resist and enforce an attempted erasure. While representations of land in *As for Me and My House*

have been widely accepted as depicting a “natural” quality of place (Daniells vi, x; McMullen, Introduction), rather than a quality of the perceptual system of the characters, rereading Ross with Indigenous thinkers such as LaRocque and Campbell belies this naturalization.

Land as Life: Campbell's Abundant Prairie

Indeed, in contrast to visions of land in *As for Me and My House*, the land in *Halfbreed* is depicted as a place of safety that can provide for Maria and her family. It is a place that is rich with life. From the very first page in the vivid descriptions of “a family of beavers . . . busy working and chattering” or of “wild roses, tiger lilies and thistle” (1) to Maria’s childhood memory of the spot where the “most luscious strawberries in the country” grow (29), the book is full of the life—the sounds and smells as well as the sights—that fills the prairie. We hear of “red willow” (19), of “seneca root and berries” (34), of spruce (35, 41, 61), pine and tamarack (41), “blueberry, cranberry, and Saskatoon berry” (54), of owls (54), moose and duck (34), elk (62), coyotes, wolves, and bears (36). Unlike Mrs. Bentley, Maria knows these animals and recognizes their calls and sounds (62). We learn of the power of the bad medicine at Montreal Lake, which “you cannot see or hear, only feel and smell” (46), and that “Momma and Cheechum used to make a broth from the bark of green poplar for colds” (91). The land, in these depictions, is a place of plenitude.

Maria takes comfort in the sounds and smells of place. In the last night in her old house after the children are taken away, when she is about to leave for the city with her abusive husband, she “[lies] in bed and listen[s] to the frogs sing” (128). In these painful moments, Maria is able to take comfort in Cheechum’s words and strength (114, 128). Cheechum’s home, with its “familiar smell of herbs and roots [and] rabbit soup simmering on the stove” (179–80), provides her a sense memory of safety and comfort, not only because Cheechum is a figure Maria can look up to for her strength of spirit and self-possession (180), but also because this strength is inextricably related to Cheechum’s refusal to acknowledge the settlers, to her hunting and trapping, and to her “being completely self-sufficient” due to her knowledge of the land (11). Cheechum is an important link for Campbell to family, land, and culture, as well as to a worldview that

recognizes the proper relationships between people, land, animals, and spirits and ancestors. As mentioned previously, comparing Campbell to Ross thus reveals an inversion of the location of safety: the bush in *Halfbreed* provides food, freedom, and dignity, while the settler towns are spaces of danger and shame. “Town” is the only place in *Halfbreed* in which young Maria sees the men walk with their heads down, due to the racism and violence of the settlers (37–38).

Halfbreed clarifies the history that is occluded in Ross, narrating how the Métis people came to Saskatchewan and were then dispossessed of the land when “the white settlers encroached on them by using Homestead laws” (4). This process, Campbell writes, took place in several waves, and “in the late 1920s,” despite Métis petitions to Ottawa to respect their title to the lands where they lived, “the land was thrown open for homesteading and again came the threat of immigrants. By this time the lakes were drying up and the fur and game had almost disappeared” (7), so there was no other choice but to attempt the homesteading that was destroying the land, as it was the only way the government would acknowledge title. Under the earlier homesteading laws that shape the physical environment in which Ross’ novel is set, Campbell writes, “the land was ten dollars for a quarter section. Ten acres had to be broken in three years, along with improvements, before title would be granted” (7). In other words, colonial forms of so-called land management were used to seek Indigenous dispossession.

The reference to “breaking the land” in Campbell’s work provides a framework with which to revisit both the dust and the sense of disconnect expressed by the characters in Ross’ *Horizon*. The naturalized worldview that shapes the text situates the land as there to be dominated, subdued. Claiming title, under the homesteading laws, as Campbell’s writing reveals, obligated settlers to quite literally “break” the land (7, 20), with repercussions that carry forward into Ross’ time. As Robert A. McLeman and colleagues note,

Farming practices of the era . . . created ideal conditions for wind erosion once the droughts struck. An example of such a practice was plowing fields to a fine consistency prior to leaving them fallow, on the assumption that the exposed soil would have a higher rate of absorption and retention of moisture; instead, this practice produced

conditions that made drought-desiccated soil more susceptible to wind transport. (427)

Further, as McLeman and Ploeger write, “Farmers were encouraged to plow their land often, in the belief this would make their soil better able to absorb precipitation, and to leave fallow land plowed and bare to prevent weeds from using soil nutrients. Some boosters of Western agriculture . . . went so far as to actively promote the idea that ‘rain follows the plow’” (308). The results across the prairies were, of course, disastrous in the long term, with the harshest consequences arriving during the time that Ross’ novel narrates.

Breaking the land is at once physical—the removal of the traditional plants that hold the topsoil, the repeated ploughing of the soil “to a fine consistency,” the creation of farmland out of grassland and bush—and metaphorical, as one might “break” a wild horse, or as suggested by Great Grandpa Campbell’s unsuccessful attempt to break a young Cheechum (Acoose 142; Campbell 10). Given the naturalization, by law and culture, of the requirement to “break” the land as the only permitted relationship with it, it is perhaps not surprising that the land would resist.

Mrs. Bentley as Settler Protagonist

What is surprising, then, is less that the settler subtext might structure a novel such as *As for Me and My House*, but rather that the text of the novel in fact richly rewards this rereading. The distinct disconnect between the town and the land, for example, can be reread in light of this context. When Mrs. Bentley writes, looking out over the prairie beyond the edges of the town of Horizon, that “a queer, lost sensation comes over you of being hung aloft in space” (214), I propose that this depiction points as much to the settlers’ ignorance of the land where they live as it does to the Bentleys’ famously stifled lives in the small Presbyterian town (Stouck, Introduction), to modernist alienation (McMullen, Introduction), or to Philip’s potentially closeted romantic inclinations (Fraser).

The placelessness of the novel further entrenches a settler perception of land; though Ross was born and raised in Saskatchewan (“Sinclair Ross”), and therefore a Canadian audience may presume a

Saskatchewan setting, a signature feature of the novel is its lack of precise location (Stouck, Introduction). Horizon, famously, could be any dustbowl town, anywhere in the American plains or Canadian prairie. Readers are provided no markers of territory, a choice possibly made to widen the audience appeal of the book (Harrison), with the result that, beyond the fact of the dust and prairie, as readers of the novel, we literally do not know where we are. Reconsidered in light of colonization, it becomes possible to view this disconnect as a further expression of a colonial relationship to land, one that denies the importance of specific place.

In contrast, Armstrong's discussion of the relationship between land and language is instructive:

I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time. My own father told me it was the land that changed the language because there is a special knowledge in each specific place. All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings—to its language—and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations . . . In this sense, all Indigenous people's languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it. ("Land Speaking" 178)

This emphasis on precise geography, on knowing and listening to the land in its specific location, contrasts the placelessness of *As for Me and My House*, a placelessness that could be possible only in the settler imagination, and one that further disconnects the characters, and the reader, from the land in which the novel is set.

The town is repeatedly described as "perched" on the land, separate from it, holding on tenuously, as though it exists in empty space. Readers hear that the house is "perched up again all alone somewhere on an isolated little peak" (178), that the schoolhouse is "perched up alone on a little hill, prairie stretching round it for miles" (8). Mrs. Bentley writes, "The town seems huddled together, cowering on a

high, tiny perch, afraid to move lest it topple into the wind" (4). The "indifferent" wind, she adds, "frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned" (4). The many repetitions of *perch* in a landscape that is the flattest in the country, distinctly lacking in "high, tiny perch[es]," the fears of the "indifferent" wind and of the land beyond the town, negate the land even as they appear to depict it. Mrs. Bentley writes, "You can scarcely see the [grain] elevators at the end of town. One step beyond, you think, and you'd go plunging into space" (103). Beyond the domestic world of Horizon lies not the rich and abundant prairie described in Cree and Cree-Métis thought, but an incomprehensible nothingness as perceived through the settler protagonist's worldview.

When scant details do appear about the land beyond the edge of town, they primarily convey danger, as when coyotes lure the family dog, El Greco, into a dash for the wilderness—a potent symbol of Philip's longed-for freedom—only to "turn . . . and [make] an end of him" (212). On her walks, Mrs. Bentley writes that "the darkness [is] alive and slinking" (190), and reflects: "it was as if I were entering dead, forbidden country, approaching the lair of the terror that destroyed the hills, that was lurking there still among the skulls" (135). To the settler characters, as these passages suggest, the wilderness appears inherently unsafe, and the characters do their best to learn as little about it as they possibly can. The town's inability to perceive the land, this sense of being "perched" on the prairie, can be reread not as a response to an inherently indifferent landscape, but rather as a quality of the town's own self-absorption and self-created isolation as a disconnected, inward-looking settler space. Mrs. Bentley evocatively, if inadvertently, supports this assertion when she writes: "A Main Street is such a self-sufficient little pocket of existence, so smug, compact, that here we feel abashed somehow before the hills, their passiveness, the unheeding way they sleep" (141). While her comment may be a critique of the townspeople's small-mindedness, it also points back to her own limited ways of understanding the environment in which she lives.

At the same time, as I will explore further, the land in the novel appears to resist this dislocation. The voice of the land where the novel was in fact written arguably breaks into the text, despite naturalized attempts to ignore, subjugate, or silence it. The pull of Mrs. Bentley's senses against her settler consciousness thus generates fascinating

tensions throughout the novel. At best, Mrs. Bentley writes of the land beyond the settler town as something that “withstand[s] us, remain[s] as serene and unrevealed as ever” (141). At worst, the relationship is one of active antagonism. On her walks she fears “something wild and ghostly . . . like a skulking, primeval terror” and describes “a queer sense of something cold and fearful, something inanimate, yet aware of us” (183, 141). While readers may be invited to read this line as Mrs. Bentley projecting her own fears onto an inanimate landscape, a different reading of this line might propose that the land is not in fact inanimate at all. Her insistence on the inanimate nature of the land thus generates tension with her own perception that the land is in fact somehow “aware.” While the novel focuses on Philip’s painting, perhaps Mrs. Bentley, who is herself a sensitive musician and writer (Cramer 56), at some level senses what the logic of her society denies.

“Underlying Rhythms”: An Unsettled Rereading of *As for Me and My House*

Contrary to her repeated insistence on the land’s inanimate nature, then, Mrs. Bentley actually describes the land as alive many times, even as she denies and contradicts her own perceptions. As Daniel Coleman writes in his discussion of Don McKay’s analysis of Duncan Campbell Scott, this manner of “contradiction [is] pervasive in colonial experience” (Coleman). Mrs. Bentley grapples with what her settler worldview will not let her understand, as when she writes: “The stillness and solitude—we think a force or presence into it—even a hostile presence, deliberate, aligned against us—for we dare not admit an indifferent wilderness, where we may have no meaning at all” (141). This vision simultaneously perceives the animate and relational quality of the land (Kress and Horn-Miller), even as it overwrites this perception, insisting that it is without “meaning.” These moments reveal the pull between Mrs. Bentley’s direct perceptions of the land and a settler-colonial worldview that positions land as a neutral resource to be exploited, one that can have no animate quality of its own.

The rare moments in which Mrs. Bentley feels not fear but a puzzled sympathy with the land suggest an awareness of something she perceives but cannot comprehend. On another of her long walks, she writes: “Everything seemed aware of me. Usually when a moonlit

winter night is aware of you it's a bitter, implacable awareness, but tonight it was only curious and wondering. It gave me a lost, elemental feeling, as if I were the first of my kind ever to venture there" (210–11). If we rethink Ross in a colonial context, she is in some ways correct. Mrs. Bentley is certainly not the first person to "venture" onto the prairie and attempt to listen to the land, but she may well be the "first of [her] kind" to do so. What this rereading suggests is that, even in the obscuring enacted by depictions filtered through settler consciousness, the land cannot be silenced. At some level, Mrs. Bentley perceives the land's animate quality, even as she cannot quite understand it. To revisit representations of the land in Ross with Cree and Cree-Métis voices in mind brings into relief, then, a startling, if not surprising, subtext in *As for Me and My House*. Ross' novel of "evasions" becomes, anew, a quite different book.

Reread in this light, it becomes apparent that the interplay between the narrator's attuned, thoughtful senses and the denial and repression of these perceptions by her settler consciousness generates a fascinating tension in the novel, and indeed reveals moments when the voice of the land can be seen to break back in to the narrative. In striking contrast to her other impressions of the abyss, Mrs. Bentley writes of one of Philip's paintings:

But still you feel [the horse in the image] belongs to the earth, the earth it stands on, the prairie that continues where the town breaks off . . . You sense a flow, a rhythm, a cycle . . . [T]he town in contrast has an upstart, mean complacency. The false fronts haven't seen the prairie. Instead, they stare at each other across the street as into mirrors of themselves, absorbed in their own reflections. (97)

How evocative, this passing observation that the town hasn't "seen" the prairie, not because the land is not present, alive with its own "rhythm" and "cycle," but because of a quality of the settler town. Absorbed in its own reflection, unable to comprehend its own location, the aptly named (Daniells vi) town of Horizon gazes inward on itself and does not see the prairie. These rare expository moments run directly counter to the representations of land in the rest of the novel and reveal in swift flashes of insight what the rest of the text evades.

Perhaps it is possible to articulate more clearly what Mrs. Bentley can sense but cannot comprehend when she continues: “The town shouldn’t be there. It stands up so insolent and smug and self-assertive that your fingers itch to smudge it out and let the underlying rhythms complete themselves” (97). Taken together, the recurring visions of the land in Ross as a chasm or abyss, the impressions that the land drops off into nothing at the edge of town, and the shockingly sparse details about the land, its “rhythms,” and its inhabitants, can therefore be revisited in a new light. In the absence of the ability to listen to the land, the refrain of danger and an incomprehensible (McMullen, Introduction), yet distinctly animate quality recurs again and again, which invites the question of what, exactly, structures this relationship. How would the characters know the paths of gophers, where to find the “most luscious strawberries” (Campbell 29), or what the land is trying to tell them, if they perceive the land primarily as a terrifying abyss? The settler worldview that shapes the narrative cannot comprehend these moments. And yet Annie’s nearly elided presence in the novel reveals a break in the smooth surface of what can be reread as a settler-colonial text.

In Annie’s disruptive presence in the narrative, as in Mrs. Bentley’s depictions of the land, lies a refusal, one that invites an entirely different way of reading this novel. This reading is one that listens to voices that share rich knowledge of the land. Rather than viewing the land as either “hostile” or “indifferent,” as the early critics proposed, and rather than situating the evasions in the text as about whether Mrs. Bentley is “pure gold and wholly credible” (Daniells, Introduction vii) or an unreliable or even manipulative narrator (Cude 83) of her life as the wife of a failed prairie minister in a suffocating garrison town (Ross 19, 21, 26), or about the modernist “search for meaning in an incomprehensible universe” (McMullen, Introduction), or the romantic and sexual dynamics of the Bentleys’ marriage (Ross 21), I propose that it is Mrs. Bentley’s settler worldview that generates a significant sense of evasion in the novel, as she denies, and yet struggles with, the animate quality she senses in the land. The violence that Mrs. Bentley foggily perceives against the grain of her settler worldview points as much to the physical destruction of the soil as to the imposition of a colonizing discourse of management, disconnection, and dominance, in part naturalized through literature

such as the novel itself, that insists that the land could not possibly be perceived as alive, part of a living web of relations.

To return to the description of Philip's painting mentioned above, Mrs. Bentley writes: "Philip himself could feel that there was something wrong, but he didn't know what" (97). Some eighty years after the novel's publication, and reading with Campbell and other Indigenous scholars, elders, writers, and knowledge keepers in mind, it is no longer possible not to know what is wrong. The characters in Ross' novel cannot properly perceive the land, and this inability may be partly a question of dust and drought, but it is also certainly one of attempted dispossession, dislocation, settlement, and disruption. The characters in *As for Me and My House* cannot understand the land, not because it is indifferent to them as Mrs. Bentley supposes, but because their settler worldview denies them the tools and skills they would need to listen, and therefore to know where they are.

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Naava Smolash teaches in the English department at Douglas College and holds a PhD in English Literature from Simon Fraser University. Her fiction, poetry, and nonfiction appear in popular and academic publications, including *Studies in Canadian Literature*, *English Studies in Canada*, *West Coast Line*, *Briarpatch*, *Everyday Feminism*, *LitHub*, and *the University of Toronto Quarterly*. Her essay "The Opposite of Rape Culture Is Nurturance Culture" is used in counselling centres and university classrooms worldwide and grew into a book, *Turn This World Inside Out* (AK Press, 2019). Originally from Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, she lives in Coast Salish Territories and is a 2018 graduate of *The Writer's Studio*.

For Whom Does the Water Flow? The Politics and Aesthetics of Eeyou Istchee's Water in Blue Bear Woman by Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau¹

Indigenous feminist scholarship has been especially careful to remind: there is no decolonization without Indigenous presence on Indigenous land and waters.

— Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang*, *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View*

Introduction: Water and Relationality as a Theoretical Framework

At an event called “Water Is Life (But Many Can’t Drink It),” held in September 2017 in Toronto, Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) presented in her keynote address images of crystalline water structures being formed symmetrically from “deflated-looking mushy droplets” after human prayer (Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2).² These images, write Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou), Eve Tuck (Unanga), and K. Wayne Yang, are a reminder that “humans have a relationship to water that is reciprocal” (2). Water, they add, “in its profound relationship to places, to its multiplicity of forms, in its fluidity, and its worldwide connections to all places and peoples . . . has become an appropriate organizing principle” (16). This organizing principle is what the Métis artist Erin Marie Konsmo underlined at the same event: for Konsmo, our relationship with water can be a model of our relationship with others; accepting that water is “self-determining” and appears in various forms can help us accept our kin as they are (qtd. in Smith, Tuck, and Yang 3). It is from this perspective, that water organizes and models our relationships to one another and to the

other beings around us, that we analyze Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau's novel *Blue Bear Woman* (*Ourse Bleue*, 2007). Victoria, the narrator and protagonist, undertakes a journey to her ancestral territory, Eeyou Istchee,³ known to settlers as James Bay or Jamésie, weeks before the erection of hydroelectric dams on the Rupert River and the inundation of the lands around it. Her mission is urgent: before the Hydro-Québec project renders the land inaccessible, she must find the remains of her missing uncle, who, some fifty years prior to Victoria's journey, wandered away from his hunting territory in search of game and never returned. Pesemapeo Bordeleau's narrative is thus situated within the context of Québec's hydroelectric project. We argue that water operates as the main contextual element of *Blue Bear Woman* and evokes a series of material relationships and a specific sociospatiality that contrast with the model of relationality that has engendered the extractive and imperialist hydroelectric project in Îyiyû country. This relationship is highlighted by Pesemapeo Bordeleau's emphasis on the materiality of animals, food, and spirituality, and in a general embodiment of the land and everything therein that has been and will be further impacted by the expansion of Québec's nationalist hydroelectric project. We thus study water as an "organizing principle" by examining how Victoria's mission intervenes in the settler state's use of the water and allows her to underline her relation to the land, to ancestral knowledge, and to her kin, as well as it enables her to map the land according to these corporeal and qualitative relationships.

Our analysis is informed by Indigenous feminist views centred on relationality and on the importance of good relations between humans and other-than-humans. As non-Indigenous scholars, we conducted this research mainly through textualized Indigenous and, more specifically, Îyiyû scholarship; we recognize that our insight into the Îyiyû world view is limited and, at best, fragmentary. Our hope is to show the impact of Hydro-Québec's colonial extractive projects on Îyiyû communities, share with readers what we have learned by engaging with Pesemapeo Bordeleau's novel and Îyiyû knowledge, and connect those findings with discourses about water in Québec society. We thus consulted sources on Îyiyû ontology, which understands the world as "a network of relations between all living things," in the words of Rodney Mark, former chief of the Cree Nation of Wemindji (6). In this sense, we understand the disruption of water flows by the

hydroelectric dams as part of a larger settler disruption of the Îyiyû flow of life. *Blue Bear Woman*, however, does not abide by the Western, fatalistic end-of-the-world trope, but rather underlines the survival strategies and the continuing relationships on the territory. Pesemapeo Bordeleau's narrative epitomizes what Seneca literary critic Mishuana Goeman calls "a story of survivance and future" (*Mark My Words* 23).

We will also apply Goeman's concept of (re)mapping to show how this Îyiyû narrative of water interrupts the prevalent Western and colonial narratives of progress. Goeman coins the term *(re)mapping* in her study of literary works by Indigenous women in the United States that "challenge the seemingly objective and transparent forms of Western mapping" (23). These creative works "tell and map" a future that "produces possibilities for Native people" (23, 2) in general, and, especially in the case of Goeman's corpus and the novel of our study, for Indigenous women who have borne the brunt of harm and erasure caused by settler patriarchal and hierarchical spatial reconfigurations. (Re)mapping the territory refutes not only colonial geographies, but also colonial management of Indigenous communities through the reorganization of their "bodies . . . and social and political landscapes" (3). Goeman further explains what the addition of the prefix *(re)* brings to *mapping*: "The framing of 're' with parentheses connotes the fact that in (re)mapping, Native women employ traditional and new tribal stories as a means of continuation or what Gerald Vizenor aptly calls stories of *survivance*" (3). Throughout the novel, we learn that Victoria's uncle's unusual trajectory during his hunting trip was due to the scarcity of game in the territory, scarcity that has been brought about through centuries of settler greed and colonial policy. The Hydro-Québec project appears to be inscribed within the same colonial and extractive logic, and the protagonist's quest mirrors her uncle's will to survive and to resist. As Richard Preston observes throughout his study of Cree narrative, and as *Blue Bear Woman*'s protagonist reminds readers, the spiritual mission bestowed upon the female character is traditionally reserved for men in Îyiyû culture. In this sense, Pesemapeo Bordeleau's narrative is anchored in the *(re)* of *(re)mapping*, in that it creates new stories from traditional knowledge and old stories.

The socio-political backdrop of the narrative situates it in the context of Îyiyû resistance to Hydro-Québec's use of the land and

waters of Eeyou Istchee and highlights the ways in which the hydroelectric project of the Crown corporation affects not only the territory's waters, but also all aspects of life for the Îyiyûch. We read Pesemapeo Bordeleau's novel as an aesthetic and political response to the colonial project of Hydro-Québec in Eeyou Istchee. Before examining this response, it is important to present a summary of Hydro-Québec's activities in Eeyou Istchee and what it means to Québec's nation-building project.

The Reconfiguration of the Land by Hydro-Québec

The James Bay project, led by Crown corporation Hydro-Québec, aimed at reorganizing Eeyou Istchee's territory and waterways to serve the needs of Québec's industrialized south. The project was also presented to the Québécois people as an important economic step towards nationhood. This move by premier Robert Bourassa widened the meaning of the provincial Liberal government's catchphrase, "Maîtres chez nous," or "Masters in our own house," to include northern Québec, inhabited by Cree, Innu, Naskapi, and Inuit peoples, and where the Euro-descendent Québécois had not yet settled. Before the 1970s, the mantra applied mostly to the south of the province. Québec was, however, given stretches of Rupert's Land in 1898 and 1912 under the obligation that it negotiate the surrender of land rights with the Indigenous peoples of those territories. Thus, with the prospect of a hydroelectric project, Québec was eager to take over the northern territories that it would lose to the Crown in the absence of a treaty. From then on, all discussions about this project would be mired in settler-nationalist discourse (see, for example, Beaulieu).

The arrival of hydroelectric dams and the consequent rerouting of the waterways and flooding of parts of the territory changed the Îyiyûch's relationship with water. It was more than just a question of dams and reservoirs. For Matthew Coon Come, former Grand Chief of the Cree Nation, it represented "a terrible and vast reduction of [the Îyiyûch's] entire world" (qtd. in Wynn xxi). Throughout the Indigenous resistance to the project, the Québec government led a campaign to invalidate Îyiyû ways of knowing the territory and Îyiyû spirituality to downplay the devastating impact of the project on the land and on the people that had protected and lived with it for

millennia: “For the first time,” observes Hans Carlson during his travels to the territory, “Cree lands were defined not by watersheds, traplines, and family agreements, but, rather, by latitude, longitude, mean sea-level geodesic benchmarks, and resource harvesting management” (234).

Redefining the land thus meant redefining Îyiyû peoplehood: relocation by the government, as explained by Jamie Pashagumskum (Îyiyû), whose father lost his family’s territory to the flooding of the Caniapiscaw River, “was a sudden change . . . and it served to distance people from the land in many ways.” Pashagumskum himself also experienced displacement when his community was removed from Fort George, “where [his] people could reconnect with family and friends. Fort George was also a place to celebrate events together, like weddings and walking out ceremonies for young children touching the Earth for the first time.” The government forced the community to relocate to Chisasibi’s current emplacement in 1980, where, Pashagumskum writes, the “housing situation is a far path from the traditional lifestyle of the Cree.” Furthermore, as Mimie Neacappo (Îyiyû) explains, “The specific relationships between people and their interactions with the land, animals, plants, and spirits of the land are what have woven the liyiyiu⁴ cultural fabric” (7), and, as a result, “the chaotic destruction of the land has had dire social consequences such as the disintegration of traditional Cree moral values and the breakdown of the communities” (13).

Such water imperialism also has a specific geographical orientation; the harnessing of water that flows in the north of Québec provides the south with electricity. Water is perceived according to the dominant Western epistemology as something which can be controlled, commodified, and sold as electricity, which in turn runs the engines of modernity. Since 1973, proponents of the massive, state-funded hydroelectric project espoused the positivist argument of superiority of humans over nature and allowed the Société d’énergie de la Baie James to reroute many rivers in the north of Québec to build dams, artificial reservoirs, and power plants. This supremacist view of the land and other more-than-human relations, the separation of people from their territory mentioned in Pashagumskum’s quotation above, and the arrival of settlers from the south for the sole purpose of working on the plants, mark the abstraction of the body from the land. It is in this light that Pesemapeo Bordeleau’s narrative involves a

rescaling of the body to interrupt the Québécois nationalist narrative and to reinsert corporeality into the land, consequently mapping the land with and through these embodied relationships.

Storytelling and Embodiment

As Caroline Desbiens explains in her monograph *Power from the North*, in order to render their resistance to Québec's colonial imposition and extractivism on their territory legible to settlers, who often demonstrated an intentional ignorance and refusal to acknowledge the Îyiyû uses of land and water or governance over territory,⁵ the Grand Council of the Crees mimicked certain settler governance practices, such as uniting all Îyiyû communities under one flag and using discursive devices around nationalism that are comparable to those of Québécois national discourse. Similarly, Neacappo explains:

At the time of Quebec's proposed economic venture, liyiyiuch were not yet legally officially defined as a Cree Nation. liyiyiu society still consisted primarily of family units. Community groups were only defined under the Indian Act. Furthermore, liyiyiuch were certainly not politically organized in the Western sense. It was in the heat of the developing news that for the first time the liyiyiuch gathered forces amongst the (then eight) communities and assembled as one fighting power. It was also out of this momentum that the Grand Council of the Crees (of Eeyou Istchee) was born. (11)

Innu scholar Pierrot Ross-Tremblay notices a similar tendency in his community. He observes that the settler state recognizes settler values in the Essipiunnuat reserve's band council governance as indicators of success and a way to "overcome colonialism" and "free a society from profoundly complex traumas, various forms of unaddressed intra-family injuries and a sense of indignity" (5). *Blue Bear Woman*, in contrast, offers a political resistance that does not necessarily mimic settler politics and understanding of counter-movements. Such stories and narratives offer personal and subjective accounts, rather than

objective and abstract ones, as well as an interpretive tool for the changes brought about by colonialism and extractivism that ties the personal to the historical and the political. They establish a different ethic that is context-based and relational and offer different remedies for the colonial trauma and the community's "sense of indignity."

Storytelling, in Pesemapeo Bordeleau's novel, is thus an ethical embodiment of all that is related. Goeman also remarks on this relational, ethical embodiment in works by the Indigenous feminist writers of her corpus and qualifies it as a decolonial strategy to resist and counter the violence, alienation, and disembodiment of colonization. In *Blue Bear Woman*, alienation and disembodiment are the results of different extractive projects such as mining and hydroelectricity in Eeyou Istchee. Pesemapeo Bordeleau also highlights the embodied character of storytelling in a separate paper titled "Koukoume Ka Wapakaout," published a few years after her novel and titled after her grandmother and one of the characters of *Blue Bear Woman*. Îyiyû storytelling, as Pesemapeo Bordeleau explains in that article, "comes from ancestral memory which is transmitted through words" (12). She further explains that, when embodying the characters of a story, notably by standing up and mimicking their "natural performance," she becomes those characters: humans, animals, and even water. Quoting Nihithaw/Woodland Cree scholar and performer Geraldine Manossa, Pesemapeo Bordeleau insists on the relations embodied by the storyteller:

Through our storytellers, we are exposed and witnesses to the movements, the songs, and the dances of water, the trees, and all the living creatures concerned. When a Cree storyteller tells a story, their sounds, words, and movements are inspired by the territory which they experienced. When they imitate the sound of the waves, they embody the water they have visited and experienced. (qtd. in Pesemapeo Bordeleau, "Koukoume Ka Wapakaout" 11; our translation)

Pesemapeo Bordeleau then posits literature as an extension of Îyiyû storytelling traditions:

We, writers, are the new keepers of language, of our oral tradition written on paper according to a holistic worldview in which we consider our roots and Mother Earth with all that she bears. We are evolving to adapt while holding on to our essence, in harmony with our cultures. Literature may seem less embodied than oral storytelling—it doesn't hold the same sacred dimension as tales and myths—but it protects and maintains this tradition by perpetuating and adapting it to modernity. (12; our translation)

The narrator-protagonist of *Blue Bear Woman* is in constant movement. Her destinations are never fixed, as she lets herself be guided by the animals, waters, and spirits that she encounters along the way. Furthermore, the narrative itself moves between different times: chapters alternate between Victoria's memory of her childhood and her present time. This movement and the encounters lend a flow to her story that evokes the flow of bodies of water that the imminent Hydro-Québec project will be harnessing.

Victoria's numerous encounters with humans and other-than-humans on the territory "[disrupt] the linear and patriarchal narrative of original sin that begins with knowledge produced from her embodiment" (Goeman, "Ongoing Storms" 117). The embodiment of the land and relations on it is thus "a Native feminist praxis [that] can begin to tackle the cycles of destruction or even to dismantle the narrative that colonization, or conquest is complete" (117). As we will see below, to achieve this, *Blue Bear Woman* effectuates a reconfiguration of space and geography and, to borrow from Goeman again, a rescaling of the body.

Reconfiguration of James Bay to Eeyou Istchee

Victoria's quest to find her deceased uncle's body connects her to her spiritual gift, which in turn leads her to the location of the remains of her great-uncle. Her journey to the deceased body isn't linear and takes her to six of the nine communities of Eeyou Istchee that have formed the Grand Council of the Crees in response to the Québécois state and Hydro-Québec's advances in the territory.⁶ Pesemapeo Bordeleau's narrative engages with an epistemic system that does not

frame land as a basis for sovereignty separate from Indigenous embodiment. Rather, it underlines the Îyiyû relations and cultural and spiritual practices, as well as the impacts of Hydro-Québec on these aspects of life in Eeyou Istchee.⁷

The narrator thus presents two different world views in her story, a biculturalism that was frequently evoked during the 1970s James Bay testimonies on the impact of the La Grande hydroelectric complex (Desbiens, “Le Jardin”). Instead of navigating the waterways her ancestors would have travelled, the narrator undertakes her journey and reconnects with the territory and her kin by travelling on service roads built by Hydro-Québec. However, while she uses these colonial roads for her own national and personal affirmation, her entrance into the territory marks the paradigmatic differences between the two ways of life.

The first chapter of the novel sets the stage for this biculturalism and highlights the opposition between settler and Indigenous ways of relating to the land. During her stop in the settler mining town of Matagami, on the former trapping territory of her kin Jos and Allaisy, which has since been destroyed by the erection of the town in 1963, Victoria comments on the decrepit state of the municipality. Matagami is both a temporal and a spatial threshold. The dying mining industry—which is one of the first extractive industries that penetrated Eeyou Istchee in the 1950s—and the anxious settler inhabitants, former mine workers who anticipate unemployment and poverty, are giving way to another industry: hydroelectricity. The state of this town can point to a possible cautionary tale for the settlers who have set out on yet another exploitative mission of extractive colonialism. The narrator insists, however, on the presence of Jos and Allaisy’s spirits on their former territory, regardless of settler encroachment.

The colonial, disembodied understanding of land is further highlighted as the main character is about to enter her ancestral territory beyond the mining town, where provincial signage warns her of possible dangers ahead: “Isolated route, enter at your own risk” (Pesemapeo Bordeleau, *Blue Bear Woman* 3).⁸ This signage signals two different paradigms: one that perceives nature with fear and denies relationships with different forms of life, and one that inhabits it. It is the latter that Victoria highlights throughout her narrative by foregrounding the material relations that bind her to the territory. In his notes on his stay with the James Bay Cree community, Carlson also

observes that this fear is implicit in the warnings amongst non-Indigenous hunters (4–5). It stems from the denial of life on a territory perceived by the settler population as empty, isolated, and devoid of relationships.⁹ The signage is a colonial narrative of absence and the narrator's road trip is thus a *presencing*,¹⁰ since Victoria demonstrates throughout her journey that Eeyou Istchee is far from being “isolated”; rather, life is plentiful on the territory. For instance, upon entering the territory, Victoria and her husband come across some wild mushrooms for their evening meal; the narrator describes with flawless detail the varieties encountered during the “hunt,” and refers to her ancestral territory as “nature’s fast food court” because of the abundance of food available in the bush (*Blue Bear Woman* 2). Her journey to her territory reactivates memories and ways of knowing and being that help her (re)map the territory through storytelling.

The protagonist's spiritual mission constitutes the main thrust of the story. While her first destination in Eeyou Istchee is set to be Nemaska, a bear guides her towards another community, Waskaganish (*Ourse Bleue* 19). It is in this town that she will meet her spiritual mentor, Johnny Humbert Mistenapéo, and learn about her task of finding her great-uncle. Mistenapéo, a friend of Victoria's great-uncle, George, explains that, through his vision, he has brought Victoria to Waskaganish with the help of “the spirit of all of the caribou of the territory” to inform her of her quest (83). While a comprehensive account of Îyiyû spirituality is outside of the scope of this article and of our knowledge, it is important to note that the spiritual gift or guiding presence in Pesemapeau Bordeleau's narrative appears to be what the Îyiyûch call *Mistabeo*. The name Mistenapéo is phonetically very close to *Mistabeo*, an anglicization of the Îyiyû word *mistaapaau* which, according to Elders Geordie and Jacob Georgekish, is a “spirit helper” who warned an Îyiyû man “that white men would come on a large boat” —before contact with the Europeans (qtd. in Bussi res et al. 304). Îyiy  Elder John Blackned tells anthropologist Richard Preston that it is up to the individual to accept or reject this presence: “You meet them, you see them coming and if you want to bother with them you meet them. If you don’t want to bother you don’t go on to meet them” (qtd. in Preston 125). Victoria's decision to follow the bear and her acceptance of the gift and the mission bestowed upon her by Mistenap   is thus an intentional and affirmative action which further highlights the protagonist's subjectivity and responsibility towards her community.

As the narrator and her husband leave the town, they encounter a “son of the territory” walking beside a slow-moving car on the roof of which a handwritten sign reads *Save the Rupert River (Ourse Bleue 41)*. As Victoria and her husband “eat on the banks of the Rupert River,” she regretfully reflects on the river’s “turbulent waters crash[ing] against the riverbed’s massive rocks that have blocked the river’s forward motion for centuries. That power soon to be tamed, harnessed, converted into comfort for people’s homes” (*Blue Bear Woman 22*). The Save the Rupert movement, embodied by this Îyiyû water protector walking the territory, ties itself to the narrator’s spiritual mission of finding the remains of her uncle before the flooding of the territory.¹¹ The novel presents a spatiotemporal rescaling that involves intimacy with Îyiyûch and other-than-human inhabitants of the land, including Victoria’s kin spread across the different communities she visits, her spiritual Elder, her settler friend whom she meets at the end of her journey and who guides her to Malcolm (another spiritual Elder), her ancestors’ spirits, animals, and animal spirits. Furthermore, by highlighting these relations, she counters not only the *terra nullius* ideology, but also the settler perception that the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the territory does not require work and subjectivity and would thus be *natural*.

Blue Bear Woman as a Narrative of Land and Water

The knowledge that Victoria finds on the land is relational and collaborative. She is attentive to the guidance of the lynx, the caribou, and the bear. This knowledge is, however, illegible to settlers such as her husband and her father, both of whom have dismissed Îyiyû spirituality. Victoria’s political and spiritual quests then dissociate her narrative from the Western dichotomy of spiritual and material, as well as political and personal. Rather, it represents, as Martin Hébert underlines, the ways in which neither is a dichotomy at all; the elements of each are “inextricably intertwined” (36; our translation). This dualism refuted in *Blue Bear Woman* also underlines the epistemic duplexity between a settler view and an Îyiyû view of water and land. One is inscribed in an epistemological system that perceives water and land as commodities that are extracted and, once the profit is exhausted, disposed of; the other is grounded in a world view in

which water is permanent, protecting and protected by other beings on the territory. Along the way, Victoria often stops to pray or recharge emotionally and spiritually on the shore of a body of water, be it a lake or a river, and performs ceremonies. During these ceremonies, Victoria is “inhabited by the elements dancing in a white light intersected by colourful flashes” (*Blue Bear Woman* 31). Her body is in interaction with the water, a mutual encounter that evokes the reciprocity that LaDuke highlights in the talk that we have cited in the introduction of this paper. The ceremonies that Victoria performs often involves singing, employing her voice and the material animal skin of her drum; they aim to restore, upon her return to the ancestral territory, “good relations with water” (Smith, Tuck, and Yang 16). Her journey in search of her uncle’s remains engages her in mourning the waterways that will be violated by Hydro-Québec.

By storying her spiritual journey and the territory on which this journey is taking place, Victoria resignifies the land and the water and inscribes them in the bigger narrative of the people of this land. She brings forth a form of knowledge that is different from the *sui generis* Cartesian *cogito* (Goeman, “(Re)Mapping” 295). As Carlson also highlights, this epistemology, which “creat[es] and maintain[s] . . . relationships, which amounts to creating and maintaining meaning” (31), contrasts the quantifying knowledge of Hydro-Québec’s engineers, for whom the water is knowable through a series of scientific measurements devoid of any relationality.

Victoria’s engagement with the land and the waters through her rituals also foregrounds a temporal rescaling. On her second trip to Waskaganish, her friend asks her to come over and evaluate his artwork. Overwhelmed and moved by the friend’s creations and by the recent revelations in her life, notably the discovery of her last name and her new spiritual visions, Victoria stops by the river to clear her thoughts: “the river lures me with its long, grey sandbank . . . I walk, I breathe, and the strangeness of this voyage north to my roots overwhelms me with a jumble of emotions” (*Blue Bear Woman* 72). And then her past “comes to the surface” in a rhythm that evokes that of waves and of bodies on the water: “The past, the alcohol, the abandonments, the disappearing of loved ones all come to the surface like the drowned from the bottom of a lake” (*Ourse Bleue* 99). While the coming to the surface can be read as a metaphor, it is the rhythm of the water that gives cadence to her resurfaced memories. By the

river, she enters another temporal space where she interacts with a crow, her spiritual mentor's totem. Upon her return, her white partner is both worried about her and enraged by her late arrival to their appointment with her cousin. This is the first explicit sign of the growing cultural gap between the two: "[H]ow can I tell him what I was meant to experience on the riverbank? A stranger in a culture whose rules he knows nothing of, Daniel fears ridicule more than anything" (*Blue Bear Woman* 75). Daniel, Victoria anticipates, will understand neither her relation to the water nor the temporal transformation she experienced by the water. He is, rather, preoccupied by patriarchal concerns for his ego and by his Western, commonsensical understanding of reality. For Victoria, by contrast, being by the water is a moment of loss of ego through relationality.

The land and the water circumvent conventional time and establish another temporality. All there is and ever was, such as Jos and Allaisy's spirit and her uncles remains, her relations, and her memories of childhood, is present on the land and in the water. The flooding of the land and rerouting of the rivers means severing this connection with the land and a drastic temporal alteration. When Victoria hears about the future harnessing of the Rupert River, "[p]art of [her] resolve collapses" (50). In fact, the protagonist remarks to her cousin that her "most vivid dreams [take] place when . . . [she is] camping between the Rupert and the Eastmain rivers" (50). The materiality of the water is a nourishing source of spirituality through which Victoria can fulfill her responsibility to her family. When she finally visits one of the construction sites on the pretext of collaborating on an archaeological art project before the destruction of the land, she falls silent; she and her guides are "shocked by the devastated forest and the huge piles of rock and sand next to craters dug by giants" (138). More than "five thousand years" of inhabiting the territory are suddenly disrupted by Hydro-Québec's reconfiguration of the land (140); Victoria is "overcome with sorrow" (141).

This destruction is put in contrast with her settler father's constant fear of nuclear annihilation throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The novel suggests that the father's employment at National Defence exacerbates this fear; to protect himself from the threat, he builds a bomb shelter and further isolates his family from their kin (53). The father's fear is marked with immobility, and his individual responsibility towards his nuclear family operates through rupture from community. This speaks, on the

one hand, to what the settlers consider a legitimate threat, and, on the other, to different ways of resisting disasters: the father's individualist and isolating response to a hypothetical threat is contrasted with Victoria's collective and social responsibility towards her people and all the elements of the territory in the face of true industrial destruction. While, for the father, the nuclear bomb represents the end of the world, the Îyiyû community, like many Indigenous communities on Turtle Island, has been faced with apocalyptic destruction of their land and their communities since the arrival of the colonizers. In this light, the story of the narrator's great-uncle George and of his death, told on the eve of the flooding of the land, is distinct from settler end-of-the-world narratives and serves as both a cautionary tale of starvation (Feit) and a narrative of survivance (Vizenor).

George's Story: Cautionary Tale and Îyiyû Survivance Narrative

During his visits to the territory in the 1970s, ethnographer Harvey Feit noticed that starvation stories were told repeatedly by older Îyiyû hunters to younger ones.¹² These stories highlight, Feit writes, "how surviving is grounded in the land, and how surviving can be both aided and threatened by relationships to animals, Eeyouch, and Whitemen" (39). Carlson, too, underlines "a cultural characteristic that points to the larger relationship between the hunter and the hunted. The hunter trusts the land to take care of him . . . and this indicates the confidence and hope that they had in their relationship with the land and animals: if it was good, if they were confident and able, then they would eat" (Carlson 47). The fact that wolves may have devoured George's body, as the visible bite marks on the bones show, attests to this severing of the relationship between the Îyiyûch and other beings on the land and to the disruption of both Îyiyûch's and other creatures' trust in the land. The wolves devoured George because they did not recognize their relationship anymore—and, possibly, could not trust that the land would provide for them. General starvation brought by the colonizer's actions on the land disrupted the order of things. But Pesemapeo Bordeau's is not a fatalistic and tragic narrative of disappearing. Throughout her trip, Victoria emphasizes the dynamic life in Eeyou Istchee and highlights the continuing kinship relations that have survived the colonial impositions of both Québécois and

Canadian governments. The finding of George's remains happens in the presence of other kin—Victoria's brothers and her cousin—and with ceremony: the cousin's wife has sent a bag made of caribou skin for George's remains to be brought back and buried in on his trapping territory. Furthermore, at the end of her journey, the protagonist decides to return and live on the territory amongst her kin; her own and her family's healing happens through knowledge and the regeneration of kinship and relations.

In his monumental work *Manifest Manners*, Gerald Vizenor theorizes "survivance" as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name" (vii). Native survivance stories are, in this sense, "renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy" (iv). The story of George is thus a survivance narrative, one that carries in it a reckoning with colonial harms and with the dead, as well as the promise of a resurgence, notably of spiritual and social affirmations in the face of this new colonization of water. This survivance is rooted in decolonial epistemologies and embodied ways of knowing and understanding the world.

In Pesemapeo Bordeleau's narrative, death too has an embodied manifestation: the protagonist's quest is to recuperate the bones of her dead uncle, whose passing is rooted in the colonial wounds of famine and dispossession. The physical gathering of family members at the site of George's remains is further evidence of the importance of this embodiment. The insertion of the bodies and of embodied kinship into the land disrupts the colonial narrative that has organized meaning on the territory through the logics of conquest and extraction. The remains of George are re-membered by Victoria in the presence of her kin, surrounded by archaeologists on the site who try to preserve Îyiyû objects before the territory is flooded. Therefore, *Blue Bear Woman* displays a "symbiotic relationship between the injured body and the rest of the community" (Goeman, "Ongoing Storms" 119).

Conclusion: Rescaling the Body, Reconfiguring the Land

Two world views are in opposition in Pesemapeo Bordeleau's *Blue Bear Woman*, as they are in Eeyou Istchee upon the arrival of resource

industries in general and Hydro-Québec in particular: “one enshrined in the metaphysical understanding of [I]ndigenous hunting peoples and the other in the outsiders’ marketplace narrative of ownership, control, and sovereignty” (Wynn xix); one of kinship with the land and its waters, the other of humans dominating nature. These two world views lead in turn to different reconfigurations of land. The protagonist contests Hydro-Québec’s vision and reconfiguration of the land with her own understanding of the land as corporeal, intimate, and relational. In so doing, she, to borrow Goeman’s term, *rescales* the body. If, according to Hydro-Québec and settler scalar logic, “Indigenous bodies are made absent or disinterred to lands now renamed and domesticated” (“Ongoing Storms” 101), Pesemapeo Bordeleau’s novel reaffirms Goeman’s suggestion that, “[i]n thinking of the body as a geography connected to other geographies under the structure of settler colonialism, we can uproot it from narrowly defined colonial scales” (102). This entails a move away from the privatized, atomized, and individualistic vision of the body to connect it to the land and to other bodies on the land. Through this lens, even the hydroelectric dams constructed in Eeyou Istchee are “structures that mark embodied experiences” (102).

Through the course of her journey, the protagonist of *Blue Bear Woman* underlines her corporeal connection to the land and its material elements, and it is through this physical contact that she gains access to her spiritual gift as a medicine woman. Moreover, it is the rhythm of her body that leads her in her spiritual quest. Despite her eagerness to begin her spiritual ceremony to locate her uncle, Malcolm, her spiritual guide, advises her to take time to allow her body to grieve first; her body is an integral part of her spirituality and needs to be present and active during her quest. In fact, bodies in Victoria’s narrative are always in motion and present. Later, in the cave where the location of her uncle’s remains is revealed to her, Victoria is accompanied by other beings who have travelled through the spirit world to accompany her and help her use her gift in the service of her people and her kin. There are consequently no clear lines between the physical and the spiritual. Unlike in dominant Western epistemologies, where the body hinders the mind and the spirit’s access to the creator and to higher beings, in Pesemapeo Bordeleau’s novel, it is bodies of living beings (human *and* other-than-human) and spirits of the ancestors on the territory which lead the way. While on

the road, Victoria is guided by a bear, by a lynx, and by moccasins made of caribou skin. When weighed down by old age, Victoria's mentor travels through the body of a crow. These bodies in movement map out a geography and tell a story of the land that are constitutive of bodies and of the İyiyû ways of life. In the same way, with the temporal back-and-forth between her present journey and her childhood memories in the first part of her narrative, the protagonist creates a movement that disrupts the linear colonial time that has, in turn, disrupted the flow of Indigenous bodies on the land through forced sedentarization and the flow of water through hydroelectric dams.

In Eeyou Istchee, rivers are routes and highways, but they also hold historical and relational significance (see also Yazzie and Baldy 1): Mark, for example, when talking about the Paakumshumwaashtikw (Old Factory River), calls it a "historical route." He further explains: "Many families used it. My grandfather used to always tell me stories about paddling down and portaging along Paakumshumwaashtikw. Yes, most of the stories were about paddling and portaging from the lake to the bay. This river really is a historical route that was used by more than one family" (qtd in. Buissières, Mulrennan, and Stewart 302). Ironically, as we've already highlighted, the protagonist of *Blue Bear Woman* does not navigate on rivers and lakes, but instead uses the service roads and highways that were built to make way for Hydro-Québec's workers; however, she goes along these roads as her ancestors did along rivers, from community to community, and highlighting relations and kinships. This kin-based mapping is what distinguishes Pesemapeo Bordeleau's novel from fatalistic settler narratives of Indigeneity: despite the imminent destruction of the Rupert River and the construction of hydroelectric dams to which the service roads testify, the territory continues to be marked by the presence of living as well as deceased İyiyû bodies. In this sense, Pesemapeo Bordeleau is not so much concerned with what Konsmo calls "concepts of purity" (qtd. in Smith, Tuck, and Yang 3). She understands the entanglement with different infrastructures and that this entanglement changes strategies of resistance, relation, and storytelling. The main character's rescaling of the body and (re)mapping of the land interrupt what Sarah Hunt calls *colonialscares* and settler logics that present Indigenous lives as dying and expendable. Hunt suggests that colonialscares rigidify space in their attempt to establish settler spatiality as normal and natural and as always-already there (72). This rigidity, which contrasts the fluidity that

Indigeneity and Îyiyû identity represent in Pesemapeo Bordeleau's novel, renders the colonial spatial logic brittle and easily susceptible to collapse, much like the collapse of the rigid building of the church burying Victoria's white husband in her dream in the beginning of the novel.

As Pesemapeo Bordeleau herself explains in a passage quoted above, storytelling is an extremely important act in Îyiyû culture, inasmuch as it is constitutive of Îyiyû peoplehood. Colonial and statist projects have aimed to erase Indigenous narratives to enact an uncontested, official history that renders the land prior to the arrival of Europeans *terra nullius*. Novels like Pesemapeo Bordeleau's *Blue Bear Woman* offer a counter-narrative resignifying territories, lives, and relationships, reimagining the world through artistic creation. They decentre the settler perspective and immerse the reader in an Îyiyû world view.

Notes

1. We are indebted and grateful to Îyiyû artist and columnist Maïtée Labrecque-Saganash from Waswanipi First Nation—a community in Eeyou Istchee visited by Victoria in *Blue Bear Woman*—who carefully read this paper and provided generous comments which helped us better understand the context in which Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau situates her novel; Maïtée's reading and comments also helped us correct some cultural inaccuracies in our analysis. We have consulted her since Îyiyû spirituality is an important element of Pesemapeo Bordeleau's novel and we are both non-Indigenous academics with limited knowledge of that spirituality. Maïtée's reading and comments were both informative and humbling, and we are grateful for her time and insight. Furthermore, we decided to adopt the *Îyiyû/Îyiyûch* spelling when referring to the Eastern Cree people of Eeyou Istchee, otherwise known as James Bay Crees. While this decision favours the coastal dialect instead of the inland dialect, which uses the *Îyinû/Îyinûch* spelling, it most importantly disambiguates the confusion possible, especially when it comes to world views and spirituality, between the numerous Indigenous nations sharing the name "Cree"—itself derived from an Ojibwe exonym distorted by French colonists. We have chosen to use the endonyms—or autonyms—*Îyiyû* (singular) and *Îyiyûch* (plural) to reflect the linguistic revitalization consequent with the Indigenous resurgence and self-determination currently unfolding. Nevertheless, when referring to a specific community or organization, we keep intact the names as they are being used (e.g., Grand Council of the Crees, Cree Nation of Wemindji, etc.); furthermore, we have not altered the words used by authors in quotations.
2. This event was organized by the Mooshkahan Planning Committee, a collective of artists, water protectors, and students, faculty and staff of the University of Toronto. We believe what LaDuke presented at the event was based on Masaru Emoto's experiments on water crystals, which suggest that water molecules are affected by thoughts, feelings, and prayers.

3. Rodney Mark, of the Cree Nation Government, explains that Eeyou Istchee “translates as ‘the land of the people’ and refers to the homeland of the Crees of Northern Quebec . . . But since ‘Eeyou’ applies not only to Crees or other human beings, but to living beings in general, Eeyou Istchee also connotes ‘the living land’” (3).
4. Neacappo explains her use of the term *Iiyiyiu*:
Iiyiyiu Aschii is the Cree term referring to Cree land and territory in the James Bay region in Northern Quebec. The Grand Council of the Crees, the Cree political body representing Iiyiyiu Aschii, has adopted the spelling Eeyou/Eenou Istchee. *Iiyiyiu Aschii* . . . reflects the direct conversion of syllables into roman orthography as standardized by the Cree School Board, the education authority for Cree education in Iiyiyiu Aschii. (6)

For our decision to use *Īiyiyû/Īiyiyûch*, see note 1, above.

5. These sentiments are reflected in Hydro-Québec’s officials’ scathing comments on *Īiyiyû* relationality between water, territory, and humans in Diane Beaudry’s 1993 film *Sur le dos de la Grande-Baleine*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada.
6. Later, in 2003, after the implementation of the governing body, a tenth community was established when Washaw Sibi Eeyou joined the Grand Council of the Crees. An eleventh community, MoCreebec Eeyoud, is also now recognized by the Cree Government.
7. See Tiffany Lethabo King’s elaborations on flesh in the works of Indigenous and Black feminists in *The Black Shoals* (53–58; see also Nelson).
8. All translations of *Ourse Bleue* are our own, except where we cite *Blue Bear Woman* in parentheses. These citations refer to the 2019 translation by Susan Ouriou and Christelle Morelli.
9. Writing about Hydro-Québec’s La Grande project, Matthew Coon Come interprets Québec’s government’s encroachment on Eeyou Istchee as follows: “This is the law of the country, our leaders were told. Your territory was *terra nullius*, or land belonging to no one, when King Charles made his grant in 1670. Your society has no concept of ownership or jurisdiction over land. And so, according to our laws, your rights were extinguished, and Rupert’s land became Crown land (government land)” (281).
10. We borrow the term from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who conceptualizes *presencing* as Indigenous material, political, spiritual, educational, or healing practices on the territory. Indigenous cultures, writes Simpson, “understand and generate meaning through engagement, presence and process—storytelling, ceremony, signing, dancing, doing” (93).
11. Emphasizing *Īiyiyû* mythology and a healthy distance from pan-Indigenous views, Maïtée Labreque-Saganash explained to us that water itself does not possess a soul for her people; however, “there used to be a type of divination called *wâpamahcâhkew* which translates to ‘seeing the *ahcâhkew*’ where some people used to stare into water in the dark to find lost things.” This further elucidates the hours that the narrator spends by the water in her journey to find the remains of her uncle.

12. Maïtée Labrecque-Saganash reminded us that “starvation, freezing and drowning are the three nemeses of the people of the North.”

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Zishad Lak (she/her) is a postdoctoral fellow (Lakehead University Orillia) and member of the SSHRC-funded research group "Racialized Ecologies." Zishad completed her PhD in *Lettres françaises* with a specialization in Canadian and Indigenous Studies at the University of Ottawa in October 2020. Her research is interdisciplinary and engages principally with queer theory and de/postcolonial and settler colonial studies. Zishad is also an adjunct professor in the French Department and Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies at the University of Ottawa.

Before joining the Department of French and Francophone Studies at the University of Victoria in July of 2019, Pierre-Luc Landry (he/they) taught at the Cégep de l'Outaouais, at the Université Laval, at the University of Ottawa, and at the Royal Military College of Canada. His research focuses on contemporary literature of

various geographical areas (mostly Québec, Canada, and France), and on Indigenous literature. He specializes in research-creation—understood as an “undisciplined” methodology—and on queer theories and cultural studies. Trained in the field of narratology, he expanded his theoretical standpoint to include feminist and cultural critics in his toolbox to explore and examine art and literature, and their relationship with society. He is also a writer, a publisher, and a queer activist. His work has been shortlisted for many prizes and received different national accolades.

Theory Is Not a Luxury: Literary Studies, Sociology, and Minoritarian Critique

Poetry Is Theory . . .

In her essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde writes, “it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are . . . nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept . . . as knowledge births (precedes) understanding” (36). Lorde is a pioneer of Black feminism and her work is now canonical. The above-mentioned essay is so beloved that its title has become something of a mantra among gender and sexuality scholars across disciplines. However, the meaning of Lorde’s words, with her graceful yet firm reminder that poetry has the capacity to animate and articulate our cosmological worlding in ways other registers do not, is a lesson that not all gender and sexuality scholars have appeared to grasp.

Women, specifically women like Lorde—Black or non-white women, queer women, poor women—have long used poetry as a means of survival and sociological critique that extends beyond the confines of traditional intellectual thought (Jackson 35; McKittrick 5). When Lorde names poetry as a non-luxury, or a necessity, it is in recognition of this tradition. On the one hand, women, especially non-white women, are given few opportunities to express our inner selves, needs, wants, and desires (or the *erotic*, in Lorde’s formulation [53]), and therefore turn to writing to touch base with our spiritual-affectual realms, which often reside at the intersections of multiple oppressions and complex identities (Lorde 55). But, unlike other types of writing, poetry does not require that the author expend copious energy to make their point. On the contrary, poetry provides a way to

connect with that which lives within us but is *nameless*; to embody the intricacies and near ineffability of being multiply Othered in a world that denies us, the gendered-racial-sexual Other, intelligibility in the first place.

Decades later, Lorde's insights still hold true, not just for racialized women academics, but for all non-white gender and sexuality authors within the institution, whom, borrowing from José Esteban Muñoz, I refer to as "minoritarian" scholars (7). Given the colonial confines of the university (la paperson xiii), scholars of minoritarian status must often write our concerted trauma and wonder around gender and sexuality into academic frames that demand we use the language of whiteness to legitimate our truths (Brand 48; McKittrick 37; Watts 22). Not only is this process exhausting, but it also assumes that living an injustice does not qualify us to critique it; that our stories fail to provide "evidence" for the violence and beauty that we have personally endured in relation to gender, sexuality, race, and/or Indigeneity. To quote Teoria, protagonist of Canadian author Dionne Brand's novel *Theory*: "[T]here's no reference for what I want to do. Why can't I simply speak without having to have that speech legitimated by god knows who?" (48).

While poetry might not be a luxury, academic writing has been made one through white knowledge systems that refuse to take the felt worldings of the oppressed as a catalyst for "valid" sociological inquiry. For minoritarian scholars, this refusal translates into the need to bifurcate ourselves as racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects within our research, while concertedly articulating our embodiments of white cisheteropatriarchy with violating accuracy. No academic discipline is exempt from this practice of racialized contortion (la paperson xiii), but I find it particularly concerning in sociology (Walcott 485). Sociology is one place where poetry *should* flourish as critique, and yet the opposite tends to be true (McKittrick 7). That this is the case reflects, to me, a general failure to embrace the intimacies between sociology and poetry's analytical home: literary studies.

As a nonbinary queer woman of colour and sociologist who was originally trained in literary analysis and is themselves a creative writer and poet, I believe that sociology and literary studies have much to offer one another when it comes to analysing the intersections of race, Indigeneity, gender, and sexuality. The discipline of sociology understands social relations—often among humans, but

not always—as a matrix of history, time, embodiment, and possibility (Mills 4; Watts 23). As such, it is deeply invested in theory as a mechanism of worldly comprehension and transformative critique (Mills 5). The same can also be said about how literary studies approaches poetry, which takes as its historical and conceptual centre the power of poesis: the ability of poetry, literature, and art to make meaning and to bring—to theorize—into existence something new (Sherbert, Gérin, and Petty see 1–21). Framed in this way, there is little conceptual distinction between what each field considers theory.

Yet, in contrast to sociology, literary studies is typically regarded, at least, by social scientists and the wider public, as a narrow field pertaining solely to literature and other textual objects, as if these things were not intrinsically sociological; as if they were not, by design, rich and complex modes of social thought (Jackson 35). By contrast, there is almost an inverse fluidity attributed to sociology, since, as the study of society, it spans a variety of disciplines, from gender studies to geography to history and so on, thus containing within itself the ability to traverse knowledge domains. Aptly, I would argue, this ability, too, is a defining characteristic of literary analysis (Sherbert, Gérin, and Petty see 1–21), and that this signals yet another intimacy between the two fields. But as is, literary studies is often denied sociology's versatility within academia because, as a colonial institution, academia has historically distinguished culture and art from sociological “research” and “knowledge” (McKittrick 38).

This systematization is also what limits sociology. Sociology is a colonial discipline born from the insights of dead, white, cishet, able-bodied men who did not consider the roles of gender and sexuality—let alone the conditional role of white supremacy—in shaping society (Walcott 485). In turn, sociologists have long struggled to escape the ghosts of our paradigm, which, as the intellectual product of privileged white men, remains haunted by a racist-colonial legacy of “scientific knowledge” and “objectivity” (McKittrick 38; Walcott 485). Clutching, as we do, to the reminiscences of a scientific model that demands precision, proof, rigour, and an impossible sense of truth, sociologists refuse the “sociological” poesis of poetry, via its masterful ability to animate new ways of theorizing the social world. At stake for sociologists in this refusal is a disciplinary failure to grasp the intellectual impact of poetry and art and, with it, the very reason why Lorde describes such forms as intellectual necessities: their capacity to

grant thinkers like her/us the space to theorize race, Indigeneity, gender, and sexuality as they are lived.

When Lorde declared poetry not to be a luxury she was, in essence, declaring poetry to be theory. This declaration has long acted as a cornerstone of literary studies, which takes seriously the analytical power of poesis and the transverse field of knowing contained within poetic form. Sociologists can heed this approach to nourish sociological imaginations beyond the colonial divide of art and knowledge. That said, sociology is not entirely limited to the colonial thinking that has traditionally structured its imaginings. Sociologists have repeatedly proven that the discipline can be reimagined through bricolage and critical intervention, culminating in something that not only exceeds but also confronts its violent roots (Ali see 2–4; McKittrick see 1–13; Watts see 21–25). In so doing, we have illustrated the value of what C. Wright Mills calls the “promise” of sociology (Mills 5): to understand the social world as a densely-patterned tapestry woven across time and space, its fibres and colours shifting based on context and the intricacies of history. This promise is just as valuable to literary studies as poesis is to sociology: when literary studies is framed as inherently sociological it elevates poesis to the status of worldly comprehension that is most often attributed to social theory.

In light of this mutual promise, I advocate for an understanding of poetry and social theory and, by extension, literary studies and sociology, as intimately linked. To do this, I read two minoritarian creatives located within so-called Canada—Joshua Whitehead, a Two-Spirit Indigiqueer author, and Trish Salah, an Arab Canadian trans woman—to illustrate that their poetic works constitute sociological theory. My analysis is framed around two popular queer and trans of colour theoretics, disidentification and monstrosity, and is designed to demonstrate what minoritarian scholars and creatives know all too well: that poetry is not only an object of theory but theory itself (see McKittrick 1–13; see the creative works of Brand; Simpson; Salah; Shraya; Whitehead for examples). The irony of my analysis is, of course, that I turn my objective sociological eye to these creative pieces to highlight their theorizing. Yet the inherent contradiction of my approach speaks to the heart of my analysis: until academia recognizes the extent of Lorde’s claim that poetry is not a luxury, one of the best ways—or perhaps the only way?—to make clear to

academics that poetry is social theory is to theorize the sociology from within it.

Disidentification

Disidentification is a well-known queer of colour analytic. Coined by José Esteban Muñoz in the late 1990s, the term describes the strategic ways that queer people of colour relate to and perform gender and sexuality in accordance with racializing optics that would otherwise nullify us. At the time of its inception, disidentification offered an intervention into budding notions of queer performativity: the idea that gender and sexuality are subjectivized through citational practices that are themselves animated through subjectification and are thus fluid (Muñoz 12). Enriching this premise, disidentification reveals how these citational practices depend on racial schematics that cannot be undone by simply making gender and sexuality signifiers more fluid (25). On the contrary, when these signifiers are taken up or adapted by the uncritical white queer subject, the terms keep intact their racial exoskeletons and extend them into the realm of queerness, which not only dilutes queer possibilities and futurities but also relegates non-white folx to the margins of queer belonging (Driskill et al. see 1–24).

Although Muñoz uses disidentification to explore how queer people of colour rework the racial matter of whitestream queer identities, he also positions it “as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance. Disidentification can be a way of shuttling back and forth between reception and production” (25). This clarification suggests that disidentification is a dual site of subversive subjectification in which whiteness, not queerness, is key. Here, the minoritarian subject invokes dominant (read: white) constructions of gender and sex using a practised method of positionality that allows the subject to identify with familiar queer epistemological registers, such as transness, femmeness, or other modes of queerhood, while abandoning the racist ontologies embedded therein. Through disidentification, Muñoz observes, the racial core of dominant—or Western —gendered and sexual ideologies is exposed, and its imperialist circuits reworked to “account for, include, and empower” the very bodies that they are designed to obfuscate (31).

Disidentification does not dissolve colonial circuits; instead, it grasps their ideological contents and imbues them “with new life,” with refracted meaning and movement (12). The practice thus allows the abject subject to read themselves, and their world, into the cultural forms arising from Western gender and sexual ideologies that are structurally coded to *unread* such selves. In so doing, these subjects undermine the myth of a singular identity that undergirds Western sociopolitical logics. As Muñoz puts it, disidentification is “meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social” (8). In other words, disidentification is less about the material enmeshments of race, gender, and sexuality than it is the racial rebuttal of Western identity codes.

Joshua Whitehead demonstrates this rebuttal when he recounts his boyhood through a series of disidentifications in the poem “April 5: Pass[hang]over” (42; henceforth, “April 5”). Not only does Whitehead explicitly invoke disidentification in this piece, but he also inverts it for the white reader. The poem begins with a list of digitally or sexually charged phrases (e.g., “initiating,” “VR,” “teenagemasterbation”) that are broken up by a series of colons that appear to simulate a coding sequence in transmission, concluding with the word “installationcomplete.” This opening sequence captures the actual sensation of disidentification, likening the way the practice reworks cultural codes to the process of recoding a computer. Whitehead establishes this comparison by emulating the grammar of computer coding, which results in a muddled combination of two types of language: digital and human.

Through this fractured linguistic coupling, the actual content of the arrangement becomes only semi-intelligible, both visually and semantically hard to decipher. In turn, the form of the poem’s opening remarks is rendered, I posit, foreign to the English-only, presumably white reader, despite its use of the English language. This is a type of inverted disidentification: the white reader may be able to understand parts of the trans-linguistic sequence, but only through disidentifying with the overall form in which the words appear and are remade, or digitized, and literally encoded with new meaning. The power in such a move is not just that it disrupts the rules and colonial logics of English grammar, but that it is its own articulation of queerness,

especially certain (read Othered) types of queerness, into (Western) cultural sites that diametrically oppose its existence. This act of articulation plasticizes and thus pushes said cultural sites beyond the white gaze. This is why Whitehead's cybernetic language is a type of inverted disidentification: the white reader must disidentify with the cultural codes of English-language poetry to read, and thus read themselves into, the poem.

Opening up the poem with this inversion sets the rest of the poem up to foreground poesis: from the get-go, we know that this poem is not a disidentification narrative that the white gaze can easily consume and contort, but a critical and complicated undertaking of disidentification logics. This foregrounding is not only a reminder of the intellectual power and agency of poetry, but also a refusal by Whitehead to be read as object, which might be understood as an attempt to stop the white reader from uncritically projecting themselves onto the poem's contents. Indeed, the same human-computer semiotic that opens "April 5" also opens the poetry collection *full-metal indigiqueer* writ large (Whitehead 19–22). In this way, the collection itself might be said to be anchored in a refusal to be legible, digestible, and palatable; a refusal to render the voice of the subaltern audible (Ali 22). This refusal makes a striking intervention into our interpretative methods as scholars, acting as a barrier against our epistemological hunger to extract meaning and, conversely, prompting us to understand the poem as sociological critique.

Whitehead follows the opening sequence with a poetic arc that structurally resembles that of a sociological research paper; whether intentional or not, this resemblance invites sociologists and literary scholars to consider the intimacies between poesis and sociology. He begins with the basics—presenting a concept (42):

when i was a boy
i (dis)identified with roseanne barr—
i saw myself in darlene
& that excited me
terrifyingly

Whitehead names disidentification outright, using parentheses to separate "dis" from the rest of the word, which suggests a dual process of dis/identification. He then continues to engage and apply the

concept in ways that suggest he is intentionally calling upon Muñoz's work, as we shall see below. Again, Whitehead does not give us the opportunity to project disidentification onto his words; rather, he claims the concept for himself and imposes his reading of the term onto ours—much in way a researcher might do.

Further, his introduction of the term is simple and clear, just like a definition in a research paper should be. Not only does Whitehead name a well-known white queer figure as his site of disidentification, but he names an infamously racist one: Roseanne Barr. He then uses the word “excited” to denote his feeling of queer kinship with Barr, as well as her co-star, lesbian actor Sara Gilbert, adding the word “terrifyingly” to suggest the racial disconnect therein. Through this, Whitehead makes the meaning of *disidentification* immediately legible to the reader and, subsequently, sets up the remaining poetic (or argument). This approach is akin to the way an academic research article might first define a concept or theory before exploring it, just as I did above. Yet, while Whitehead appears to adopt the general structure of sociological argumentation from this point on, he continues to push against the writing standards of traditional sociological analysis, once more muddying the bounds between sociology and poesis. Examples of this pushback include his decisions to lowercase proper nouns and the first-person singular subject pronoun, use an ampersand rather than *and*, and abandon all periods.

In the next section, Whitehead starts to describe his past practices of disidentification using active verbs. He begins:

i used to skip school & stay up late on weekends
(when my parents worked at ikwe widdjiitiwin)
to watch queer as folk & kink on showcase
fantasize about brian kinney
dye my hair to look like justin taylor
catch brent everett & brent corrigan
in a brokeback bareback parody (Whitehead 42)

As before, Whitehead names white, queer media as the targets of his disidentification, first by fantasizing about Brian and emulating Justin, two white characters from the iconic queer show *Queer as Folk*, and then by watching gay porn stars Brent Corrigan and Brent Everett in a parody of the equally iconic gay film *Brokeback Mountain*. These pop-

culture references are easily identifiable to white queers, and Whitehead engages and attempts to perform them by skipping school and dying his hair pink. Here, disidentification is applied and exemplified through Whitehead's lived experiences, the equivalent of a "findings" section in an article.

Keeping with his inverted rhetoric of dis/identification, however, these "findings" are peppered with the same off-kilter grammatical practices as before, as well as new minoritarian references to Indigeneity. For example, Whitehead contextualizes his ability to skip school and stay up late with the knowledge that his parents are working at Ikwe Widdjiitiwin, an Aboriginal crisis centre in Winnipeg. This reference does two things. First, it incites a moment of inverted disidentification, since settlers, especially those outside the territory, would likely not recognize the referent and would thus be unable to identify with its cultural milieu, briefly rupturing the overall sense of identification we feel with the other queer figures cited. Relatedly, the reference alludes to the cis-heteropatriarchal violence Indigenous folx experience under settler colonialism (see Simpson 85–87; Watts 28), bringing this violence to bear on the preceding references to the queer whitestream. This juxtaposition disabuses the settler queer of their kinship with Whitehead. That this reference occurs within parentheses further supports this sense of reckoning, as the parentheses signal a break from the flow of the sentence in order to offer a directed caveat to a particular reader who understands what "ikwe widdjiitiwin" means.

Whitehead uses parentheses like this twice more in the poem. The second instance follows the last line in the above quotation, where he clarifies that he watched the "brokeback bareback" porn "(after the weather girl got naked)" (42). This parenthetical seems to indicate Whitehead's fluid desires by fusing his sexual fantasies of a presumably real, fully clothed weatherwoman, whose report he seems to have watched before the *Brokeback* parody, with his consumption of the gay porn film. In doing this, Whitehead blurs his desire across the bounds of not only homo and hetero wanting but also the cosmologic realms of reality and imagination, thereby gesturing to the inarticulability of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer belonging within the binary colonial logics that condition the Western world more generally and the queer whitestream especially (Driskill et al. 1–24).

The last instance of parentheses in the poem extends this theme of blurred boundaries by looping it back into the digital symbolism incited by the opening sequence. Whitehead writes:

feel guilty about jacking-off
to badboyton & mike18
(my first cybernetic boyfriends)
i was making mirrors out of white queers
whereami|whereami|whereami|
i|I(questionmark) (42)

In this section, Whitehead highlights his sexual relationships with his “cybernetic boyfriends,” badboyton and mike18, who, in contrast to the previous cultural references, are not only the objects but also the encounters of his desires. Here, the rhetorical practice of parenthesizing clarifies a shift into the relational dimensions of disidentification: these online boyfriends can be read as two of the fourth line’s “white queers.” Not only is this line an artistic description of disidentification, if there ever were one, but the two lines thereafter highlight the fracturing and liminality of self that is involved with the practice, as Whitehead asks “whereami” thrice in his disidentified, cyber-hybrid rhetoric. Whitehead continues this rhetoric as he types out “question mark,” repeats words with varying capitalization (e.g., “i|I”), pairs mismatched punctuation (e.g., “(questionmark)”), and continues to combine words and avoid periods.

If the above section of Whitehead’s poem resembles the findings section of a research article, then the next section is the discussion. Here, Whitehead pushes the application of his own disidentification into a critical intervention by considering the usefulness of the praxis for Indigiqueers. He starts by describing a fictional act of disidentification that does not incite inverse disidentification within the white reader, but rather denies them *any* kinship with Whitehead’s next figure of disidentification. What makes this so striking is that the site Whitehead chooses is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sacred, whitewashed figure of institutionalized Christianity and a cultural symbol of colonialism and whiteness. He writes:

my easter chocolates aren’t hidden anymore
why bother when a hershey jesus

with wonky eyes will cost \$2.99
tomorrow[questionmark]
if anything i want to resurrect
the toughest ndn in the world
ask him, “whats it like to be a swiss army knife
& have hardcore anal sex[questionmark]”
maybe even ask him, “hey cuzzin
can you teach me how to be
a beautiful brown boy in love[questionmark]” (42)

Whitehead’s choice to replace a resurrected Jesus with a resurrected male “NDN” who engages in “hardcore anal sex” not only demonstrates how an Indigenous person may disidentify with the figure of colonial violence that has long served as justification for their genocide; it also contorts the whitewashed, appropriated image of Jesus so that the white settler can no longer recognize him. Such imagery is about more than disidentification, more than recoding cultural forms to expose their imperial circuits. It is about destroying these circuits altogether and resurrecting something else in their place: something queer, unbounded, and able to teach us racialized-gendered-sexual Others how to become “a beautiful [person] . . . in love” (42).

Whitehead ends on a more joyous note, incorporating contemporary queer popular references that extend beyond the realms of white culture, queer and straight alike, entering a world of sexual agency and self-assuredness. After Whitehead envisions finding answers in the figure of a resurrected gay Indigenous man, he shares:

instead i dance in pool halls to rihanna
“bitch better have my money”
wait for the sharks to get horny
get them off for another beer
reassure them that everyones a little gay
honey-boo-boo even told me so
channel apu to exoticize myself
be a jack-of[F]-all-ndns
“thank you, come again”
tell him, “hey bo’

this is treaty 1 territory
so you may as well treat yourself too" (42)

The change from white gay and lesbian figures to more mainstream icons, such as Rihanna, Honey Boo Boo, and *The Simpsons*' Apu, indicates a shifting milieu of disidentification in which non-white queer, trans, Two-Spirit, and intersex folk may dis/identify. However, these are all problematic figures: Rihanna, while undeniably beloved by a diversity of both non-white and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, is a billionaire whose celebrity status arises from massive mainstream success; Honey Boo Boo is white and owes her celebrity to fatphobic and classist "white trash" stereotypes, and Apu is a stereotypical East Indian character voiced by a white man. By employing these complicated figures within his poem, Whitehead continues to remind us of the limitations of disidentification. His reminder is coupled with a series of references to the sex work he does with seemingly straight-identified white men, whose insecurity feels lacking in comparison to Whitehead's intentional navigation of his own body and desires. Here, Whitehead paints himself as acting upon his desires, as opposed to in response to them, or in response to the white queers of whom he is no longer "making mirrors" (42).

The first two verses map Whitehead's boyhood and teenage years; the concluding verse registers adulthood. In so doing, the poem combines the gender dis/identification of the "introduction," which centres white women like Roseanne and Darlene, with the sexual dis/identification of the "findings" section, which centres white gay characters and porn stars. Through this combination, Whitehead marks out processes of gendered and sexual becoming and recoding as interconnected and located across a complex, potentially confusing, multitude of cultural references.

Anchored in Whitehead's self-determination and -direction, this closing verse indicates a more grounded practice of disidentification, one which recognizes the process as a necessary yet failed attempt to cosmologically fracture and recode Western cultural codes on behalf of Indigiqueer and Two-Spirit communities. His closing assertion, "this is treaty 1 territory / so you may as well treat yourself too," is a testament to this groundedness; he invites the settler reader, queer or otherwise, to identify with queerness (and thus justify their desire for

him) by exhorting said reader to disidentify with settler cartographies and identify with Indigenous ones.

Whitehead's use of poesis pushes his analysis beyond that which is typically achievable within sociological research. He offers not only a new way of theorizing society, but also an embodied way of critiquing it from a decolonized cosmology (see Simpson for another example)—one of the very cosmologies that sociologists have historically silenced (Watts 23). Whitehead's approach itself might be read as an inverted disidentification of sociological analysis via poetry: it takes the pieces and coding of sociological, academic research and rearranges and transforms them for the minoritarian reader. For instance, there is the sources section that appears at the end of the collection (Whitehead 117–119). As in a conventional bibliography, Whitehead lists references for all his in-text citations, but he lists only the works' titles and authors, offering a source list that at once evokes and rejects academic formatting and style. This final disidentification transforms the act of citation from the practice of speech legitimation that Dionne Brand writes of in *Theory* to one by which Whitehead can archive the sites of disidentification that his work explores.

Monstrosity

I will now consider how the concept of monstrosity appears within the poetic works of Trish Salah. My understanding of monstrosity is located in the works of two scholars and, by extension, two fields of thought: critical trans scholar Susan Stryker and Black feminist scholar Alexander G. Weheliye. Whereas Stryker writes about monstrosity in relation to her own trans body, Weheliye analyzes monstrosity as it operates within and against the confines of Western humanism, or what Black feminist Sylvia Wynter refers to as “the genre of the human . . . [as] Man” (228). For Stryker, monstrosity describes a specific aspect of trans belonging that simultaneously invokes and destabilizes normative gender-sex relations (247). Stryker argues that by corporealizing feminine and masculine signifiers through our otherwise gendered and sexed bodies, trans folx move towards gender-sex categories that we can never fully fit into, thus calling attention to the cosmological failure of these categories to take hold in and hold onto our flesh (also see Da Costa 326; Simpkins 139).

As Stryker puts it: “Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist” (248).

At the crux of Stryker’s argument is a point that has been made since by other critical trans studies scholars (Simpkins 139): that trans people possess the radical ability, if not the need, to transverse normative gender-sex formations, and, in transversing them, to open up new ways of relating gender to the body. This is akin to what Sandy Stone calls the “*intertextual* possibilities of the transsexual body” (297): the ability of trans folx “to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries” (296). However, since Western femininity and masculinity are born from the imperializing bonds of white cis-heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism (Simpson 85–87; Watts 25), the implications of Stryker’s trans monstrosity exceed gender and sex. The figure of the monster gestures to how trans folx can and do transcend, if not rupture, the racializing assemblages built into, and out of, hegemonic gender-sex codes.

This is where Weheliye’s intervention is most helpful. Weheliye builds on Black feminism’s long tradition of locating gender-sex relations within the racist exoskeleton of late Western modernity to explain that Black and other non-white subjects can articulate themselves in ways that transcend the imperializing legacy of Western empire. Drawing specifically from the work of Wynter, Weheliye describes this legacy as the conflation of humanism with that of the figure of Man: the white, cis-heterosexual, able-bodied settler patriarch. Using the language of monstrosity to capture the racial Other’s transformative ability, he foregrounds the importance of resisting hegemonic gender-sex codes and the ideologies that uphold them, such as patriarchy and cisnormativity, as racial optics bound to white supremacy (Driskill et al. 1–24; Watts 28).

Working across critical trans studies and Black feminism, Black queer-trans scholars, such as Kai M. Green and Riley C. Snorton, have effectively relocated Stryker’s formulation (87) of the trans monstrosity to the larger landscape of racialized monstrosity that Weheliye describes (see also Dryden 63). These scholars work from the shared idea that Black flesh especially, and racialized, colonized flesh more generally, has been used as “the material and metaphorical ground for unsettling a view of sex and gender as neatly divided” (Snorton 33), and that this division is a central mechanism through which Western

humanism, or the genre of Man, is secured. From this perspective, the racialized, gendered or sexual Other is thought to more easily move against and beyond the imperialist bonds of Western (read: normative) bodily codes to “reclaim power over their image” (Green 78). With this scholarship in mind, monstrosity can be framed as a trans of colour analytic, one which takes the racialized contours and possibilities of transness as its point of departure.

I find within Trish Salah’s poetry collection, *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1*, a strong example of a monstrous approach to gender, sex, and sexuality; one which, like Whitehead’s work on disidentification, muddies the boundaries between sociology and literary studies via poesis. As summarized by Kay Gabriel, “*Lyric Sexology* surveys a range of discourses, sciences, political positions, and epistemologies that have had multiple, overlapping, and contradictory roles to play in determining the historical emergence of transsexuality, and of transsexual womanhood specifically, as a coherent category of gender” (525). Gabriel argues that, through this approach, Salah offers a fantastical yet lived archive of the discursive categories that have long generated a transmisogynistic violence rooted in colonialism and racism, “even as these categorizations have simultaneously mediated the historical emergence of transsexuality itself” (526).

Gabriel’s interest in Salah’s work lies in how she uses the politics of un/translatability and figuration to explore the sociohistorical relations that shape trans realities (525). Drawing on Syd Zolf’s notion of “disfluent listening” (qtd. in Morra 151), Linda M. Morra notes how Salah both takes up and troubles the definitive gender-sex scripts of Western culture that try to “dictate identities and behaviours” yet can never foreclose—and indeed, often give verbiage to—the possibility of transcendence (151; see also Robinson 168). That Salah’s poetry explores Western gender-sex ideologies as a concerted site of ideological-affective confinement and transgression registers with the central logic of monstrosity (Billingham 34). In particular, it registers with the idea that the genre of Man is built upon the abjection of the monstrous Other (thus confining them), but it is through this very abjection that said Other is able to exist beyond, and thus extend beyond (transgress), Man’s territorializing assemblages, operating within a cosmological elsewhere (Dryden 63).

Part six of Salah’s poem “Diagnostic Detour” (95–96; henceforth VI) exemplifies the logic of monstrosity in her work. In contrast to

Whitehead's "April 5," vi is not broken up into verses that one can read as an analogy for sociological research. On the contrary, it is a lyrical stream of consciousness that transforms and refracts as it evolves. Salah writes:

i.

When I had my surgery I went blonde.
Even newly arab as I was—
I tried to think of Farah, the Lebanese Angel
one of Charlie's
I needed to think about that, my feminist commitments
My blonde commitments, the improbability
Of looking what is called good looking
Anyplace glossy, or a white girl with a gun, I could glean
A short skirt, a voice, like the voice of girls on tv or at
the mall
When I had the surgery, I went to the mall
I needed new clothes
For my sugery, [*sic*] my surgery
I needed to differentiate
Internalized sexism as a woman
From being the bearer of the male gaze
From lesbian desire in a patriarchal economy
Of desire
I needed to not be a woman
To be a woman
With a gun
Without reference to changing my sex
To the patriarchy
My gender
My symbolic capital
The queer chic
You get the picture.
Electrolysis hurts.
Some days I worry about loosing my hair.
My job,
My girlfriend.

ii.

As femme I tried to say, blonde is no witness to
whiteness,
I tried to say, it is a quickening streak.
Hunger and its competence, I tried to pitch, against the
body politic
As a femme, like anyone being fucked over,
It can be tricky to see where your blows land. (113–14)

The works' diverging forms make sense, considering the conceptual distinctions between disidentification, the subject of Whitehead's poem (and, arguably, collection), and monstrosity, the subject of Salah's poem (and, again arguably, the whole collection). Whereas disidentification denotes how hegemonic gender-sex articulations can be recoded to fit the queer of colour subject, monstrosity describes the built-in insurmountability of these forms and the corresponding possibility for the minoritarian subject to rupture and transform them. Similarly, whereas Whitehead's poem takes on a poeticized, structured analysis that inverts and reveals the disidentification it explores, Salah's piece bears no resemblance to conventional analytic forms and is instead firmly rooted in the literary tradition of free verse and lyric, as announced by the collection's title. Salah explicitly draws on literary conventions to theorize gender, sex, and sexuality via poiesis, and, befitting the logic of monstrosity, they have the power to fluidify Salah's language in the same way her intersecting monstrosities fluidify dominant Western gender and sexual ideologies. This offers sociologists, among others, an example of gender-sexuality poiesis that is often unfamiliar to us, yet still does sociological work, while offering the inverse for literary scholars: engaging a mode of familiar analysis (poiesis) within the unfamiliar, or at least distinct, domain of sociological critique.

We can identify this technique in the poem's opening lines, where Salah writes: "When I had my surgery I went blonde . . . Even newly arab as I was—" Immediately, gender affirmation is aligned with whiteness (being blonde) and rhetorically placed at odds with non-whiteness (being Arab). To mediate this tension, Salah goes on to reimagine Farah, a Lebanese Angel, as the iconic blonde actor Farrah Fawcett via her role in the 1978 TV series *Charlie's Angels*. Salah recognizes that blonde signals womanhood and whiteness,

concertedly, and that she, a recently surgically affirmed trans woman of colour, is in the impossible position of having to embody one yet reject the other. Not only does this invoke the racialized colonial grid underpinning monstrosity, whereby gender-sex codes are imposed as racializing optics imbued with white racial matter, but it also sets Salah up to consider how popular “feminist commitments” have been contorted by these optics—a critique similarly expressed by feminist scholarship on monstrosity.

Much of the logic of monstrosity stems from Black and postcolonial feminist critiques of those commonly referred to as “white feminists”: feminists who use universal notions of gender and sexuality to erase and contort the realities of “women of difference” into an essentializing, Eurocentric optic that centres white experiences (Da Costa 321). Such a feminism will never work because, in the famous words of Lorde, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (110). Yet it is white feminism’s *commitments* that have long dominated the feminist intellectual traditional. Black and postcolonial feminists, among others, have thus explicitly or effectively mobilized the logic of monstrosity to point out the limitations of white feminists and other social science thinkers who cling to imperializing notions of gender, all the while claiming to rebuke gendered violence (Da Costa 320).

These theories highlight how white women’s dominance of feminist thought has hindered “women of difference’s” relationship to feminist praxis, especially non-white and trans women’s. Racialized and Indigenous women are asked, by white feminists, to either mute or mutate their racial Otherness in favour of a pathologically universal quest for sisterhood, whereas trans women are either charged with internalized patriarchy for the very femininity that is demanded of them, or loathed as “men” who fail to abide by colonialized gender-sex relations (Da Costa 323). Trans women of colour like Salah are thus placed in the tenuous position of having to navigate both realms.

vi introduces these tensions in tandem when Salah writes of how her “feminist commitments” are her “blonde commitments,” which imbues feminism with white sentimentalities that evoke the racialized underbelly of gender itself. We then see, hear, and feel these tensions play out in the narrative of the poem, as Salah struggles with the impossible burden of having to reject patriarchy as a feminist, but still perform it enough to validate her womanhood without also revealing

her transness. Further, she must do all this while negating the whiteness built into patriarchy and feminism alike. The confounding nature of these demands are mirrored in the poem's stream-of-consciousness lyricism, which makes salient the overlapping connections between womanhood, cisnormativity, and whiteness, but which provides no clear path outside of this tautological system of subjectification. For instance, "My blonde commitments" is followed by "the impossibility," which then breaks into the next line: "Of looking what is called good-looking." Given the enjambment, the so-called impossibility here could be that of Salah being blonde and therefore attractive. However, the line "My blonde commitments" echoes the earlier line "my feminist commitments," which rhetorically poses being blonde in relation to being feminist. Accordingly, the impossibility in question could also be Salah's ability to "properly" promote feminism. Adding to the confusion, the line "My blonde commitments" is capitalized, which indicates a break from the preceding line about feminism. This same feature is then repeated in the line about being good-looking. Yet neither of these lines are enclosed nor preceded by a period, which indicates continuity. Hence, each line is both disconnected from *and* connected with the one before it. Such grammatical ambiguity attributes the impossibilities described here to being, respectively and simultaneously, a feminist, a white woman, and a conventionally attractive woman, a proposition that is impossible for Salah.

The dual fragmentation and connection of ideas, as achieved by the lyrical form and, similar to Whitehead's poem, the combined lack of periods and initial capitalization, structures the entire poem. In turn, the reader wrestles with the enmeshment of divergent identities throughout. These enmeshments become more immediate as the poem proceeds, such as when Salah writes: "I needed to differentiate / Internalized sexism as a woman / From being the bearer of the male gaze," or when she describes how she has "To be a woman" without also referencing her sex change, "the patriarchy," or her gender (113). Further, Salah later reveals that she must engage these references in relation to yet another dual identity of hers: trans lesbian.

As a trans woman who feels compelled to prove her womanhood via femininity, Salah cannot secure her queerness through butchness. This then leaves her vulnerable to performing "lesbian desire in a patriarchal economy" (113). Similarly, as an Arab woman, the implicit

white-codedness of “queer chic” is another aesthetic she cannot use. These remarks reflect how disidentification is not available to Salah in the same way it is to Whitehead in “April 5.” Unlike Whitehead, Salah cannot recode whiteness via gender expression without revealing her transness or threatening her feminism or undermining her race, as these identities are inextricably woven together for her as a trans woman of colour feminist.

But considering where Whitehead’s poem leaves off, ultimately exposing the failure, rather than the promise, of disidentification for Indigiqueers, the two poems appear harmonious in their critical disposition towards the concept; that is, towards using the master’s tools, such as white gender-sex codes, to dismantle the master’s house, i.e., the genre of Man. The main difference is that Whitehead orientates his critique directly towards dis/identification, whereas Salah uses hers to advocate for the alternative: monstrosity. This is perhaps most salient in *v1* with the recurring metaphor of Farah as one of Charlie’s angel, played by Farrah Fawcett.

Salah revisits this metaphor twice in the poem. First, right after she makes the connection, Salah writes that she can never be good-looking because she can never occupy “Anyplace glossy, or [be] a white girl with a gun.” Then, near the end of the poem, she writes, “I needed to not be a woman / To be a woman / With a gun.” *Charlie’s Angels* arguably epitomizes the cultural image of gun-wielding women. Other than continuing with the idea that to be a “real” woman is to be white and blonde, like Fawcett, these references to white women with guns gesture to the violence of gender-sex norms: to how “womanhood” is a racializing assemblage of Man that abjects the minoritarian subject, of which our monstrosity is both the product and the critique.

In both form and content, Salah’s poem advocates for and embodies the logic of monstrosity. Yet, even as *v1* diverges from Whitehead’s critique of disidentification, Salah and Whitehead share a common rhetoric: each poet peppers in sociological sentiments and concepts, drawing not just on metaphor and imagery to make their points, but also on critical proclamations and terminology. For instance, even though Salah’s poem does not mimic sociological research as Whitehead’s does, the poet still opts for academically charged language, using phrases like “patriarchal economy” and “symbolic capital.” Further, she does this, just as Whitehead does, by

using a poetic form that reflects the logic of her specific idea of interest. In this way, both poets approach sociological inquiry in a way that is at once sociological and literary and which, as such, nourishes the insights of minoritarian scholars like Whitehead and Salah.

... And Theory Is Not a Luxury

If scholars of gender and sexuality truly want to transverse the bounds of academic knowledge, we cannot simply subject minoritarian poetry to the same colonial analyses that have refused it in the first place. On the contrary, we must approach poetry as social theory so that we can write about gender, sexuality, and beyond in ways that befit their lived-and-aliveness. Although my current analysis falls, ironically, within the realm of the former, my goal has been to illustrate the validity of the latter: folx such as Whitehead and Salah not only prove that poetry is theory, but that we can mobilize poetics to push sociological critique beyond the white canon and thus allow minoritarian scholars the space we need to theorize fully.

This contribution benefits sociology and literary studies alike. Literary scholars would benefit from less academic research on poetry and more poetry as academic research, while sociologists would benefit from the recognition that poesis is a type of sociology; that poetry is social theory. Poetry need not depend on nor be mired in whiteness to mobilize its power but instead ought to be rooted in the radical energies of the minoritarian subject, in the power of our monstrosity. Similarly, sociology may be rooted in whiteness, but it is indebted to an expansive critique and worldly comprehension that invites poesis as living praxis. By understanding these two facets of worlding as complementary, we can begin to transcend academia's colonial impulse to pose sociology and literary studies as conceptually distinct—theory as science and poetry as luxury—to arrive at a place where poetry is never a luxury because poetry is always theory.

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Jade Crimson Rose Da Costa (they/them/she) is a gender nonbinary queer woman of colour scholar, community organizer, educator, and creative writer across Central Southern Ontario. They are a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow with Re-Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph and have a PhD in Sociology from York University. To learn more about their work, visit: www.jadecrimson.com.

Black Heterotopic Space in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!

In 1781, the slave ship *Zong* was transporting enslaved African peoples across the Atlantic when, following the captain's orders, the crew murdered approximately 150 Africans by throwing them overboard to drown. The captain attempted to justify this action by arguing the ship was low on drinking water, and that throwing some of the enslaved people overboard had ensured the survival of the remaining crew and enslaved people. The *Zong*'s owners, deeming the action necessary, sought to recoup from their insurers the cost of losing such cargo. M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 book *Zong!* responds to and derives from the resulting 1783 court decision, *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Philip makes this document, the only contemporaneous public documentation of the *Zong* massacre, her poem's "word store" (191), restricting herself to using only words from the decision—writing through them, erasing them, and recombining them—to create her book. By effacing, reimagining, and destabilizing the legal decision, Philip reshapes language and the page on which it appears as alternate Black spaces that expose and disrupt hidden power systems; as such, Philip creates alternate spaces within the poem, spaces which function as what Michel Foucault has termed *heterotopias*. By relating Foucault's concept to Black Atlantic scholars' critical race work, I argue that Philip creates specifically Black heterotopic spaces in *Zong!* that accomplish two major points, one critical and one reparative: they expose language's role in normalizing inequitable power relations, and they provide an imaginative space where the story of the murdered Africans, as Philip states, "through not-telling, will tell itself" (199).

***Zong!* as Black Heterotopic Space**

At the heart of *Zong!*, and of the *Zong* massacre, is a foundational truth so simple that it is easily overlooked: slavery justifies itself through metaphor. Examining *Zong!* from a legal perspective, Anne Qu  ma identifies in *Gregson v. Gilbert* “a key metaphor that is both appallingly simple and politically complex: slavery rests on the notion that a human being is a thing, and that as such it can be owned and shipped as cargo across the Atlantic, then be exchanged as a commodity” (89). This substitution, in which race determines which groups are human and which are things, means that

the metaphor of the human-thing functions as a floater travelling among the various elements . . . that in their assemblage produced colonialism. Therefore, at work is not only the trope of the human-thing, but also its exposure to a metonymic process whereby the trope functions as a relay among heterogeneous entities and fosters a circulation of meaning and practices. (89)

Metaphorical thought was crucial in the process of turning a human being into a human-thing, the slave as fungible commodity. Philip works against this practice by adopting a system of counter-metaphors that undoes slavery’s metaphorical foundation. *Zong!* functions according to a basic comparative equivalency, an organizing principle that underpins the text by establishing a series of metaphorical linkages between the poem, its creation, and the world. In the “Notanda” that ends *Zong!*, Philip states many of these linkages. First, Philip, as author, is equivalent to Luke Collingwood, captain of the *Zong*; as Philip puts it, “I [am] as much [on] a journey as the one Captain Collingwood made . . . since I am, metaphorically speaking, at sea . . .” (190). Repeating this point, she emphasizes, “Like Captain Collingwood, I am now fully launched on a journey. Unlike the good captain, however, I do not feel fully provisioned, indeed, uncertainty is my familiar” (190). This equivalency situates Philip as the captain of *Zong!*, implicitly comparing the process of creating the poem to that of captaining the *Zong*. However, Philip draws a firm distinction: Collingwood was provided the tools necessary for his journey, whereas Philip was not. This establishes the rule of comparison

throughout the poem: the *Zong* was supported by and consonant with the systems of power of its time, whereas *Zong!* does not have—and, as I argue, works to avoid—the support and congruency of the systems of Philip's time.

The second equivalency further explains this different orientation towards systemic power. Philip equates the law, represented by *Gregson v. Gilbert*, with reason, but not with morality. As Philip writes, “*All the justices agree that the action of the ship owner was wrong—in law, that is, but not because it was murder*” (193). This creates an equivalency between white Europeans and the law, one that highlights the law's role in dismissing the Africans on the *Zong* as property, not people. This equivalency of law with *white* and *personhood*, and the concomitant equivalency of *African* with *legal property*, forges a subsequent correlation: poem and court decision are equated through their reliance on language. As Philip writes, “Law and poetry both share an inexorable concern with language—the ‘right’ use of the ‘right’ words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is the goal shared by both” (191).

With this last equivalency, however, the divergencies become irreparable. The murdered Africans, Philips emphasizes, officially exist only in the court decision—“the Africans are in the text” (192), she writes, “the case is the tombstone, the one public marker of the murder of those Africans on board the *Zong*, locating it in a specific time and place. It is a public moment, a textual monument marking their murder and their existence” (194). Legal language is the only marker for the murdered Africans; however, that language also effaces them, preserving them only as nameless, fungible *goods*. Therefore, as Justices Lee and Chambre comment in *Gregson v. Gilbert*, “It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods” (qtd. Philip 211). As Alexander G. Weheliye explains, racialization functions “as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans,” meaning that “blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot” (3). Sociopolitically, the *Zong*'s crew could not be considered murderers in their time because, legally, one cannot murder property. Consequently, the law's precise language preserves the murdered

Africans in a site not of death but rather in eternal nonhumanity, with their never having had legally recognized lives or identities. Moreover, as Weheliye argues, the law implicitly functions on an equivalency that ingrains ownership (and whiteness) at the heart of humanity: “the benefits accrued through juridical acknowledgement of racialized subjects as fully human often exacts a steep entry price, because inclusion hinges on the codification of personhood as property” (77). That is, full humans *own* themselves—thus making it impossible for enslaved Black people to legally move from non-humans to full humans. Weheliye’s ultimate point here is that enslaved Africans and their present-day descendants cannot achieve full humanity within Western legal systems, due to those systems’ inherent white supremacy.

Which leads to and explains a further correlation: Philip enacts a destruction of the legal decision equivalent to the decision’s metonymical destruction of the murdered Africans. Philip states, “I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women and children were mutilated / I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs” (193). The court, according to its own systems, could never condemn the murders of the Africans aboard the *Zong*, so Philip’s poem dismisses the court decision and the legal system it represents by completely reimagining them.

But Philip’s disruptions go beyond the legal system, to the system underpinning the legal system: language itself. The subtlest equivalency that Philip creates is between the limitations she sets for herself—writing only from *Gregson v. Gilbert*—and all linguistic creations, creations she argues only appear to be free: “the limitation here is the text itself—the language comprising the record / Language appears to be a given—we believe we have the freedom to choose any words we want to work with from the universe of words, but so much of what we work with is a given” (192). Philip’s limiting of *Zong!* to words, anagrams, morphemes, and phonemes from *Gregson v. Gilbert*, then, differs only in degree, not in kind, from any linguistic utterance because the universe of language always sets limitations that constrain our options before we speak. That is, we do not say what we want to; rather, we speak only what we can put into the language we have available at any time and place. So, Philip defines the stakes by equating the eternal captivity of the dead with her authorial captivity within the

court decision, and, even more so, within discursive norms in general. Thus, grammar becomes the representative of discursive slavery: “[I]t is grammar which is the ordering mechanism, the mechanism of force” (193). Such norms are the bedrock for the ordering logic that drives Western society and allows for the violence of grammar and the reality of enslaving certain human beings as property.

This indictment of language and discursive norms leads to Philip’s most crucial decision. For, if language is the problem, then she must subvert language; arguing rationally against slavery is pointless, she explains, as any rational argument submits to and implicitly endorses the rules of order that language brings (197). Instead, she “fight[s] the desire to impose meaning on the words—it is so instinctive, this need to impose meaning: this is the generating impulse of, and towards, language, isn’t it—to make and, therefore, to communicate, meaning?” (194). Rather than working in language, “[t]he poems are about language at its most fundamental” (195). *Zong!* disassembles English, reverting the language of the court decision to its basic elements, in “the basic way in which children put language together when they begin to speak, building syllable on syllable” (195). *Zong!* does not tell the story of the *Zong* because, as Philip states in “Notanda,” “I want poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself” (199). This subversion of language avoids any linear trajectory that could be simplified into a straightforward argument: speaking with Dzifia Benson, Philip states bluntly, “I don’t want to make arguments in poetry . . . I save[] the arguments for the essays. Because when I come to poetry I want the contradictions to be there.” These contradictions, and the subversion of linear thought that they help to create, keep the poem free from working in service to larger arguments. For Philip, poetry’s use is, counterintuitively, its lack of utility:

it’s in its [poetry’s] absence of utility that its great strength lives. . . . Nobody’s asking for it—poetry I mean, but if you write about it, maybe it becomes a truth, simply as it exists in that moment, maybe in the way that poems can be places of solace, and when you share it, if you do, the solace is shared. (Benson)

There is no efficacy in poetry, then, no using it to accomplish something else, but Philip's point about shared solace suggests that there is something that happens in a poem like *Zong!* While Philip, with her point about shared solace, endorses literature's utility as a means of fostering sympathy, she suggests that this shared feeling happens outside the efficaciousness of language, beyond the realm of everyday, rational language. It occurs in the encounter with the irrational language of the poem, and this encounter cannot survive translation into words other than the poem's.

This attempt to think and speak otherwise can be usefully viewed within Denise Ferreira da Silva's concept of a "black feminist poethics," a radical way of writing and thinking differently that becomes a purpose in itself, "a practice of imagining and thinking (with/in/for) the world, without separability, determinacy, and sequentiality . . . [that] approaches reflection as a kind of study, or as the play of the imagination without the constraints of the understanding." Such a practice of thinking differently allows alternative pathways into and through the world, so that

if the task is unthinking this world with a view to its end—that is, decolonization . . .—the practice would not aim at providing answers but, instead, would involve raising questions that both expose and undermine the Kantian forms of the subject, that is, the implicit and explicit positions of enunciation—in particular, the loci of decision or judgement or determination—this subject occupies. (da Silva)

da Silva's argument meshes well with Philip's practice in suggesting that the use of form to refuse inherited enunciative practices takes on a politics of challenge that undermines and destabilizes standard Western thinking in relation to subjectivity and the practices and laws that work in concert with it.

This argument illuminates an implicit purpose to *Zong!*, specifically, Philip's attempt to tell without telling by offering what she calls an "un-telling" (207). This un-telling refuses language's logic, with its enslaving grammar and systemic limitations and injustices. *Zong!* is not an argument against, but an un-argument, an undoing that works within language to disassemble normative discursive codes and the

systems of Western thought that these codes metonymically represent. The un-telling respects the dead by refusing to speak for them. To accomplish this seemingly impossible task of un-telling, Philip makes language and the page on which it is recorded into a space related to, but subversive of, all inherited rules of order. In other words, she makes the page what Michel Foucault terms a *heterotopia*. In the preface to *The Order of Things*, Foucault discusses heterotopia in relation to Borges' description, in his short story "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," of a fictitious Chinese encyclopedia that taxonomizes animals according to a list of absurd features. What is important about Borges's list, Foucault argues, is not the absurdity of the delineations, but that the list proceeds arbitrarily, with no subordination or coordination between the elements, which include *tame, included in the present classification, and drawn with a very fine camelhair brush* (qtd. xvi). It thus removes "the common ground" that would normally suggest some linkage among them (xviii). The removal of the common ground means there is no place the animals taxonomized thusly could ever meet, "except in the immaterial sound of the voice pronouncing their enumeration, or on the page transcribing it[.] Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language? Yet, though language can spread them before us, it can do so only in an unthinkable space" (xviii). This unthinkable space is the heterotopia, the other space where "things are 'laid,' 'placed,' 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all" (xix).

While Foucault's later theorizations of the term stress actual heterotopic spaces in society, this first engagement conceives of heterotopias primarily as impossible, textual spaces, describing them in terms similar to Philip's when she interrogates grammar and language: "*Heterotopias*," Foucault states,

are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things . . . to "hold together." (xix)

Foucault's discussion of syntax here equates roughly to Philip's concept of grammar: it invisibly underpins our systems of order. Heterotopias expose these hidden structures by creating spaces that radically disrupt those structures. As Foucault says, heterotopic disruptions show that order is

that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression. (xxi)

That is, there is natural order in the world, but it is not the order that we impose on the world. Power works by installing a fundamental but false equivalency: that the order it creates and incessantly promotes is the natural order; that things relate to each other as they do in any system of meaning because that specific, artificial system is the natural order of relations. Heterotopias expose the artificiality of these created systems of meaning, undermining their claims to power. The result, Peter Johnson explains, is that "heterotopias are fundamentally disturbing places. . . . [T]hey display and inaugurate a difference and challenge the space in which we may feel at home. These emplacements exist out of step and meddle with our sense of interiority" (84).

Where does a reader feel more comfortable, more assured in their sense of interiority, than when encountering a well-behaved, discursively normative text? This is why Philip's choice to keep *Zong!* firmly outside discursive norms is crucial, whether it manifests itself in irregular phrasing ("is being is / or / should / is," [37]), an absurd portmanteau ("150sixtyfortytwoandahalfeventhreesevenfifty-thirtyseveneighteenseventeenonesix," [51]) or the illegible overstrikes that appear throughout "Ebora" (see Figure 1). *Zong!* defamiliarizes language in a space—the professionally published book—where one expects it to be most familiar.

Zong! challenges discursive order, destabilizing those systems of power—such as the legal system—embedded in the rules of language. But, while *Zong!* enacts a profound distrust and destabilization of

English's order, it is important that Philip still believes in the power of language itself, specifically the heterotopic use of language outside the space of grammar or syntax. Heterotopic language in *Zong!* is the vehicle of disruption, the site of struggle and destabilization; it is a place of freedom for both Philip and for the murdered Africans, a freedom that exceeds the readers' and the writers'—Philip's and the justices'—ability to control it—for example, when languages slip between and over each other, so “slave” becomes not just “salve” but also the Latin “*salve*,” which, when shortened into “*ave*,” shimmers between its Latin meanings (both *ave* and *salve* are words of greeting), its Shona meaning (“so that he or she can be” [184]), and its Latinate English near eye rhyme (“ah we”):

salve the slav
 e *salve* to
 sin *salve* slave *salve*
 and *ave* *ave*
 the rat the rat *ave*
 ah we (63–64)

This disruptive heterotopic freedom, then, extends to language itself in the poem. As Philip says, “I think poetry has been drafted into a kind of transactional commercial economy. I don’t think it’s done poetry any good. . . . If the poet has a responsibility I think it’s our responsibility for caring for the word” (Benson). *Zong!* is Philip’s act of radical care for the word, for utterance, which can take place only outside the transactional commercial economy that the rules of language constantly seek to reaffirm. In “Notanda,” Philip suggests an equivalency between language and slavery: “The ultimate question on board the *Zong* is what happened? Could it be that language happened?” (205). But Philip also stresses that language holds within itself the heterotopic possibilities of its own disruption:

The same letters in the same order mean different things
 in different languages . . . Take a letter away and a new
 word in a different language is born. Add a letter and the

word loses meaning. The loss of language and meaning on board the *Zong* levels everyone to a place where there is, at times, no distinction between languages . . . a state of pre-literacy. (205–06)

Without downplaying the actual suffering of the murdered Africans, Philip frees words from their accustomed rules, from language's mastery, to provide a heterotopic space where words can be free, where poetry can "disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which through not-telling, will tell itself" (199).

This disorder creates "a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning" (201), working against the discursive norms and rules that invisibly structure our utterances. In this regard, it is important to note that both *Zong!* specifically and heterotopias generally, while disruptive of established order, are not simply chaotic mish-mashes; so, heterotopia "describes the spatial articulation of another discursive order" (Wesselman 2). Likewise, both *Zong!* and heterotopias establish their discrepancies through a distinct, disruptive relationship (as opposed to a simple refusal) within the dominant structures: as "discrepant segments of larger discursive totalities," they "manifest their own distinct logics, moods, and norms. Heterotopian effects are also relational; they refract, disturb, but also accentuate aspects of the wider social or discursive totality. In their difference, heterotopias signal that another order, condition, or discourse can be realised, at least in part" (Wesselman 2). *Zong!* offers such a discrepant, alternative discursive space, refusing to argue against the evils of slavery or even for the humanity of the Africans; instead, the heterotopic spaces Philip creates are sites where the historic, metaphorical underpinnings of slavery simply cannot function. Or, as Foucault puts it, "heterotopias . . . desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences" (xix).

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which Philip's focus on the racialization of *Zong*'s legal narrative subverts and reshapes Foucault's racially problematic theorization of heterotopic space.¹ As Weheliye forcefully argues, Foucault, "by placing racial difference in a field prior to and at a distance from conceptual contemplation, inscribe[s] race as a 'real object'" that implies "an

indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization" (7, 4). In opposition, Weheliye upholds race "as a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body" (5). Moreover, he cautions that "theoretical formulations by white European thinkers are granted a conceptual *carte blanche*" as they are "deemed transposable to a variety of spatiotemporal contexts because the authors do not speak from an explicitly racialized viewpoint (in contradistinction to nonwhite scholars who have written about racial slavery, colonialism, [I]ndigenous genocide, etc.)" (6). To avoid this type of universalist transposition, I would emphasize that the heterotopic spaces in *Zong!* are explicitly and fundamentally raced, that Philip is working with a *Black* heterotopia. Focusing on the realities of racialization helps to affirm Weheliye's call for "a materialist reconceptualization of suffering" which emphasizes that, "[o]nce suffering that results from political violence severs its ties with liberal individualism . . . we can commence to think of suffering and enfleshment as integral to humanity" (14). This enfleshed suffering, as represented in the Black heterotopic spaces in *Zong!*, can "offer pathways to distinctive understandings of suffering that serve as the speculative blueprint for new forms of humanity" (14). Or, as Weheliye asks more pointedly, "How might we go about thinking and living enfleshment otherwise so as to usher in different genres of the human and how might we accomplish this task through the critical project of black studies?" (2–3). Black heterotopias, functioning as alternative spaces that build upon but also deform Foucault's conceptualization, are one potential avenue to thinking otherwise.

The most important Black heterotopia in *Zong!* is likely the space that hides in plain sight: the page. The page is where Philip encounters *Gregson v. Gilbert*, where "the Africans are in the text" (192), and where Philip undoes the rules of discursive order. More than just the place where the immaterial voice is transcribed (as Foucault describes it), the page for Philip becomes an active, disruptive, Black heterotopia, again through a number of comparative equivalencies. The official page of the court decision is the "tombstone" (194), the inert, fixed, written-in-stone reification of language's power; moreover, Philip describes the page in aquatic terms, writing that, "[o]n the 'surface' the *ratio* [the written legal decision] of *Gregson v. Gilbert* was that 'the evidence [did] not support the statement of the loss made in the declaration' . . . The

‘underwater’ *ratio* appears to be that the law supercedes being, that being is not a constant in time, but can be changed by the law” (200, brackets in original). Therefore, erasing that legal document makes the page in *Zong!* a place of absence, of erasure—but, more importantly, a site of liquid fluidity: Philip describes how the poem “bears witness to the ‘resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed’” (203) and ponders, “What is the word for bringing bodies back from water? From a ‘liquid grave’? . . . I find words like resurrect and subaquatic but not ‘exaqua.’ Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you’re underwater there is no retrieval—that you can never be ‘exhumed’ from water” (201)? She then declares that her goal is to “bring the stories of these murdered Africans to light—above the surface of the water—to ‘exaqua’ them from their ‘liquid graves’” (202). The *Zong* crew massacred the enslaved Africans by forcing them into the sea, and Philip’s desire to “exaqua” them, to “resurfac[e] . . . the drowned,” reconfigures the plane of the page as a waterline. The poem’s words are not underwater, but floating in airy space above water. So, in the section “Os,” where Philip gifts names to the enslaved Africans, the names appear in the footer, separated from the poetic text by a horizontal line; for example, see the names Aba, Chimanga, Naeema, Oba, and Eshe in Figure 3. These names are “ghostly footnotes,” she states, “floating below the text—‘underwater . . . a place of consequence’” (200); however, their voices, their un-telling of their story, exists in a metonymic place that is not onboard the *Zong* (the site of slavery) nor in the water (the site of death), but in a Black heterotopic space in between, floating in the air between ship and sea, where the poems and the words can get what they need: “breathing space” (195). The page becomes an airy space where the drowned Africans can breathe, sing, and un-tell their tale in forms that avoid white, Eurocentric rules of grammar, narration, and characterization.

***Zong!* as Site of Solace—not of Revisionism**

Philip ends “Notanda” by stating:

Zong! is chant! Shout! And ululation! *Zong!* is moan!
Mutter! Howl! And shriek! *Zong!* is “pure utterance.”
Zong! is Song! And Song is what has kept the soul of the

African intact when they “want(ed) water . . . sustenance . . . preservation.” *Zong!* is the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling. (207)

If poetry, as Philip acknowledges in her interview with Benson, creates the possibility of sharing solace, *Zong!* makes it clear that sharing solace neither removes nor lessens the pain of the original action of mass murder that occurred aboard the *Zong*. All Philip does in the poem to imagine the lives and thoughts of the Africans on the *Zong* remains consciously artificial, as do the names that Philip gives the murdered Africans in “Os”; likewise, the poem’s subtitle, “As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng,” is crucial to this artificiality: as Philip explains in an interview with Philip Metres,

I describe myself as the unauthor of the work. I was following gut feelings when I felt the need to ask permission to bring these voices forward, and I would say that the most important aspect of the process of working with those energies, which are larger than us, is humility—a putting aside of the ego to be able to allow what needs to come through to manifest.

The names of the Ancestors on the cover of *Zong!* represent at least three different legacies. . . . I should say that I didn’t see myself as collaborating with the Ancestors so much as listening to what seemed needed or necessary.

The emphasis on ancestral listening over personal authority stands out, as does Philip’s diminishing of her role as creator of the text. These aspects align with the concept of *Zong!* as a Black heterotopic space, one where emotion displaces reason and where singular identity is undone in favour of a fractious, intentionally messy plurality that performs an attempt, as Weheliye states it, at “thinking and living enfleshment otherwise” (2). Philip’s diminishment of authorial intent also aligns with da Silva’s Black feminist poethics. “[S]urrendering the artist’s intention to the needs of the work,” da Silva argues,

leads to a loosening of the composition and its materials, which invites them to signify willy-nilly. Each and every decision she has made due to familiarity . . . with the forms and materials used in the work loses its immediate efficacy in the assemblage.

The diminishment of Philip's role as creator or decider of *Zong!* extends the text's efforts to think differently in order to prompt the reader to do likewise.

However, what is less obvious is the offhand comment "The names of the Ancestors," Philip's reference to "Setaey Adamu Boateng"; it is incorrect, then, to refer to Setaey Adamu Boateng as a coauthor, or even as coauthors. They are Ancestors, plural, who exist in a Black, heterotopic, impossible space between Philip and *Zong!*; it is absurd to suggest the three names refer to fictional people, but it is simultaneously incorrect to suggest they refer to actual, specific people. As Jenny Sharpe argues, "Either a literal or metaphorical reading of Boateng as co-author would subject the formally-innovative book of poems to traditional codes of European realism" (472). In providing Philip with poetry, these ancestors seem to evoke the Western concept of the Muses, but, as ancestors, they are African humans, not Greco-Roman goddesses, and they are implicitly participants in the story that they tell to Philip. James McCorkle notes that Philip uses a similar African reimagining of Western tropes in her use of English, arguing that in Philip's previous work, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, the positive and negative relationship towards Africans' forced adoption of English shows that "Philip describes the hinged condition, to be deprived as well as to acquire, of English which supplants as well as supplements African languages under slavery and colonialism" (73). Philip emphasizes this point in her essay "Interview with an Empire":

the potential seductiveness of language is dangerous. . . .
[T]his was a language that the European forced upon the African in the New World. So that the exploitative plantation machine could be more efficiently run. It was a language of commands, orders, punishments. This language—english [*sic*] in my case, but it applies to all the languages of those European countries involved in the

colonialist project—was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. . . . [I] do not believe that english—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A decontamination process is probably more accurate. (50-51)

Zong! maintains this hinged condition in order to decontaminate English: if the poem “un-tells” the murdered Africans’ story, then the poem should be read as a celebration of the full humanity of the Africans onboard the *Zong* as much as a dirge. To see the poem only as the latter performs the same foundational stance that underpinned slavery, implicitly leaving the Africans in a perpetual state of not-quite-human by denying that they ever had or could have had agential ownership over themselves.

At the same time, *Zong!* refuses to allow the reader to forget that the Africans aboard the *Zong* were cargo, that they did not have legal humanity, and that they died while being forcibly removed from their cultures and languages. Simply ignoring the circumstances of the time would be irresponsible revisionism. Such revisionism does disservice to the actual murders of the Africans by providing a pseudo-solace that disrespects the horrific suffering that occurred on the *Zong* and every other ship in the Middle Passage. Like Borges’s impossible Chinese encyclopedia, Philip’s poem exists as an impossible space where the reader struggles to discern between seemingly incommensurate oppositions: the poem is a lament and a celebration, an entrenchment of both the Africans’ humanity and of their horrific existence as nonhuman cargo. However, unlike the concept of the human-thing that underpins slavery, *Zong!* places the Africans in a Black heterotopic space of fully human *and* nonhuman, both existing together simultaneously and—for this reader—thoroughly uncomfortably. This impossible space of the human-and-thing epitomizes the promise of heterotopias:

The spatial aspect of heterotopias allows for an entirely different form of thought—it allows us to think *Otherly*. Whereas utopian thought relies on teleological notions of progress, thinking spatially is grounded in a materialist

phenomenology; it is a perceptual form of critical thought that occupies space at the same time as it constructs space. . . . As such this is a form of thinking that can perceive possibilities that do not fall back on myths of progress. (Hancock 8)

This suggests two important points. First, the Black heterotopic space in *Zong!* promotes thinking otherly by refusing the idea that solace can only be realized through agency and resistance, since, as Weheliye states,

resistance and agency assume full, self-present, and coherent subjects working against something or someone. Which is not to say that agency and resistance are completely irrelevant in this context, just that we might come to a more layered and improvisatory understanding of extreme subjection if we do not decide in advance what forms its disfigurements should take on. (2)

The second point to note relates to the progress myth behind utopic thinking: there is nothing in *Zong!* to suggest that progress has been made in the centuries since the massacre.

This refusal of progress is key to *Zong!* and to Philip's work in general. For Philip, oppressors easily coopt progress to dismiss the accusations of the oppressed by relegating those oppressions to the past. A recurrent theme throughout Philip's writing is that we are not past the past, that the issues of the past remain with us today; the manifestations may be different, but the issues are the same. So, in her essay "Jammin' Still," she argues that "Canada and the US and the many other countries of the Americas and the Caribbean remain colonial states, most obviously in their relationship with their First Nations- and African-descended populations" (20). The past informs the present in a foundational way; we must work to overcome the superficial differences between times in order to see the ongoing systemic racism that exists a-temporally in Western society.

As Ian Baucom observes, similar views of time occur throughout much of twentieth-century Caribbean and Black Atlantic writing. Baucom locates the germ of "a conception of time" that attempts "to abandon the temporal schemes of [political liberalism's] progressive philosophy of history" with Édouard Glissant (311), specifically his

Poetics of Relation: “To the extent that the time of the past survives, nonsynchronously, into the present, for Glissant . . . that time survives . . . as that which accumulates” (318–19). Such accumulative time means that “what-has-been *is*, and it is *lived*, and it is lived as the total environment linking together the histories of peoples” (319). Baucom identifies similar theories of accumulative time in contemporary Black Atlantic texts such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*, and—unsurprisingly—Philip’s *Zong!*, arguing that these texts “are not concerned with the return of the past. Their interest is in our conception of the contemporary” (322–24). Or, as Christina Sharpe rephrases the issue, “This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still. . . . [H]ow does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?” (19–20). White racism manifested itself as the transatlantic slave trade centuries ago, but the end of this slave trade in no way means that antiBlack racism has ended or even diminished: “It seems redundant,” Philip argues,

that one has to state that Black lives matter; indeed, in a capitalist economy Black lives have *always* mattered, unfortunately, however, not for their intrinsic value but for their use value. The financial system we live with and in today has its roots in a system of speculative financing that was developed during the transatlantic trade in Africans . . . (17)

This subtle equivalency—that the past and the present are not interchangeable but are inextricably linked in ways that a liberal belief in progress wants to deny—means that in Philip’s words, “This has never happened to us before; this has always happened to us before” (“Caribana” 232). The treatment of time as accumulative and recurrent focuses *Zong!* as much on contemporary society and its endemic racism against Black people as on the historical massacre of Africans on the *Zong*. It also suggests that the solace that *Zong!* creates relates not only to the Africans murdered on the *Zong*, but also to Black victims of violence today.

Arguing Through *Zong!*, Not in It

By using experimental, non-normative discursive forms, *Zong!* challenges readers to remake meaning rather than passively receive it. By arguing that the poem creates and exists in a Black heterotopic space, I have suggested a number of issues that Philip raises and engages with—but I have downplayed arguments about specifics in the poem itself. A close reading, or a careful textual examination of the particulars of the poems, risks being counter-productive because such examinations often normalize discursive challenges by explaining them. Jenny Sharpe, for example, argues: “To see the book as the recovery of lost stories would be to make its ghosts reside within the house of archives, by regarding silences only as absences to be filled with stories,” going on to argue that Philip “suggests a language in silence” (472). Likewise, Eva C. Karpinski emphasizes how

[e]ach page [of *Zong!*] invites slant ways of moving through/across its surface, similar to the deadly swirls and whirls of water activating the competing currents of language. Such verbal mobility suggests that finding alternative routes is necessary in order to extract new meanings from the legal detritus. (641)

These critics emphasize the provisional nature of meaning in *Zong!*, suggesting that multiple meanings must be respected.

Yet they each also offer moments of close reading of the poems, implicitly endorsing Karpinski’s problematic desire to “extract new meanings.” Such new meanings cannot help but impose explanations on the poems in ways that undo Philip’s foundational argument in “Notanda” that the *Zong* massacre is a “story that must tell itself” (191). The poems work to undo inherited knowledge and social practices by undoing inherited, normative speech patterns, and they embody Philip’s intentional violence on the *Gregson v. Gilbert* ruling and its English language: when Philip states “I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women and children were mutilated,” hers is a mutilation that wants to avoid re-assemblages that lead to the comfort derived from understanding (*Zong!* 193). Readers should respect the equivalency between murdered text and the *Zong* murders by acknowledging that the text attempts to remain somewhat

beyond both understanding and experience; readers must remember that it is the poems' violence against discursive norms which undoes logic and meaning, inviting us into Black heterotopic space. Exposition and close reading must respect the creative violence of Philip's mutilation as an attempt to forge radically new insight: "I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling" (193–94). It is problematic, then—with the implicit connection between the violence towards English and the violence towards actual women, children, and men—for a reader to try to find a distance away from the text from which to rationally understand it. Instead, the reader must work to stay in the poems' Black heterotopic space, reached in the moment of ethical encounter, to avoid lapsing into a contemplative space of thinking *about* the poem. The possibility of experiencing solace in *Zong!*, mentioned earlier, occurs in the site of the encounter, whereas contemplation—relying on inherited practices of meaning-making—detours us back into logic. Philip, discussing how the techniques of *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* relate to *Zong!*, emphasizes that her goal "was to move beyond representation of what the New World experience was" since representation "would have meant ordering an experience which was disordered (and cannot ever be ordered), irrational, illogical and unpredictable; it would have meant doing a second violence, this time to the memory of an already violent experience" (*Zong!* 197). Representation would have meant a second violence; yoking the irrationality and disorder of *Zong!* to an argument would be another such second violence, one that disrespects the extraordinary but all-too-ordinary violence of the *Zong* massacre. Sharpe justifies the extreme formal challenges of *Zong!* by arguing that Philip and fellow formally challenging Black Atlantic poets Dionne Brand and Kamau Brathwaite "do not seek to explain or resolve the question of [the ontological negation of Black] exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights, but rather depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity" (14).

Having said that, Philip is the first to break her rule. The poetry of *Zong!* remains consistently heterotopic, outside the boundaries of logical discourse and reason. The “Notanda” that follows, however, is a twenty-page explanation of Philip’s authorial processes, intentions, difficulties, and justifications, one that begins and ends with Philip’s argument for the necessity of writing the text as she has (189, 207). The “Notanda” does not undo the poems’ Black heterotopic challenges, but, as Kevin Hetherington suggests, such paratexts work heterotopically to create spaces where the reader can engage in interpretation:

the supplementary texts in a book that are outside the main body of the text—index, title page, acknowledgements, dedications, forewords and so on—can have a heterotopic relationship to the content of the book in which they are bound. . . . And that relationship can be established by author or audience in their writing/reading of what is placed outside of the main text but in relation to it. It suggests that other readings are possible, that there is always a supplement and that things remain unfinished despite the craft of the author/editors. (196)

Philip legitimates the readers’ ability to create their own engagements with *Zong!* because the “Notanda” creates a heterotopic space that implies the poems require discussion and interpretation.

This also suggests that the challenges *Zong!* offers are necessarily ephemeral. Philip’s spatial rupturing of words throughout the poetry, her inclusion of words from multiple languages, and her inclusion of nonce words all radically disrupt English and destabilize reading; the first poem in the book, “*Zong! #1*,” for example, incorporates all these techniques (Figures 2 and 3). Initially, this poem appears beyond comprehension; however, the active reader eventually works towards an understanding, moving the poem from heterotopic disruption to something closer to normative discourse and reason: words such as *want* and *water* present themselves (3), and eventually a simple utterance—to me, “What was our water, good water? O, one day’s water of want”—appears. One could dismiss this readerly reorganization of the poem, which requires decoding as much as it does normative reading, as an act of recuperation. It is that—but such reorganization is also an aspect of all heterotopic spaces: as Elham

Bahmanteymouri and Farzaneh Haghighi argue, “[A] heterotopic site is ephemeral and cannot last long. Due to social and cultural changes, divergence from the norm is in constant flux” (142). What is heterotopic, what disrupts our conceptualizations of space and meaning, is incessantly being recuperated because it exists “in contrast to the accepted norms and ideals” that are themselves always in flux—at least partially due to heterotopic challenges (141).

Moreover, heterotopic disruptions are recuperable because heterotopias remain in strained dialogue with normal space; not completely alien, heterotopias “function as resistance to more hegemonic forms but never operate in isolation from them. . . . Heterotopia always carries with it traces of interconnectedness with all the messy, fragmented, and contradictory power relations that precede and surround it” (Elliott 38). Put simply, heterotopic space is disruptive because it retains enough of a relationship to the normative that we recognize it as the normative skewed. Not complete destruction, it is rather radical renovation, “an always faltering, incomplete process, without synthesis, a dialectics at a standstill, an unstable interruption or suspension” (De Cauter and Dehaene 94). So, Philips mutilates the English of *Gregson v. Gilbert* rather than creating a new language or abandoning language altogether. *Zong!* disrupts readers’ discursive norms, but actively engaged readers will eventually find a way to tame those disruptions. Rather than problematic, however, Lieven De Cauter suggests this dialectic of disruption and incorporation is positive:

Heterotopias are the laboratories, the breeding grounds of these ambiguities and equivocations, of this feast of mystery and meaning (ritual), of senselessness and gratuitousness of the rule itself (play). Therefore these places, all of them, . . . are crucial for anthropogenesis: it is in heterotopias that we become human. (26)

The reader’s own identity, then, must come into play in both personal and critical readings of *Zong!* The Black heterotopias Philips creates are disruptive, challenging, freeing, frustrating—but readers with different familiarities with experimental texts, with varying levels of comfort with uncertainty, and from different cultural backgrounds will enter those spaces from very different places and with different

experiences. (As a white male, my own discomfort with mastering *Zong!*—pun intended—accounts for my unwillingness to overly analyze the poetry.) In these regards, heterotopic space functions as a site where readers are able to share various experiences of discomfort that work to disrupt their habituated discursive norms. Readers should engage with *Zong!*'s heterotopic spaces and their destabilizations without trying to shift the poem away from its radical otherness; instead, readers must try to encounter the poem where it is, in a series of uncomfortable Black heterotopic sites, and try to actively listen to what and how the text works to un-tell the story of the murdered Africans.

As Philip writes in "Notanda," "The not-telling of this particular story is in the fragmentation and mutilation of the text, forcing the eye to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray" (198). Given the ephemerality of heterotopic sites, readers must work to allow the poem to remain as fragmented and mutilated as possible, struggling towards receding meanings rather than relaxing in a reified meaning they place upon the text. What this finally suggests is a revision to da Silva's, Weheliye's, and Philip's arguments in favour of the radical nature of what I have termed Black heterotopic space: thinking and living enfleshment otherwise (Weheliye), unthinking this world (da Silva), and untelling (Philip) are effective, necessary stances—but they each work heterotopically, as other spaces that remain tied to this world; they do not radically leave the world behind (nor would they want to), and so the heterotopic linkages tying Black heterotopic space to the world renders these theorizations more re/visionary than radical reconceptualization.

cut her open in live will be grounds justice stamper be
the noise miter cortices the sound links I in lives & am
inidechalerant as thinnis oream savetosucking throw flitting
le p'tit mthe crew tonightyufelidrentensley Ruth throw them
of alt of mortality in rations murder schuze is fate crusts
but why Rthe namesum am tone & time the seer there is creed
tharhones she do the stars appégnig nig if shine there isander if only
& fipfs inmiuder mde us & yong wherbyragn aide oh oh

Figure 1. *Zong!* p. 182

Zong! #1

w w w w a wa
 w a w a t
 er wa s
 our wa
 te r gg g g go
 o oo goo d
 waa wa wa
 ww waa
 ter o oh
 on o ne w one
 w o n d d d
 ey d a
 dey a ah ay
 s one days
 wa wa

Figure 2.

w w w w w a
 w wa wa t
 er wa te
 r wat
 er wa ter
 of w
 ant

Figure 3.

Notes

1. Foucault's racially naive discussion of Jesuit colonies and ships in his article "Of Other Spaces"—one of two texts, alongside the preface to *The Order of Things*, wherein Foucault substantially theorizes heterotopias—is particularly problematic.

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Andy Weaver is an associate professor of English at York University, where he teaches courses on contemporary poetry, poetics, and creative writing. In addition to academic articles on contemporary experimental poetry, he has published three books of poetry. His fourth book, *The Loom*, is forthcoming from the University of Calgary Press.

Jamella Hagen

Transition

If a child was a poem,
it would write itself.

It would
write itself out of you
through a roar
deep as the river
Styx, it would

pass through
your hallucinations

of faces, people who seemed
familiar
and perhaps were,
telling you something
you could almost hear;

that forest of pale birches
in snow,
a flash of red
between branches;

a weathered wooden dock,
and dark waves, Pacific
in their strength,
lapping its edges
in moonlight.

You saw each of these things
several times,
then you entered a pain
that changed you

the way an artist models clay,
or a climber reports a stillness
in the deepest fear, a fierce
precision, unroped,
pressed in granite.

At the end of it you had a child,
naked and quiet
against your damp breast.
Death had left the room again.
Your raw nerves surged—

if that child had been a poem,
you would have held it for two years
and watched it take off running.

Instead, you held the child.
When your lap was free,
poetry crept back up
like a cat, looking
for the story.

| *Jamella Hagen is a writer who lives in Whitehorse, Yukon.*

Steve Noyes

Second-hand Albums

They yellow over time, over-exposed,
losing the clarity of their prime.
There is, I'm afraid, no other way
of flipping through donated LPs,
each flip displaying another sad
splash of valiant fashion. Please,
it isn't our fault your skin-tone paled;
that you hiss in the same groove;
that all that was bright and baleful
about you, once, now cannot move.

You could have worn a less flocculent
hairdo, or shoes that didn't transport
you onto a far-out planet of rare
tottering lost aliens. You might
have chosen thinner 'staches and lapels,
forgone those flagrant flares, sported
sideburns less like schooner captains,
fleshed out dresses that didn't yell
I am my own ghastly confection.

So long, chic buccaneers and wenches
of some thoroughly modern decade.
Your brief turn in the fame parade
has made you and your band-mates,
with your tickle-trunk of costumes,
seem less the vanguard of a revolution,
more outcasts of a stage-play who must rue
the attention span of all convention

and face their music. Jam-bands
whose cool looseness surpasses jazz;
those convinced the klezmer
would mesmerize the masses;
guitar-gods, fretting out cacophonies,
Funkensteins, fusion chimeras,
folkies holding only four chords
and sincerity, with liner notes by
philosophes of the Beat Academy.
All, all placed and lost their bets,
with mixing-levers and stubbed cigarettes.

To leave milk-crates of bygone vinyl
is to say goodbye to something, true,
but some mechanism kicks in, gets you
ear-worming with a simple melody
as inept as it is untrue:
Never/Gonna/Happen/To You.

| Steve Noyes' *The Conveyor* has just been published by Alfred Gustav Press.

Melanie Pierluigi

Open-hearted Acupuncture

How to change into ghosts
with flesh we can see through
and still look normal the next day.

How to swing the light from our bodies
to the wall and back. Shadows greedier
with their clothes removed.

An architectural design. A jigsaw
of blueprints no one remembers
in the day, but unclasp my
necklace before you leave, my bones

a puzzle put to good use. Don't call.
Let the empty ringtones curve around
my torso. Film videos instead
and pretend I'll get wet

from the white static.
I'll let you fix me however
you like, an enigma of glass jars,
night a porcelain drape

drawn around the room. I'll let you do
things you imagined
needed repairing: eyelids elastic and tight
in their wingless fluttering, molars

locked firm in the mouth—
acupunctured pricks of light.

| *Melanie Pierluigi lives in Vancouver and teaches high school English.*

Object Permanence

"I'm old enough to know there's nothing we love without incurring the debt of grief."

—*Ellen Bass*

Everything, once out of sight, disappears.
The sun, the stars, the cat as it scurries

under the bed. The bed, too, so why bother
tucking the fitted sheet right under the duvet.

See that fog, the one that shrouds memory
and roadways? Something might exist

beyond it, though not the wandering
convenience stores you came to know.

You might think love is the strongest,
the last barrier against that sudden flash

of unbeing. But smell, that's what keeps
its hold. No amount of pine breeze can mask

the depth of grief, the knowing that the end
of this day will bring a new loss. An orange-

and-black scarf never leaves your neck.
There could have been a tiger in your life

once. There could have been a love so epic
its very breath became the dedication

of all love poems after. In the gap of un-
knowing, you could be the happiest.

No one remembers your debts. You forget
how you cried over every pet's death.

Almost everyone will forget you as soon
as you're dead, except for that tiger you spent

a summer with, once. It will crawl out of
the jungle sniffing for you,

for that time one single thing stayed when
the sun and the stars flashed away.

| *Manahil Bandukwala is the author of MONUMENT (2022) and Heliotropia (2024).*

We don't know yet how we got our eyes

but when we needed air
we borrowed lungs
from the fan-finned Bachir
of the Nile reeds
and while we were there,
we plucked from its heart
the vital conus arteriosus
to move our own blood.
We didn't even ask—when we
wanted to hunt—we just took
the Bachir's fluid-filled synovial joints
for our limbs and fingers
and etched into cave walls
buffalo, deer, and rudimentary maps
of the night sky (yet, not a single
river fish). Maybe it's our brain, this jelly

in a bone jar, that operates
in terms of debts
to be paid. It was hundreds
of synovial hands
that carved the animal kingdom
into the pillars of Gobekli Tepe,
aligned them to a forgotten
zodiac of stars.
And it was hundreds more
that dug them out
of the Anatolian dirt
ten thousand years after
the Younger Dryas impact
froze the world.

Upon the Vulture Stone
flies its namesake,
a fossil brush reveals
the bald head, recognizable
even after an epoch of silence.
Beneath the carrion eater
a scorpion crawls like a severed claw
and below that, a tiny headless
human, one arm raised, missing
its hand. It is hypothesized
that the circle above the vulture's wing
represents the impact of
a comet, a livid amalgamation
of leftovers that escaped
the violence of solar system's
foundation; the builders

must have seen it then,
a second moon approaching:
everything that was of such little
consequence, now curled
into a fist.

| *Internationally published, Rocco de Giacomo's Casting Out was released in 2023.*

Tom Wayman

A City Most at Home in the Rain

Vancouver is most at home
in heavy rain. The water hammering down
on residential streets could not care less about
the cost of the houses, whose inhabitants,
glad now just to be dry and out of the storm,
peer at the gale through windows against which
the ocean wind continually throws more rain. Money
means nothing to the falling water.
Expensive sedans, beaters, delivery trucks
and jammed buses alike splash through the pavement's rivulets,
spray rising from their tires. Drivers peer at the avenue ahead
blurred by streaks the vehicles' wipers
frantically attempt to again clear.

Store windows in the sodden shopping districts
are equally fogged whether the invisible merchandise
is marked-down vegetables or bespoke jewellery.
The few pedestrians—in suits and ties, cast-off clothing
or under hard hats—hunch along wet sidewalks
thinking only of being out of the weather.
In the drop-pocked harbour, a dozen anchored freighters
endure the steady downpour as they wait their turn to
load wheat, potash, lumber or to unload
high stacks of dripping containers. Steel decks
are slick with water that also soaks
the sand and rocks of the inlet's beaches, empty
except for drenched logs and a solitary walker.

Under the rain, the city extends comfortably
around its coves and over promontories,
low hills and creek mouths, stretches at its ease
from the mountains that northwards crowd the shore
to, away south, the delta of the great river
also pouring water into the sea.

| *Tom Wayman received BC's 2022 George Woodcock Award for Lifetime Achievement.*

Kit Dobson

Readers' Forum: Literary Biodiversities

Introduction

In my copy of the 1999 field guide *Mammals of Alberta*, written by Don Pattie and Chris Fisher, there is a single joke. The field guide is not intended as a joke book, but the authors—presumably with the full knowledge and participation of the editors and publisher at Lone Pine Publishing—have inserted a typically Albertan bit of humour. The joke exists in the entry for the Norway Rat, *rattus norvegicus*. As many people know, there are no rats in Alberta, or at least not officially. The province maintains an active “rat patrol”—formally known as the Alberta Rat Control Program—that is the subject of much common interest, myth, and lore. In practice, the rat patrol is a small government agency tasked with investigating and eliminating any rats found in the province, keeping Alberta, as the agency puts it on their website, free from “the menace of rats since 1950” (Government of Alberta). So, then, there should be no need for an entry on the Norway rat in *Mammals of Alberta*. Why is it there? The entry provides a full description of the rat and its habits, in keeping with the other entries in the book. But then, with a sly swerve, the field guide provides a spurious entry on the best location to spot Norway rats in Alberta—at first seemingly in keeping with the pattern of the book, which provides interested readers with potential sites for spotting each of the book’s mammals *in situ*. What are the best places in Alberta to spot Norway rats? According to my guidebook, these are the places: “British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Montana, Toronto, Ottawa” (154). These jokes are not marked in any way, but they are evidently comical, identifying as they do locations that lie outside of Alberta. Naming

these places as sites for spotting Norway rats also plays to persistent Albertan cultural patterns: first, disparaging the United States, and even Montana specifically, which is mythologized as the historical point of entry for bootlegged alcohol during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, poking fun at neighbouring provinces British Columbia and Saskatchewan is an easy bit of humour. Third, and jointly, disparaging Ottawa and Toronto is a common pastime in Albertan politics, since Ottawa—as the centre of government “back East” or in “Upper Canada”—and Toronto—as an uppity finance capital—are the supposed origin points of Western alienation.

This joke can serve as an opening point for thinking about the ways in which cultural objects that purport to be scientifically neutral—objects like field guides—can very quickly become literary objects. Biodiversity—of the sort taxonomized and captured in guidebooks—is not a neutral concept, even though it may seem like it, or even though it has been naturalized as such. In the first instance, biodiversity is simply the diversity of life, the variety of biological forms associated with specific places. However, as the contributions that follow each observe in their own ways, biodiversity is a concept that is also imbued with history, politics, and culture. Like my guidebook, it is not neutral, even if it is at times understood as such. The invocation of biodiversity is always a cultural moment, and it can become a literary moment, too, in the hands of creative practitioners. It is something like this process of taking a seemingly neutral scientific term and subjecting it to literary scrutiny that might, to my mind at least, make the idea of literary biodiversities a productive one.

This Reader’s Forum for *Canadian Literature* endeavours to provide opening points to the nascent idea of literary biodiversities.¹ Between July 18 and 22, 2023, a group of scholars and writers joined together in a workshop at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity to begin to tease out this idea. We were a deliberately small group, all situated in Canada’s westernmost provinces of British Columbia and Alberta. This restraint was an effort both to render ourselves as impervious to the vagaries of the pandemic as possible and to minimize our carbon footprints. We were brought together by shared concerns over the climate crisis and the relationship between scientific research and literary writing, as well as by the question of what something like “literary biodiversities” might mean for us. We were supported in this endeavour by a series of institutions, specifically, the Social Sciences

and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the Department of English and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Calgary; and the Kule Institute for Advanced Studies and the Centre for Literatures in Canada at the University of Alberta.

What follows is a short series of interventions that arise from our group's conversations in Banff. These are offered not as solutions or any sort of closure to the question of literary biodiversities; indeed, our time together raised far more questions than it solved. These interventions are by turns critical, scholarly, research-creation, and creative ones. As one of our throughlines in our conversations has been about the risks of taxonomizing and categorizing forms of life and animacy, though, I will avoid narrowly assigning these labels to individual pieces. Assembling them for this Readers' Forum, I am struck by their range, their generosity, and their nuance. I thank (in alphabetical order) Jordan Abel, Nicholas Bradley, Sarah Krotz, Stephanie Oliver, Shazia Hafiz Ramji, and Tathagata Som for their willingness to participate in this project. At a time when scholars and non-governmental organizations—as well as some governments—are calling for renewed and sustained focus on environmental concerns connected to the climate, it is my hope that the interventions in this Readers' Forum might serve as a means of spurring further dialogue.

Notes

1. While this forum offers a range of ways of thinking about literary biodiversities, neither I nor the contributors claim this term itself as a new; it appears in different ways in recent thinking. See, for instance, Niall Binns, "Ornithological Competence and Literary Biodiversity in Spanish American Poetry," and Lars Langer et al., "The Rise and Fall of Biodiversity in Literature," for a sense of the diversity of recent work.

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Kit Dobson lives, works, and writes in Calgary, Treaty 7 territory, in southern Alberta. A professor in the Department of English at the University of Calgary, he is the primary investigator of the SSHRC-funded project Literary Biodiversities in Western Canada. Kit is the past author or editor of eight books, including the books Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization, Mailed: Deciphering Shopping in Canada, and Fieldnotes on Listening, the latter of which was listed as one of the CBC's top non-fiction books of 2022. His debut novel, We Are Already Ghosts, is scheduled for publication in 2024. You can usually find him outside somewhere.

Tathagata Som

Literary Studies and Global Biodiversity Discourses: Points of Engagement

Between May 14 and 16, 1979, the Government of West Bengal, India, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), forcefully evicted Bangladeshi refugees from the island of Marichjhapi inside the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, a reserve forest created in 1973 and turned into a national park in 1984. The leftist government reasoned that the settlement inside a reserve forest violated forest laws and was detrimental to environmental conservation (Mallick 107). The police, along with Communist Party workers, perpetrated great violence in which “the refugees were fired at, their houses were burned down, and all signs of prior activity wiped off” (Jalais 338). While an exact estimate of the dead became impossible because the bodies were allegedly thrown into rivers and the press was not allowed to enter the region, it is said that “[a]t least several hundred” were killed (Mallick 111). “In a final twist to the episode,” writes Ross Mallick, the CPI(M) “settled its own supporters in Marichjhapi, occupying and utilizing the facilities left by the evicted refugees. The issues of the environment and the Forest Act were forgotten” (112).

The Marichjhapi incident is an instance of how the environmentalism of an urban, metropolitan, and comparatively

affluent class acts against the interests of the poor and the marginalized, creating contradictions between environmental conservation and human rights. The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve was created as a part of Project Tiger (1973), an initiative to protect the Bengal tiger and its habitats in India. Project Tiger became hugely popular and gathered international support, most notably from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). While no conservation group was implicated in the massacre, Mallick notes that

human rights abuses can result from tourism and environmentalism without direct pressure by these interests on governments for eviction. By developing a business interest in preservation, ecotourism creates a lobby for government policies that place new value on these areas, which would otherwise be seen as wastelands suitable for settlement and more conventional forms of development. (118)

This kind of conservation effort is especially dangerous in economically poorer countries where a significant part of the population directly depends on forests.

The decade that followed the Marichjhapi massacre saw the popularization of the term *biodiversity*, as well as the creation, by then-WWF Vice President for Science Thomas E. Lovejoy, of the debt-for-nature swap, by which a part of a developing country's international or foreign debt was cancelled in exchange for environmental actions by the debtor country. According to Nicole Hassoun, debt-for-nature swaps are a novel form of international loan, and the implementation of these loans by local governments creates new barriers to the exercise of human rights. Hassoun gives the example of such swaps in Bolivia, where the Indigenous Tsimané people became "unable to secure formal tenure to their lands" in the aftermath of the creation of national parks through this kind of swap (367). Similarly, the creation of Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica "displaced farmers from their lands and expropriated land from those who refused to sell their property" (367). Thus, neoliberal biodiversity conservation efforts have been instrumental in limiting economic and social opportunities for the poor and the marginalized.

In this context, the relationship between literary studies and biodiversity discourses should be a critical one, and we should examine how literary works engage with this seeming contradiction between biodiversity conservation and human rights. Instead of seeing these two concepts, conservation and human rights, as opposed to each other, we need to investigate under what conditions they become contradictory and what role literature plays in facilitating a worldview where human habitation is seen as inimical to environmental wellbeing. The fact remains that many Romantic and transcendentalist works of nineteenth-century Europe and North America cannot be read without the framing context of the global expansion of colonial capital. Literature, however, can also be critical of neoliberal conservation efforts by highlighting how the history of capitalism and colonialism has been instrumental in shaping the “environments” we are trying to protect. Including the history of capital will also, I hope, draw closer attention to class—an analytical category notably absent in posthumanist discourses about human-non-human relations—as a constitutive element of environmentalism. Literary studies can also engage with biodiversity discourses by examining literary connection-making across ecologies and geographies. What are the connections between literatures about the Rockies and the Himalayas, for example? Or, how does a novel set in the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta speak to one set in the Niger delta? In his 2011 book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon accuses ecocritics from the US of “superpower parochialism” because of their indifference to “foreign history, even when it is deeply enmeshed with US interests” (35). More than a decade after the publication of that book, a majority of North American ecocritical production remains fixated exclusively on North American environments, although surplus labour from the rest of the world, in the form of cheap raw materials, commodities, and services, keeps flooding North American markets. In this context, engagements with global biodiversity discourses might also help combat the parochialism in North American ecocriticism by highlighting connections that remain hidden when we focus on a region or an environment in isolation.

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Tathagata Som is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Calgary. His research interests are environmental humanities, postcolonial studies, South Asian literatures, and Bangla literature. His scholarly work has appeared in ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature, The Goose, and The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Medical-Environmental Humanities.

Sarah Wylie Krotz

Lichening

How to learn from this quiet, immobile life?
— Vincent Zonca, *Lichens*

Near the end of George Amabile's poem "First Light," the poet is arrested by a memory of lichen: "I don't know why I think // of Patrick in Swift Current," he writes:

the stone he brought
home like a lost pet
and the stone's lichen
exactly the colour of glacial till
but white at the edges
like a drying lake
seen from the top of a mountain. (102)

Interrupting an extended contemplation of the mind's confrontation with reality, the depths of human history, and origin stories, the sudden, inexplicable surfacing of this memory—of Patrick (Lane, I presume), of the stone, of the lichen that Patrick sprinkles with water

to keep alive—catches the randomness and the sacredness of life's encounters. Friend with friend, poet with reminiscence, lichen with rock: all these life-forces converge on the poem that, for a moment, carries them. "Literary biodiversity" encompasses this confluence of language and the mess of life. The stone, the friend who appropriates it, the poet's attempt to describe this memory and then, of course, the lichen—a strange, nearly immobile being, radically different from ourselves: literary biodiversity lives in such convergences.

I came to this conversation about literary biodiversity through my interest in habitat studies—a method pioneered by Laurie Ricou that eschews the traditionally anthropocentric orientations of literary studies around authors, literary movements and histories, the development of genres, and the like.¹ Habitat studies begins not with the human but with the biodiversity of which the human is a part: with bees and sandpipers, bats and frogs, birches and blackberries. Or it might begin with lichen, for any being who shares your space is as valid a starting point as another. The literary comes afterward, in the form of ecologies of texts that coalesce around each non-human being, highlighting the myriad ways in which writers have named, framed, described, reflected on, and related to them. Tracing at once the impact of language on the non-human world and the impact of the more than human world on language, habitat studies offers one possible method for the study of literary biodiversity.

Through this approach, we can ask what it means to follow lichens: not only to look and listen for these organisms, but also to be guided by them into new modes of thinking, reading, writing, and inhabiting this world and this ecological moment. What does lichen do, not just in this poem, but outside it? What ways of being does it bring into the poem? How might we regard it as an agent of "enlichenment" (Goward)? What is the language of lichens?²

Lichens live in every biome. They grow on many of the earth's surfaces, from tree trunks to tundra to desert to sheer rock face. They are the "glue" that holds the soil of indigenous bunchgrass prairie in place (Goward). They also find homes on concrete and stone walls, wooden fences, rooftop shingles. Although they can be some of the largest and oldest organisms in the world, they can also be "the smallest thing: a lichen scab on stone" (Crozier 59).

Showing up on poetry's surfaces, too, lichen's strange, faceless forms put a particular pressure on language.³ Metaphors and similes

range from blight and skin disease to baroque decoration, in some cases even conjuring celestial realms: lichens are described as “whorls” and “drab arabesques,” as “splotch[es]” and “scab[s],” as “explosions” and “cosmological map[s],” “spiky as galaxies.”⁴

Despite their ubiquity, lichens are an example of “neglected biodiversity” (Zonca 4–5). They do their small, slow-growing lichen thing, whether we notice them or not. In many poems, lichen is as quiet and unobtrusive a presence as it is on the bark of a tree (which, despite its ability to dissolve stone, it does not kill, contrary to some popular misconceptions). A reader might overlook the lichen in Karen Solie’s poem “Parallax,” for example, but it is there, drawing nourishment from the air; tenaciously, fragily, resiliently generating life among the stones left behind by Indigenous nations who, neglected at the hands of the colonial government, lost so much land:

The government once saw fit to give this land away,
there being only grass and Indians on it. Stones
from teepee rings host lichen in the rockpiles
as corporations draw a bead on the flyover zone
posing buy-outs like questions to those for whom
there are none. (76)

To attend to lichens, here and elsewhere, we need to slow down, abandon the god’s-eye views of flyover zones, land surveys, and picturesque prospects, and get closer to the earth. We need, in other words, to be more like lichens.

Growing at a rate of only one-half to five millimetres per year, lichens model an “ethics of slowness” (Zonca 33). As Nicholas Bradley also intimates in his contribution to this Readers’ Forum, such an ethic has become urgent. As rapacious resource extraction and fuel consumption dramatically outpace ecological processes of regeneration and natural carbon sequestration, we need to slow our rates of consumption. We also need to make time to think clearly, to collaborate meaningfully, and to listen attentively if we are to change how we are in the world: to treat our addictions to energy, convenience, speed, and escape; to build communities in the ways that might better sustain us and our non-human kin.

New worlds emerge through collaboration with lichen. In “Gathering,” Innu poet Natasha Kanapé Fontaine’s fiercely loving

reclamation of Indigenous land relies on an intimate bodily connection: “tonight,” she declares, “I’ll dress / in my lichen robe” (19–20). Inhabiting lichens becomes key to a transformative relationship with the earth.

Lichens are born of slow collaboration. Defying many of the categories humans have created to understand biodiversity, including taxonomic systems that account for species as individuals, lichens are symbiotic assemblages that cross species lines: composite beings “In photosynthetic algae-fungus cahoots,” as Sonnet L’Abbé puts it (xxxii).

While at first this way of being appears radically different from our own, the idea “We are all lichens” echoes through enlichenment thought.⁵ Recognizing that there are no individuals is a critical ecological insight made glaring by our global environmental crisis, and it must become central to our understanding of who we are in the world if we have any hopes of shifting the dangerous individualism that has led us here.

As a literary scholar, I like to think about reading and writing as collaboration: about intertextuality and citation, about the polyphonic practices of scholarship. There are no individuals in this line of work.⁶ Literary biodiversity, as a critical concept and a forum-generating practice, exemplifies further forms of collaboration that might help us navigate the enormous challenges, the griefs, and the possibilities for change we need to explore collectively. We need to sit together, to make time to talk to one another. We need to step outside, to approach literary studies through the non-human beings who have shaped it alongside its human concerns and plotlines. Literary biodiversity, like habitat studies, prompts us also to collaborate with ecologists. The gap between science and the humanities remains wide. We rarely think together, and we need to. We need to be lichens.

Notes

1. See especially *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* and *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*.
2. “Quand tu vis sur le territoire,” writes Innu poet Joséphine Bacon, “tu parles le langage des lacs, des rivières, du lichen, de la mousse, des montagnes” (1).
3. As Vincent Zonca observes, “Faceless, mineral and inert in appearance, lichen poses a moral and political problem: it inspires no spontaneous empathy. Like other ‘lower’ beings, it has a hard time accommodating anthropomorphism” (5).
4. Ormsby 132, 71; Crozier 59; Lane 15; Ormsby 71.

5. This metaphor, first posited by biologists Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber in "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals" (2012), also appears in David Griffiths' "Queer Theory for Lichens," Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life*, and Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, among other places.
6. My thinking on lichens rests not just on the work of poets and researchers cited here, but on the diligent rummaging done by my SSHRC-funded research assistant, Rachel Burlock.

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Sarah Wylie Krotz is an associate professor in the Department of English and Film Studies and director of the Centre for Literatures in Canada / Centre de littératures au Canada at the University of Alberta. She researches the spatial and ecological dimensions of literature in Canada and the possibilities of reimagining settler relationships with Indigenous lands. The author of *Mapping with Words*:

Anglo-Canadian Literary Cartographies, 1789–1916 (*U of Toronto P*, 2018) and co-editor (with geographer Bruce Erickson) of *The Politics of the Canoe* (*U of Manitoba*, 2021), she is currently working on a book of literary ecologies and habitat studies tentatively titled *Everyday Nature: Guides to a Shared Habitat*.

Jordan Abel

Dad Era

A dad is a parent is a human.

I have this crazy idea that I could never escape my father's shadow.

A dad is garbage is gone.

First, my father disappeared and then my mother abandoned all rational thought.

It was my father who told me nothing.

To be creative. To be loving. To be generous and kind and human were all lessons that I learned alone in the snow.

You are a fireball.

You are a being of infinite love.

A friend once said to me "fuck dads."

Did you know that being alone is sometimes terrifying?

If a dad exists or doesn't exist can we still be whole?

If I've learned one lesson in all of this, it's that you are a whole world.

I am a human being and I have made more mistakes than I can count.

Rely on yourself.

Love for yourself should be eternal and everlasting.

You are brilliant and shining and the brightest star in the sky.

Did you know that you can be a contestant on Master Chef Jr if you want?

As a person, I have not been the same since you came into my life.

I am no expert in racial passing but I do know that declining invitations to the Calgary Stampede is one the strangest things I've ever had to do.

Bright children are those that sometimes see themselves in the mirror.

You and I sometimes share one heart.

Maybe it's true that I would climb a mountain just to see you smile,
Phoenix. A human is a child is a parent.

The thing about climate change is that it's not personally my fault but I am responsible for your well-being and this gives me pause.

I once went on a research retreat about biodiversity at the Banff Centre and I ended up sharing some of these lines in a well air-conditioned conference room.

Jordan Abel is a queer Nisga'a writer from Vancouver. He is the author of The Place of Scraps (winner of the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize), Un/inhabited, and Injun (winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize). NISHGA won both the Hubert Evans Non-Fiction Prize and the VMI Betsy Warland Between Genres award, and it was a finalist for the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction, the Wilfrid Eggleston Award for Nonfiction, and the Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize. Abel's latest work, a novel titled Empty Spaces, was published by McClelland and Stewart in Canada (fall 2023) and Yale UP for the world excluding Canada (spring 2024). Abel completed a PhD at Simon Fraser University in 2019, and is currently an associate professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, where he teaches Indigenous Literatures, Research-Creation, and Creative Writing.

On Slowing Down

As Kit Dobson explains, this forum emerges from a meeting in Banff. Driving from the coast to the Rockies and back, delighting in glimpses of the Illecillewaet Glacier and the snowfields of Rogers Pass, marvelling at the changing topography along the thousand-kilometre route, seeing in real time the expansion of the Trans Mountain Pipeline, and catching the scent of forests on fire, I was preoccupied by persistent disciplinary concerns: the relevance of literary studies to environmental and social justice, the relation of criticism to scientific inquiry, the capacity of literature to envision alternatives to the world beyond the windshield. Such matters have no straightforward resolution; they come with the territory of environmental criticism. But after our gathering, my questions became more immediate. How should teachers and students undertake literary biodiversity studies, and why? How do we read and write under the shadow of climate change? Where should we conduct our work, and at what scale? In short, what are the methods of literary biodiversity studies?

The phrase “literary biodiversities” suggests a textual approach to the otherwise scientific investigation of biodiversity: the examination of writing about, or that depicts, ecological variation, literature about life in its astonishing variousness. But the phrase also implies something akin to “the biodiversity of literature,” by which I mean the gamut of forms in which literature occurs across the spectrum of human languages, whether spoken, written, gestural, or a combination thereof. As J. Edward Chamberlin eloquently suggests, “stories and songs” are linked by fundamental properties:

Over tens of thousands of years, storytelling has taken a variety of forms and has served a number of different purposes, shaped by the different languages and cultures and circumstances of storytelling communities. But at the core, and in the beginning, there would have been wondering about the things of the earth and the ordering of the environment, as well as a fascination with the

wonders of the sky above, the waters around and the fires that alternately startled and saved them. In addition, there would have been wondering about spiritual figures and forces that, through stories and songs, helped people manage the mysteries of life and death, mysteries that for all our scientific storytelling and spiritual teaching are with us still. (10)

Because foundational literary impulses are expressed by specific people in specific ways and contexts, giving rise to a “variety of forms,” to imagine the biodiversity of literature is to ponder genre, mode, style, and shape across time and cultures, as well as underlying artistic and linguistic principles that permit comparison of works and traditions. Studying literary biodiversity involves tending to literary species in their abundance, grasping both their heterogeneity and their likeness.

In *Professing Criticism*, John Guillory observes that the contemporary understanding of genre is diminished:

[P]oetry was once refracted into dozens of genres that have all but disappeared in modern practice. A “poem” today exists only in a form descending from the Romantic lyric, the remnant of an atrophied genre system. Such long-durational shifts have become almost invisible in the discipline, as the organization of the curriculum has turned away from the history of literature. (355)

The salient point is that “literature,” in the broadest sense, encompasses a remarkable diversity of types. One task, therefore, is to listen to the interactions of an assortment of forms in relation to ecological systems. What do daffodil-lyrics and raven-novels and desert-memoirs and harvest-prayers say to each other? How do the shapes of stories and songs affect our encounters with non-human others? Certain ways of writing (and speaking and singing) communicate certain prospects. Thus, in *Imagining Extinction*, Ursula K. Heise asks whether it is “possible to acknowledge the realities of large-scale species extinction and yet to move beyond mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia to a more affirmative vision of our biological future? Is it possible to move beyond the story templates of

elegy and tragedy and yet to express continuing concern that nonhuman species not be harmed more than strictly necessary?" (13). The significance of recognizing literary biodiversity can also be stated more plainly. If life itself is extraordinarily diverse, so too is literature, a category that exceeds the grasp of any single reader. The interrelated worlds of life and language teem, and overlooked books, like unexamined species, promise to overturn assumptions.

But why literary *biodiversity* instead of the more general term *diversity*, which already suggests variety? The prefix *bio*—from the ancient Greek *bios*, for *life*—encourages us to think of literature as alive, as existing in vital relation to other biotic and abiotic elements of an ecosystem. Is this a metaphor—book as creature, poem as sandpiper or sunflower? Of course. But *biodiversity* also suggests aspiration: a desire for literature, and by extension the other arts, to play living roles in our communities and societies. An ecosystem that includes humans by definition includes stories and songs, and whereas productivity and stability are biological indicators of ecological health, the vibrancy of the arts and their connection to the public are essential cultural elements of any sustainable world of which we might conceive.

Understanding the entanglement of culture and environment, of artistic imaginations with manifold forms of existence, entails close attention to the cultures, histories, and ecologies of a given location. The requisite particularity means that the nation as such may be of secondary importance; from the standpoint of biodiversity, a shift from the singular *Canadian literature* to the plural *literatures in Canada* is overdue. A departure from *English*—as the language of primary interest, as a term of convenience for our discipline—likewise acknowledges the multiplicity of languages spoken, sung, and written virtually everywhere, not least within the borders of this country. Reading locally but also widely—a necessary antilogy—obliges scholars to work differently. Despite the intrinsic value of the individual imagination, the paradigm of the single scholar working in isolation, in and with a single language, seems inadequate to address the scope of environmental crisis and the complexity of the ecosystems that literary biodiversity studies seeks to comprehend. Collaboration represents a crucial alternative. Close reading, historical contextualization, the use of critical theory—these and other familiar methods are powerful hermeneutic techniques that lend the discipline its remaining coherence, “English” consisting today less in a canon or

curriculum than in the development and application of characteristic modes of reading. But to foreground how people are intertwined with non-human others, analysis alone may be less germane than other endeavours: poetry readings beneath the hoodoos, exhibitions of site-specific art, expressions of surprise and wonder, creative responses to “the things of the earth” (Chamberlin 10).

I am hardly the first to advocate new ways of reading, writing, and teaching that prioritize environmental awareness. I think of Laurie Ricou’s playful questions to students—“How does the woodland skipper communicate? What language does bull kelp speak?” (349)—and of recent critical responses to climate change, such as Martin Puchner’s *Literature for a Changing Planet* and Min Hyoung Song’s *Climate Lyricism*. But reshaping conventional practice is inhibited by the problem of time, or rather speed. On campus, everyone is overscheduled. Students and teachers alike are unable to take their time with books; deliberate reading, like collaborative research, stands at odds with the imperative to produce term papers or articles on demand, to meet deadlines and answer email. And off campus, the busyness of life influences our knowledge of place. Writing about Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska, Tyra A. Olstad describes a disjunction between the time typically available to tourists and the time demanded by the setting: “Few people can linger at Denali until they see the mountain, especially if it hides for a month at a time. For the eighty-five per cent of visitors who stay overnight, visits last, on average, less than three days. Those who stay less than a day spend an average of nine hours peering into some corner of the park” (74). Scholars and students of literature could do worse than to stay put, at least for a while—to slow down, to think like a mountain or moss. That can’t be done without a degree of privilege: the academic system renders time a luxury, and a program of reading less, writing less, and thinking more closely about the yellow sand verbena (Ricou 356) fits uneasily with administrative calls for productivity, accountability, and measurability, and perhaps with an ingrained sense of professional ambition as well. But I see in patient attention the potential for writing and teaching that may deepen our connections to places, languages, forms of life, and culture in its countless manifestations. At the risk of being simplistic, I suggest that those of us interested in literary biodiversity slow down. Our method should be first to pause, to look, to listen, and to step outside ourselves.

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Nicholas Bradley is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Victoria, where he teaches courses on aspects of Canadian literature and environmental writing, and an associate editor of *Canadian Literature*. His most recent book is *Before Combustion*, a collection of poems (Gaspereau Press, 2023). He lives in Victoria, BC—in lək̓ʷəŋən territory.

Shazia Hafiz Ramji

Poem with Real and Fake Plants

I have come to dread summer
thick air and wildfire
light splitting the blinds loudly
so that there is noise
even when I book a flight,
commit to whatever
boiling point we are reaching
and have reached.
In Toronto I sat down
by Kapwani Kiwanga's
keyhole garden for three hours
because the art was plants

that cleaned the air.

My laptop was divine
and the security guard across me smiled
like the good co-worker I dream of having,
someone who understands that announcing
joyous community and the falsity
of transactional relationships openly
would be missing the point.
Why is it that people on the move
are seen to be lost? The colonial
hangover of adventure-
as-storytime still makes our questions
but not my tiredness which
comes from the heat and the shame
of fainting, not being able to tolerate it
as if there is something wrong with my body
for its refusal. But this is a hangover
too. Nothing is bygone, obviously. Let me eat my fish
in a cool room, please. There is a reason
someone like me feels at home
in hotels, eavesdropping on fake plants
that look succulent in warm lighting.
I miss the oak outside the window,
can hear it bending with the wind,
can remember my ancestors from two hundred years ago
sitting under another tree
waving at the lion approaching,
singing in prayer and solidarity
and the hospitality of trust.

Shazia Hafiz Ramji received a 2023 Critic's Desk Award from ARC Poetry magazine and was shortlisted for the 2023 Alberta Magazine Awards. Her fiction has appeared in The Malahat Review and her poetry has appeared in the 2022 Montreal International Poetry Prize anthology. She lives in Western Canada and London, UK. Shazia is the author of Port of Being and is at work on a novel.

“Literary Biodiversity and You!”: Restorying Biodiversity through Bitumen

When our research group first met to consider what the concept of “literary biodiversity” might offer in an age of climate emergency, we began with a free write on the topic—or on “literary biodiversity and you!” as one participant jokingly put it. Recalling the generic essay topics that one encounters in high school, the tongue-in-cheek prompt generated many nuanced responses, thoughtful questions, and careful critiques that stimulated discussion throughout the retreat. Later, I was surprised to find a Government of Canada website entitled “Why Biodiversity Is Important to You.” With its uncanny echo of our free write, the website takes up a similar prompt but in a markedly different way. I was struck not only by the website’s emphasis on simplicity when addressing biodiversity loss, but also by the unstated assumptions and layers of irony that characterize how the settler-colonial nation, with its long history of destroying biodiversity in the name of resource extraction, defines and understands the concept.

Defining biodiversity as “the variety of living species and ecosystems on Earth and the ecological processes of which they are a part,” the website “highlights fascinating facts about biodiversity in Canada” and outlines the federal government’s work “to conserve it and use it sustainably.” Providing a random assortment of information—lists of flora and fauna, statistics about parks and lakes, tips to implement in readers’ daily lives—the website provides minimal context for the complex connections between seemingly disparate aspects of nature positioned as separate from culture. The website’s form and content perpetuate Canada’s investment in extractivism which, as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues, “removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning” (qtd. in Klein). The website rhetorically removes these relationships, repackaging “biodiversity” as a series of “fascinating facts” for Canadians to consume like nature itself.

This consumptive approach to nature is evident in the opening paragraph:

Why is biodiversity so important? The answer is simple. We all want to continue living in a country where we can watch birds, go fishing, walk in nature, swim in lakes and rivers, and do all the activities that take us outdoors while enjoying fresh air and clean water. The diversity of life is essential for us to enjoy these simple pleasures.

This deceptively simple answer, offered in response to a question marked by grief for many as they witness the intensifying loss of human and more-than-human life under extractive capitalism, assumes a national body that views nature as a resource. The “we” is narrowly defined by a singular desire: to preserve biodiversity because nature is valuable, above all, as a source of human pleasure. Providing examples of “nature at work,” such as plants producing oxygen for “us” to breathe, the website advocates for greater recognition of how nature sustains (certain forms of) life.

Ironically, this emphasis on preserving biodiversity relies on the same violent settler logic that threatens it. Invoking the language of the Doctrine of Discovery, the website asserts that “[p]rotecting biodiversity starts with knowledge and exploration,” which includes “research, monitoring, politics, regulation, enforcement, conservation and partnership activities.” As Zoe Todd (Métis) argues, the federal government increasingly supports Indigenous-led conservation efforts which, when grounded in self-determination, positively impact biodiversity; however, the government tends to promote Indigenous conservation efforts without supporting sovereignty, all while investing billions in resource extraction projects and partnering with industry to criminalize land defenders (“Respect”).

The government’s role in destroying the biodiversity it strives to protect is apparent in its celebration of the national parks system—which, as the website notes, originated in 1885 with Banff National Park, the site of our retreat: “We have the best national park system in the world and have grown it by almost 50% since 2005.” This point masks how the parks system is a key part of Canada’s tourism industry, which exists because the government violently expropriated Indigenous lands in the name of white settler nationalism to justify railways, highways, extractive industries, and the destruction of biodiversity.

Notably, the website highlights Wood Buffalo National Park, not Banff, as Canada’s exemplary national park. According to the website,

at 44,807 kilometres, Wood Buffalo is Canada's largest national park; spanning Alberta and the Northwest Territories, it is home to North America's largest bison herd and the endangered whooping crane's only nesting site. The website does not mention the park's proximity to one of the most notoriously destructive resource extraction sites in Canada: the Alberta tar sands. The Mikisew Cree First Nation and other Indigenous nations have long criticized the devastating impacts of bitumen mining in the Athabasca region, and as recently as June 2023 a UNESCO report asserted that oil sands and hydroelectric development pose a significant threat to the park's unique biodiversity (Weber).

These gaps are not simply blind spots; rather, they are the function of a settler-colonial logic invested in aligning the nation's extractivist investments with contemporary environmental discourses and policies. How might other stories re-narrativize this colonial, extractivist approach to biodiversity that removes relationships (to recall Simpson)?¹

Working at the intersections of Indigenous studies, environmental studies, and anthropology, Zoe Todd offers a decolonial approach to biodiversity that is instructive for restorying fossil fuels, which are often represented as inherently destructive substances that pose a serious threat to biodiversity. Notably, the characterization of fossil fuels as innately toxic is a story more often told by environmental organizations than governments or corporations, which reflects how colonial assumptions about nature-as-resource cut across multiple discourses and signals a need for restorying biodiversity. Reflecting on her relationship to her home province of Alberta, where I also live as an uninvited guest and settler on Treaty Six territory, Todd reminds readers that fossil fuels are "long-dead beings" or kin that the oil economy "weaponises" by unearthing them from their resting places and transforming the massive deposits of carbon and hydrogen into threats ("Fish" 104). "So," Todd asks, "what other worlds can we dream of for the remnants of the long-gone dinosaurs, of the flora and fauna that existed millions of years ago?" (107). This question strikes me as a crucial one for those who want to think with the concept of literary biodiversities.

Inspired by Todd's question as well as his own intimate encounters with naturally occurring bitumen on the banks of the Athabasca River and in his petrography,² Warren Cariou (Métis) also restories bitumen in his art and writing. For example, in "An Athabasca Story" (2012), Cariou offers a story about Elder Brother, a complex figure and

important spiritual being in Cree and Métis storytelling (Beeds 63). Driven by cold, hunger, and a longing to connect with his relations, Elder Brother wanders away from familiar territory and stumbles upon the Athabasca tar sands. In an ironic reversal of the *terra nullius* myth, the story describes the “empty” landscape as Elder Brother bears witness to the horrifying visuals, deafening sounds, and sickening odours of resource extraction (“Athabasca” 70). Combined with the pro-capitalist story of oil development relayed by a worker, who “talk[s] as if he ha[s] no relations at all” (“Athabasca” 72), Elder Brother’s overwhelming sensory encounters with the tar sands attest to how resource extraction’s monocultural hellscapes arise not from bitumen itself, but from the toxic neo-colonial relations that transform it under extractive capitalism.

Cariou’s story illustrates how an extractivist approach to biodiversity runs directly counter to Indigenous ways of knowing grounded in intimate relationships with the land. In a recent essay, he writes: “Indigenous modes of relating to the land represented political, and . . . sensory, threats to the burgeoning carbon-based modernity”; in contrast, individualistic capitalist ideologies condition people “to regard the land from a distance, as a thing to be manipulated rather than a living entity we are utterly dependent on” (“Landsensing” 313). This extractivist view “deadens[s] our senses, numbing our abilities to distinguish the nuances and the teachings of the land” (312). In contrast, “landsensing”—a term Cariou uses to describe the “particular skills of ‘sensing’ the land, which were very highly developed among Indigenous people before colonization, but which [have] been affected by colonial interventions in various ways” (309)—requires an intimate relationship with the land. He argues: “We need to find better ways to *feel* our connection to the environment, and to the sources of our energy, so that we understand at a deep bodily level what is at stake in our relationships with the world” (322).³ Cariou’s tales of multisensory intimacy offer a sense of how bitumen, and biodiversity, might be storied differently.

Notes

1. Thank you to Dr. Willow White (Métis) for inviting me to consider this question in this way.
2. See Cariou, “Petrography and Bitumen Poetics,” and Cariou, “Petrography.”

3. In an earlier essay, Cariou describes this relationship as “energy intimacy” (“Aboriginal” 18).

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Dr. Stephanie Oliver is an associate professor of English at the University of Alberta’s Augustana campus, where she teaches Canadian, postcolonial, and diasporic literature. Her research interests include literary representations of smell and diaspora, writing about sensory encounters with oil, and the poetics and ethics

of breathing in settler atmospheres. Her work has been published in Canadian Literature, Transformative Dialogues, and Teaching Innovation Projects; most recently, her article “‘Stinking as Thinking’ in Warren Cariou’s ‘Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto’” appeared in the special issue of Canadian Literature on poetics and extraction. She also co-edited (with Kit Dobson) the special issue Everything is Awful? Ecology and Affect in Literatures in Canada for Canada and Beyond: A Journal of Canadian Literary and Cultural Studies. She is currently working on a manuscript about smell in recent Canadian literature and has a chapter on Rita Wong and settler atmospherics forthcoming in the collection Living and Learning with Feminist Ethics and Poetics Today (U of Alberta).

"A Particular Wonky Elegance": Two Approaches to Form

Geoffrey Morrison and Matthew Tomkinson

Archaic Torso of Gumby. Gordon Hill Press \$22.00

Chris Benjamin

Boy with a Problem. Pottersfield Press \$21.95

Reviewed by David Huebert (University of King's College)

In the interest of transparency, I want to mention that I am on friendly terms with two of the three authors discussed here: Chris Benjamin and Geoffrey Morrison.

Taken together, these two very different books show the wide spectrum of possibility available in the short prose form. Chris Benjamin's *Boy with a Problem* is vintage Canadian short fiction with its own unique twists, angles, and gifts. Geoffrey Morrison and Matthew Tomkinson's *Archaic Torso of Gumby* is a less familiar creature, full of narrative plasticity, exuberant genre-play, infectious, *academish* wanderings, and mole tunnels of thematic interconnection. Unlike Morrison and Tomkinson, Benjamin is not so much interested in experimentation as he is invested in using the established short story form to achieve his effects of vivid scene-setting, dramatic development, and emotional revelation.

Archaic Torso of Gumby is a strange, experimental, generically hybrid collection that is by turns powerfully imaginative, wickedly surprising, and totally hilarious. It is no coincidence that Gumby—the star of this book and of the eponymous cartoon media franchise (1953 to present)—is a clay animation character. Both thematically and formally, this book is fascinated by shape-shifting and plasticity, asking readers to rethink narrative norms and to tunnel the thin walls between story and external reality. Recurring themes include energy, animal life, materiality, psychedelic experience, and digital technology. The book integrates a wide range of archives, from *YouTube* comments and *Amazon* reviews to informed, playful, and erudite readings and remixings of early modern texts, like Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1628). Morrison and Tomkinson's sources are capacious, including references to Adonis, Sigmund Freud, H. G. Wells, Voltaire, the Grateful Dead, Tomson Highway, John Milton, and many more. With four pages of endnotes, the book's scholarly scope is unusual in a collection of short prose.

There is not much atmospheric detail in the book's fictional stories, and though there are sustained and lengthy scenes, they are more absurdist set pieces than attempts at empathy-building or crisis-and-resolution patterns. Terms like *character development* become clunky and ham-fisted when grappling with this book. *Archaic Torso of Gumby* revels in bathos: the closest thing to a climax is when Gumby—who hops in and out of chapters throughout—appears at the end of "Red Rocks IV," reveals that he has been travelling from book to book, offers the protagonist a pearl, and then descends "feet-first through the desert floor" (154).

The collection does contain some significant and welcome narrative protein. One of the most cohesive units is the "Red Rocks" sequence, a story in four parts about a Denver student and ice-cream slinger who goes on an antiodyyssey to see the Grateful

Dead in 1978. There are many memorable narratives and scenes here, including moments when a hypochondriac attends a party and winds up with “two bottles of Country Club 400z. duct taped to [their] hands” (79), when a group of cephalophores recall “the sad absence of air” (32), or when a child performer, aptly named “The Great Clay,” becomes a Gumby avatar and “starts to morph like an unstable chemical” (160).

Some of *Archaic Torso's* most illuminating moments come in essay-riffs spinning out of stories, such as the moment when “The Spineless Ones” moves from massage therapy autofiction to a consideration of Egyptian zoology, or when “Holes in My Memory (1994–2018)” begins to theorize haptic cinema. One of the collection's most memorable essays, “Tropic of Almanacs,” opens a fascinating window into an early modern text, *The Owles Almanacke* (1618), illustrating a rare moment of early modern trans-species empathy. The *Almanacke* itself may have been authored by Thomas Middleton or Thomas Dekker (the kind of aporia in which our authors clearly delight). Analyzing this text, the authors provide a moment of ostensible *ars poetica*, describing how “the *Almanacke's* figurations achieve a particular wonky elegance” (74). Clearly, the way they describe the *Almanacke's* prose—“imagistically dense and delirious in its quick cuts”—is precisely what the authors are aiming for; they certainly achieve this goal.

The title of *Boy with a Problem* spins out of Benjamin's own *ars poetica* moment. In the title story, a ninth-grader named Dan enters NaNoWriMo to try to bond with his aloof novelist father. Uninterested in connection, the dad tersely explains how to start a good story: “Boy with a problem” (10). One of Benjamin's obvious gifts is for dialogue. His ear is excellent, and he combines authentic vernacular with surprising verbal idiosyncrasies. For instance, Dan's aunt Chelsea delightfully reinvents herself when she asks a small-minded radio host why she should “give a tiny shit” about anything he has to say about a community he's never been to (9). Chelsea's question frames the book's larger concern with authenticity, as the author endeavours to tell cross-cultural stories in respectful and meaningful ways. One of his most powerful stories, “Home,” is about a woman, Bayarmaa, from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, acclimatizing to life in Halifax. She takes on a job as a caregiver for the child of a wealthy woman, which ends with the mother, Chloe, exposing her own cultural insensitivities. Afterwards, Bayarmaa listens to the “inconsolable wails” of a baby crying next door to her apartment and, in a shattering moment, she “puts her hand on the door. Feeling for what, she does not know” (75).

Benjamin often takes risks with subject matter. One of the most striking stories, “Arsonists,” tells the story of a settler nun who worked in a residential school. The story is carefully narrated from the perspective of the nun's grandson, who must end her life, and does so while both confronting her complicity in cultural genocide and tenderly recalling her acts of love towards him. The narrative is unflinching, not quite sympathetic to the nun, but nonetheless providing her with a genuine perspective and an emotional life that allows this story to unfold in its ugly truth.

Benjamin gravitates to downtrodden characters and unusual, often colourful premises. “Mulch Glue” tells the story of a teen eco-activist who pulls a half-baked act of ecotage by gluing himself to the doors of the local mill. “Operation Niblet” is about a couple who farcically attempt to free the test subjects from a Dalhousie animal experimentation lab. His characters are never bland, always a little bit off-balance. Benjamin's is a wonky elegance that works less against formal norms than within them.

Flow and Flight

Kazim Ali

Northern Light: Power, Land, and the Memory of Water. Goose Lane Editions \$19.95

Richard Pope

Flight from Grace: A Cultural History of Humans and Birds. McGill-Queen's UP \$44.95

Reviewed by Rachel Fernandes (Queen's University)

Kazim Ali's *Northern Light* is the story of Ali's return to his childhood home in Jenpeg, Manitoba. His father worked for Manitoba Hydro in the small community, damming the Nelson River to bring power to the lower part of the province. The Hydro project was eventually legally halted by the people of the nearby town of Cross Lake and the Indigenous peoples of Pimicikamak because the damming polluted and eroded their water supply. As Ali witnesses first-hand upon his return, the remote community of Pimicikamak continues to suffer the ramifications of environmental destruction: it faces a suicide crisis among its youth, work is scarce, and provincial and federal governments continue to refuse to take responsibility for or attempt to repair the devastation to the community's water.

Northern Light takes up questions of belonging and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people at a personal level, and it is especially compelling in its exploration of the intersection between Indigenous and immigrant experiences. Ali's return home is more than a chance to reminisce. He bears witness to the changes to the land: the destruction of both water and shore, but also nature's resilience as it reclaims the former town of Jenpeg. Although Ali insists that he does not fully know the reason for his trip, it seems clear that he is searching for a way to reconnect to his childhood, a way to experience a feeling of belonging—and he finds a community of people in Pimicikamak that eagerly welcomes him home. Ali builds relationships with the people of Pimicikamak, who see him as a prodigal son and allow him into their community and lives. In *Northern Light*, Ali illustrates how an open, attentive approach to reconciliation might be accomplished; he listens to the people of Pimicikamak and, in turn, he lets the experience of his homecoming change him.

Richard Pope approaches another nature-based relationship in *Flight from Grace*. He takes on the difficult task of exploring human relationships with birds through the lenses of history, religion, art, and the natural world. In *Flight from Grace*, Pope examines our fascination with birds, from the oldest surviving cave drawings and images of winged and feathered deities of ancient Egypt to humanity's obsession with flight and our love of birdsong. The majority of the book is devoted to the history of birds as sacred beings, and Pope details societies that celebrate and document their relationship with these winged creatures. The second section of the book traces humankind's attempts to embody and demystify the birdlike characteristics of flight and song. The final part of the book is pragmatic in its discussion of humankind's betrayal of birds, as Pope outlines our destruction of bird habitats and questions whether we can reverse course on our path of destruction.

Pope introduces *Flight from Grace* as a "meditation about birds and their meaning for human beings" (viv), and although the first part of the book is more meditative and exploratory, the final chapters of the book present an argument about the current state of the interplay between birds and humans. Pope enumerates the damages that

humans have caused to birds as a means to “shock us into action” (187). Humans, he argues, have not seen themselves as animals for some time, and if we do not think of ourselves as part of an interconnected web of life, we are destined to continue to abuse and exterminate nature because of our false sense of superiority. Pope’s book ends on a warning note, as he insists that our violence and greed as a species will certainly lead to further extinction and environmental exploitation, which will result in further loss of species and poisoning of resources.

Both Pope’s and Ali’s books insist on rethinking our interconnectivity with the natural world. Pope argues that “turn[ing] away from our legitimate place in nature” is what precipitates our disrespect for birds and other animals (227), as well as our abuse of natural resources, like the waterways that Ali highlights in *Northern Light*. However, both authors remain hopeful that we can establish a new, sympathetic relationship with nature if we renounce the colonial belief that humans have dominion over all things. Both books advocate for a humbler, more equitable worldview as a pathway to reconciliation with one another and with nature.

Innocence Lost and Found

Marie-Claire Blais; Katia Grubisic, trans.

Songs for Angel. House of Anansi Press \$22.95

Alina Dumitrescu; Katia Grubisic, trans.

A Cemetery for Bees. Linda Leith Publishing \$18.95

Reviewed by Heather Macfarlane (Queen’s University)

Quebec writer Marie-Claire Blais needs little introduction. Her first book, *Mad Shadows* (*La Belle Bête*, 1959), and her fourth, *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* (*Une saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel*, 1965), are part of both the English and French canons in Canada, and she has won the Governor General’s Award for French fiction four times. A resident of Key West, Florida since the 1980s, Blais has turned her gaze to the southern United States. Few authors can narrate misery as she can, and her most recently translated novel, *Songs for Angel*, is no exception. The ninth in the *Soifs* cycle, a series of ten novels, *Songs for Angel* picks up the relentless rhythm of misery established in the first eight books and revisits many of the more than two hundred characters depicted in the cycle.

It is the innocence of the characters that makes the novel simultaneously devastating and beautiful. At the centre of the story is the mass murder of fifteen Black American parishioners by a nameless and thus archetypal Young Man, a seventeen-year-old white supremacist searching for infamy; on the periphery there is war, suicide bombing, homophobia, child abuse, rape, starvation, the death penalty, terrorism, homelessness, and the environmental degradation and sickness that accompanies human exploitation. There are hauntingly beautiful breaks from the violence, however, in snapshots of various communities comprised of Black, white, mixed-race, and trans characters, among others, who come and go, resisting violence with innocence. What results is a relentless, living, breathing humanity created by Blais’ perfectly modernist stream-of-consciousness prose. Bits of plot, politics, philosophy, and conversation pass from one character to the next in one continuous

sentence broken only by commas. Seen through the eyes of an omniscient narrator, countless psychological dramas come together to create a human whole—it is, in fact, almost impossible to follow any one story, apart from that of the white-supremacist Young Man awaiting trial in prison, who is disturbingly portrayed as innocent and victimized in spite of the horror of his crimes.

The book opens as a community of predominantly Black and trans characters gather on the beach to scatter the ashes of their friend Angel, who dies of AIDS at the end of the eighth book. Together with the intermittent appearances of other characters from the *Soifs* cycle, these characters form a kind of human chorus, continually threatened with exploitation and violence, but always united by human frailty and community. By the end of the book, vets have cured some sea turtles trapped in plastic, and the final period brings temporary respite. Trans character Yinn “believes in a positive revolution” (196). However, danger always looms, and the respite provided before the next and final book of the *Soifs* cycle begins is tenuous.

The translation of a two-hundred-page sentence is no mean feat, and Katia Grubisic captures all that is Blais in her interpretation of the text. She is the translator of both of the books reviewed here, which are similar in their self-reflexive search for meaning (whether this is a feature of the original texts themselves or of Grubisic’s translations). The language is haunting and bleak in *Songs for Angel*. Behind the recurrent imagery of mist and fog, the language in *A Cemetery for Bees* expresses diasporic loss and longing. A published poet, Katia Grubisic was nominated for a Governor General’s Award for Translation in 2017, and she brings poetic sensibility to both English translations.

Montreal author Alina Dumitrescu’s *A Cemetery for Bees*, originally published in 2016 as *Le Cimetière des abeilles*, is an autobiographical novel revisiting the author’s childhood in the former Socialist Republic of Romania before the fall of Ceaușescu. Described on the back cover as “an elegy for childhood,” the book describes fragments of memory featuring colourful figures as only a child would see them. Not unlike Blais’ procession of acrobats, dogs, parrots, and drag queens, Dumitrescu’s childhood town houses a fortune teller, a one-armed news agent who knits with her feet, a “madman” (23), and a piano teacher who feeds her students orange liqueur. The author spends her childhood summer gathering fallen insects and creating elaborate graves, just as decades later she gathers memories and commemorates them in text.

Both authors’ texts are performative—the first performs humanity, while the second performs memory, and this is underlined in the metafictional elements in both works. Young Man’s story in *Songs for Angel* is being written by the fictional author Daniel, who, according to the omniscient narrator, “knew it was impossible for him to be cured of the distress he felt while he was writing about the Young Man who lived within him now” (75). Dumitrescu, meanwhile, speaks repeatedly of *autofiction*, the “opulence of words” (10), and of languages lost and found. Her departure from Romania to Montreal is titled “Dress Rehearsal,” and her self-creation as a diasporic subject in Montreal takes place over seven chapters that evoke the seven days of Genesis until, finally, at the end of the book, twenty-eight years in her new country have passed and she has mastered French, her third language after Romanian and Russian.

French is the language that Dumitrescu uses to simultaneously create herself and immortalize her past, the latter signalling the desire for symbolic or literal return that characterizes the diasporic experience. Dumitrescu’s memories are fragmented and nostalgic, and while she describes her displacement from Romania to Montreal as a

“double absence” (13), she manages to fill it with language and words. These are ultimately the words that sustain her, and the writing process anchors her in both the past and the present: “I tucked the weight of childhood into my shoes so I wouldn’t fall” (145). Both works demonstrate the role of story in human experience; in *Songs for Angel*, the narrator credits the printing press with American emancipation—in *A Cemetery for Bees* it is words that represent Dumitrescu’s salvation. The fragments of story can be challenging to assemble, but the humanity that emerges in both works makes the process worth the effort.

Witty and Environmentally Attuned

Aaron Bushkowsky

Water Proof. Cormorant Books \$24.95

Nicholas Ruddock

Last Hummingbird West of Chile. Breakwater Books \$22.95

Reviewed by Ginny Ratsoy (Thompson Rivers University)

With a plot indebted to the traditional picaresque and William Shakespeare, complemented by contemporary environmental topicality and a protagonist akin to Barney Panofsky, *Water Proof* is both a romp and a reckoning.

Bushkowsky’s dexterous employment of the picaresque hallmarks—an episodic structure, strong satire of societal mores, and a roguish narrator-protagonist who is simultaneously affable and contemptible—serves both comic and serious ends. Andy is a fifty-something narcissistic Vancouver filmmaker, successful at making commercials but aspiring to more aesthetic contributions. The philanderer is also a reluctant kayaker (to appease his wife, Anna, who is battling cancer), and he is propelled to action because of two incidents for which he has, in varying degrees, moral culpability.

The novel’s opening scene describes a kayaking and scouting expedition to Cortes Island in Desolation Sound during which Anna’s best friend, Sarah, disappears. Andy furtively pockets Sarah’s camera’s memory stick—containing incriminating visuals of the pair in flagrante delicto—but he is spied. Bed-and-breakfast proprietor and fellow kayaker Holly drugs him and steals the memory stick, intent on blackmail. Sarah is never found.

When a self-driving car gone awry injures a child during a commercial shoot, Andy and his business partner, Will, scheme to avoid the possible financial repercussions of a lawsuit. But actor Gili, Andy’s paramour, is the voice of conscience, and although the film company is found only ten per cent liable, guilt lingers.

Like Douglas Coupland’s *Generation A*, Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle*, and Emily St. John Mandel’s *The Glass Hotel*, *Water Proof* posits Canada’s far-left coast as a last refuge from the polluted-beyond-redemption world. After a year of plotting an autobiographical feature film and a response to the blackmailing, Andy and Will lead a crew back to Cortes Island. Bushkowsky sets up the circuitous return as epic, as the characters experience a transformative encounter with dolphins and orcas and find the island’s Internet reception temporarily inoperative, among other plot details.

The island of *Water Proof* proves, however, both otherworldly and all-too of this world. The backdrop of unparalleled beauty and unrestricted freedom and experimentation, with plenty at hand to induce psychedelic experiences, is a thin veneer. Ensnared in Holly's lodge and a pseudo-yoga centre, the cast of flaky characters is capable of worldly machinations. Fleeting but recurring images of oil tankers loom over the outwardly idyllic setting like the Grim Reaper. It is, after all, *Desolation Sound*.

Yet, in true comedic and picaresque fashion, Andy is rescued and temporarily, if superficially and partially, redeemed; at least, the seeds of self-awareness seem planted.

On several levels, *Water Proof* calls out for filmic adaptation. When initially laying out the setting, Bushkowsky suggests a cello soundtrack and a preferred camera; the light on Anna's headlamp in the couple's closing confrontation is likened to a spotlight. Film-canon references, from *Waterworld* to *Chinatown*, abound. More to the point, Bushkowsky, who foregrounds manifold cinematic tropes, is a picture-perfect parodist of the West Coast zeitgeist.

Spanning the years 1832 to 1853 and flitting through England, a Pacific island, and Singapore, with a detailed months-long return journey, *Last Hummingbird West of Chile* is in equal measures romance, adventure, and critique of Western society's classism, sexism, racism, and anthropocentrism. The novel invites reading as an updated epic, incorporating eloquent language characteristic of nineteenth-century fiction with twenty-first-century hindsight and ethical sensibilities.

Born in bizarre circumstances, twins Catherine and Andrew are raised in wealth and unhappiness by the ruthless Earl of Amberley and their withdrawn mother. Mutual admiration and the care of kindly servants provide some solace, but familial dysfunction causes each to end their teens with momentous decisions: Catherine enters a mediocre marriage with fortune seeker Gerald Egerton and Andrew pursues an honest life at sea.

Quester Andrew, rescued from a shipwreck, alights on an island where he finds love with Jaimia and friendship with the hummingbird Zephyrax, whom the couple houses in an open-door cage. When Andrew's life is endangered, the trio flees to Singapore, where pregnant Jaimia succumbs to a disease carried by Europeans. Fate puts Andrew in the company of Razak (who had been hired to kill Andrew but got the wrong man) and a trio of quasi-nuns: Marceline, Eulalie, and Manon (with whom romance ensues). When our hero learns of the death of the earl, he decides to return home. With animals in tow, the human quintet travel—with a long layover in Suez—to Cairo, Alexandria, and Venice, where Eulalie is murdered in another botched attempt on Andrew's life. Andrew and his entourage continue through Italy, Switzerland, and France, with London as terminus.

Concurrent with Andrew's adventures is the plotting of duplicitous Egerton, who succeeds in having the Earl killed but, thanks to hapless hiring and shrewd servants, fails to eliminate Andrew, his rival for the family fortune.

Ruddock unveils the plot through multiple points of view—human, animal (especially that of Zephyrax), and arboreal. Of course, this panoramic perspective underscores the subjective nature of perception (when, for example, an attempted murder is foiled, or a scorpion is compelled to bite a nun and then skewered by Zephyrax in retaliation). Anthropomorphizing and ascribing narrative and plot functions to animals also endears them to readers, making us privy to animals' feelings and motivations as only fiction can. For example, Ubaid, a donkey, evokes

much readerly empathy as he narrates his function as beast of burden. The cumulative narrative perspective also becomes a universal consciousness, allotting equal significance to all earth's fragile inhabitants.

The actions of those of lower social or species order result in all ending well for the twins in London. Worldly-wise servants, wives-of, and disinterested observers prove astute judges and juries, discerning the character of their social "betters," ascribing guilt, meting out justice, and protecting the innocent. In Nicholas Ruddock's expansive world, the last word belongs to Zephyrax, who tops off his encapsulation of the adventure by informing readers that Andrew has recounted events to Catherine, with the hummingbird in the role of his saviour.

Illusions and Made-Up Truths

Steven Heighton

The Virtues of Disillusionment. Athabasca UP \$19.99

Daphné B.; Alex Manley, trans.

Made-Up: A True Story of Beauty Culture under Late Capitalism. Coach House Books \$21.95

Reviewed by Shannon Lodoen (University of Waterloo)

Daphné B.'s *Made-Up: A True Story of Beauty Culture under Late Capitalism* and Steven Heighton's *The Virtues of Disillusionment* are proof that books do not have to be long to be profound. In fact, Daphné B.'s is a quick 170 pages, and Heighton's essay-turned-book is just thirty-six pages long. Yet both offer strong insights, commentaries, and critiques that will have readers contemplating the contents long after turning the final page.

Heighton's essay starts by examining the paradox of the word *disillusion*, which combines two negative words (*dis* and *illusion*) to create yet another negative word—a rarity in the world of linguistics. He describes *illusion* as "a false conception . . . a lie, a delusion" (4), a pure minus one (5). However, illusions are often necessary and productive for writers, who need these foundational beliefs or truths to produce believable and investment-worthy characters. But, Heighton cautions, long-term reliance on illusions (to the point of structuring one's life around them) is dangerous and, ultimately, self-defeating. The more a person clings to illusions, the harder the fall when they finally are *disillusioned*. Heighton describes *disillusionment* as "a *kind* of jilting/rejection," like being "Dear Johned by a spectre" (6–7). Nevertheless, he insists that *disillusionment* is necessary, and in fact beneficial, because it is only through being *disillusioned* that we gain freedom from the illusions that structure (and thus control) our lives. He uses the example of his own first novel, which fell woefully short of expectations, to emphasize that it is often better (even necessary) to fail justly, rather than to be unjustly rewarded. It is on this note that Heighton concludes his essay, leaving readers with a sense of hope and determination, perhaps in spite of themselves.

Throughout his essay, Heighton strikes a fine balance between light-hearted observations, deep philosophical probing, and personal anecdotes. He seamlessly entwines his own experiences as an author with words of wisdom from Zeno, Leonard Cohen, and Tolstoy. One of the most interesting aspects of Heighton's discussion is his

figuration of “the Museum of Illusions,” which contains two exhibits: a skull with “[b]lindly staring eyeholes” surrounded by “layers of stained mummy wraps” (14), and an elaborate yet completely empty “coffer with its plaque, spotlighting, and internal ventilation system” (17). The first exhibit is “Ego,” the part of us that dominates our waking lives, craves attention and control, and pushes away unconscious thoughts and dreams. Heighton warns that allowing Ego to rule results in a life that is shallow, self-centred, and ultimately devoid of deeper meaning. The second exhibit, “the Pursuit of Happiness,” reveals how the equation of success or material wealth with happiness is an illusion doomed to fail and to leave us in despair until we are able to overcome it.

Daphné B.’s book in many ways exemplifies Heighton’s discussion of illusions and disillusionment, bringing the conversation into stronger focus around the makeup and beauty industry. At first, readers might be tempted to identify with the widely held perspective that makeup is frivolous and foolish, that the author’s recounting of expensive Sephora purchases and *YouTube* binge-watching exposes her as a typical, shallow-minded millennial. However, as the book progresses, Daphné B. explores increasingly complex and uncomfortable topics, from the beauty industry’s commodification of Audre Lorde’s radical conception of self-care, to the inner workings of “influencer culture,” to the mica mines in Jharkhand, India. She eloquently weaves in discussions of vulnerability, invisible labour, bodily autonomy, and the desire to love and be loved. By the end, readers must confront a number of difficult truths. One is that the beauty industry is complicit in many unethical goings-on, including environmental damage and unsafe labour practices. Another unpleasant but undeniable truth is that the beauty industry operates under the dictates of capitalism, and, like capitalism, it always adapts to create new needs and exploit our desires; it is pervasive, impossible to escape: “To live under capitalism is to participate in it” (131). Lastly, the equation of makeup with women, and the concomitant equation of ornament with artifice, is a patriarchal construction designed to disempower and disparage women who choose to make themselves up. Daphné B. supports these claims with examples from all eras and areas of the globe, from Plato’s distrust of *kosmētikē*, to a twentieth-century Milanese women’s prison, to Gloria Gaynor’s anthem “I Will Survive.”

In addition to offering commentary on different aspects of the makeup industry and beauty culture, Daphné B. also brings in autobiographical details, reflecting on the origins of her love of makeup and the roles it has played in her past relationships. She offers, as Heighton does, a deconstruction of her own illusions, writing through the process of disillusionment before the eyes of her readers. This sloughing off of illusions, which mirrors the sloughing off of her makeup each night, also mimics the reader’s experience as they, too, are forced to abandon (or at least reconsider) the prejudices they may hold against those who have bought in, literally and figuratively, to beauty culture.

Although working from very different perspectives, both Heighton and Daphné B. offer thought-provoking explorations of the illusions that structure our lives—and the necessity of stripping them away. Both works are more widely applicable than they might at first seem. Heighton’s book is not just for authors looking to energize or revamp their writing; it is for people from all walks and stages of life, although it will certainly resonate with younger readers setting out on careers and life courses who have yet to become (as many older readers already are) disillusioned. Daphné B.’s book will mainly appeal to users of makeup in their thirties or younger, since

references to *YouTube* gurus and musicians like Grimes might fall flat for an older audience. However, the incisive arguments she makes in her book address much broader social issues, so that the relevance of her work extends far beyond the beauty world she uses as her case study.

How Much Happens in a Year

Michael K. Hawes, Andrew C. Holman, and Christopher Kirkey, eds.

1968 in Canada: A Year and Its Legacies. U of Ottawa P \$29.95

Reviewed by J. A. Weingarten (Fanshawe College)

1968 in Canada is, like 2020, a good reminder of just how much can happen in a year. The book offers a usefully granular look at a decisive year in Canada's past and adds thought-provoking detail to some well- and lesser-known events from 1968, each of which influenced the nation's future in its own way. This finely focused lens may overwhelm casual readers of history, but for researchers of Canadian history it provides unusually detailed assessments of projects, policies, and figures from Canada's 1960s—though one cannot help but wish the book addressed more topical and diverse issues.

The sixteen chapters of this book cover a range of events: US-Canada tensions, public reactions to progressive investigations and commissions, the evolution of Canadian media, Quebec's cultural life, and so forth. Arguably, the best part of this book could have been more effectively signposted: its fascinating attention to the ways in which mainstream media reacted—both helpfully and unhelpfully—to various political figures, movements, or events. In histories with broader temporal markers, there is rarely such dedicated attention to public reactions and media as in *1968 in Canada*. Each chapter typically presents a “ground-floor” view of events and what feels like, in many cases, a refreshing perspective on long-discussed topics.

That being said, while individual chapters feel comprehensive, the book itself has glaring absences. Familiar discourses on media, publishing, Trudeaumania, Vietnam, and US-Canada relations receive disproportionately more attention than issues more representative of Canada's diversity: the FLQ is barely mentioned; there is one strong article on Indigenous issues, but the book nevertheless feels quite uninterested in the Red Power movement (for which 1968 was a big year: recall, for instance, Harold Cardinal's momentous election as leader of the Indian Association of Alberta); and there is an especially noticeable inattention to Canada's Black communities (the founding of the Black United Front on the East Coast in November 1968 certainly fits very well within the book's parameters). It also struck me as odd that the book says nothing (at the very least, certainly nothing I can recall) about the dramatic unfolding of homosexuality's decriminalization from 1967 to 1969.

To be fair, I generally think it is poor form to critique a book on the basis of “it should have included X.” But in this case, such criticism has merit. If a text presents itself as an exploration of “a nation in the process of remaking itself” (4), then it obligates itself to include fuller discussions of the marginalized groups that play the biggest roles in this remaking, instead of focusing predominantly on the life and times of those in positions of power. The absence or elusiveness of such discussions becomes

increasingly distracting as the book goes on. In the introduction, the editors “recognize the importance” of subjects they do not address and express their wish to “leave those discussions for other scholars to pursue” (7). But this acknowledgement rings quite hollow, given the insufficiently minor (or completely absent) mention of numerous important sexual revolutions and cultural groups that would permit readers to move on from the fairly traditional and well-mapped territory of Trudeauania, political shuffles, Canadian media, book publishing, international relations, and the like. These are all worthy topics of discussion, but it is disappointing to see them so divorced from the other issues that I mention in this review. Some chapters (especially those from Jane Arscott and Andrew Gemmell) help alleviate my concern to one degree or another, but the book as a whole struggles to do so.

Another issue worth noting is the frequent feeling of disconnection within the book itself, marked by missed opportunities for discussions amongst the authors: Graham Fraser’s article on language debates, for instance, could easily have replied to Paul Litt’s representation of Canada’s “progressive” image in the media during the Trudeau era, just as Andrea Chandler’s article about the “Prague Spring” might have responded to Stephen Azzi’s contention that Anglo-Canadian political energies in the 1960s focused primarily on reducing “American influence—especially economic influence—in Canada” (71). There are, admittedly, some quick references to other chapters (in David Wright and Sasha Mullally’s piece, for instance), but these are, to be sure, very quick. *1968 in Canada* seeds intriguing debates amongst its authors, yet these never meaningfully materialize; if they had, the book would enjoy a much stronger feeling of coherence. This issue is most noticeable with the book’s final chapter—an otherwise strong contribution by Will Smith that minutely attends to David Helwig’s writing (in lieu of a conclusion that ties the many threads of the book together).

Perhaps my criticisms of the book’s editorial approach give a false impression of the individual contributions, so I wish to be clear that the individual chapters offer fresh, intriguing perspectives on some of the debates, figures, and events that have preoccupied Canadian historians for the last fifty years. There are extraordinary entries in 1968 that offer enjoyable, in-depth explorations of many major and minor historical personages: Walter Gordon, Mel Watkins, Kahn-Tineta Horn, Laura Sabia, André Laurendeau, Jack McClelland, F. R. Scott, Paul Sauvé, and others. What limits the book, however, are its disjointed “case-study” structure and its inattention to events from the late 1960s that speak more directly to the cultural debates and discussions that define today’s political moment and that will, arguably, guide the sociopolitical discussions of our country for still quite some time. There are many more legacies of 1968 to explore, and hopefully the other scholars to whom the editors of 1968 allude will explore them in fuller dialogue with each other.

Women's Time

Alix Ohlin

We Want What We Want. House of Anansi Press \$22.95

Aimee Wall

We, Jane. Book*hug Press \$23.00

Meghan Bell

Erase and Rewind. Book*hug Press \$20.00

Reviewed by Kelly Baron (University of Toronto)

It is, and has been for years, erroneous to use the first-person plural when describing women's experience. Early criticisms of the feminist movement focused on the differences of female experience when it came to race, class, and sexuality, noting that second-wave feminism championed the straight, white, middle-class woman as implicit in any use of *we*. But in Alix Ohlin's *We Want What We Want*, Aimee Wall's *We, Jane*, and Meghan Bell's *Erase and Rewind*, there is a new connotation to *we*, highlighting the diversity in contemporary women's experiences. When Wall and Ohlin use the first person plural in their titles, *we* is not a homogenizing force that attempts to universalize a specific female experience, but an acceptance of difference in the female community.

In *We Want What We Want*, Ohlin writes about the diversity of female experiences, particularly when it comes to the imperfections of family. In one story, Vanessa, a young woman, returns home from a year abroad to discover, to her surprise, that her best friend has fallen in love with her father. While her best friend gorges herself on wedding cake samples—vanilla bourbon with chocolate ganache, carrot cake, chocolate, and coconut, among others (111–12)—Vanessa falls in love with an old friend from high school, later asking him to follow her to New York City. Neither situation, to her understanding, makes sense. When she asks her partner to come with her, she expects him to consider “the practical things: about money, geography, youth” (95). But none of these concerns him, and he replies instead that he wants to marry her. While Vanessa's best friend, Kelsey, wants the stability that comes from marrying her best friend's father, Vanessa wants nothing more than for her partner to stay in her life while she studies in New York City. In this story, as in others, the diversity of expression is in desire. Ohlin shows great range in her portraits of women of different ages, social classes, and races, all of them unafraid to demand exactly what they want.

We, Jane, by Aimee Wall, depicts a different variety of female experience but is similar to Ohlin's book in its representation of fearless desire. It tells the story of Marthe, a young woman from Newfoundland who befriends a woman whom she initially refers to as Jane. Jane becomes Therese after she returns to Newfoundland to stay with Trish, an older woman who performs underground abortion services in her rural community. Marthe commits to learn Trish's skills as an abortionist and to take over her role after Trish is arrested, having been exposed by Kara, a young leftist academic writing about the experience of home abortion for a feminist magazine. Desires clash: Therese wants to leave, while Marthe wants her to stay; Trish wants to stay clandestine, while Kara wants to “detail[] her adventures in outsider reproductive

health” (188). But there is beauty in these interactions: Marthe’s decision to continue her work as *Jane* (the name adopted by the abortionist) is one that ensures that women in rural Newfoundland will continue to have access to abortion services. Wall’s novel highlights the difference in experiences that come from the rural-urban divide, along with the valuations that contemporary society places on differing forms of education and knowledge. Trish is arrested not because she endangers women, but because her intergenerational knowledge is not recognized by the province. *We, Jane* is, fundamentally, a love story about alternative knowledge and women’s dedication to helping each other.

But the collection that truly shines amidst this vast array of female experience is Meghan Bell’s *Erase and Rewind*. Darkly comic, the titular story uses time travel to explore the story of Louisa, a woman who is date-raped by Nick, her classmate. After her assault, she reverses time, choosing to rewind it to prevent her from meeting her rapist. But she also struggles with her decision:

If she removed herself from the equation, it didn’t mean Nick would no longer be able to date or date-rape. It just meant that he would happen to somebody else, like he had already happened to somebody else. What sort of activity—what sort of feminist—was she, if she was fighting only for herself? (20)

Louisa considers her responsibility to report Nick, but she ultimately chooses to rewind time, hoping to forget the moral quandary inherent in her decision. Although she chooses to protect herself, Louisa does warn a fellow student away from sitting near Nick in class. The rest of Bell’s collection is equally thought-provoking and, at times, laugh-out-loud funny. Her writing is as exciting as her subject matter. *Erase and Rewind* is an impressive debut and should not be missed.

Whose Canada Is This?

Linda M. Morra and Sarah Henzi, eds.

On the Other Side(s) of 150: Untold Stories and Critical Approaches to History, Literature, and Identity in Canada. Wilfrid Laurier UP \$85.00

Hollay Ghadery

Fuse. Miroland \$20.00

Reviewed by Sylvie Vranckx (Independent Researcher)

Canadian exceptionalism still thrives despite overwhelming evidence of ongoing systemic racism, settler colonialism, and environmental disregard, among other issues; recent events include Indigenous pipeline protests, BLM demonstrations, and the discovery of over thirteen hundred unmarked graves around former residential schools. Morra and Henzi’s collection *On the Other Side(s) of 150* and Ghadery’s acclaimed debut memoir *Fuse* counter the official metanarrative by highlighting patterns of exclusion within Canadian society and its institutions. *Side(s)* problematizes Canada 150 through an assemblage of critical essays, counter-memories, and revisiting of national myths, foregrounding untold or unheard voices

and concerns (gendered, racialized, LGBTQ2S+, anti-capitalist, environmental, from religious minorities or relegated genres). In a similar vein, *Fuse* navigates the intricacies of Ghadery's Iranian and British heritage and underscores how mainstream Canadian culture excludes bodies and identities that do not fit its narrow preconceptions, resulting in a "prevalence of eating disorders and body image issues among biracial women" (xi). The covers of both books coincidentally represent figures with partially hidden faces, conveying opposite yet related meanings. While *Side(s)* symbolically drips red "paint" onto a portrait of John A. MacDonald (reminiscent of the splattering and dismantling of colonial statues like his), the black silhouette of a woman on the cover of *Fuse* seems to dream about a lush garden in an Iranian mosaic, a place free of boundaries and hate.

The offshoot of the 2017 Dublin conference "Untold Stories of The Past 150 Years," *Side(s)* takes the sesquicentennial celebrations as an opportunity to re-evaluate Canadian master narratives as hegemonic discourse striving to feign historical continuity, re-inscribe the myth of Canada as a peaceful multicultural nation, and manufacture consent. Based on a body of commemoration studies, this award-winning collection exposes the role of social memory and "affiliated rituals" in naturalizing a model of Canadian identity and citizenship whose colonial heteropatriarchal underpinnings go largely unquestioned—in addition to producing a version of Canada which is easily consumable by tourists. Accordingly, the "other side(s)" of the title evoke both the underbelly of Canada 150 and the volume's multiplicity of scholarly, artistic, and personal perspectives, eschewing binary thinking and the "two founding nations" trope.

Stressing the lack of definite answers, this collection offers several entry points and strategies for deconstructing Canadian myths, questioning "what remains untold or obscured" and examining the interrelationships between present concerns and any (re)telling of the past (11). Noteworthy examples include the hidden history of wartime German internment camps and of slavery in Nova Scotia, as well as the many competing versions of Louis Riel as cultural icon, from which the real man is absent. Aware that the dominant cultural discourse—notably including CanLit as institution—instrumentalizes the production of BIPOC artists, among others, Morra and Henzi are preoccupied with the ethics of responsibility, good allyship, and interrogating one's own potential complicity—what contributor Libe García Zarranz calls "response-ability" (116). Accordingly, the collection is framed by Indigenous authors stressing the need to recover Indigenous stories (such as residential school memoirs from the 1970s and the censored passage from Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* about her rape by a policeman) and to read them through Indigenous epistemologies, as epitomized by contributor Deanna Reder's work with the *First Voices, First Texts* series.

Fuse uses a complementary angle, the coming-of-age memoir, to broach the triply taboo theme of biracial women's mental health. Ghadery had originally planned to write about eating disorders (EDs) as manifesting "the conflicts and uncertainties surrounding the biracial female body and identity" (xi), but needed to contextualize this issue within broader social ones and within her personal history as the daughter of a Euro-Canadian mother and a father from imperial Iran. Organized by thematic connection rather than chronological order, the fifteen chapters have a digressive, musing quality that reflects this entanglement and Ghadery's experience of mental illness as "the battered and inarticulate self" (xii). The result is a layered, incisive analysis interweaving self-reflection, social commentary, pop-culture references, family

dynamics, and research. Thus, Ghadery juxtaposes the skinniness of Hollywood's Wonder Woman with the painting of a muscular, dark-skinned Amazon she saw as a child. Elsewhere, she criticizes a study on biracial identity due to its omission of gender and its reference to self-acceptance, which might connote compliance.

Fuse is a gripping testimony about the toll of split allegiances, gendered double binds, and conflicting cultural expectations. One is struck by the amount of scrutiny, stereotyping, and crude remarks Ghadery experiences growing up, from casual, gendered racism at school, to her father's controlling misogyny, to her family's criticism of her appearance. With excruciating candour, she details the process through which her internalized belief that she could never be good enough led to lasting issues with OCD, EDs, addiction, and self-harm. However, she writes in a spirit of compassion: as she raises her own children while recovering, she grows more accepting of her parents' mistakes (the dedication means *I love you* in Farsi) and fears that readers might judge them. Beyond this, she writes to "make people feel less alone," whether from dealing with racism, mental health struggles, or stigmatization as "bad parents" ("Hollay Ghadery"). An author on the Surviving ED blog, she speaks out because silence and shame are slowly killing people. Ultimately, her message is hopeful, as she believes multiracial people "are afforded the chance to experience humanity as it should be: undivided" (167).

To conclude, the messages of both books have grown even more urgent in the COVID-19 context. The pandemic has exposed the ways in which some experiences and lives matter more than others, as denounced by Mbembe's necropolitics and Butler's grievability. The limits of mental health are also more obvious than ever, with eating and anxiety disorders dramatically on the rise. Hopefully, the recent Global Mental Health Summit and the growing awareness of social fractures are steps towards heeding these calls for a more empathetic world.

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Small Frye and Great

Robert D. Denham, ed.

The Reception of Northrop Frye. U of Toronto P \$150.00

Reviewed by Nicholas Bradley (University of Victoria)

Northrop Frye's Canada, and therefore his hypotheses and pronouncements about the dominion, have increasingly little to do with ours; or, rather, his Canada has become the wintry subject of our discontent. But readers today, whatever their sense of Frye's pertinence, may still admire the wit of his infamous claims. Every year when I teach Canadian literature, I am presented with one reason or another to refer to "Canada and Its Poetry" (1943) or the "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*" (1965), or even, if struck by a particularly oracular mood, *The Educated Imagination* (1963).

The traveller from Europe edges into [Canada] like a tiny Jonah entering an inconceivably large whale, slipping past the Straits of Belle Isle into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where five Canadian provinces surround him, for the most part invisible. . . . To enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent. (219)

Well, probably not, but this memorable assertion from the “Conclusion” is one way to spark a classroom discussion of migration and displacement, and of the seismic shift between 1965 and the present in the meaning of the term *colonial* in Canadian public discourse. (A teacher might even say a word about the tale of Jonah and the great fish, not assuming its universal currency.) If Frye’s statements on Canadian literature and culture are now primarily of historical interest, requiring neither sustained engagement nor debunking, it is no less true that his extraordinary influence over a long period and his prodigious output as a scholar mean that he is not likely to be forgotten in his own country.

Everywhere else, where Frye is not in the first instance the author of *The Bush Garden* (1971) and *Divisions on a Ground* (1982), but instead of *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), it’s a different story. The prevalent view is that Frye’s stature, immense as it was in the postwar period, has long since diminished, his heyday, like that of the English department itself, decidedly over. *The Reception of Northrop Frye* is Robert D. Denham’s seven-hundred-page-long attempt to overturn this judgment with the blunt force of bibliographical data. In compiling the tome, he has omitted no trace of Frye’s enduring significance. “What kinds of evidence,” Denham asks,

might be offered to test the truth of the claims that Frye is obsolete, that his works have been buried in obscurity, that he is now seen as deluded, that his influence screeched to a halt in the late-1970s, that his criticism fell out of style and has begun to fade from memory, and that the history of literary criticism has now passed him by? (x–xi)

The answer is any and all. Denham devotes chapters to “Books and Symposia,” “Essays, Articles, and Parts of Books,” “Obituaries, Memorials, Tributes,” “News and Feature Stories, Miscellaneous Items,” “Biographical Notices and Articles,” “Reviews of Frye’s Books,” “Dissertations and Theses on Frye,” and “Reviews of the Volumes in Frye’s Collected Works” (in which series Denham edited or co-edited eleven volumes). The list of books on Frye and reviews thereof, twenty pages in length, is extremely useful. The compendium of essays, twenty times as long, is less helpful. It includes articles about Frye, but also a vast number of essays in which Frye’s ideas are applied in some measure or, in certain cases, merely mentioned. The list is organized not by chronology or topic, but alphabetically according to the names of the authors, making it unwieldy for anything but browsing. It shows that Frye has not vanished, thus confirming Denham’s essential point, but equivalent lists for Derrida or Foucault or Cixous or Deleuze would be at least equally long, I should think. In the absence of context or comparison, the list is staggering but difficult to decode.

A methodological excess is demonstrated even more vividly in the list of theses and dissertations. “[T]he answer to Terry Eagleton’s rhetorical question, ‘Who now

reads Frye?,' is a very considerable and ever-growing number," Denham writes in his introduction to the volume (xiv). Yet the evidence is inconclusive. Denham explains that he assembled his list of "more than 3600 theses and dissertations" by searching academic databases; he allows that "[s]ometimes the reference to Frye is to a single citation or even to a parenthetical remark" (570). While a doctoral dissertation on William Blake written in 1965 can be expected to have taken up Frye's criticism—the omission would have been conspicuous—it is less apparent that a dissertation on Austrian rap written in 2018, fine as it may be on its own terms, represents a consequential extension of Frye's thought. Especially as it moves toward the present, the list is less a record of influence than of the bibliographical thoroughness of graduate students. The all-encompassing catalogue is an indication, should one be necessary, of changing academic fashions, but it will be of limited use to scholars of Frye. More concise, and more conducive to further commentary on Frye and his works, are the valuable lists of reviews and biographical material.

Denham's credentials are beyond dispute. Five pages are needed to list his commentaries on Frye, and his name appears throughout the book. But too much of *The Reception of Northrop Frye* is dedicated to landing a blow at the expense of creating a focused critical resource. Denham's entry for Harold Bloom's foreword to a reissue of *Anatomy of Criticism* (2000) includes this verdict from Bloom: "Frye's criticism will survive because it is serious, spiritual, and comprehensive, but not because it is systematic or a manifestation of genius. If *Anatomy of Criticism* begins to seem a period piece, so does *The Sacred Wood* of T. S. Eliot" (64). Bloom, full of bluster, always betrayed his own anxiety of influence when writing about Frye; but here, I think, he is right. No work of criticism survives the passage of time unscathed, but neither does authentic criticism disappear altogether. Authentic? I mean serious, in the sense of requiring careful thought, and spiritual, in the most catholic definition of the term. Soulful, perhaps, and generous: marked by humility rather than bumptiousness. On these grounds, Frye's reputation, like that of Eliot, is secure, no matter how many dissertations are written, or how few. In his final annual survey of Canadian poetry (1960), Frye wrote that "every genuine poet is entitled to be read with the maximum sympathy and concentration. When he is, an astonishing amount of imaginative richness may be obtained from him, and without reading into him what is not there" (128). So, too, for the genuine critic.

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Impossibility of Return

Grace Lau

The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak. Guernica Editions \$20.00

Linda K. Thompson

Black Bears in the Carrot Field. Mother Tongue \$19.95

Dallas Hunt

Creeland. Nightwood Editions \$18.95

Reviewed by Sunny Chan (Toronto Metropolitan University)

The first thing that stands out in the first poem from *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* is the use of Chinese words embedded into the text without an English translation. This code-switching recurs in other poems, including “When Yuhua Hamasaki Went Home,” “My Grandmother’s Wallpaper,” and “Birth/Right.” It matters that the words are in Traditional Chinese and not Simplified; perhaps matters differently to me, as a reader who is also a Hong Kong-born Canadian woman constantly thinking of how the generations before me performed gender and class, just like Grace Lau.

Lau’s debut collection proves time and again that the universal is accessed through the particular. Lines such as “He has been mourning / the future / for the last twenty years” and “The thing with returning to a home / that exists only in your mind: / your body gradually forgetting what home feels like” address the 1997 handover of Hong Kong and the feelings around it that characterize a distinctly Hong Kong sensibility (6). And yet, at the same time, what human being cannot relate to the feeling of being unable to return to a place or time because it no longer exists?

Lau juxtaposes the painful bits of memory—the longing of nostalgia, the homophobia of Christian parents and traditionalist grandparents, the generational poverty brought over by immigration—with the good parts, such as the love tasted through food and acts of care. In between that is her fierce defence of it all from “hustle culture” and “Elon, Mark, and Jeff” (22), the things that threaten to strip the pleasures and sorrows of lived experience away from us through overwork.

At the end of the work, after all the poems, is a glossary of all of the Chinese words that appeared. Part of me wishes it weren’t there, despite, of course, understanding the desire for every reader to understand the references. It just would have been nice to have the people who would not understand feel left out for once—the way folks like Lau and I have felt before.

If the Hong Kong diaspora’s idea of home is a place that exists only in the mind, then the opposite of that might be an idea of home as completely tangible. In *Black Bears in the Carrot Field*, Linda K. Thompson can see herself and all the people she has ever known in the very living things farmed on top of and inside the land she calls home. But even for someone like Thompson, who lives not far where she was raised and can still see the same landmarks pictured in her inherited black-and-white family photographs, time changes everything. Nostalgia is stirred up and at the same time assuaged by the repeated recitation of relatives’ names, retold anecdotes of cousins and neighbours and her mother’s old friends.

We were all from here.
 Dad's childhood places, ours.
 The flat steep-sided valley—
 all we knew.
 Same grey soil
 where he had run
 clung like cold forge dust
 to our pale legs (32)
 is put up against:
 How could we know? Families drift, break
 apart on the rocks. The stories are fading,
 nearly forgotten. Washed up on some foreign shore,
 we may never find on a chart. Die, waiting
 for the phone to ring. (49)

Even if you stay still, the people and things around you move—over Rockies and across prairies as large as an ocean.

Black Bears in the Carrot Field combines poetry with a photography collection from the poet's personal archive that spans as far back as the 1920s, with the most recent photograph from 2012. The words interweave with the photos, which are just as intimate and unpretentious as the verses. They are not trying to be art photography; they were made to capture memories not of special occasions but of the mundane, made to be passed down, just like the stories told in the poems. The poems themselves interweave verse with prose, and they also weave past with present in a way that deliberately obscures when any given story might be taking place in time. This gives an accurate representation of what our relationship with memories feels like. The personal past is not neatly cordoned off in linear timelines, but rather a part of our present lives.

Dallas Hunt's *Creeland* is also a contemplation of the place the speaker called home growing up: the land itself in northern Alberta, and the people frozen in the time of memory such as his grandmother, his *kóhkom*. The distance between home and now, for Hunt, is not immigration and is not only time—it is also the violence of the colonial state, embodied in the forms of police officers, prison guards, teachers, a hospital that is not there to help.

With a few exceptions, the majority of the poems in this collection take the structure of very short lines. The most notable exceptions are "Porcupine I," "Porcupine II," "Porcupine III," and "Porcupine IV," a series of tender tributes to the legacy of the poet's beloved grandmother that paint a portrait without clichés. The majority, though, are carefully sparse lines that usually stay under five syllables, letting long words stand completely alone and drawing attention to clusters of short words like prepositions usually overlooked. It has the effect of constant impact, so that one cannot ignore individual words within stark lines like:

but what of
 the original
 intent
 of treaties? (102)

Like Lau's book, *Creeland* ends with a glossary of Cree words; I do somewhat wish that a settler reader like me were forced to do the work of learning the words myself. Where all three of these works explore our relationships to the past, I leave you with this, from *Creeland*, about the future: "the future / is a ghost / you inherit" (88).

Why Marry? Read Instead

André Alexis

Ring. Coach House Books \$21.99

Keath Fraser

Damages: Selected Stories 1982–2012. Biblioasis \$26.95

Reviewed by Tim Conley (Brock University)

André Alexis concludes his Quincunx series with this fifth book (though numbered volume three), *Ring*. Like the other four, it is set in Ontario, balances lofty but explicit allusions with slyer, closer-to-home winks and nods, and blends the fantastical with Socratic dialogues in casual dress. Also like those other books, *Ring* includes guest appearances by characters (humans, dogs, sheep, actually living Canadian poets, and gods) and explores the meaning and weight of tradition, whether social, cultural, or familial.

Having dealt with such genres as the pastoral, the fable, and the ripping yarn in the previous books, here Alexis offers a pastiche of the Harlequin romance, with a gainfully employed, professional young woman facing that perennial dilemma, the two-suitor problem. (It turns out they're both really sweet guys!) This approach runs a number of risks—among them, patronizing satire—but just at the moment when the reader contemplates stepping out of the sticky morass, the plot twists. The Danielle Steel effect (Alexis lists one of her books as background reading) does not simply shut off, however, but, more perversely, becomes entwined with the big questions that the Quincunx books all address. At one point the heroine, Gwenhwyfar (seriously!), provides a Steeley plot summary when the discovery (a surprise to her alone) that her beloved is rich "[makes] the trajectory of her last few months even more odd: meet a man, fall in love, inherit a magic ring, change the man, lose a finger, then find out the man that you love is insanely wealthy. God, what was next?" (193). Right? It's, like, so unbelievable. Parenthetically, she wonders: "Was it wrong of her to feel intimidated by his wealth? It was too late to change her feelings, if so" (150–51).

The novel's title refers not only to the question of marriage, which gradually grows from being simply an inevitable conclusion of such fiction to a theme of much deliberation, but to a ring passed from mother to daughter, bestowing three wishes. All three wishes must pertain to the man the ring-bearer is to marry, but—another surprise that is not a surprise—the wishes must be chosen carefully, because changes to him will be matched by changes in her. That is to say that *Ring* is a fairy tale about reciprocity.

The secret to Alexis' simultaneous success as both genial storyteller and formal experimentalist lies, I think, in the freedom he affords his reader. The reader who wants the thrills of the marriage plot, updated for today's mores and problems, may rejoice in them, while the puzzle-cracker who wants to catch the allusions and discern the various constraints undergirding the writing will find much to ponder—and best

of all, the reader does not have to choose between these pleasures. By the same token, one may read any of Quincunx volumes without the others, or in any order one chooses. This, too, constitutes a ring of reciprocity.

Though marriage is all very well, where would fiction be without adultery? When they are not studies of faithless men, Keath Fraser's stories zero in on adulterated language and assorted kinds of betrayal. In "Memoir," the narrator's daughter "has taken the vow of singlehood" based on her "conviction that husbands kill their wives—dump on their scruples, treat their friends coolly, expect submission, dole out the silent treatment if we don't get it, and, offered the least encouragement, screw around" (396). The stories gathered in *Damages* give no reason to fault her decision.

Diminishing echoes of mimicry are the stuff of Fraser's stories. In "The Anthologist Takes a Holiday," the disaffected NGO worker Eddy Atwal ponders something a woman asks in the opening sentence: "If a man is alone in a forest talking, and no woman hears him, is he still wrong?" (45). He first "miscopies" this witticism as "*If a woman is alone in a forest talking, and no man hears her, is she still wrong?*" (46), and then sulkily thinks, "Of course the man is still wrong; he was wrong before he left home" (47). In "Foreign Affairs," the disaffected former diplomat Silas approximates Nehru's voice: "*You are a veddy veddy young woman*" (255). He then repeats this "veddy veddy" formula to his Indian doctor without concern for whether "the doctor [thinks] he [is] mocking him. He [makes] himself *speak*" (262). "As a mimic," comes the explanation with the third iteration, "he seldom [speaks] without the fluency he'd lost" (274). Both of these instances are illustrative not just of a structural device but of an anxious focus on the male voice and its prerogatives.

Amid all the refrains of jokey male guilt (one narrator makes strictly rhetorical asides to "Your Honour") is the title story, narrated by a woman. Her version of this guilt manifests as anxiety about libelling herself and the distance of the stars. "I love songs," she admits. "I love the way a singer trusts a song, the way she trusts a stamp not to poison her when she licks it" (362). This in a world that she finds rife with distrust and disappointment.

Sometimes spotted with questionably placed Anglicisms such as "an unwelcome bloody analyst" (57) and "a ponce friend" (363), Fraser's prose produces amuses-bouches like "noisomely young" (102), but also the occasional oddity, like the statement: "Unlike men in her firm, who could be told nothing they didn't already know, Michel was different" (479). I remain uncertain as to whether that sentence lost its way or some confusion of mind is being attributed to the female protagonist.

Damages comprises twenty-two stories written over thirty years but, frustratingly, this collection gives no indication of when or where each story was written or published. Nor is any editor (or "selector") named, though John Metcalf provides a needlessly bloviating introduction of over forty pages, with lengthy quotations from the stories that follow. While it's great to see Biblioasis launching this reprint series, it would be nice to include some more explicit sense of the history of those texts.

Particular Selves

Eleonore Schönmaier

Field Guide to the Lost Flower of Crete. McGill-Queen's UP \$17.95

Edward Carson

whereabouts. McGill-Queen's UP \$17.95

Josie Di Sciascio-Andrews

MetaStasis. Mosaic Press \$21.95

Reviewed by Paisley Conrad (Concordia University)

The relationship between poetry and the idea of selfhood is intimate. The poet, offered some critical distance through the apparatus of the poem, can separate the concept from the form of the self and itemize its contents. Yet the self, as understood through poetics, emerges always entwined through the particular interests and inflections of the poem. Ever in flux, the poetic self meticulously constructs itself through the internalization of the outer world.

Grief reconstructs the self, and such internal transformations are often catalyzed and recatalyzed by the sight of something minute, like a nut, a flower, or a shadow. Eleonore Schönmaier's *Field Guide to the Lost Flower of Crete* develops a poetics rooted in such small, quotidian details. In some poems, the memory is in the detail—a speckled eggshell ("Compose") or a rusted car ("Touching"). In others, memory emerges through physical sensation: "the world's raw wetness" ("Sisters") or a cold morning ("Branches"). Even as the speaker remains preoccupied with remembering her own grief, the collection maintains an even tone of patience and calm. However, these memories threaten to overwhelm her calm veneer:

... the self we
thought we possess
the self we thought

we are is no
longer
the self. (71)

Schönmaier's emphasis on precise, short verses invites the reader to become intimate with each vignette, with ample blank space left on the page. Multitudes split across pages, yet each discrete poem's speaker remains ultimately alone, rehearsing memory without fully giving in to emotional narration. Embracing moments of silence, the speaker's descriptions of images are clear and distinct; these occasions unfold into the complexity of relationships marked by loss, harm, and unspoken trauma.

Edward Carson's exploration of the self is equally precise. His *whereabouts* advances a self that materializes through a series of complex cerebral operations. Instead of demystifying responses of beauty, love, and ecstasy through his attention to neural synapses, Carson enchants emotion by tracking the curve of each feeling. The section called "thereabouts (or the mapmaker's dilemma)" sets up an understanding of the poem as a sort of machinic map of an ever-expanding mind. His interest in the

neural and the biological established, the section “hereabouts (in fourteen scans)” proposes a poetics of grey matter:

where language and thought are ciphers
the likeness of you in countless images

crops up only after you begin to appear
unmoored from the very thought of you. (26)

In the “left lingual gyrus occipital lobe” is the brain’s capacity to recognize beauty and similitude, to associate pleasure with a particular face (21). The operations of the brain—minute and distinct, yet entirely continuous—coalesce to create a notion of the self that is responsive, deft, and plastic. Perception, however, remains dependent on what is palpable; a “never-ending notion of self” propels Carson’s collection (30), as impulses stemming from images coagulate to form some notion of consciousness.

Josie Di Sciascio-Andrews’ latest collection *MetaStasis* is wholly invested in thinking through various tactile, cultural, and physiological implications of the virus as a form of appropriation of the self. She frames the book both in personal terms—thinking through her mother’s death from cancer and creative theft carried out by her peers—and through the global stakes of late capitalism and climate change. Throughout the collection, she cultivates a morphology of surveillance culture. As artistic and biological appropriations decontextualize previous experience, each is the root cause of the emergence of a new form of chaos:

In the heart of the city’s crucible
We become new entities

Reshuffle our foreign selves
In the amniotic foam of new possibilities

This agar dish we will multiply on
Replicating our old selves. (106)

Here and elsewhere, the collection grates against liminal spaces of rapid change. The self is gradually worn down by cancerous replications that threaten to overtake the speaker. *MetaStasis* embraces a glib form of nihilism, expressing sardonically that there is no boundary that cannot be breached by cellular or human interlopers. Thus, the self remains leaky and permeable, but also capable of change and ultimately resistance.

Emetic, Bouquet, Galaxy

Roxanna Bennett

The Untranslatable I. Gordon Hill Press \$20.00

John Elizabeth Stintzi

Junebat. House of Anansi Press \$19.95

Billeh Nickerson

Duct-Taped Roses. Book*hug Press \$20.00

Reviewed by Julian Gunn (Camosun College)

Roxanna Bennett's "The Winged Victory of Samothrace" first announced itself to me in early 2020. My own poem rejected, I huffily clicked over to the online magazine's website, muttering, "Well, what *do* you want, then?" I was immediately decked by "Winged Victory," now a part of Bennett's third collection, *The Untranslatable I*. In wing-like stanzas, "Victory," chiasitic and ekphrastic, brings into language the movements (cognitive and physical) of a speaker living and honouring a body both socially abjected as disabled and in pain:

what holy is. Armless, headless, "right wing
truncated, reconstructed" nonetheless, a vision
of wholeness. Let my body be so in translation. (5)

I mean.

I have here, in three new collections, a fistful of poetry doing the hard work of creating poetics for embodiments lived under erasure, embodiments read as queer, as trans, as disabled, as too much or not enough of each of these things. After Foucault scholar Lynne Huffer, I am calling this work chiasitic, to name this labour of revealing, through the poetics of inversion, descent, and mise-en-abîme, self-reflection, the ongoing failure of existing regimes of knowledge to allow for such lives. Huffer describes Foucault's "ethics and . . . politics of counter-conduct . . . characterized by chiasmus, a rhetorical structure of inverted parallelism" (22). These poets, Bennett, Stintzi, and Nickerson, enact in their work a chiasitic dailiness as counter-conduct: they rummage through the given world for something they can use to reveal the bar(r)ed self. John Elizabeth Stintzi's *Junebat* concretizes this self-reflecting structure. Billeh Nickerson's *Duct-Taped Roses* demonstrates that the chiasmus is emotional and relational as well as linguistic.

Roxanna Bennett fashions *The Untranslatable I* from genres of daily reflection governed by medical regimes of self-knowledge: CBT worksheets, symptom trackers, gratitude journals. Bennett's speaker strives ceaselessly for visions of liveable embodiments through an ekphrastic mythos pieced together from the hoards of English museums, Anne Carson's translations, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and Superman's bottled city of Kandor (candour).

How to write, speak, eat, travel, perform the activities of daily living, when the speaker is daily abjected, spit out, by medical and social regimes of wellness:

Can I tolerate
enough radiation to illuminate
the origin of suffering? As if it's

born in the gutsack, not imported (18)

These poems insist on the affect of nausea, the inside forced out. The body cannot acquiesce to the rules of polite consumption. The speaker refuses to pretend otherwise: "I picked at the picture / perfect entrée at the Michelin-starred restaurant / & delicately vomited into the table bouquet" (15).

Bennett pieces together a portrait of an emetically eloquent speaker. She evokes a medicalized dailiness made up of waiting rooms, prescriptions, diagnoses, insufficient medical coverage; of condescension in the doctor's office rendered, by repetition, mundane but never barbles: "'You're just sensitive,' / says Dr. X, noting tears unshed. 'You're just / insensitive' I don't say, afraid to offend" (35).

If Bennett's poems enact a seeking, active ekphrasis, a gaze that claims, rejects, and transforms in pursuit of a liveable image, John Elizabeth Stintzi's *Junebat* is a predictive ekphrasis, conjuring the not-yet-formed.

The *Junebat* is Stintzi's figure for the elusive (im)possibility of a liveable self-image. *Junebat* is arranged into three sections: two outer wings and a central body with a chiasmic centre of three poems, "Apophatic *Junebat*," "**METAMORPHOSE**" (crossed out in the original), and "Cataphatic *Junebat*." "Selected Definitions of *Junebat*" invokes the possibility of a new grammar, "a noun which is neither a person, nor a place, nor an idea" (8), and invites the reader to try *Junebat* as every part of speech.

The collection's formal experiments vaporize reference in the hope that it can re-condense into a new, more liveable pattern. Stintzi's "I am every stranger here except myself" (20) echoes Foucault's *sed ego non sum ego*: I return, no longer myself (Huffer 23). This apophatic strategy appears throughout the collection, iterated by thought-stems like "you are not you" (27), "what is a body if not" (16), and "a *Junebat* is not" (37). Negation is inverted into a tool of possibility. The dailiness of a train ride becomes the occasion for a revision of psychoanalytic binaries: "Am I the station or am I the New Jersey Transit / train that hit it?" (9). In the second wing, the *Junebat* imago becomes more habitable, if not more translatable. The first wing's "the best way to look at a *Junebat* / is to look away" becomes the second wing's "we begin / to fashion a Frankensteinian sublime" (28; 56).

"Your poem, your poem / on the bus, on the Skytrain" (38)—Billeh Nickerson continues to be the West Coast poet of queer dailiness. The poems in Nickerson's new collection, *Duct-Taped Roses*, align themselves with the iconic queer poets of the New York School: Joe Brainard, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara. As CanCon camp, Celine Dion replaces Lana Turner in Nickerson's mythos of the everyday. "Langley" is a memory sequence echoing Brainard's *I Remember*: "I remember walking under the power lines near my house and how if it was raining and you held an umbrella you'd sometimes get a shock" (68).

The moving prose-poem sequence "Skies" explores the dynamic between a queer son and his father, a bush pilot. In one vignette, the father shows the son the cockpit of his plane. Nickerson stages the painful and comic failure of translation across the chiasmic gap between straight father and queer son. The son points to the control panel, asking the child's question, "what's that," over and over. Each time, the father

answers “a fuse” (48). Fuse is just what their understandings cannot do. They are father and son, images of one another, and yet neither can offer a useful reflection. Their positions are inverted in relation to the AIDS epidemic: as a pilot among flight attendants, the father knows more gay men who have died than does the son: “*JeanEduardoPierreMarcTim* rolls off his tongue” (49).

What use is a poem, that sublime stranger? It is a pattern for the gaze’s surrender: it is emetic, bouquet, galaxy, reflection.

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Huffer, Lynne. “Foucault’s Queer Virgins: An Unfinished History in Fragments.”

Foucault Studies, no. 29, 2021, DOI: 10.22439/fs.vi29.6212.

From Universal to Intersectional

Rob Taylor

Strangers. Biblioasis \$19.95

Triny Finlay

Myself a Paperclip. icehouse poetry \$19.95

Jody Chan

sick. Black Lawrence Press \$16.95

Reviewed by Jodi Lundgren (Thompson Rivers University)

The title poem of Rob Taylor’s fourth collection, *Strangers*, offers a defence of poetry, asserting that its powers—including to reanimate a lost loved one and to console a grieving survivor—foster connection among people who “would be strangers / if not for this” (11). Taylor expresses an unabashed universalism here—a faith that the poet’s experiences can stand in for the reader’s and that language unites writers and readers in their common humanity. Illustrating this credo throughout the collection, Taylor turns to familial themes: childhood memories of a father’s premature death, of an accident-prone but well-meaning mother; scenes from a harmonious marriage in which the couple, after “seventeen years together” (42), welcome a colicky baby. In the poignant “Why and Why,” an aging mother forgets words as the child learns them: “my mother, my son, their vocabulary / a passed baton so now he reminds her / *river Grammy the word is river*” (75).

If compelling meditations distinguish these poems, so does their musicality: an iambic undercurrent often bubbles up, which Taylor alternately gives rein to and curbs. In “You ask me about my mother,” a line of blank verse is followed by two enjambed tetrametric lines as the speaker describes his three-year-old brain: “a squall within which stories wouldn’t last / unless she lashed them there: the scene, / the thud and wail, the nightmare snap / that might have been” (12). The collection’s sonic play peaks in the multi-poem series “At Roblin Lake,” set in Al Purdy’s A-frame. In “Interruption,” certain dactylic lines about mouse-catching scan almost as evenly as a lyric from *The Sound of Music*’s “My Favourite Things”: “Cardboard and duct tape and sheeting and screws. / Tip traps and neck-snaps and a chemical map” (44). Well-

suiting to this light-hearted poem, a similar rhythm sounds off-key in “Cemetery,” in which the speaker addresses Purdy about a fifteen-year-old’s recent death: “Every thing, by definition, has edges. / I’m not here to ask you to pass on a message” (48). Perhaps the occasional false note stems from Taylor’s strict allegiance to stanzaic form, which can verge on stifling. Every poem is single-spaced and left-justified until two-thirds in, when triple spacing in “The Long Goodbye” is like being given the chance to breathe deeply enough to fill the lungs.

In *Myself a Paperclip*, her third collection, Triny Finlay explores mental illness and psychiatric hospitalization in what is also an irreverent, book-length response to T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “In the room, the women come and go, talking of the elusive *O*” (9). Finlay not only adapts lines that Eliot assigned to Prufrock but also assumes the voice of that poem’s misunderstood, pillow-settling woman. On the penultimate page, Finlay revises Eliot’s famous lines to, “I have lingered in the psych-ward common room: cautious, / ridiculous, at times the fool . . . / Stuck a pillow under my cheek to catch the nightmare’s drool” (75). In granting Eliot’s woman agency, Finlay exerts her own, also using her craft to render the setting unique and immediate; the speaker’s room smells, for example, “like a beach of trout carcasses frequented by dogs” (61).

Given the book’s confessional nature, the voice can be surprisingly impersonal. “Self-Portrait as a Paperclip” eschews first-person pronouns, though the word “trinket” stands in for “paperclip,” seemingly an ill-fitting synonym until the similarity to the author’s first name is noted (12). A detached third-person perspective often positions the speaker as an observer of “psych-ward types,” who notes, for instance, “Some of them hoard food / in their nightstands and dresser drawers” (29). Anger does surface, especially in “#MeToo, and You, and You, and You, Too,” whose placement early in the collection suggests that sexual trauma has contributed to the speaker’s mental illness. Interpolated among the titled poems are pages of italicized speech, presumably either addressed to, or overheard by, the speaker: “*That one over there shits himself. / Him! Yeah, he shits himself*” (28); “*Dude wants weed more than he wants those meds. / Who’s dealing these days?*” (66). These snatches of found dialogue form some of the book’s strongest passages by giving voice to the other patients, individualizing them beyond their status as “types.”

In *sick*, their debut full-length collection, Jody Chan traces the impact of borderline personality disorder and depression on their relational life, which includes a longing for intimacy that is repeatedly self-sabotaged: “you never stay long enough / to be left . . . haunted by people / you thought better off without you” (48). Chan sometimes chooses, like Taylor, to use left-justified stanzas of even lengths: unrhymed couplets in “tooth fairy,” tercets in “not here,” quatrains in “the first time I return to New York.” But Chan plays with form, using various techniques to allow breath and movement into the collection, including uneven indentation, widely spaced lines, and rotated typeface that makes the reader turn the book in their hands.

Chan’s wide-ranging points of reference include popular singers like Taylor Swift and Teresa Teng, Reddit posts, therapist’s notes, and emerging poets such as Warsan Shire and Nancy Huang. Embracing their linguistic ancestry, Chan uses Traditional Chinese characters in poems like “superstitions” (in which the words are translated) and “餓鬼 // hungry ghost” (an online version allows readers to use a digital translator, which repays the effort).

Of the three poets discussed, Chan is the most overtly ecological: in “migratory patterns,” environmental crisis becomes a constitutive thread of the intersectional subjectivities depicted, yet interpersonal dynamics still occupy the foreground:

..... in twenty years
summer and winter will meet and you'll have forgotten
our own first collision . . .
...
that summer and nearly every one since has been the hottest
on record, but we were tied to our own equator (34)

For Chan's speaker, romantic longing emotionally overpowers the climate emergency, but an ecological awareness persists:

if the world was ending I would
barely look away from my little life
long enough to notice. I am a poor witness
but I love the world the way I could not
love you. (35)

This ecocentric love—alongside an open embrace of psychiatric diagnoses, nonbinary gender, queer desire, and cultural origins—marks *sick* in a generational sense as truly contemporary poetry.

Speed and Syntax

Selina Boan

Undoing Hours. Nightwood Editions \$18.95

Garry Thomas Morse

Scofflaw. Anvil Press \$18.00

Reviewed by Geoffrey Nilson (Simon Fraser University)

Selina Boan and Garry Thomas Morse write poetry at different speeds, each with a syntax that reflects a unique textual purpose. *Undoing Hours* is a slow, aromatic text, each poem like a simmering soup pot, simple ingredients combining to make more than the sum of their parts. Boan's syntax of understanding employs sentence-based grammar and strives to communicate clearly. In contrast, *Scofflaw* fires lines in rapid succession, like a linguistic gun-fight where the reader must duck for cover. Morse's syntax of confusion promotes double meanings and a grammatical openness which often disavows the sentence. These divergent texts present two perspectives of contemporary Indigenous life in Canada.

Undoing Hours, Boan's debut collection, centres thematically on a narrative of learning, discovery, and reclamation. The speaker journeys into nêhiyawêwin (the Cree language), slowly integrating the words of her paternal ancestors into her vocabulary. Usage begins as simple definition—

i am learning to name.

sâsâpiskisican frying pan
tahkascican fridge
wasênikan window (30)

—employing roman orthography common to most European languages. The arc of the narrative culminates with the speaker developing her nêhiyawêwin to a skill level where she can integrate Cree syllabics into her poetic practice, as with the poem “<∩∩∨∞.” Water floods *Undoing Hours* like “river melt / running” (24), yet Boan’s diction stays carefully controlled, words soft as if drawn in sand, plain-spoken in a register recalling fellow Nightwood Editions author Gregory Scofield. These poems at the pace of memory develop a continuity of voice across the collection. Metatextual elements suggest an autobiographical correlation between the speaker of the poems and the poet herself, even when disguised behind a third-person narrator: “a girl clicks beginner / cree on the internet” (19). Boan’s lyricism is without any particular metaphor or line break a reader can point to in critique. The poems hit beats and notes in the correct emotional places. Well-crafted lines to be sure, but sometimes so technically articulated they feel sapped of human quirk. The most effective moments in *Undoing Hours* throw out the workshop rulebook and perform flairs of form or language, reader be damned.

Where Boan is ultra-conscious of the accessibility of her text, Garry Thomas Morse has no such concerns. *Scofflaw* refuses to make sense. With an “I,” an unknowable “we,” and a cast of different characters, polyphony shifts between voices, dialects, and vocabularies. The text is brutal, jagged, and demanding at times; at others, playful, ironic, and breezy. It’s a standoff with the settler state—punning and wordplay, twisting idioms and pop culture references into original phrases, a

trickster
plum out of pancho tricks

& spaghetti themes
bordering on uncool (36)

Almost disgusted, Morse turns English back on those who would use it as a weapon: “One day we get wind of the factoid the Air’s changed / (say fake news one more time / I can’t even)” (58). The notes mention a long gestation for the text, yet *Scofflaw* retains a spontaneity that keeps it exciting. Morse reverses the length and slowness of the postmodern long poem. A reader might expect the poet to layer meaning in small bits over many pages, à la Robert Kroetsch. But *Scofflaw* is just over sixty pages, and so the reader screams through it unwittingly, arriving at the conclusion with both confusion and the desire to start again straight away. Morse spoofs us poet Edward Dorn’s *Gunslinger* and cuts down CanLit “Prairie Poet” John Newlove, two quite different poets that nonetheless both represent a certain white, male brand of North American settler postmodernism. “[S]tuff that in your vape & toke it / not another word about fields of pure yellow” (24), Morse writes, interrogating Newlove’s legacy. This poem, in real time, engages the covid-19 pandemic zeitgeist with dark humour:

Censor any anti-viral spirals gone viral
Wander lonely as a social bearing cloud
Reel in all bonspiel super-spreaders
Reboot apology tour with ethical breathables (56)

Scofflaw knows the food scarcity, housing instability, and lack of adequate health care that Canada faces during covid-19 are not exclusive to the current pandemic, but perils faced continuously by Indigenous communities.

A *scofflaw* is defined in the OED as “one who treats the law with contempt, esp. a person who avoids various kinds of not easily enforceable laws” (“scofflaw”). Morse’s *scofflaw* can be read as flouting both the laws of poetry and the laws of the Canadian settler state that would seek to assimilate, control, and erase Indigenous peoples. Boan might declare Indigeneity where Morse declines to, but it would be wrong to assume she practises a politics of recognition. Her speaker does not “tell / the whole story as i know it” (75), even if she recognizes “you want / the piece of the story // that is clandestine” (86). The fundamental difference between *Scofflaw* and *Undoing Hours* comes down to the purpose of poetry. Boan’s lyric realism focuses on emotion, identity, memory, and narrative. Her poems still believe in the redemptive power of the form. Morse’s surrealism is intertextual and propelled by subversive desire. His poems undermine the very form he wields and the canon of avant-garde poetics he summons as influence. *Undoing Hours* pins meaning to its sleeve, while *Scofflaw* holds meaning close to its chest.

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Suicide Is among Us (And So Is Theory)

Lauren Fournier

Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism. MIT Press US \$35.00

Concetta Principe

Stars Need Counting: Essays on Suicide. Gordon Hill Press \$22.00

Reviewed by Valerie Uher (University of Waterloo)

Where does personal reflection stop and scholarly investigation begin? To even ask this question might appear clichéd or outdated; and yet, critical writing about art, theory, and literature often stops short of inviting in the personal, the reflective, or it does so only with much conspicuous and self-conscious hedging. So, here’s my own disclosure: it’s not only a scholarly interest in *auto-* genres that impels me to write this review; it’s also a desire to better understand myself—I lost a friend to suicide two years ago, and some of my own writing (the writing which means the most to me) might be lumped under the umbrella of autotheory.

Engaging in overt disclosure in writing meant for a scholarly audience often invites the charge of narcissism, a topic that Lauren Fournier addresses at length in

Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism. Wide-ranging in its research of the roots of self-writing in theory (from Gloria Anzaldúa to bell hooks to Andrea Long Chu), Fournier traces the term *autotheory* to the early twenty-first century, and then considers how it might be used to understand a transdisciplinary body of work emerging from feminist and queer writers and artists from the 1960s to the present. Fournier addresses the work of Adrian Piper, Hazel Meyer, Sona Safaei-Sooreh, Maggie Nelson, and Chris Kraus, as well as other notable figures aligned with transnational feminisms, Black feminisms, queer performance art, and trans and critical disability art and writing. Fournier delimits the space of autotheory as performative and self-aware, highlighting the ways in which autotheory's intentionally counter-hegemonic praxis propels it outside previously established categories of conceptual art, critical memoir, life-writing, or creative non-fiction.

Written with meticulous sensitivity, Fournier's text explores (and sometimes performs) the ways in which the *auto* of autotheory reanimates and engages "theory with a capital T" from the position of a self often absented from it: the self that is raced, disabled, queer, trans, feminized, colonized, or poor (46). Fournier gives the example of a talk given by one of her mentors, David Chariandy, at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2019. In his talk "Theory: A Footnote," a "footnote" to Dionne Brand's 2019 novel *Theory*, Chariandy addressed antiBlack racism in the academy and Canadian society, recounting his experiences of reading and studying theory as both generative and "enmeshed in pain," as Fournier describes it (267). Fournier also contextualizes this pain via reference to the incident of egregious antiBlack racism that occurred at the very same conference (269). As Fournier recalls, Chariandy memorably said in his talk that "[t]heory, real theory, will appear to be white; and the more opaque it is, the better: 'like being an asshole'" (53). The figure of *real* theory as a white asshole is poignant (and of course, bitterly funny) because it (re)animates capital-*T* theory with its writerly (white) body attached, when normally it might (want to) appear as the "opaque" cardboard corpse of whiteness. Of course, the capacity to disarm theory and shed it of its supposed objectivity exists *within* what many consider capital-*T* theory today, as Chariandy notes in his talk and Fournier acknowledges in various ways throughout her text via her engagement with feminist, queer, Black, and decolonial theorists, amongst others. The focus of Fournier's text, though, is on the capacities inherent to the autotheoretical form, and its tactic of putting a spotlight on the "vacuumed *rigor*" of "theoretical abstraction" by way of its self-consciously embodied and reanimating engagement with theory (47).

Though profoundly different in tone, Principe does something similar in her work on suicide, which re-embodies and reanimates the seemingly frozen-off topic of suicide by bringing it closer, making it more visceral, while also treating it with the tenderness and empathy that this topic deserves. Someone once told me that "death is among us," and one of the many gripping aspects of *Stars Need Counting* is the way in which its poetic refrains, motifs, and images—the unsettling taste in one's mouth, an uncanny glass of water, "observable stars that are already dead" (89)—bring what the writer Al Alvarez famously describes as "the closed world of suicide" into the phenomenal world of the living. With its refrains, Principe offers a lattice of associations that ripple through the book, bringing an underlying logic to the text in much the same way as the manifest content of the dream (one of Principe's intertexts is *The Interpretation of Dreams*) draws the interpreter to the latent meaning. In this way, Principe uses images, anecdotes, and lyrical references to pick away at the many

unknowns encasing the hard shell of suicide, providing clarity and relief by delivering fleeting openings into its “closed world.”

When you lose someone to suicide, the question of determining if the person intended to take their life, and of course why, haunts and torments. Shirking (with grace and care) the task of digging into the rabbit hole of intention, Principe’s preface delineates exactly what this book will *not* provide, including “any categorical claims” or “a definitive definition of suicide” (2–3). She instead traces suicide’s black hole of intention across several evocative “case studies,” wherein acts of murder-suicide, suicide in war, and “unsolved cases,” such as that of Merriweather Lewis, are intertwined with personal stories and experiences with suicide from the author’s life, as well as quotes from and conversations with big-*T* theory from Lacan, Blanchot, Malabou, and many others. To use nomenclature from Fournier, Principe uses “lateral citation” to reanimate theory as yet another “life-text” to draw from, which has the obvious levelling effect of *bringing down* theory while also *raising up* experiential accounts of suicide and, in so doing, providing new prisms for thinking as a result. This, in conjunction with the author’s lyrical prose and occasions of literary critical analysis (ranging from Sylvia Plath to Daniel MacIvor), evokes fresh, revelatory, and at times disarming insights into an act that can feel devastatingly elusive in its aftermath.

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An “Epic” Fail?

George Elliott Clarke

The Quest for a “National” Nationalism: E. J. Pratt’s Epic Ambition, “Race”

Consciousness, and the Contradictions of Canadian Identity. Breakwater Books \$14.95

Reviewed by Tracy Whalen (University of Winnipeg)

Published by Breakwater Books, this slim volume provides the written transcript of celebrated poet and critic George Elliott Clarke’s 2018 address, “The Quest for a ‘National’ Nationalism,” which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Pratt Memorial Lecture series. Clarke turns his attention to two of Newfoundland-born E. J. Pratt’s poems—*Brébeuf and his Brethren* (1940) and *Towards the Last Spike* (1952)—to re-evaluate Pratt’s status as Canadian epic poet within the complicated socio-political identifications of this country. Previous critics haven’t, it seems, disputed Northrop Frye’s nomination of Pratt as “English Canada’s great epic poet” (Clarke 15), debating instead what *kind* of epic poetry he has written. When it comes to *Brébeuf*, for example, Pratt’s poem about the martyrdom of Jesuits in seventeenth-century New France, Sandra Djwa tells us that some “describe it as Christian epic,” while others “are content with the term heroic epic” (82). Clarke’s argument is that in a nation as diverse and fraught as settler-colonial Canada, epic, understood as a unifying force, is bound to fall short—despite a poet’s lofty ambitions or the fact that they are, as Clarke believes Pratt to be, “yet a mighty poet” (61).

Clarke, with incisive irony, turns to Pratt's modernist contemporaries, Ezra Pound and Northrop Frye, to frame his discussion of epic, his reference to Frye a collegial nod to the inaugural Pratt Lecturer fifty years previous. Pound argues that the epic genre is defined by a "beautiful tradition," narrative cohesion, and epic heroes, "men who are more than men" (Clarke 9–10). Unity is a central feature of the epic form formulated by Frye and Pound—no heteroglossia, heterogeneity, or diversity allowed in this imperialist and nationalist genre of the dominant. According to Pound, the epic voice is to be "the speech of a nation through the mouth of one man" (12). (While Clarke does not engage with gender and epic directly, the epic is also frequently the domain of the masculine: poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. knew all too well that "the epic hero is traditionally male, his heroic qualities are masculine, and the ordeal he faces is a masculine agon," and worked from within the genre to challenge such norms [Friedman 205]). Frye similarly defines epic as "the voice of a civilization (or a culture), the vocalization of a unity of cultural experience" (Clarke 13). Clarke grants that, "generally, the epic answers the question 'Who are we?'" but suggests that, problematically, this "we" is rarely a voice from the margins, from the disenfranchised or displaced. One might quibble here that epics don't so much "answer the question" of who we already are, but instead, if rhetorically successful, *constitute* such subjectivities in the first place through narrative identification. (Rhetorician Maurice Charland is instructive on this score.) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic *Evangeline*, for instance, was a tremendously successful piece of constitutive rhetoric for the Acadians, and, not surprisingly, Pratt emulated this epic.

Clarke's most thought-provoking speculation (or "wager") is that *Brébeuf*, although written in English by an English Protestant, is best understood as a pro-conscription piece for Catholic French-Canadian readers during World War II, specifically, as "pro-war, pro-Francophone-enlistment propaganda, toggled up as a paean to ye olde Christian military slaughter" (29). Only problem is, as he points out, *Brébeuf* wasn't translated into French until 1988, so if Pratt was serious about Francophones actually reading his narrative poem and being sufficiently moved by it, he had to have imagined his English narrative being "overheard" by Francophones (30) or believed that, like Longfellow's wildly popular *Evangeline*, his poem would enjoy quick translation and circulation—which it didn't. (Particularly interesting is Clarke's footnote that suggests Earle Birney's "David" is arguably the closest thing to national epic Canada has because so many students have read it as part of their education, which also brings up the questions of circulation and readership). Further to that, the poem's demonization of Indigenous peoples with fascistic allusions makes it an unlikely epic under "the forensic scrutiny of later generations of multiculturalized and/or Indigenous/Métis Canadian poets and scholars" (50).

Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike*—an encomium for the glorious completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway westward through the Shield and Prairies to British Columbia—doesn't fare much better as constitutive epic in Clarke's view. Pratt lionizes the capitalist who opens up the West to economic opportunity, ignoring the Chinese workers who endure the tortures of physical labour and the Indigenous peoples whose lands are stolen for the capitalist cause, as celebrated by the iconic photograph of Donald Smith, later Lord Strathcona, pounding the last spike at Craigellachie. Ultimately, Clarke says, "*Towards the Last Spike* is a celebration of Muscular Protestantism, tacit White British Supremacy, and Capitalist Derring-Do" (42). Hope may lie, however, in a re-imagining of the national epic: *epic* defined not in terms of

unity, or one voice, but comprised by many; epic coming not from one, privileged viewpoint, but from the diasporic, the marginalized, the outcast, the multiple.

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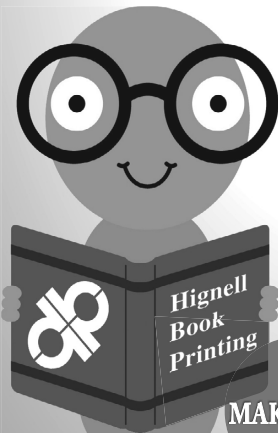
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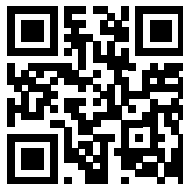
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