

Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

Number 257, 2024

Published by The University of British Columbia, Vancouver
Editor: Christine Kim

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Errata Notice

Please note that in the print version of issue 256, May Agnes Fleming is misgendered in the following sentence:

“Moreover, Fleming’s contract with the *Weekly* resulted in a joint publishing opportunity, where the *London Journal*, a source that once reprinted **his** works without authorization, could publish **his** novels at the same time as the *Weekly*, with the stipulation that Fleming would be compensated and that the *Journal* would pronounce the works to be copyright protected” (135).

This error occurred in the proofing stage of production, and is through no fault of the Opinions & Notes author. All online versions of “A Working Bibliography of Texts by May Agnes Fleming” have been corrected to “her.”

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GST R108161779

Publication of *Canadian Literature* is assisted by The University of British Columbia, the Faculty of Arts (UBC), and SSHRC.

Canadian Literature is indexed in *Canadian Magazine Index*, *Canadian Periodical Index*, *European Reference Index for the Humanities*, *Humanities International Complete*, and the *MLA International Bibliography*, among numerous others. The journal is indexed and abstracted by EBSCO, ProQuest, and ABES. The full text of articles and reviews from 1997 onwards is available from ProQuest, Gale, and EBSCO Publishing. The journal is available in microfilm from University Microfilm International.

Publications Mail Agreement NO. 40592543
Registration NO. 08647

**Return Undeliverable
Canadian Addresses to:**

Canadian Literature
The University of British Columbia
Mary Bollert Hall, Room 111
6253 NW Marine Drive
Vancouver, BC
Canada V6T 1Z1

Telephone: (604) 822-2780
Email: Can.Lit@ubc.ca
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Subscription for Issues 256-259

Within Canada (GST included):
Individual \$76.65; Institution \$351.75

Outside Canada (shipping included):
Individual \$112.00 USD;
Institution \$374.00 USD

ISSN 0008-4360

Print Design & Layout: Clint Hutzulak,
Rayola Creative Inc.

Printing: Hignell Printing Limited

Paper: recycled and acid-free

Christine Kim

History × Literature

In an interview with Christopher Lee featured in this issue, renowned author Paul Yee says, “archives will never provide the answers to all our questions—and that is why we need fiction” (46). I find Yee’s assertion to be a provocative one for how it frames the relations between history and literature, and how it raises questions about what we hope to learn by reading and writing historical fiction. For Lee and Yee, historical documents are prompts to engage with the complexity of Chinese Canadian lifeworlds, whose messiness and discomforts often contradict the fantasies of ethical, and even heroic, behaviour we want to ascribe to early migrants. Archives, within their incomplete records, offer entry points into historical imaginings, but ones that come with formal problems. Lee raises the question of how these stories of Chinese Canadian pasts can be written when he shares that, in the classroom, “I often tell my students that some writers have to reinvent their entire narrative language and form in order to tell a story properly,” or to better capture a time period (49).

Many of the other contributions to this issue also offer ways of rethinking the ways in which history and literature inform each other. By turning to Indigenous literatures and languages, diasporic writing, and canonical Canadian literature, the essays and forum pose generative questions about the reading, writing, and teaching of Canadian literatures and histories. The essays by Allison Hargreaves, Johanna Lederer, Cara Schwartz, and David Kootnikoff can be read as engaging in a dialogue about positionality, settler-colonial projects, and Indigenous literatures and histories. Hargreaves’ contribution grapples with how the teaching of Indigenous literatures and settler-colonial histories are two related, but different, projects. While they are often assumed to be intertwined, she reveals how their goals are often at odds with each other. Her essay offers many valuable insights about positionality and pedagogical projects, the need to interrogate assumptions about the linearity of time and the appearance of progress,

and the need “to move *beyond* instrumental and merely content-based modes of inclusion in order to embody more radically relational forms of understanding and accountability” (70). Schwartz also foregrounds questions of positionality in her scholarship, as she opens by thinking about the relations between individuals and wholes through Robin Kimmerer’s metaphors of baskets and braids. The braid offers a powerful means of engaging with the importance and challenges of connectivity, given the degree of tension required to produce a braid. Noting that parts of strands are tucked away in a braid and therefore not visible to the eye, she shares that as a settler scholar, part of her reading practice is to acknowledge there are readings that she does not have access to. Kootnikoff also contributes to these topics by turning to Michael Ondaatje’s celebrated *In the Skin of a Lion*, rereading it through the lens of settler colonialism. He frames the novel in terms of the debates around multiculturalism that marked its publication, observing that both the novel and the Multiculturalism Act share a tendency to render invisible Indigenous peoples, and that the novel uses the conventions of romance to “normalize Indigenous dispossession” (146). Lederer’s essay explores Indigenous language revitalization, and examines the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages as land-based knowledges and localized practices. While the other pieces in this issue direct our attention towards the intersection of literature and histories, Lederer reframes this nexus in terms of futurity. She argues, via a reading of Chelsea Vowel’s futurist writing, that, “[a]t the core of Indigenous future imaginaries, the presence of Indigenous languages in the future speaks to the future presence of Indigenous people, stories, and knowledges” (94–95).

The forum on islands also adds to this exploration of history and literature, querying which histories are central to our conceptions of Canadian literary studies and how this centrality influences the framing of the field. Guy Beauregard, Eva Darias-Beautell, Cornel Bogle, and Joanne Leow advocate for conceptualizing Canadian literature in terms of islands, rather than in terms of a nation-state, by demonstrating the kinds of questions such an analytic is capable of yielding. Collectively, they engage with Indigeneity, colonialism, transnationality, diaspora, spatiality, and global capitalism, concepts that have long been central to Canadian literary studies. In the introduction to the forum, Guy Beauregard invokes Pacific poet and scholar Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa’s call

to use *island* as a verb, rather than a noun, in order to “develop what might be called ‘islanding’ perspectives” (10). To engage with *island* as it acts, rather than is acted upon, he argues, “has profound ethical implications for how we might learn to relearn received notions of which places, which spaces, and whose stories matter” (10).

Beauregard’s own contribution to the forum examines Jessica J. Lee’s non-fiction for how it writes Taiwan’s ecology from the perspective of a Taiwanese diaspora in Canada and, moreover, how the distance between these sites produces problems of knowledge production and interpretation. Extending Teaiwa’s method, he writes that, “[b]y thinking of ‘island’ as a verb, we may learn to attend more carefully to the often violent impacts of such motion and their varied aftermaths in Taiwan and Canada and beyond” (41). Eva Darius-Beautell adds another important layer to this exploration of *island* as Canadian literary method by offering a critique of imperialism from the Canary Islands. This is a positioning that enables her to move through the interlinked problems of global tourism, green capitalism, and social injustice via Michael Christie’s novel *Greenwood*. Cornel Bogle argues that if we think of the island “as more than a physical space—as a critical lens—scholars can engage in the grouping and reinterpretation of texts that defy conventional categorization” (20). As he considers how Caribbean Canadian literature is positioned within the field of Canadian literature, Bogle traces how islands are central to conceptions of modernity and, in turn, Canada’s sense of self. And finally, Joanne Leow’s contribution positions Canada in relation to Singapore, highlighting diaspora, settlement, migration, and imperialism as connective tissue with site-specific histories. She situates islands within the context of colonialism and Canadian literature in order to trace the material and conceptual histories of islands through literary traditions that include Wayne Compton, E. Pauline Johnson, and Lee Maracle, and via practices of resource extraction, transportation across pipelines and waterways, and labour migration. Their dialogue reveals what is at stake in the angle at which we approach these histories, as well as the methodologies we employ to analyze them. Taken together, these essays and forum contributions push us to reflect upon the stories we construct about the past and the histories we routinely draw upon, the conventions that guide these storytelling practices, and our positionality as teachers, writers, and readers.

Guy Beauregard, Eva Darias-Beautell, Cornel Bogle,
and Joanne Leow

Islanding Canada, Islanding the World

Introduction

“Shall we make ‘island’ a verb?” So asks Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa, the late Pacific poet, scholar, and educator. Born to an African American mother and a Banaban/I-Kiribati father in Hawai‘i, Teaiwa was educated there as well as in Fiji and the continental United States, later dedicating much of her professional life to teaching and helping build Pacific studies in Aotearoa, New Zealand.¹ Of particular interest in her life and work across islands is “To Island” (2022), a poem in which she urges us to envision islands as verbs to help develop what might be called “islanding” perspectives. For Teaiwa, viewing islands as nouns leaves them “vulnerable to impinging forces,” including to what she calls “the stupor of continental fantasies.” Paying tribute to the work of Epeli Hau‘ofa, her former colleague at the University of the South Pacific, Teaiwa acknowledges, “Yes, there is a sea of islands”—but, she adds, “sea’ can be a verb, just as ‘ocean’ becomes a verb of awesome possibility.” By making *island* a verb, Teaiwa urges us to act with more care: “Care for other humans, care for plants, animals; care for soil, care for water.” Doing so, she writes, “could save our lives.” Teaiwa’s call to transform *island* into a verb has profound ethical implications for how we might learn to relearn received notions of which places, spaces, and stories matter. When relocated into the contexts of our teaching and learning and writing, her call affirms the similarly expansive work of “the worlding project” developed at the University of California Santa Cruz, where the notion of “worlding” was tied to what Christopher Connery calls “an interruption and critique of a

range of field imaginaries,” helping us to question “the ways in which a given discipline or scholarly field sets its own boundaries” (1).

In this spirit, the contributors to this forum have sought to think through existing configurations of “Canadian literature” as a field, seeking to do so by “islanding” Canada and “islanding” the world. Eva Darias-Beautell opens our discussion by focusing on the tensions between islands conceived as objects to be controlled through an imperial and/or a marketing gaze *and* islands as places of uncertainty eluding such forms of control. By foregrounding her subject position as a scholar working in the Canary Islands, and unfolding a reading of Michael Christie’s novel *Greenwood*, her contribution helps us to better understand the politics of representing islands by evocatively “reopening the island archive.” Cornel Bogle extends this approach by viewing islands not simply as physical spaces but also as “a critical lens.” Through his discussion of Caribbean Canadian writing—including the works of Olive Senior, Kaie Kellough, Lorna Goodison, and Austin Clarke—Bogle thoughtfully attends to islands as “spaces of dynamic and diverse experiences rather than fixed, isolated entities.” Presenting her poetry as research creation, Joanne Leow reflects on the stakes involved in reading across texts from Canada—including the work of Wayde Compton—and from Singapore. Instead of viewing national spaces as discrete and separate, Leow helpfully calls attention to the politics of waterways and extraction through “nodes in Canada,” including on the prairies, and through specific sites in Southeast Asia. Finally, I turn to Jessica J. Lee’s creative non-fiction text *Two Trees Make a Forest*, a text that stitches together glimpses of political and family histories in diaspora with attempts to better understand Taiwan’s fractured and shifting ecologies. Focusing on the notion of the *fragment*, I urge us to develop a critical language to adequately address the connections, complicities, and displacements depicted in Lee’s text and beyond. However richly resonant, the texts and sites noted here are of course not the only ones worth discussing. So much more could and should be addressed. We hope that this forum can help to animate new critical conversations to inspire further reading, learning, teaching, and writing about configurations of “Canadian literature” and its complex points of connection with the world.

— Guy Beauregard

Notes

1. For a glimpse of the range of Teaiwa's creative and critical contributions, including her commitment to program building, see her posthumously published collection *Sweat and Salt Water* (2021).

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Reopening the Island Archive

In her editorial to a recent issue of *Canadian Literature*, Christine Kim puts forward the importance of probing the terms, frames, and methodologies of Canadian literary studies today. Kim highlights the epistemological shift brought about by Indigenous scholarship in the past few decades, transforming the field through its thorough re-evaluation of questions of territory, nation, and sovereignty. So have diasporic writers and critics, especially Black and Asian Canadian, contributed to expanding and reframing literary studies effectively within and beyond the nation by identifying and tracing the itineraries of racial capitalism and colonial violences as connected to, but transcending, the specific history of Canada as a white settler project. Rethinking literary studies through the lens of those alternative genealogies, Kim argues, “reframe[s] *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” (13).

This forum comes across as a potential site of that move, not only because its topic explicitly asks us to think beyond normative frameworks of literary studies in and about Canada, but also, and perhaps especially, because of the individual positions of the invited contributors, island-based and/or island-born scholars working from both inside and outside the country. This is a form of tracing a two-way tangential line of inquiry into the field from outside in and from inside out, as it were.

Speaking of positionality, if poststructuralism has instructed those of us working within Western academia on the elusiveness of any attempt to reach or produce objective knowledge, one of the many lessons learned through reading feminist, critical race, and Indigenous scholars is that personal situatedness matters and our readings are always enmeshed in a web of relations. As the editors of the collection *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island* put it: “Embedded in the notion of positionality is the recognition that we are interconnected with those around us” (4).

So, let me mention my own position as a white woman scholar born and raised in the Canary Islands, an extra-peripheral territory in Europe where I live and work. I am also a settler of a land colonized by the Spanish since the fifteenth century, with Indigenous inhabitants (of Berber origin and known as Guanches on the island of Tenerife) who were massively exterminated or enslaved. Today, the modest remnants of their culture are a fascinating lure to the approximately sixteen million tourists who visit the islands every year.

I would like to bring forth that form of land occupation by eliciting the relationship between islands and global tourism. Tourism is by far the main economic activity in the Canary Islands and the creation and development of tourism-related businesses and infrastructures have been given priority by the authorities for nearly a century (Sabaté-Bel and Armas-Díaz 214). This is no wonder, when one learns that islands figure “among the most profitable spaces for tourism and real estate investment” (Armas-Díaz et al., 251), and the farther away they are from the centres of world-economy, the more they confirm their status as “peripheries of pleasure” (Louis Turner and John Ash, qtd. in Armas-Díaz 251). But, as many studies show, the commodification of nature by means of different forms of so-called green capitalism is a crucial strategy in the success of the tourist industry. These processes capitalize on an aesthetic approach to islands as paradises, spaces of spirituality, reconnection, tranquility, shelter, or protection in order to produce islands as spaces of exclusion within colonial and/or capitalist logics, their access a symbol of status and privilege for the very few. Putting the aesthetic and the material significations of the island in conversation with each other—for instance, its connotations as spaces for reconnection with nature vis-à-vis the ensuing monetization of nature, the gentrification of local life, the control and hyper-occupation of public space and so forth—problematizes the idea of economic growth and produces important areas of creative friction, to say the least.

I propose to read Michael Christie’s novel *Greenwood* (2020) in that contrapuntal mode. This text, I believe, traverses deep layers of this same discussion and re-opens crucial and interconnected archives in the colonial history of Canada and beyond. Partly set on a private island on the west coast of Canada in a near future when climate crises have led to the extinction of most trees from the world, the novel

explores the connections among colonial extractivism, environmental destruction, and social injustice (class-based, racial, gendered, and sexual) through the spatial trope of Greenwood Island, a luxury heterotopia accessed only by the richest people in the world, who pay a high price to spend a few days in one of the last remaining old-growth forests.

If island territories have often served as experimental grounds for male and masculinized colonial projects, providing simplified self-contained spaces easily controlled by the imperial gaze (Weaver-Hightower), there also are multiple ways in which texts endow islands with the opposite meaning, as places of uncertainty, precariousness, and disorientation (Riquet). Christie probes these contradictory meanings through various narrative strategies. One of them is the reopening of the island archive. The following parts of my contribution to this forum are some preliminary notes in the analysis of that strategy.

Archive 1: Island Is/as Land

Christie's *Greenwood* offers a rich myriad of entry points. It is a complex family saga, part futuristic climate fiction, and part historical novel. It clearly locates the history of logging and forestry at the centre of the white colonial project in Canada, piercing temporal frames and geographical locations through this extractivist logic that also impregnates the social and economic dimensions of land occupation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Connecting the dots of these narrative threads, the two crucial signs that I believe bind the most disparate characters and stories together: the trees and the island.

Each of the four main characters, representing four generations of the Greenwood family between 1908 and 2038, is entangled in different ways with the lives of trees and the island where the trees are miraculously alive after an ecological catastrophe called The Withering. The island is named after the first Greenwood who bought the land, and that first transaction, cancelling the history of the land before him, seems to anticipate other essential erasures and gaps in the story. In fact, far from the linearity invoked by the image of the family

tree, the narrative progresses through a Foucauldian genealogical method, in the sense that identitary expectations constantly break and reconfigure as we read on. And, as they do so, the island is also invested with shifting and often contradictory meanings and values.

Archive 2: Island of Desire

Harris Greenwood is a white settler who becomes rich in the first part of the 1900s through logging Canadian forests from East to West, whose approach to the trees resonates with the garrison mentality and who views nature in terms of extraction resources and capital accumulation. Yet, early in his life, he loses his eyesight, and this loss introduces an important degree of vulnerability into his otherwise impenetrable character, opening a sensory archive that diverts the narrative from the linear account of his economic success. Soon, he falls in love with a man who reads poetry to him in an Irish accent. When, escaping the homophobic society of the time, Harris and his lover find shelter on Greenwood Island, the meaning of the latter seems to shift from territorial private property to a space for fantasy and desire.

This transgression of the script, together with the fact that the island is saved from logging after a complex chain of events, may lead the reader to imagine the island as an exception to the process of nation-building through the exercise of violence on territories, humans, and non-human beings. Yet this separation turns out to be as precarious as the non-heteronormative love that sustains it, and, a century later, the outer frame of the story reinvents extractive capitalism through the trope of island tourism.

Archive 3: Pristine Island

In fact, in the futuristic part of the novel, the company that owns the island renames it the Greenwood Arboreal Cathedral, and this renewed branding exercise firmly locates the land back within the usual capitalist relations of production and consumption. Scholars have explained how islands have become “the objects of what may be

the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history.” Islands are “locales of desire,” “platforms of paradise,” “habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading or religious pilgrimage” (Baldacchino 201). They are the object of a “fine-tuned marketing strategy that seeks to tap a primordial allure for the exotic, the unexplored and, more recently, the green and pristine” (200). In the dystopian world Christie describes, Greenwood Island seems to be an epitome of the latter. Rich tourists, ironically called “Pilgrims,” flock into its miraculously green old-growth forest in search of “something ineffable that’s missing from their lives,” “to glean something rare and sustaining from its trees, to breathe their clean air and feel less hopeless among them” (Christie 7).

The island is here the site of mourning, of nostalgia for a lost pre-withering world. It becomes the stage for iteration of what Renato Rosaldo has called “imperialist nostalgia” (108), an aporia set in motion when “agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed” (107–08).

Archive 4: The Return of the Anti-Conquest

Accordingly, in Christie’s novel, imperial nostalgia depends on an image of the island as a pristine natural space. The island can function as a self-contained space for freedom and possibilities only by suspending both its history of colonial dispossession and environmental violence and its present condition as the locus of surveillance and precarious labour (through the racial capital necessary to maintain the nature offsetting), all against the backdrop of social, economic, and ecological crises.

This contradiction recalls Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the “anti-conquest.” Although Pratt initially developed this concept in the context of her study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel writing (see *Imperial* 8–9, 37–38), she later applied it to the mechanisms of the tourist industry today (“The Anti-Conquest”). The “anti-conquest” refers to the process by which tourists, in this case, are spared the labour, violence, and damage that happens behind their tourist experiences. This practice of concealment generates a structure of precarity, since, as Bruce Braun argues of the history of what he

calls “cognitive failures” in the construction of the forest in British Columbia, “[a]t any moment, that which is disavowed (i.e., the territorialities of First Nations) may return to haunt the colonial order, and reveal its constitutive displacements as a type of violence enacted on people and things” (260).

Reopening the Island Archive

There are multiple and complex ways in which Christie’s novel seems to both reinscribe white settler logics and make visible the erasures of these logics, introducing disturbances that undo the main plot and/or run parallel to it, interrogating it, unveiling the fraught and highly entangled relationships underneath the simulacrum of the Pilgrims’ experience of the island. I have sketched some areas in which the colonial history of islands in general and the specific setting of the fictional Greenwood Island become instrumental in the process of disentangling and reinterpreting these relations as they are depicted in Christie’s novel. To reopen the island archive is then to rethink the field of Canadian literary studies, making visible its complex fabric and fissures, extending its borders and underscoring the need for further research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Christine Kim and *Canadian Literature* for organizing this conversation and for inviting me to participate in it, and Emma, amanda, and Brianne for their assistance in making this forum happen. As a returning visiting scholar at UBC, I am also grateful to the Department of English for its sustained hospitality over the years, and to the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) people on whose traditional unceded territory I am conducting my research. This work is part of the larger research grant funded by the Government of Spain: *The Premise of Happiness: The Function of Feelings in North American Narratives* (PID2020-113190GB-C21).

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Islands in Us Now

In exploring the boundaries of Canadian literary studies, Christine Kim's recent editorial "Methods, Objects, Fields" poses a pivotal question: "[W]hat have we conventionally gravitated towards as a proper object for Canadian literary studies?" (7). Kim's query invites a reflective examination of how Canadian literary studies defines and validates its objects of study, urging us to reconsider what is included or excluded within the field. For me, as a scholar of Caribbean Canadian cultural production, this question feels especially urgent and necessary, particularly regarding the inclusion of works by Caribbean Canadian artists.¹

The island motif provides a flexible and innovative framework for organizing texts and archival materials within Canadian literatures, encouraging a departure from traditional methodologies. By conceptualizing the island as more than a physical space—as a critical lens—scholars can engage in the grouping and reinterpretation of texts that defy conventional categorization. This perspective challenges established frameworks such as regionalism, diaspora, gender, sexuality, settler colonialism, and ecology, which, while foundational, may impose limiting structures that obscure more intricate narratives. Although Canada is home to between thirty and fifty thousand islands, it is seldom perceived as an archipelago.² The variability in counting methods has resulted in conflicting figures, yet it underscores the significance of islands in shaping Canada's cultural and geographical identity. Indeed, these islands are more than just geographical features; they are central to the national consciousness, where Canada's immense size is a source of both cultural and national pride.³

In *Island: How Islands Transform the World*, Ted Chamberlin argues that islands hold a central place in our understanding of modernity (x). As a Jamaican living in Canada, I am particularly attuned to the Caribbean's significance, especially that of the Bahamas, known as Guanahani by its Indigenous inhabitants. This site marks Christopher Columbus' first encounters with Indigenous peoples in the Americas—a moment that resonates deeply within the broader

narrative of colonialism. From a Spinozian perspective, where consequences are seen as inevitable outcomes of preceding causes, Sylvia Wynter, in “1492: A New World View,” contends that the post-Columbian settlement and colonization of the Americas served as a crucible for a newly racialized concept of humanity. Wynter’s analysis suggests that this first encounter laid the groundwork for the emergence of modernity, influencing the development of contemporary nation-states, including Canada, which remain profoundly shaped by the enduring legacy of settler colonialism traceable to that first contact.

Chamberlin deepens his exploration of the island’s significance by illustrating its versatile nature—representational, symbolic, and historical. He portrays islands as embodying a spectrum of often-competing characteristics: they can both constrain and liberate, nurture love and foster hatred, and serve to unite or divide. He contrasts islands that hold spiritual significance and are reserved for select groups—such as prisoners or the ultra-wealthy—with those that are ephemeral or imaginary (x–xiii). This diverse conceptualization of islands helps to avoid essentializing them, instead recognizing their varied roles as motif, setting, and perspective. In this light, islands become not just geographic entities but complex symbols through which we can better understand the forces that shape modernity and its enduring consequences.

Anne Collett, in her chapter from *Beyond “Understanding Canada,”* considers the challenges of recognizing Olive Senior’s poetry within the Canadian literary canon. Collett highlights that Senior’s work, often grounded in the Caribbean, has faced limited reception in Canada due to a prevailing perception that her Caribbean themes fall outside the traditional boundaries of Canadian literature. Collett contests this narrow view, arguing that instead of fixating on the apparent absence of “Canada” in Senior’s poetry, we should appreciate how her work deepens our understanding of the Canada-Caribbean relationship (87). Senior’s poetry offers valuable insights into the economic and historical ties between Canada and the Caribbean—connections that are too often overlooked.

The island motif is central to this discussion, as it underscores the tensions between conventional literary archives and the inclusion of Caribbean Canadian cultural production. Take, for example, Austin

Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*, a novel that, despite its critical acclaim, is set outside Canada, revealing a paradox in the way the works of Caribbean Canadian writers are institutionalized. This disparity points to a broader issue: Caribbean Canadian contributions are often arbitrarily either celebrated or marginalized for their non-Canadian settings, which complicates their inclusion within the Canadian literary canon. Collett's critique of this exclusion suggests that Senior's works, and the works of other Caribbean Canadian artists who focalize the Caribbean, should be valued not solely for their geographical setting, but also for how they reflect Canada's global economic and historical connections. By advocating for a reassessment of how Canadian literary studies engages with works that reflect Canada's international relations, Collett calls for a broader, more inclusive definition of "Canadian literature."

To understand how islands influence the reception of Caribbean Canadian writers, it is important to contextualize this approach within Canada's historical entanglements with the Caribbean. Throughout the early twentieth century, Canada's relationship with the Caribbean was marked by efforts to integrate the region into its economic and geopolitical domain. At various times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Canadian officials considered the possibility of establishing a Caribbean province, with discussions focusing on territories such as Jamaica, Turks and Caicos, Barbados, and the Bahamas. These discussions reveal Canada's strategic interest in these islands, highlighting how the nation's historical and ongoing interactions with the Caribbean have in turn shaped its literary and cultural landscape. The island motif thereby functions as a critical framework for examining the complexities of Caribbean Canadian contributions, prompting a re-evaluation of the boundaries of Canadian literature and identity in the context of these transnational and global connections.⁴

Canada's historical ambitions reveal a persistent colonial mindset, suggesting that the challenges of positioning Caribbean Canadian literature within the Canadian canon are rooted in more than just geographical concerns. These ambitions are reflective of broader historical and economic strategies that have shaped Canada's interactions with the Caribbean, underscoring how imperial aspirations and economic priorities have influenced the reception of literature. In her research, Paula Pears Hastings explores the

ideological and material processes that shaped the Canadian nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, offering essential context for understanding these complexities. Her work supports the view that the Canadian nation-state should not be understood as a fixed geographical entity, but rather as one shaped by its historical connections with islands. This perspective again challenges us to rethink the Canadian literary canon, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the global interactions and imperial legacies that have influenced its development.

The notion of islands provides a framework for understanding continuous movements and diasporic experiences. Kaie Kellough's *Dominoes at the Crossroads* begins with "La question ordinaire et extraordinaire," a story framed as a lecture delivered by Kellough's great-grandson, 150 years in the future. This lecture reflects on Montréal in the early twenty-first century, revealing how Black histories were marginalized compared to official Québec histories. It critiques the suppression of Black Quebeckers' contributions to Québec culture. Central to Kellough's story is the depiction of the island of Montréal's dramatic physical transformation. The St. Lawrence River encroaches upon the island, causing flooding and rendering once-livable areas, such as Nun's Island, Île Ste-Hélène, Île Notre-Dame, and Longueuil, uninhabitable. This portrayal of submersion illustrates the island's vulnerability and instability. By depicting the island's dynamic and precarious state, Kellough challenges the perception of islands as permanent and immutable, highlighting their susceptibility to environmental changes and external forces.

The historical and speculative dimensions of the island are key to understanding its representation in Kellough's text. The narrative references pivotal historical events, such as the alleged burning of Montréal by Marie-Joseph Angélique, to illustrate how the island's identity is shaped by its past and continually reconfigured. Angélique, an enslaved Black woman in eighteenth-century Montréal, was accused of setting a fire in 1734 that led to the destruction of a sizable portion of the city. This act, which some interpret as a form of resistance against her enslavement, has been analyzed by scholars such as Afua Cooper and Katherine McKittrick, who argue that it was not merely an act of arson but a powerful statement against the brutal

conditions Angélique endured.⁵ The resulting devastation forced the citizens of Montréal to reimagine and rebuild the city, marking a radical transformation. This event underscores that the island is not static, but is continually reshaped by history and human actions, with Angélique's defiance serving as a reminder of how marginalized voices can drive profound change in the geographic understanding of a place.

This historical context lays the groundwork for Kellough's speculative future of Milieu (formerly Montréal), where the island's identity and social structure have evolved. In this future, "Milieu is one cohesive island civilization, but it is also one in which there no longer exists a dominant ethnic group. No group can claim a 50% or greater share of the population" (19). Here, the island symbolizes equitable distribution and cultural diversity, transforming from a city dominated by specific groups to one characterized by balanced representation. This reflects the potential for islands to embody new social and cultural possibilities. Kellough's work also underscores the importance of inclusive narratives in rethinking the concept of islands. By foregrounding the experiences of Black and marginalized communities, Kellough ensures that the representation of islands encompasses voices historically marginalized or erased. This approach reorients the literary treatment of islands, portraying them as spaces of dynamic and diverse experiences, rather than fixed, isolated entities.

This shift is exemplified in Lorna Goodison's poem "Making Life," where islands symbolize not just physical spaces, but also the complex, often painful process of cultural and personal reconfiguration in the wake of colonial dislocation. The poem opens with vivid imagery of Jamaica—"the cherry afterglow of Negril spring break" (70)—portraying the island as a vibrant symbol of home and cultural richness. Here, the islands are more than just geographical locations; they represent states of mind and existential conditions. Goodison's use of the island metaphor questions whether the inability to find a sense of belonging is rooted in the experience of originating from the African continent, suggesting a fragmented or unsettled identity. This metaphor captures Goodison's inner conflict about belonging and the search for a stable identity within the diaspora. The poem explores historical displacement, questioning whether the movement of Caribbean people across continents—such as the forced relocation of Maroons or migration to the Americas—represents a search for a

home or a form of recrossing. Jamaica, depicted as a departure point due to events such as transatlantic migration, becomes a symbol of both physical and cultural departure, as well as the ongoing quest for identity across diasporic routes.

Goodison reflects on the Caribbean diaspora's approach to "making life," rather than seeing it as an exile, using islands as symbols of continuity and survival.⁶ Despite their migrations, Caribbean people maintain a powerful sense of identity tied to their island origins, suggesting that islands are central to their understanding of self and belonging. The references to "Blackbrits and Jamericans" illustrate the hybrid identities born from migration (71), with islands serving as a touchstone for cultural heritage amid assimilation. In the poem's conclusion, Goodison asserts that they are "not really exiled" but "just making life" (71), signifying a reconciliation of their island identity with their current reality. Here, islands are not merely remnants of a past identity, but active components in the ongoing construction of the present self. This metaphorical use of islands underscores Goodison's acceptance of a complex identity that harmonizes past and present, home and away.

In Austin Clarke's short story "Leaving This Island Place," the personal journey of a young boy, marked by the trauma of illegitimacy and social marginalization, becomes a profound exploration of identity, belonging, and the complexities of migration in a postcolonial context. The protagonist's repeated declarations, "I am leaving this island" and "this island place," are more than expressions of intent; they encapsulate his internal struggles, the desire to escape a painful past, and the social constraints shaping his identity. As the illegitimate son of a lower-middle-class mother who forbids contact with his lower-status father, the boy grapples with shame and alienation, further intensified by the discovery of a nude photograph of his mother among his father's possessions. This moment severs his connection to his father and deepens his sense of isolation. Despite his success as a student and athlete, poised to leave for college in Canada, the trauma and social stigma of his illegitimacy haunt him, fuelling his need to break free from the island and the past it represents.

The repetition of "I am leaving this island" functions as a refrain and is loaded with finality, as it reflects the protagonist's internal conflict: his oscillation between resolve and doubt mirrors the

emotional weight of his decision to leave behind a place so integral to his sense of self. This repetition serves as both psychological preparation and a foreshadowing of the identity transformation that awaits him as he distances himself from the island's influence. The phrase "this island place" adds depth to the narrative by blurring the line between the island as a physical space and as a metaphor for the protagonist's lived experience. Clarke's choice to leave the island unnamed universalizes it, representing any island where tensions between belonging and exile, home and migration are keenly felt. Clarke invites readers to see the island as more than a location—it is an embodiment of the protagonist's heritage, personal history, and the constraints he must overcome. This abstraction transforms the island into a metonym for the broader postcolonial experience, where identity is continually negotiated between tradition and modernity.

The use of "this" in "this island place" subtly conveys the protagonist's psychological detachment from the island, reflecting his need to distance himself as he prepares to leave and forge a new identity. This shift in perception—from seeing the island as home to viewing it as a place he must escape—is underscored by his avoidance of his dying father, who lives in an almshouse. The almshouse, symbolizing social and economic decline, reinforces the character's urgent need to break away from the past and its limitations. Furthermore, the term *place* in "this island place" adds depth to the protagonist's relationship with the island, suggesting it is more than a geographical location—it is infused with the legacies of forced migration, enslavement, and colonization. The island represents both the source of his identity and the constraints pushing him toward a new future. This duality is central to Clarke's exploration of identity, as the protagonist navigates the tension between his attachment to the island and his desire for liberation. The island thus becomes a dynamic space that not only shapes but also constrains his identity, reflecting the broader complexities of postcolonial diasporic identity formation.

Clarke's nuanced depiction of the island, through the carefully chosen phrases "I am leaving this island" and "this island place," illuminates the profound challenges of identity formation in the postcolonial island context. The protagonist's journey away from the island is not merely a physical departure; it is a psychic journey that reflects the broader experience of migration, where leaving an island signifies a complex

process of reinvention and the negotiation of identity in a globalized world. By exploring the consciousness and affective experiences of island inhabitants, we deepen our engagement with Canadian literature, enabling peripherally positioned cultural productions, such as Caribbean Canadian writing, to redefine the centre.

Notes

1. The title of this essay is an allusion to the 1976 anthology *Canada in Us Now: The First Anthology of Black Poetry and Prose in Canada*, an early and important attempt to represent Black and Caribbean Canadian writing in Canada. This allusion highlights how Caribbean Canadian writing prompts reflection on Canada's own islands and how Caribbean islands themselves have become integral to Canadian literature.
2. Royle notes that, while the existence of every island is known, the total number of islands in the world remains unclear. "This seems odd," he writes, "since surely anybody with access to a very comprehensive map repository, sufficient time and endless patience could simply count them. The problem is not one of location, however, but of definition, for it depends on what is counted as an island" (8). He concludes, "All that can be stated authoritatively is that we cannot state authoritatively how many islands there are" (10).
3. Owrarn examines the Canadian expansionist movement between 1856 and 1900, highlighting how it shaped Canada's self-image as a vast and imposing nation, especially compared to the US. Owrarn notes:

The initial point of comparison between Canada and the United States was sheer size. Until recently, as railway surveyor Charles Horetzky pointed out, "Canada represented but an insignificant portion of the North American continent." Confederation and annexation changed all of this, however, and the very size of the Dominion of Canada quickly became an integral part of the nation's self-image . . . "Our country," wrote H. B. Gates in 1872, "has expanded into a broad empire." Writers, in Gates's time and since, have never tired of pointing out that Canada, whatever else it might be, is one of the earth's largest nations. (107–08)
4. For an analysis of Canadian ambitions to create a "tropical Canada," including the West Indies, from the late nineteenth century to the post–World War I era, see Hastings, who explores the tensions and contradictions in the Canada–West Indies union discourse, showing how race, nation, and empire shaped these expansionist goals, and tying them to Canada's national identity and state formation.

5. McKittrick emphasizes the central role of Marie-Joseph Angélique in our understanding of Black presence in Canada, particularly regarding Canadian entanglements and direct involvement in transatlantic slavery. McKittrick notes that

Angélique's place in black Canadian history is, as far as counternarratives go, an important one. Not only does Angélique evidence slavery in Canada (a denied and deniable Canadian institution), the alleged act of arson led to a forced confession about the crime and her life in New France. (91)

McKittrick further asserts that "Marie-Joseph Angélique's Montréal is a site where Canada, as we are meant to know and encounter it, falls apart: it is where blackness and whiteness meet, historically, presently, imaginatively, and geographically" (107). Angélique's contested presence, McKittrick suggests, makes Black Canada visible and challenges the dominant historical narrative, creating alternative spaces to articulate Black Canadian identity.

6. In his insightful review of Goodison's *Controlling the Silver*, which includes the poem "Making Life," Baugh argues that the Jamaican expression "making life" embodies and affirms a variation of a universal phenomenon. By transforming "exile" into "making life," the poem showcases the creative capacity of a people—their ability to "make" something from circumstance, necessity, and lack, much like the Jamaican saying, "turn you hand make fashion." This poem, Baugh suggests, highlights one of Goodison's significant achievements: her ability to inscribe Jamaican sensibility and culture onto the world's literary canvas—an accomplishment that is far from trivial. This depiction of Goodison as a Caribbean Canadian writer who imprints Caribbean sensibility onto the global stage aligns with Collett's argument concerning Senior's poetics, which reveals Canada's place in the world.

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Islands, Lost and Imagined

In contributing to this forum, I am struck by the resonances between colonial power and the multifaceted ideas of how we might think through islands in the context of Canadian literature, which has often seemed to be a very regional and continental endeavour. If you will indulge me, I'd like to start by sharing a poem from my collection *Seas Move Away* (2022), where I consider the island of Singapore, where I'm from, but also Saskatchewan, where I worked from 2016 to 2022. As a preamble, I am very interested in the territorialization of extraction and the role of islands as we think about it. Cornel and Eva, in your pieces, you think through terms such as "escape," "exclusion," "seclusion." And I've been thinking about the waterways that surround islands, what it means to define an island by the waterways that surround it, and how we think of continent versus island. How exactly do we conceive of these landmasses in our imagination and also in our politics?

When I was living in Saskatoon, I was possibly as far from the ocean as I've ever been in my life. I was very upset by this, on an emotional level, not to be on an island anymore. I would return constantly to my island of birth, Singapore, but then come back to a place where I could not see the ocean. As I wrote *Seas Move Away*, I was thinking about the ways in which Canada functions as this site of constant crossings and the islands that figure around Canada, home to some thirty to fifty thousand islands, as Cornel notes in his contribution to this forum.

I'm going to share a poem called "Western Interior Seaway." It came about when Joanne Arnett, the Métis poet, told me, "Hey, you know, if you go back, just not to the history of coloniality, but if you go back way further to the geological, the middle of the continent used to be an interior seaway." So, I'm looking out at these grasslands and

thinking, “How could they be part of an ocean?” and really trying to imagine what used to be here before.

Western Interior Seaway

— *With gratitude to Joanne Arnott*

From the air I can almost
see it, believe that
the lights of the houses
 are those of ships
 set against dark waters

I recall other night landings
my home islands
 surrounded by oil tankers
 glutted with barrels of crude

Here, though, traces are deeply buried
veins of potash and oil
thick pink salts, black slurry
the substances of death and life

shaping the politics of this bone-dry
land deep in the lungs of those insisting
all pleasures and rights are linked
to mining out all that remains

All this used to be tropical
lush green humid warm
a shallow wide salty body of water
now buried beneath
the centuries of suburban and rural life
 ruination, occupation
 dams railways asphalt
 pipes gas lines sewage

Memory must descend (72–73)

I read this poem thinking about CanLit. I've never thought of myself as a CanLit author or a CanLit poet, but I've also realized through our conversation here that there is no way to escape this conception of Canada in the world. I'm also thinking about all this research I've been doing through my poetry as research creation, but also through critical and close analysis of texts from Canada and from Singapore, and finding these resonances between, for example, Wayne Compton's idea of the lost island, and ideas of islands as needing to be new or to reappear, or to be places of contention, of contestation.

In Compton's story "The Lost Island," the island in question suddenly erupts in the middle of Burrard Inlet and is variously a site of scientific study, a refugee centre, and a condo development. And then there's always this idea of how land is treated, especially on the West Coast, especially in this thing that we call the Greater Vancouver area, which incorporates all these islands as well. Reading Compton's collection, I've been struck by the genius of how he has focalized and compressed difficult questions about unceded land in Vancouver through the trope and materiality of the island. The story reminds us of the human and non-human aspects of what makes up an island: whether these are volcanic elements, volunteer species of plants, activists, scientists, politicians, ghosts, or other transient inhabitants. In reading "The Lost Island," one cannot help but think of E. Pauline Johnson's identically titled short story, and how Compton was influenced by it, and of Lee Maracle's writing about the coast and the islands as well.

All this to say that there has been a long tradition of thinking through some of the ideas of how Canada is connected to or represented by these imaginary or speculative island spaces. One can venture even farther, geographically, to consider the islands that were part of the Commonwealth or the British Empire and how they are in relation to Canada. And, as Cornel has discussed, Canada wanted an island in the Caribbean, again demonstrating how it is connected to other islands in the British Empire, including Singapore, where I was born and educated.

As you see in the poem above, and as we also read in Eva's contribution to this forum, I take my positionality with great importance. I think my Chinese diasporic community in Singapore was complicit in empire. We were brought there, not necessarily by

coercion—although there was indentured labour, very similar to Chinese Canadian histories—but also brought there to settle the island, to build the plantations, to mine the tin, to take care of the rubber plantations, and then as a merchant class as well, to control the financial wealth and institutions there. These histories are very similar to, although also obviously different from, the kind of pathways and mobilities that we see in Asian Canadian writing, particularly from the West Coast.

Through these similarities, even as we must note the specificities of each history and geography, I've been thinking about these waves of colonization, these waves of immigration, these waves of diasporic communities as they are also complicit and imbricated in extraction. Why I think about straits and waterways as opposed to just thinking about land is related to mobilities, specifically of petroleum and other by-products, and the labour that it takes to facilitate their extraction as well as their transportation.

When I was living and working on Treaty 6 territory and in the homeland of the Métis, I couldn't quite see how I was connected to Canada's coastal histories and spaces. How does one conceive of the shores of a continent when one is so far from the sea? But then, through Joanne Arnett's insight, I realized the reason there are resources to extract on the prairies—whether in Saskatchewan or Alberta—is because there used to be a waterway there that divided the continent. The traces of that saltwater, a humid waterway, are the fossils that form the basis of the incredibly sought-after materials that are then transported across pipelines, and then out again through other waterways, coasts, and islands.

And two really interesting things I discovered are, first, that Singapore—at some point or another, or perhaps still—refines oil from Alberta. It does so on an offshore island that is not accessible to most people. I also found out that Canadian miners actually travelled to Indonesia, to Miri, to help them set up their first oil wells. So, it's really vital to think about this expansiveness of islandness, island politics, and also to think in terms of waterways and straits, and the middle of continents. And I do think that's some of the writing that I've been doing, but I'm also thinking of Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, Rita Wong's *forage*, Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and even *Burning Vision* by Marie Clements. Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*, where she writes

about Indonesia, and *Dogs at the Perimeter*, where she writes about the relation to Southeast Asia, have these moments when they see these discrete sites as crucial, as nodes in Canada that are linked to one other. There are so-called islands of exception, but islands are both bounded and not by straits and waterways—or perhaps, bounded by straits and waterways that we can no longer see.

It's been so lovely and illuminating, in this forum, thinking through ideas of tourism, movement, mobility. Because how do we reframe Canadian literature to think of not just the ways in which it is regional or strategically essentialist, or to think about ideas of diaspora, but to think also of spaces inland, where one might imagine settler communities saw themselves as exclusionary islands? I think that Saskatoon, Regina, Calgary, Edmonton, and all these places we think of predominantly as inland prairie cities have a long history of defining themselves as garrisons, as forts, within a sea of what they would consider to be wilderness or a hostile *terra nullius*. And then out of these nodes, wherever they were situated, mostly on bodies of water with the various rivers—and I'm thinking of Montreal and Toronto as well—and, of course, the network of pipelines—they are also bridges and nodes and through which Canada seeks to assert global dominion and positionality. Not just through finance, but through material ideas of how to transport whatever is being extracted from this continent and elsewhere offshore. I've always thought of Toronto, for instance, which is not an island, and yet is, in a sense: its edifices are constructed by mining money. You don't think of the skyscrapers as money made from mining. And yet obviously they are, and they are a kind of monument to it.

Bringing these disparate threads together, I think that there's a certain way to not just focus on the coasts of Canada and the islands, the literal islands that make up some of the thirty- to fifty-thousand-island archipelago—but to really think, as well, in the middle of the continent, and of people coming from islands, people building islands, of why there are so many forts, of the geological history of what used to be there, and listening to the stories of how places of contact also occur. What is an island of settlement versus Indigenous communities like the Cree and the Dene and the Métis, who have a slightly more fluid idea of what community, kinship, and territory could be. It is such a rich area of possibility to think of Canada not as a part of this

great big continent, but as a node and multiple nodes, connected to not just the politics and the histories of empire, but the ongoing politics and histories and legacies of these pathways, these important connections across bodies of water and across what used to be bodies of water to the rest of the world.

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Joanne Leow grew up in Singapore and lives on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. She is Associate Professor and Tier 2 Canada Research Chair of Transnational and Decolonial Digital Humanities in the Department of English at Simon Fraser University. Her first academic monograph is *Counter-Cartographies: Reading Singapore Otherwise* (Liverpool UP, 2024). She is also a poet and writer with a debut collection of poetry, *Seas Move Away* (Turnstone Press, 2022). Her creative work and research lie at the intersections of the environmental humanities, transnational and diasporic cultural production, global Asia studies, autotheory, and decoloniality.

Islanding Taiwan

Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa's resonant call to make *island* a verb—discussed in the introduction to this forum—has been on my mind as I read Jessica J. Lee's award-winning creative non-fiction text *Two Trees Make a Forest: In Search of My Family's Past Among Taiwan's Mountains and Coasts*.¹ A child of immigrants from Taiwan and the UK, Lee is presented in this text as a British Canadian Taiwanese author and environmental historian, educated in Canada and the UK, residing in Berlin. The result of extensive research (the text includes an eighteen-page bibliography—a list that, despite its length, is not comprehensive),² *Two Trees* presents Lee's reflections on visits to Taiwan in 2013 and 2017, in which she traversed the island from points north to points south. In doing so, it interweaves glimpses of a family history in diaspora, including in Canada, with partial accounts of Taiwan's environmental and political complexities.

Lee's text makes a number of noteworthy contributions to Asian Canadian literature and other related fields. It draws attention to what Szu Shen identified some years ago as “the ways in which ‘Asia’ has been conceptualized through different representational practices surrounding subjects that might or might not be considered as enacting and embodying Asian Canadian experiences” (116), in this case by depicting the experiences of a mixed-race Taiwanese Canadian writer and members of her family. In telling these stories, *Two Trees* also illuminates some of the ways that, as Christine Kim and Christopher Lee contend, “the Cold War remains embedded . . . in the very construction of Asian Canadian literature” (271). And through its mobilization of creative non-fiction as a genre, *Two Trees* further affirms what Rob Nixon calls this genre's “robust adaptability, imaginative and political” (25)—notably through its depictions of colonial and settler-colonial Taiwan.

The first of four main sections in Lee's text begins with the Chinese character for *island* and romanized pinyin indicating the Mandarin pronunciation "dao." Presenting *island* as a noun, the text then pluralizes and glosses it to emphasize motion: "*Islands emerge through movement, through collision, and through accretion*" (3). Moving across languages, and from the singular to the plural, *Two Trees* presents us with a challenge. How can we learn to read, with and beyond this text, such movements, collisions, and accretions? What sorts of critical practices are needed to adequately attend to such forms of motion, often violent, and their varied impacts on peoples, lands, and waters? Lee's text presents Taiwan as "an unstable landmass in perpetual confrontation," as an island "[b]orn into conflict" at the intersection of the Eurasian and Philippine sea plates (6). Evoking the work of Epeli Hau'ofa, whose epiphany on Hawai'i's Big Island about the vastness of Oceania remains widely read, Lee notes, "Through the forces of orogeny that form great mountain chains, Taiwan's peaks stand taller every day" (7).

Yet far from being a celebratory account, *Two Trees* consistently draws attention to questions of knowledge production and the challenges of interpretation when reading across languages and moving across histories and geographies. A keyword that emerges in this process is the *fragment*, a term which appears prominently in Lee's text, as well as in other recently published Asian Canadian creative non-fiction.³ In *Two Trees*, the fragment appears as the author obtains incomplete glimpses of Taipei through her mother's stories (22); through "examining the fragments" she has heard from her grandmother, including in a taped interview conducted before she passed away (103); and through a twenty-page autobiography left by her grandfather, described as "a series of fragments," with some parts of this found text "end[ing] abruptly in the middle of a sentence, unanchored in any time" (35). This use of the term recalls the work of Gyanendra Pandey, who is not cited by Lee, but whose work may nevertheless help us to engage more closely with *Two Trees*. Allow me then to make a quick detour to Pandey's work.

A founding member of the Subaltern Studies collective and a scholar of recent Indian history, Pandey has written brilliantly about the fragment as "an attempt to modify, or at least clarify, our understanding of historical amnesia" (15). The fragment, for Pandey,

can enable “an interruption in the narrative, a recalcitrant element, the hint of another vision—now frequently irrecoverable” (15). The specific case Pandey turns to is the Bhagalpur attacks in India in 1989 and what he calls “how much of this history we will never be able to write” (42).⁴ Underlining that his intervention is concerned primarily with the writing of history (45), he emphasizes that the fragment can help illuminate “the limits of scientific history and the scientific historian’s search for truth” (39). He then turns to a collection of poems by Manazir Aashiq Harganvi, a survivor of these attacks. By reading these poems as a fragment, Pandey calls attention to sources typically neglected by orthodox historians and also to groups in Indian society positioned as “minorities by the ruling class” (47).

Two Trees can likewise be read as an extended “defence of the fragment,” as Pandey memorably puts it. In tracing her family’s history, Lee does draw upon recognizable scholarly sources which can be accessed in libraries and museums and schools, but despite the evident importance of such sources, their limits as sources of learning are almost immediately apparent. Regarding the political history that forcefully redirected the course of her grandparents’ lives—including Japan’s invasion of China during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the outcomes of the Chinese Civil War—Lee notes “that history was not taught in Canadian schools,” leading her to realize “how little I knew myself” (14). Likewise, her subsequent training as an environmental historian “taught [her] a great deal about temperate plants” and how to “[navigate] through a Canadian pine forest or a European heath with familiarity”—yet, in Taiwan, she notes that she found herself “botanically adrift” (17). Depicting an extended process of learning, *Two Trees* at times misfires, as when it names a variety of banana named *bajiao* as “inedible” (20)—as a resident of Taiwan and an enthusiast of this fruit, I can state with some confidence that it is in fact widely available in the markets and commonly eaten! More significant than such misfires is how the text emphasizes unsteady translations and obscured views, as Lee walks and bikes and hikes and swims across parts of Taiwan’s fractured and damaged ecologies.⁵ In one case in central Taiwan, Lee notes that “[t]he mountain remains encased in cloud, indifferent to [her] movements across its heavy spine” (112). In another key episode, on Mount Qixing north of Taipei,

Lee “long[s] for a view, to see the island from a height”—but, amid clouds and rain, “it does not come” (257).

Despite this epistemological and phenomenological circumspection, not all readers have been fully satisfied with the stories told in this text. From a Taiwanese American perspective, Yi Shun Lai has described reading *Two Trees* as “an exercise in contradicting emotions,” with admiration of Lee’s “intimate knowledge of Taiwan’s flora and geographical history” colliding with what she calls “a burgeoning rage” over the relative absence of the Taiwanese language (that is, Taiwan Hokkien) in this text, as well as over what Lai considers to be the limited depictions of the forms of political violence which actively suppressed the use of this language and the basic human rights of the people of Taiwan following the Chinese Nationalist Party (that is, the KMT) takeover in 1945. Some key moments in Taiwan’s political history do appear in *Two Trees*, including for example the Indigenous Seediq-led Wushe Rebellion (also known as the Musha Incident) in 1930, the last major anti-colonial uprising in Taiwan during Japanese colonial rule;⁶ as well as the February 28 Incident in 1947, in which incoming Chinese Nationalist forces shot indiscriminately at the people of Taiwan, a traumatic incident which was followed by White Terror, a multi-decade period marked by state-directed arrests, detentions, disappearances, and executions of actual and perceived opponents of the ruling party.⁷ As Lai acknowledges, *Two Trees* openly presents how Lee’s grandparents worked for and served this regime, with Lee’s grandmother working as a secretary for none other than Chiang Kai-shek, and her grandfather working in the air force.

Lai’s response to *Two Trees* seeks to resolve some of these contradictions by thoughtfully questioning the basis of her nationalism (in this case, a form of long-distance Taiwanese nationalism) before concluding: “in my need to establish my own Taiwanese heritage, I was too eager to take it away from someone else.” But rather than following a path of what we might call competitive Taiwaneseeness (a path which Lai first follows and then reconsiders), I would like to follow another path, also seeking to track questions of community, forms of belonging, and webs of connection and exclusion. I would like to do so by focusing on the problem of how to read *Two Trees* through two of the many fragments it provides. The

first fragment I would like to discuss presents glimpses of the grandparents' bungalow in the town of Niagara Falls in southwest Ontario after they immigrated from Taiwan to Canada in 1974. Lee's text vividly depicts this specific time and place, noting the "thick orange carpeting," "smoked-glass dining table," and "black leather sofa" (12). Living here, Lee's grandfather led a quiet life while also working as a janitor (14) following his unanticipated decertification to work as a pilot in Canada; Lee's grandmother, the former KMT government employee in Taiwan, became a cleaner (189). In describing this bungalow and the lives of its inhabitants, Lee presents it as "an island unto itself" where the family spoke Mandarin, with the surrounding neighbourhood "a suburban sea" navigated and seen from "the plush comfort of the Oldsmobile" (221), with which they could also cross the US border to shop in Buffalo. This mix of a settler suburban geography imposed upon Six Nations territory, downward mobility in the Canadian labour market for racialized immigrants, and automobility reliant on the extraction and burning of fossil fuels all present challenges for us to develop a critical language that would be adequate to, as Christine Kim puts it, "understanding Canada as produced by global forces and movements" (11–12). In responding to this fragment in Lee's text, such a critical language could seek to better understand this time and place in Canada as profoundly impacted and shaped by settler colonialism, petroleum-fuelled transportation infrastructure, Cold War complicities, and diasporic displacements.

Now I would like to turn to a second fragment, which appears almost immediately after Lee's memorable description of her grandparents' bungalow as an "island": the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel in Taipei, where Lee and her mother met a long-lost relative named Jing-xien. Like Lee's grandparents, Jing-xien had left China in the mid-twentieth century, and like Lee's mother, she had grown up in Taiwan during the White Terror period, living in one of the many military dependents' villages established by incoming KMT forces after 1949. Depicted with warmth and care, Jing-xien later gifts Lee "an enormous wooden cutting board, darkened with age" (254)—bringing back powerful memories of Lee's beloved grandfather who had earlier given this wooden board to her. In this moving scene, *Two Trees* signals the possibility of intergenerational continuities and exchange stretching across continents. Yet this fragment also does more. Presenting the

Sheraton Hotel as a site of a reunion, the text inadvertently reminds at least some of its readers of other histories. Before this hotel was built, this site in Taipei served as a military training ground toward the end of the Qing Empire, as well as during the Japanese colonial period. Following the arrival of Chinese Nationalist forces in the 1940s, the site gained notoriety as a military detention centre to incarcerate political prisoners during Taiwan's White Terror. These details do not appear in *Two Trees*, but they can nevertheless supplement and extend our reading of this textual fragment, where a site of family reconnection in Taipei also remains a site of militarized settler-colonial violence and attempted Indigenous erasure.⁸

Returning now to Teaiwa's evocative work mentioned at the outset of my contribution to this forum: What would it mean to think of *island* as a verb? What is at stake in "islanding" Canada and "islanding" Taiwan? As I have discussed, the fragments presented in *Two Trees* remain partial and incomplete; institutionally validated forms of knowledge in this text are often shown to be inadequate, and the grand views the author seeks often remain obscured. No established nationalisms emerge from this text, disappointing at least one reader. The text instead presents an island in motion through movements, collisions, and accretions. By thinking of *island* as a verb, we may learn to attend more carefully to the often violent impacts of such motion and their varied aftermaths in Taiwan and Canada and beyond. Doing so would require us to question not only the sources and assumptions informing the writing of history, as we saw in Pandey's work; it would also require us to continue rethinking and recalibrating the frames we use to engage with notions of "Canada," "Canadian literature," and the subjects of "Canadian literary studies."

Acknowledgements

I would thank my fellow forum members for their inspiring insights; Christine Kim for initiating this conversation and for first mentioning to me Jessica J. Lee's work; and the wonderful team at *Canadian Literature* for expertly guiding this forum to publication. Support from the National Science and Technology Council of Taiwan (110-2410-H-002-152-MY3 and 113-2410-H-002-053-MY3) enabled me to help

coordinate and contribute to this forum and is gratefully acknowledged.

Notes

1. *Two Trees* won the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction in 2020 and was shortlisted in the Canada Reads competition in 2021. It has also been translated into a traditional Chinese edition, published by Lianpu in Taiwan.
2. Lee, for example, repeatedly refers to the work of Edward Said, but his work does not appear in the text's already extensive bibliography.
3. For an important example, see Troeung, who refers in her preface to the "allusive fragments" structuring her moving text as "a perforated language of cracks and breaks."
4. These attacks were, in Pandey's account, characterized by
[a]rson, looting, and murder [which] spread from the city to the surrounding countryside and raged practically unchecked for several days. The situation was then brought under some sort of control by military and paramilitary forces, but an atmosphere of fear and terror remained for months afterward . . . Possibly as many as a thousand people were killed in the course of violence, most of them Muslims, but estimates of the casualties vary greatly. (24)
5. Lee's text notes that "[a]round Taiwan, where land has been cleared for plantations or mineral excavation, to say nothing of the worsened storms wrought by climate change, much of the risk [of landslides] is anthropogenic" (77). These risks, as seen, for example, in the devastating impacts of Typhoon Morakot in 2009, have disproportionately affected Indigenous communities living on or near these slopes.
6. For various accounts of the Musha Incident, see Berry.
7. There is a growing body of scholarship and range of cultural texts depicting the February 28 Incident and Taiwan's subsequent White Terror, addressed in part in my recent discussion of Shawna Yang Ryan's novel *Green Island*; see Beauregard.
8. The details presented in this paragraph about the Sheraton Hotel site in Taipei are drawn from the Taiwan Cultural Memory Bank website, with a specific entry on this site accessible at the time of writing ("Detention Center of the Military Law"). On the attempted erasure of Indigenous presence in Taipei, see Lopesi, who, as a visiting Pasifika artist and writer in Taipei, found "not the Austronesian homeland [she] had imagined," but instead what she pointedly calls "a branch of China's empire" (12). I am indebted to Alice Te Punga Somerville for generously alerting me to Lopesi's work.

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Christopher Lee and Paul Yee

From the Past, For the Future: An Interview with Paul Yee

Starting in the late 1850s, large numbers of Chinese migrants arrived in the then-fledgling settler colony of British Columbia. Although their labour was deemed crucial for a colonial economy built on Indigenous dispossession and resource extraction, Chinese were singled out for a long series of discriminatory measures, including immigration restrictions, the denial of the franchise and other civil and political rights, a punitive head tax, and countless forms of everyday racism. In 1923, the Canadian government passed the Chinese Immigration Act, better known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which practically halted all new Chinese immigration until it was finally repealed in 1947.

Chinese Canadian writers and other artists have grappled creatively and critically with the histories and legacies of anti-Chinese exclusion. In this regard, few Chinese Canadian writers have had as much impact as Paul Yee. Yee was born in Spalding, Saskatchewan in 1956 and grew up in the Vancouver neighbourhood of Strathcona, located next to the city's historic Chinatown. Trained as a historian at the University of British Columbia, Yee became deeply involved in community activism while he was a student. Yee was one of the editors of *Inalienable Rice* (1979), a groundbreaking anthology of Asian Canadian writing, and the head of the planning committee for "Saltwater City" (1986), a landmark exhibition on the history of Chinese communities in Vancouver. Since 1988, Yee has lived in Toronto. Over his prolific career, he has written more than twenty-five books, with a particular emphasis on fiction for children and young readers. He has received numerous honours, including the City of Vancouver Book Award and

the Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Literature. In 2008, he started to donate his personal papers to the City of Vancouver Archives.¹

This interview began as a conversation recorded in November 2023, when Yee was in Vancouver to deliver a talk at the Chinatown Storytelling Centre. Selected portions of the original conversation were subsequently transcribed, edited, and expanded. As someone who has taught and written about Yee's works for over a decade, I jumped at the chance to ask questions about his career and writing practice. I begin by addressing Yee's personal involvement in Asian Canadian cultural activism. The next part of the interview delves into his first adult novel, *A Superior Man* (2015, hereafter *ASM*). *ASM* tells the story of Yang Hok, a Chinese migrant who came to BC in the 1880s to work on the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Just as he is about to leave for home, Hok finds out that he is the father of an Indigenous child. Struggling to come to terms with this news, he takes his son into the BC interior to find the child's mother. Along the way, he develops a tense relationship with Sam, a Chinese-Indigenous guide who plays a key role throughout the novel by conveying the devastating effects of settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession. We end by delving into the hundredth anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 2023 as well as Yee's role in the creation of a stage opera, *Chinatown*. For this project, Yee worked with writer Madeleine Thien to translate her English libretto into Hoisanese, which was then set to music by composer Alice Ping Yee Ho. *Chinatown* was performed in Vancouver for the first time in September 2022. For those who wish to explore Yee's oeuvre or read further about Chinese Canadian history, we have included two bibliographies: an overview of Yee's fiction and non-fiction, and a selection of Yee's recommendations for further reading on Chinese Canadian history.

*

Christopher Lee: When we last talked a few years ago, I said, "Wouldn't it be great if we could find a diary or a letter in an archive somewhere that could directly tell us what early Chinese immigrants were thinking or feeling?" I vividly remember how you told me point-blank that archives will never provide answers

to all our questions—and that is why we need fiction. Can you say more about how you have navigated the intersection between history and fiction throughout your career?

Paul Yee: In the 1970s, when I was studying history at UBC, there weren't a lot of Chinese Canadian books around, neither fiction nor non-fiction. To do Chinese Canadian history meant going through primary records to find a history to tell. What made things worse was that there weren't a lot of sources to go to. Since then, of course, more materials have become available in archives, so today's historians are having a field day.

Back in my time, I didn't find many items that talked about feelings. The Chinese letters that I saw consisted of mostly standard formalized phrases. Plus, I was looking mostly at business records. I was most curious about the nineteenth century, the start of Chinese Canadian history, the period for which there are the fewest sources. So, I concluded that the documentary record could only provide a limited picture of the past. To get a fuller sense of those who lived in the past, I turned to fiction. I think not everybody is comfortable with that, because people prefer history. They want to hear about people who really lived or events that really happened. They want things to be laid out as facts and footnoted so that they can check and make sure that I'm not lying to them.

But I was impatient to know more about our pioneers.² I've always wanted something more from history. I wanted heroes, I wanted stories that could whisk me into the past on an adventure that had high stakes, excitement, drama—you know, all the fun and entertaining things. And this was probably because, when I was a kid, the library books I loved the most were adventures set in historical times.

For me, history has always been the starting point for writing fiction. When I wrote the stories for *Tales from Gold Mountain*, I went through the various parts of the BC economy that the early Chinese immigrants had worked in and asked, "Okay, what kind of story could come out of this sector? What might have happened to the workers in this field?"

Other writers often start with a compelling idea and then develop a story, but I start with the history and look for a story that could have happened in that setting. I've written far more fiction than non-fiction, so clearly, history is my go-to place for inspiration. But readers find history to be more useful than fiction, and they're not all that comfortable about taking that leap into something that could be disruptive.

CL: Can you say more about how history or fiction can be disruptive?

PY: Disruptive? People have expectations of history: they want to feel proud about the past, they want heroes, they want a stake in the land. But not everything fits that mould. For example, south China in the middle of the nineteenth century was in dire straits. The peasantry was suffering, bad enough for many of them to go abroad and work. But those who stayed at home had to try and make things work, and part of that survival involved petty theft and robbery, joining informal gangs. Hok, my protagonist in *A Superior Man*, was once a bandit, and the railway workers he meets all know about banditry in the Chinese countryside. Hok also engages in the illegal sale of liquor while working on the railway and goes to jail for it. So, do Chinese Canadians today want to say that some of our forebears were forced into criminality to survive?

Plus, writing historical fiction can be disruptive when it focuses on people who were previously shunned by society, like immigrants or gays and lesbians, and brings them front and centre. Much of immigrant history and immigrant literature tells how those groups helped build a prosperous society here, which harkens back to that ancient "model minority" theory. Remember when they used to think that Chinese and Japanese Americans were so well-behaved compared to Black Americans who had to take to the streets to demand justice and fairness?

Today, sexual minorities are coming out of the closet and their behaviour is no longer criminalized to the same extent. But to write about them in historical fiction means having characters who did things that the law and respectable society, at that time, frowned on. Criminality has long been a part of Chinese

Canadian history in different ways: we were linked to opium smuggling and illegal immigration, for example, and that linkage was used to justify anti-Chinese racism. But when we tell disruptive stories—say, when we accept that the “paper son” phenomenon around immigration was real—then it seems our grip on respectability is not so firm.³

CL: Given the power of history, what led you to embrace fiction?

PY: During my last undergrad year, I took Sherrill Grace’s course in Canadian fiction and that excited me about the possibilities of literature. The course surveyed novels up to about 1980, and the ones I liked the most had historical contexts. These weren’t adventure stories anymore; this was serious literature about the daily lives of ordinary people, of adult life and the adult world. I remember reading [Frederick Philip Grove’s] *Fruits of the Earth*, which was set on the prairies, and thinking, “Wow, this is the time and place of my dad.” We read Margaret Laurence, and I thought, “Wow, what incredibly strong women!” She wrote about women who confronted their personal pasts and used it to explain their later lives. I thought, “Why can’t we tell stories like this about Chinese Canadian women?” When we read [John] Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death*, I thought, “Wow, the immigrant story has already been written!”

When I took that course, I was acutely aware that there were no Chinese titles in the syllabus. So, writers like SKY [Lee], Wayson [Choy], and I had no Chinese Canadian texts to refer to.⁴ Nobody around us was writing fiction. When Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* came out, we were all bedazzled. It was like, “Wow, we want to do this, but in a Canadian context.” So, we had a model; it wasn’t like it couldn’t be done. And Kingston set that direction of looking towards the past, towards our parents’ stories, revisiting the village world that they came from. Those were the starting points that we needed; otherwise, we were flailing about and couldn’t decide where to start. 1947? 1923? 1885? 1980?⁵

CL: I often tell my students that some writers have to reinvent their entire narrative language and form in order to tell a story properly. I

would say that this applies to all three of you, not to mention other Chinese Canadian writers who have taken up the exclusion period. What challenges did you face as you moved into writing fiction?

py: We had to build up our own self-confidence. None of us started out as English majors or with literary ambitions. SKY Lee was a nurse. I was an archivist. Wayson taught remedial English. We had no natural inclination towards writing historical fiction until we saw the possibilities. Those initial possibilities all pointed towards the past. Partly because it can be researched, partly because we know some of the stories from our own parents, partly because we want to acknowledge our own family histories. Kingston relied on her mother's stories a lot, and I remember a very strong mother character in SKY's early story, "Broken Teeth."

A lot of this writing was really about our own coming to terms with ourselves as wannabe writers. We were searching for this identity, as Chinese Canadians, as Asian Canadians, and history seemed to offer an easy entry point. History was also very safe, very respectable. We were saying, "We should be proud of our history." That's as simple as it got.

Your point about language raises a different issue, it's about how we tell our stories. Do we write in the Queen's standard English? Do Chinese Canadians tell stories in a different voice? Can our Chinese heritage affect the rhythms or imagery we use? I remember SKY saying in a speech that we were all writing in the language of our oppressors. And in my friendships with SKY and Wayson, I was always delighted to see that we had all kept ties to the Chinese language, either Hoisanese or Cantonese.⁶ Whether we were fluent or not, however, was a different matter!

CL: I recently assigned *Inalienable Rice*, which you helped edit, to an undergraduate class on Asian Canadian cultural activism. I was amazed to see how that anthology still resonates so strongly with my students even though it appeared more than four decades ago.

py: Are you familiar with the anthology out of the US—*Roots*? From the seventies? That was foundational for all of us. We all gravitated towards it. In a way, *Inalienable Rice* is a distant copy of that. It

tries to do the same thing—cover a bit of history, literature, political analysis. It is skinny while *Roots* is *this* thick.

CL: How did you learn about *Roots*?

PY: Oh, Jim Wong-Chu was always going to San Francisco because he knew the artists there.⁷ So, we were getting all these books. We would all go down and bring back books and read. And it was inspiring to see high school students in Berkeley producing their own anthologies on identity and racism. And we were nowhere. So that was all very inspiring to people like SKY and me, and Sean Gunn and Garrick Chu. All of us were thinking, "Yeah, we've got to step up if we can."

CL: The guest speakers in my class talked about how people would meet each other in university classes and start working together to organize conferences and exhibitions, which eventually led to projects such as *Inalienable Rice*. What were some important moments for you as you started this work?

PY: The most important article for me was a piece written by Ron Tanaka and the Wakayama Group (Canadian, by the way!) called "Why Are There So Few Sansei Writers?"⁹ Its argument was very simple. It looked at my generation, Baby Boomers born in the 1950s who grew up in the 1960s, and asked, "Why aren't there more writers among you? You've grown up speaking English and benefited from a university education. What happened to you?"

The analysis was succinct. It argued that as my generation grew up, we grew farther and farther away from our communities and our histories. That was certainly true for me. I grew up in Strathcona, and by the time I got to university, hardly any of my schoolmates lived in the old neighbourhood. Everyone had moved on to "better" districts. Strathcona was considered a slum, and no one wanted to be associated with Chinatown.

The article also took aim at "the system," the process by which the majority society wanted minorities to be polite and malleable and to forget the racist history that our forebears had lived through. That was true for me, too. I finished high school and

knew nothing about Chinese Canadian history: nothing about gold miners, head taxes, war veterans.

The Wakayama article argued that for Asian Canadians to become writers, they had to know where they had come from: a certain history, complex communities, a heritage of homeland languages and customs. It argued that assimilation had succeeded in cutting younger Asian Canadians off from their pasts and their communities so that they lacked a spiritual gut from which to write. To become writers, they had to recover their histories and their connections to the earlier generations. They had to learn about the past, because it was this past that would give them the power to challenge the mainstream. It was pretty heady stuff back then, to suddenly be thinking about power and about “them” versus “us” because we had all grown up thinking we were just Canadians like everybody else.

CL: In academic settings, there is a tendency to dismiss identity politics, including Asian Canadian identity politics, as something static or limiting that needs to be overcome and replaced. These are certainly important critiques, but we sometimes forget how identity politics was an integral part of dynamic conversations and arguments about community organizing and social justice.

PY: You’re right about conversations and arguments, because when I started looking into my Chinese Canadian identity, I had a mentor who spent countless hours on the telephone talking me through all my doubts and anxieties. I was lucky because identity wasn’t just an intellectual discussion. It was tied to community work. Our timing was good because the seventies and eighties saw a resurgence in the Chinese and Japanese Canadian communities. The Powell Street Festival started in 1977, the year of the Japanese Canadian centennial, and taiko came to town. In Chinatown, organizations like the Chinese Cultural Centre and SUCCESS got started. There were new social service models and a focus on arts and history. There were lots of ways to get involved.

Today, community-building has gone mainstream. Heritage preservation is big now. The Chinese Canadian Museum and the Nikkei National Museum have mandates and government support

to do history. The Chinatown Foundation and Storytelling Centre are working on the revitalization of Chinatown. The earlier activists had groups that were more ad hoc: they were just getting started, they were dipping their toes into unknown waters, and the notions of community and community-building weren't as developed as they are today.

Today, it's harder to sort through identity and community. The identity thing was: So, what's special about you? How do you become a "real" Asian Canadian? It's all personal choices. Today, it's harder to find something new that hasn't been done before. If you want to be empowered and self-actualized, you can join any number of progressive groups or causes in the community, and their aims and objectives and strategies are all laid out. So, there's more infrastructure and they make things legitimate. It's now okay to do Chinese Canadian history. It's okay to call for redressing the past. The community consciousness around the value of the past is much higher. It's now okay to want to read and write Asian Canadian literature. There's a LiterAsian festival every year. There are university courses on Asian Canada. The Chinese Canadian Historical Society gives out prizes to recognize community achievements. So, community and history are now important parts of the Chinese Canadian world, but we still have a ways to go yet. The building of archival collections, for example, is still hit and miss.⁹ Who's got the records for the campaign for head tax redress? Are the papers of the Chinese Cultural Centre somewhere safe? Chinatown was famous for its proliferation of organizations, but very few of them put their documents into public repositories.

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CL: I've been looking at early drafts of your novel *A Superior Man*, which are available at the City of Vancouver Archives. As I looked through your notes and marginalia, I was really struck by how methodical you were when it came to building dramatic tension and delineating the attitudes and motivations of each character. What was the vision of the novel that you started out with?

py: At the start, the vision was pretty broad. I wanted to tell a story at several levels. I wanted to show Chinese workers as real human beings, with good qualities as well as bad. I wanted to add a human dimension to the railway narrative that had mostly been about x number of workers brought over, x number of workers who died on the job, and how these workers earned x dollars in wages that were lower than what white workers got. Chinese workers arrived in BC as adults, so I wanted to give a sense of where they came from in terms of homeland baggage and I wanted to delve into the setting of late-nineteenth-century BC, with its contentious settler-Indigenous relations from the days of the Gold Rush.

I wanted Chinese workers to have a sense of themselves, of the work they had done. I wanted to ask the question that a standard history won't ask: "What did those workers think of the work they had done?" For example, were they proud of the railway? Tired? Just wanting to get home? Did they see themselves in the heroic terms in which we view them today? Hok starts out hating railway workers. He's ashamed of having been one. So, I wanted to show him encountering the railway workers who had been left behind. I wanted him to hear their stories, but in a conflicted way, because he certainly didn't admire them. He wanted to clear his own head.

My focus was on a Chinese railway worker, but I wanted him to share the stage with Indigenous peoples, because I had written way too much history and fiction that praised only Chinese immigrants. It was time for me to redress my own writing. I couldn't write from a First Nations perspective because of the issues around appropriation of voice. So, I sidestepped that by having a mixed-race character who had grown up in both the Chinese and Indigenous worlds of British Columbia. That's how Sam came about. I knew that he would be a foil to Hok. They would be very different characters. They don't like each other. They compete. And the part about them both having father issues, that came about as I was writing.

I think you saw in my papers a certain methodicalness because I was used to writing for younger audiences. Stories for children are very plot driven, and I'm also a writer who likes to read and follow plots. Throughout the writing, I kept looking for

points of conflict that could drive a story forward. So, that's why Hok has problems with everybody that he meets. They argue. They see things differently. Ultimately, I hoped that this was part of Hok's redemption.

CL: In your drafts and notes, you kept digging into what would motivate Hok to do something or go somewhere. New plotlines and characters would pop up in one draft only to disappear in a later one.

PY: I'm good at brainstorming, but I'm good at discarding as well. I've learned that if I don't deal with questions around motivation in my drafts, then, for sure, the editors will catch them later. For *ASM*, my storyline kept changing. A lot of ideas came along but didn't get far. But then, when something works, it just feels right. All I had was this sense that I wanted to go deep into a Chinese character, yet I didn't want a novel that was only about the Chinese world. All my previous writing had been so insular. I really wanted to get out of that hole of mine.

CL: Having Hok come to terms with being the father of a mixed Chinese-Indigenous child seems like a perfect way to explore the larger themes that drive the novel, but it took many drafts for you to arrive at this plotline. What made you settle on the final form of the novel?

PY: There were two stories being told in *ASM*. One was Hok's journey of discovery about his own railway past, which he had tried to suppress and deny because it had involved so much psychic pain. And the only reason that he had to do this was the sudden appearance of his son, Peter. The other storyline, which was more a series of vignettes, asked a related question: What was it about railway work that poisoned Hok against it? That second storyline took me into work gangs, men in their prime, men with lusty appetites, men who had strong feelings about the work they were doing. Then these two storylines came together during Sam and Hok's trip with Peter, because the ex-railway men they met

along the way all had loud opinions as to what Hok should do with the boy.

CL: The lives of most early Chinese immigrants largely revolved around family responsibilities. Is this why you built *ASM* around a father-son plotline?

PY: You're right that Chinese immigration was all about family. Even when the Chinese community in Canada was mostly male, the sojourners were constantly thinking about their relatives in China.

ASM has several different father-child pairings. First, there's Hok, who suddenly learns that he's the father of a Chinese-Indigenous toddler. So, the story question was: What's this father going to do about the child? Will he recognize the child as his son or reject him? Will he take him back to China or abandon him in Canada? Also, Hok comes from a broken family: his father abandoned the family after he left to work in Southeast Asia and never came home, which caused the suicide of Hok's mother. So, you wonder, what kind of father will Hok turn out to be?

Sam, the mixed-race guide who travels with Hok, also has father issues. His Chinese father died before being able to take Sam to China, but regaled him with stories of a strong, enduring family there. Sam longs to go find a sense of family in China, but Hok warns him not to go because he'll face anti-Indigenous racism from Chinese people. Also, Sam's woman is about to give birth, but she wants their child to be raised in the Indigenous world, not in Sam's tri-cultural world. The BC world was hard on parent-child ties.

CL: There's a telling moment in the novel where a Chinese old-timer who had come during the Gold Rush tells Hok something like, "At least you guys have contractors to get you jobs; in the old days, we came by ourselves and had to figure things out on our own." So, despite the hardship and cruelty that railway workers endured, was there already a community here by the time they arrived?

PY: Yeah, by the time of railway building, there was some community structure. Chinese merchants were the backbone of overseas

Chinese settlements. During the Gold Rush, firms in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and San Francisco did a roaring business sending goods and passengers across the Pacific in both directions. In towns on the frontier, those firms offered room and board to miners and transients, and their stores let men meet compatriots with the same surname or from the same hometown or region. Those same stores handled letters and remittances and were part of stabilizing and far-reaching networks. In *ASM*, there is even a merchant who sets up a temple in the town of Lytton, both as a way to attract customers to his store and as a way to serve the community by enabling sojourners to consult the gods and answer the life-and-death questions they faced so far from home.

The railway-building enterprise wouldn't have been possible if Chinese merchants and contractors weren't already savvy about doing business with the whites. The railway workers worked in gangs, so there was a natural group camaraderie where men could get to know each other and maybe become friends. In contrast, gold miners mostly prospected on their own or in small informal groups.

CL: It's ironic that even though most Chinese immigrants did not want to stay, Chinese Canadian history starts, by definition, with the fact that enough of them did. At the end of *ASM*, Hok decides to stay and, in that sense, the novel can be read as a Chinese Canadian story. But you also seem to resist turning his story into a pioneer narrative that revolves around becoming Canadian.

PY: Hok really didn't want to stay in Canada. At the end, he was ready to sail for China when he heard that Sam got arrested and falsely accused of murder. It's the depth of the relationship between these two guys formed during that trip, when they constantly bickered with each other, that gets him to rush back to the mainland and try to rescue Sam. And, in doing so, he makes a fateful decision to stay. It's ironic that it's anti-Chinese racism that makes Hok want to leave Canada, but then it's anti-Indigenous racism that brings him back to Sam, and then to stay. Hok has no real desire to *become* Canadian, but his two-week trip with Sam took him through some of the touchstones of that process: seeing the lives

of Indigenous people, crashing into BC's geography, and being slapped down by racism.

CL: This brings us back to the relationship between Chinese immigrants and Indigenous peoples, which is obviously a major theme in *ASM*. This is a topic that you hadn't explored extensively in your writings until *ASM*. How did you translate your understanding of Chinese-Indigenous relations into plotlines and characters?

PY: [Hok] has very little respect for Natives or mixed-race people. It's a brutal comment on the Chinese, but these days we recognize something called Han chauvinism.¹⁰ Indeed, Hok is hugely resentful of Sam because Sam knows much more than he does about the Chinese and the Indigenous worlds of British Columbia. One scene that I really like is when Sam recites aloud the family tree that his Chinese father taught him, and Hok sees that Sam has yet another advantage over him.

I wanted a strong Indigenous presence throughout the story, so I inserted striking characters whom Hok and Sam meet on their trip. Sophie, for example, is an Indigenous woman who has set out to unearth a fishing station by the Fraser River that had been buried under railway debris. She's on her own, so I had her be from a warrior family so she knows how to use a rifle. And, because Sam and Hok have just been robbed, it's Sophie who gives them money so that they can finally ride the train!

I also tried to bring in Indigenous networks of trade and knowledge by having Sam's grandmother know about Peter's mother, Mary—about who she was and where she lived. Indeed, it's this information that launches Hok and Sam on their trip. I wanted to avoid how written history tends to anonymize Indigenous people just because the historical record doesn't name them.

I wanted Indigenous characters who were fearless. Sam, for example, fights Chinese thugs who threaten the travellers. He also goes to a brothel to visit the fabled Chinese courtesan, Goddess. When they face white bullies on the train, it's Sam who paints Hok's face to let him "pass" as Indigenous, and they make a point of talking loudly in Chinese to defy those thugs. I wanted these

interactions to make Hok grow to admire Sam for who he is, which eventually led to the ending where they came together one final time.

CL: You've written elsewhere about how *ASM* grew out of your changing awareness of the role of Chinese immigrants in the settler-colonial project.¹¹ Unlike some other texts that take up this topic, *ASM* is not idealistic when it comes to Chinese-Indigenous relations. How did you navigate questions about Chinese-Indigenous conflict and/or solidarity?

PY: On one hand, I knew that Indigenous peoples had resisted the initial onslaught of gold miners who flooded into the region, which led to the Fraser Canyon War. But I also knew there were stories of Indigenous people who extended kindness to miners who were in need. I think it's possible that Indigenous people saw the Chinese as no different from white settlers. After all, the Chinese had come like the other settlers to take the gold. The Chinese bought into the settler attitude that the gold was free for the taking and wasn't the property of the First Nations. They damaged the land in the same way that white miners did. And they shared with white settlers the notion that land could be parcelled off, sold, and owned by individuals, which went against the First Nations' view of the world.

I don't know if and how the Indigenous people might have linked Chinese sojourners with the smallpox epidemic that devastated the First Nations in 1862–1863. Indigenous people would have seen that the Chinese were, like white settlers, largely immune to the disease. (But only because smallpox had been endemic in China.) They would also have seen that the white settlers treated the Chinese with enormous disdain, but did that lead to solidarity between Chinese and Indigenous people as comrades-in-arms who suffered under white racism? I don't know for sure. In my writing, I show anger towards all settlers as one of the reactions of Indigenous people to the changing times.

CL: It has almost been ten years since *ASM* was published but the issues that you explore in the novel are still relevant today. How would you like readers to approach and process the novel?

PY: I would like my readers to have really open minds, to be open to feeling what the people whom we claim as our pioneers really felt. I'd like us Chinese Canadians to go beyond pointing to the Chinese railway workers and pumping out our chests to say, "Look what *my* people did for Canada." I'd like us to ask, "If my great-great-grandfather worked on the railway, how might that experience have affected him in a way that could have been passed down through the generations to me?" I'd like the railway experience to somehow inspire our imaginations today. For example, we all know there was a high fatality rate among the railway workers. But do we ever consider how those workers felt about the deaths occurring among them? The deceased would have been their workmates, their clansmen, their friends, people with whom they had shared good times, bad times, a really difficult life. Can we question the way we receive our history and our stories? If the railway work was so awful, do we ever ask why the men stayed? In *ASM*, I suggest that some men quit rather than risking death. And if railway work was dangerous and caused many injuries, then wouldn't it make sense that some men would turn to opium to relieve their pain?

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CL: Throughout your fiction, you try to recreate the rich and complex lifeworld of early Chinese immigrants. How has your understanding of Chinese Canadian history changed over the course of your career?

PY: The big change in my later work is that I've spent time reading Chinese history to try and really learn about peasant life in mid-nineteenth-century China. Again, there are no first-hand accounts of that way of life, but historians of China have pieced together a world that was held together by clans and lineages but plagued by over-population and poverty. It was a world where tradition and

custom held sway, and where women suffered under the patriarchy.

It used to be that Chinese Canadian history started when the immigrant set foot on Canadian soil, but now it's clear that if we want to truly understand our early pioneers, then we need to know more about what was going on in China. Big events were happening: the Taiping Rebellion, the Red Scarf Uprising, the Kejia-Bendi feud, the two Opium Wars, the rise of Hong Kong. For me, these issues let me imagine the people of that time hearing about them, living through them, getting excited about them. And in the same way that we keep saying Chinese Canadians [today] aren't all the same, well, neither were our forebears: there were Kejia and Bendi, Hoklo and Tanka, plus the many dialects that divided and united people.¹²

I started doing history when the key studies were about white racism or Chinatown associations. Back then, it felt to me that Chinese people had come to North America just to set up clan and district organizations. I was more interested in a fuller picture of the community. I wanted to see how the BC economy used Chinese workers, and I wanted to tell stories about those situations. I was looking for heroes for myself, and a history to believe in. And I'm still looking. When signing books, I often write, "From the past, for the future" as the dedication. It's to remind readers to look both ways.

CL: 2023 was the hundredth anniversary of the 1923 Exclusion Act, and there was a fair amount of discussion all year about the exclusion period and its significance for our time. Has this anniversary affected how you see your work as a writer?

PY: Throughout the centennial year, I was deep into another writing project, so I wasn't paying much attention to the debates. But two things happened.

Catherine Clement, the curator of the "Paper Trail" exhibit at the Chinese Canadian Museum, asked me to talk about the "bachelor men" whom I had known in my childhood.¹³ I went and sat in front of a video camera and talked. But after it was over, I rushed to the washroom and burst into tears. I felt sick to my

stomach. I didn't understand it. I'd done history for more than half my life, and thought I knew about exclusion and bachelor men. But suddenly I was having to convey the experience of those "bachelor men" to an audience that would never really know them. I saw that I really didn't know them either. With the "Paper Trail" exhibit spotlighting them, I felt lacking, I felt there was so much unfinished business. I hadn't done my job as a historian to interview those men. For the "Saltwater City" exhibit, I found workers to talk about salmon canneries or houseboy work. But I didn't ask anyone to talk about how his family had been affected by exclusion.

Then, I was asked by the Chinatown Storytelling Centre in Vancouver to give a talk on how exclusion had affected my family.¹⁴ As much as I am a historian and storyteller, I had done little about my own family's history, so this was a chance for me to look into it. Earlier, I had found family history difficult to do because I had already lost the people who knew that history: my grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles. I did a slide show using family photos and documents that went back to the 1890s. Over the years, I had picked up bits and pieces of family history. When I pulled together the two sides of my family history—my father's side and my mother's side—and made it into a narrative that explained how the lives of many people had led to my life, I was shaken by the enormous amount of human pain that exclusion had caused.

For example, my older brother in China died unexpectedly in Hong Kong, in 1960, as a young adult, leaving behind a wife and several young children. If it wasn't for exclusion, then that brother might have come to Canada and survived, say, with better medical treatment, and his family would have had an entirely different life. Years later, I met that brother's wife and she talked about how she and my mother were heartbroken when my mother left for Canada. The two women had grown close in the village, sleeping in the same bed in the absence of their husbands. (My brother had gone to work in Thailand.) They were especially close because both were newcomers to the village, having been brought in to be married. And then, suddenly, there was this ocean between them. Worse, my mother was illiterate, so she couldn't write to my sister-in-law who, on the other hand, could read and write.

Today, we celebrate the repeal of exclusion in 1947 and then we march on with our history into better times. But not every family got reunited, and there were many people longing for family members who weren't allowed in. After "Paper Trail" got under way, I attended an illustrated talk about exclusion, but I had to leave shortly after it started because I couldn't bear the pain of hearing more such stories. So, to answer your question, exclusion brought home to me a level of emotionality that I hadn't experienced in my writing. And I have a novel in the works that looks at a family in the post-exclusion era.

CL: The first time I read *ASM*, I was stunned by how much Chinese railway workers endured, from exploitation to violence, disease, bodily injury, and death. But the railroad is just one part of a much longer history of racism and injustice. As a writer, how do you hold onto and write about this heavy, heavy past?

PY: Holding onto the past and writing about it are two different things for me. At a personal level, I try to remember family members who came here early on, and I try to understand how their lives led to mine. At another level, I try to remember pioneers who lived and worked in Canada during the dark years, and whose lives and work have also led to mine. I can write about the pioneers because I do the research and it gets my creative juices going. With the research done, I can say this is what the historical sources tell me and this is what it allows me to do as a writer.

But with family history, the past feels heavier. I can only guess at the enormous pain that was felt by the real people in my family. I'm not sure I can write about it because these are their emotions, ones that I haven't known and can't fully imagine. I've felt twinges of that pain when I've gone into that history, and I can imagine it for fictional characters, but not for my family. It seems somehow disrespectful or even presumptuous. I know that great swaths of my family history have been lost forever, and I feel guilty about that, like I should have done more when the elders were still alive.

CL: Recently, you collaborated on an opera, *Chinatown*, which premiered in 2022 just as people were starting to focus on the

upcoming centenary of the Chinese Exclusion Act. *Chinatown* explores topics well known to your readers, but what was it like to work on an opera instead of a book?

PY: *Chinatown* was an amazing experience. I was brought in to do a Hoisanese translation of Madeleine Thien's libretto, where the first act is sung in Hoisanese. What was amazing, and this relates to your earlier point about language, was that I would translate Maddie's English into Hoisanese which, as you know, is an earthy, rural dialect, unlike the urban dialects of Cantonese and Mandarin. Maddie then looked at my Hoisanese renditions and changed some of her English lines to match the Hoisanese, which was the language the characters would have used in real life. And then, because Hoisanese and Cantonese are such tonal languages, we worked with the composer Alice Ho to make sure the music let the words come through clearly through rising or falling music lines.

Chinatown was ambitious because its development process involved the Chinese community. After Maddie wrote a first draft of the libretto in English, City Opera Vancouver did community consultations where actors read through the script to live audiences. City Opera Vancouver said it wanted the story to be authentic to the community's experience, so people in the audience said, "If that's the case, then the dialect you should be using in Act One"—which was intended to be sung in Chinese "should be Hoisanese, not Cantonese." After the translations were done and the music composed, City Opera Vancouver did another round of consultations with the community to get their feedback.

As for coming to terms with the pain of history, when the opera was mounted in a concert format at the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre, we saw people in the audience weeping during Act One, when the story of how exclusion affected one family was playing out in song and music. And that testified to the power of Maddie's story. I didn't weep, because I knew the story, but the audience's tears reminded me of when I first saw my story *Ghost Train* presented on stage at Young People's Theatre in Toronto. On opening night, at the end, I wept too, for the father whom I had never known.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Ethan Eu for his research assistance as well as Christine Kim and the staff of *Canadian Literature* for their support.

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Notes

1. For a celebration of Yee's career that includes his recollections of the "Saltwater City" exhibition, see "'Saltwater City': The Beginnings with Paul Yee" ([youtube.com/watch?v=gQmPJXALQ_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQmPJXALQ_k)).
2. Even though the term *pioneer* is closely associated with colonization, the term has also been reclaimed and widely used by minority and racialized communities to recover erased and suppressed histories. While references to pioneers in this interview reflect the latter usage, we would like to recognize the uncomfortable connotations associated with the term, which stand as a reminder of the ongoing need to grapple with the role of Asian migrants in Indigenous dispossession and the settler-colonial project.
3. "Paper sons" refers to Chinese men who used illegally obtained identification documents in order to circumvent exclusionary immigration laws. Even after arriving in Canada, many paper sons, as well as a much smaller number of paper daughters, had to hide their real family origins to avoid investigation and deportation.
4. Along with Yee, SKY Lee (b. 1952) and Wayson Choy (1939–2019) are some of the most well-known figures in contemporary Chinese Canadian literature.
5. Yee is referring to some key dates in Chinese Canadian history. In 1885, with the Chinese Immigration Act, Canada imposed a head tax on all Chinese arrivals. The head tax was superseded by a second Chinese Immigration Act, a.k.a. the Chinese Exclusion Act, in 1923, which was finally repealed in 1947.
6. Cantonese is the dialect of the southern coastal metropolis of Guangzhou (or Canton) and is usually considered the prestige dialect of the region. The majority of early Chinese immigrants came from nearby Hoisan (or Toisan) County. As a result, Hoisanese was the most widely spoken form of Chinese in Canada even though immigrants often knew several Chinese, as well as non-Chinese, languages.
7. Jim Wong-Chu (1949–2017) was a prominent writer, historian, and organizer who played a key role in building the Asian Canadian literary arts community.
8. See Wakayama Group. Ronald Tanaka (1944–2007) was an instructor in the Department of English at UBC during the early 1970s. Formally trained in Milton studies, he introduced students to the burgeoning Asian American movement in the US; he spent most of his later career teaching at California State University, Sacramento. Tanaka's classes and essays were influential in mobilizing Asian Canadian activists, including the Wakayama Group, which was formed by Japanese Canadian students in Vancouver.
9. For a more detailed discussion and presentation of Yee's views on Chinese Canadian archives, see Chow and Douglas.
10. *Han* refers to the dominant ethnic group in China.
11. For example, see Yee, "Justice Aesthetics."
12. Yee is referring to different subgroups within the larger Han ethnic group living in southern China. Conflicts between these groups often spilled over into diasporic communities.

13. Until the mid-twentieth century, the majority of Chinese immigrants in Canada were so-called “bachelor men,” male workers who were separated from their extended families, including spouses and children, in China. Even after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, many bachelor men were unable to reunite with their families and lived the rest of their lives in tight-knit, homosocial communities. “The Paper Trail to the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act” is the inaugural exhibit at the newly opened Chinese Canadian Museum in Vancouver. For more information about the exhibit, see chinesecanadianmuseum.ca/exhibitions/paper-trail-1923-chinese-exclusion-act.
14. See “Our Journey Continues with Paul Yee.”
15. Each bibliography is presented in reverse chronological order.

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“Breathing forests and fields”: Reading “History Lesson” within and beyond the Crises of Settler-Colonial Power

To varying degrees, and with important differences of subject position, ancestral belonging, and personal history, all students and instructors arrive to the Canadian university classroom as the breathing animation of settler-colonial history—and its resistance. This is to say that we each embody different relationships to the place and project called Canada, to diverse colonial processes both here and abroad, and to the complex and often extractive relationship of research to the Indigenous territories on which our teaching and learning take place. Many of us also embody ongoing histories of Indigenous resurgence and of active resistance to settler-colonial regimes. We carry these histories inevitably—and sometimes without conscious knowledge—as the expression of lives lived in a system predicated on the “territorial possession of some and, thus, a dispossession of others” (A. Simpson 205). And this means that, as teachers, we contend not only with the academy itself as a structural site of colonial violence and extraction, but also with the everyday iterations of this violence and its resistance as inherited and practised by our students, our colleagues, and ourselves.

In this article, I explore resistive knowledge-making about this history and its impact on how we teach (and learn) with Indigenous-authored texts. In putting forth this discussion, I take direction from Indigenous literature itself. As a white settler scholar and uninvited guest in Syilx (Okanagan) territory, I take direction within my own teaching practice by, among other things, “taking initiative for self-education about the specific histories of the lands we reside upon” (Walia)—and then fostering critically reflexive environments in which

my students can do the same. To model this approach in the Indigenous literature classroom, I engage students in the close reading of texts (both literary and critical) that express, in their thematic content or formal approach, an instructive engagement with ongoing settler-colonial histories, and that foster what Wahpetunwan Dakota scholar Waziyatawin calls a “critical consciousness” with respect to colonial violence and the “distortion of history” as told through a colonial lens (“Reclaiming” 71). In so doing, I analyze texts not only for their “telling of what really happened” in the invasion and settlement of the place we now call Canada (Armstrong, “Disempowerment” 244), but also for their instruction in a broader tradition of Indigenous critical thought that both precedes and extends beyond the immediate context of settler colonialism in order to assert and sustain the presence of Indigenous worlds. And, to this end, I argue that *how* we read is just as vital as *what* we read in the Indigenous literature classroom. Perhaps as important as the choices we make in the course of syllabus design, the methods by which we read texts with and against one another can help to build diverse, collaborative knowledge about settler colonialism as a structure we unevenly inhabit, practise, and resist—rather than as a series of events located in past.¹ This is important in the current moment, when the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and histories is now pursued in many different educational settings as one way to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action. What Indigenous literatures contribute to this conversation in the postsecondary context is an invitation to move *beyond* instrumental and merely content-based modes of inclusion in order to embody more radically relational forms of understanding and accountability.

The adage “truth before reconciliation” as applied in the literature classroom is a good example of this, because story can offer both the bare awareness of history and deepened forms of critical consciousness and imagination that are key to relational practices of social change and decolonial resistance. Indigenous literary scholars have richly theorized story’s transformative properties in this regard; as Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice observes in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, “We can’t possibly live otherwise until we first *imagine* otherwise” (156)—and through story, such imagining is made possible (Episkeneu 192–93). Part of what interests me here is how the practices of literary analysis can uniquely foster such imaginings in the

university classroom because of the way they turn our attention towards questions of form, as opposed only to content, bringing new kinds of interpretive possibilities to the fore. To practise truth before (or beyond) reconciliation in the Indigenous literature classroom entails more than teaching an accurate account of settler-colonial history—one beyond denialism and distortion. It actually entails rethinking how we might understand the dominant narrative practices of “history” itself, and the relationships to truth—and to imagination—which these practices nurture or deny.

Literary analysis—including methods such as close reading—can empower this approach, making it possible to teach and learn chronologies of settler-colonial violence and extraction without reifying the linear-progressive constructions of time that characterize dominant historiography.² That is, through our interpretive practices, we can radically rethink settler-colonial temporalities that structure crisis-based approaches to social change, a possibility that emerges in the act of close reading because of the way formal elements—as much as thematic ones—embed different world views on the nature of time, history, crisis, and change. This is crucial because, as Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte reminds us in his vital rethinking of crisis epistemologies, colonial violence is often perpetuated in the name of *ameliorating* crisis. In the example Whyte gives of climate change discourse and policy, “presumptions of *unprecedentedness* and *urgency*” fuel an “assumption of imminence” in which solutions-oriented action trumps justice-based concerns (53–54). This crisis-based approach is structured by certain ideas around the “unfolding of time” as a linear arrangement of events to which we now must respond, and for which there are “few usable lessons from the past” (55). And because this very approach to time structures dominant colonial history as a narrative practice, as well as many mainstream progressive attempts to *resist* this history’s most devastating outcomes, it can become quite difficult to conceive of social change outside of the progress model (Tsing 24–25). In the discussion that follows, I hope to engage the ways Indigenous literatures produce critical knowledges about history and change outside the progress model—and outside the crises of settler-colonial time.

My broader goal in engaging these insights is to think about how literature serves a vital pedagogical function, allowing students a reflexive means of grappling with settler-colonial histories and

relations of power. But in interrogating the potential for *Indigenous* literature to meet these educational purposes, I also want to emphasize the intellectual sovereignty of the authors whose work I engage as existing independent of any instrumental pedagogical function, and as moreover contributing to Indigenous philosophical traditions that thrive quite apart from their responses to the “the problems continued colonialism creates” (L. Simpson, “Oshkimaadiziig” 20). So, how do we engage students in the “telling of what really happened”—and what *is* happening—while avoiding the reductive centring of settler colonialism in the discussion? And in approaching this question through literature, how might we emphasize the intellectual and activist contributions of Indigenous-authored texts to material sites of decolonial resistance without positioning contemporary Indigenous writing as a construct of dispossession? Working from the premise that Indigenous literary scholarship and teaching in the Canadian university often involves a simultaneous and sometimes conflicting obligation to foreground settler-colonial relations of power while also emphasizing sovereign Indigenous intellectual histories, I offer a discussion of two very different texts through which I have approached this dilemma in my own second-year survey of contemporary Indigenous literatures: the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) advertisement for Vancouver 2010 winter Olympic-wear, “We Were Made for This,” and Syilx writer and philosopher Jeannette Armstrong’s poem “History Lesson.” While the HBC advertisement supplies an instructive example of settler-colonial tropes arranged according to a linear-progressive (and highly nostalgic) view of history and time, Armstrong’s free-verse poem models ways to narrate colonial exploitation and violence outside of traditional Western practices of chronology and progress *as method* (Smith 31). That is, “History Lesson” centres Indigenous thought in its instructive engagements with settler-colonial history and time. It foregrounds Indigenous perspectives *about* settler colonialism, rather than centring settler colonialism itself. And it models critical approaches to an ongoing history of violence and extraction while simultaneously dispelling the idea that contemporary Indigenous literature is merely written in reaction to settler colonialism. In short, it teaches us methods of engagement with Indigenous literatures as sovereign forms of knowledge-making about and beyond settler colonialism,

while promoting a more “holistic understanding of our current and historical realities” (Justice, “Renewing” 50).

Armstrong has herself tasked writers with creating this holistic understanding; in a 1990 speech on empowerment and writing, she said: “Our task as Native writers is twofold. To examine the past and culturally affirm toward a new vision for all our people in the future” (“Disempowerment” 244). She further addresses the role of non-Indigenous writers by prompting them to “turn over some of the rocks in your own garden for examination,” and to fuel creative vision and action from this place of critical self-knowledge (243). A difficulty and a gift I receive from these instructions, as a non-Indigenous teacher, is the responsibility to mobilize both invitations simultaneously. That is to say: Armstrong effectively tasks Indigenous writers with the project of resurgence—defined by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson as the practice of “theorizing, writing, organizing, and thinking” in ways “consistent with and inherently *from Indigenous thought*” (*As We Have* 48, emphasis mine). By contrast, Armstrong assigns to non-Indigenous writers the very distinct project of critically unpacking and confronting settler colonialism from their own perspective—as those who benefit from a world “based on violence and exploitation” (101). These instructions encompass two discrete intellectual and activist projects, and yet I argue that teaching Indigenous literature in the Canadian post-secondary classroom often entails the simultaneous engagement of both. This essay is my attempt to think through what it means to centre Indigenous thought while equipping students to analyze settler-colonial histories and present(s)—a conversation that continues to unfold among scholars of Indigenous literatures, and which I engage from my own position as a settler scholar with particular investments in foregrounding Syilx histories and knowledges because of my location in Syilx territory.³ Although the learning process involves different commitments and outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, Armstrong’s directions suggest that the reflexive engagement with both settler-colonial histories and Indigenous intellectual traditions may better equip all students to envision, to struggle for, and to practise decolonial relationships from where they stand.⁴

In the sections that follow, I first define and discuss the concept and practice of settler colonialism as it might be approached in the literature

classroom through the example of HBC's "Timeline." I then analyze Armstrong's "History Lesson" for its capacity to critically engage colonial conceptions of history and time and to imagine Indigenous futures beyond the crises of colonial power. Finally, I bring the poem into dialogue with works of Black and Indigenous world-building. Even as "confronted with the crisis of earth's viability" (Maynard and Simpson 10), such projects have critically imagined what it means "to build livable lives . . . in the wreckage" (10) and to "demand alternative timelines" by which history and the future can be known (176). Described by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson as a process carried out "despite . . . and in spite of the constant imposition of the colonial machinery of elimination" (*Short History* 4), this world-building, in Armstrong's "History Lesson," is a creative "procedure for Indigenous life and Indigenous living" that pre-exists and endures beyond its immediate application in resisting the violence of colonial capitalism (4). In these ways, although "History Lesson" does not actually narrate an alternative vision of life beyond the wreckage, reading the poem within this lineage of what Robyn Maynard and Simpson call "future-oriented political traditions" demonstrates the poem's visionary capacity to show us "that there is nothing inevitable about the present"—nor about the linear-progressive arrangement of time (176).

"What Really Happened": Unpacking Settler Colonialism in the Indigenous Literature Classroom

Building from Joyce Green (English, Ktunaxa, Cree-Scots Métis), I have come to define settler colonialism as "the dominant myths and political, social and economic practices that dignify, deny, or perpetuate . . . the enforced appropriation of Aboriginal nations' land and resources" (22). This definition has been useful in the literature classroom because to speak of dominant myths is to emphasize the discursive or representational dimensions of settler colonialism in concert with material sites of systemic dispossession. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard suggests, in an interview with Harsha Walia, that settler colonialism has always been about "maintaining access to our land" and resources ("Land Is a Relationship"); Green's discussion of Indigenous anticolonial struggle, quoted above, helpfully highlights

the role of representation in securing and justifying this access on an ongoing basis. One example is the dominant myth of progress. As a linear-progressive orientation towards the nature of time, this myth perceives “history as a story of progress” (O’Brien 105), in which settlers discover and expand across the continent, taming a formerly wild and uninhabited land along the way. In this narrative, Indigenous peoples are typically represented as impediments to or beneficiaries of Western progress. Whether figured as cooperative allies or as hostile foes, Indigenous peoples are mandated by the myth of progress to meet one of two fates: assimilate or disappear. Embedded here are ideals of Western moral and technological superiority and the inevitability of development and growth as conceived according to settlers’ economic and ideological interests. As Cree-Métis literary critic Jo-Ann Episkenew elaborates, “Progress constituted a line, an inclining plane, if you will, of continual improvement from primitive to civilized, pagan to Christian, oral to written, and so forth” (24).

This myth can be seen in any number of cultural texts that represent the demise of Indigenous life-ways as inexorable in the face of Western progress. With a goal to “unmap” with my students these “taken-for-granted, ‘common-sense’ settler myths of Canadian colonialism” (Wallace 47), I like to introduce textual examples for close reading at the very outset of our course. We have our choice of exemplary material: in fiction and travelogues, in landscape paintings and advertisement campaigns, in documentary films and public heritage displays, dominant representations of colonial encounters often deny the violence of forced dispossession and attribute its resulting symptoms of social suffering instead to the deficits of Indigenous peoples (Irlbacher-Fox 31). Exploring and debunking these myths in the literature classroom can be a powerful exercise, both analytically and ideologically. Nor do Indigenous peoples need to be represented negatively—or, for that matter, *at all*—in order for Indigenous presence and futurity to be undermined. “Timeline,” the HBC’s advertisement for Vancouver 2010 winter Olympic-wear, is a teachable case-in-point: in this sixty-second video spot, the retail giant traces back its origins as a fur-trading company to mythic beginnings, framing its founding in 1670 as synonymous with the arrival of permanent human presence in what is now known as pre-Confederation Canada, or Rupert’s Land.

“We arrived 340 years ago,” a voiceover states in the commercial’s opening, “to a land of rock, ice, and snow” (“HBC 2010” 00:00:13–19). Here, early Canada is pictured as pure, uncharted wilderness—an image so thoroughly engrained in the national imaginary that the following facts are readily forgotten: first meetings and early trade between Indigenous and European peoples had already been taking place for hundreds of years at the time of HBC’s founding, and the land has been inhabited from time immemorial by diverse Indigenous nations, each with distinct languages, economies, intellectual histories, and systems of governance. Trading instead in notions of original discovery, the 2010 HBC advertisement dramatizes the concept of *terra nullius* (the Latin legal term meaning “land belonging to no one”) and represents early colonial acquisitions as taking place in the complete absence of Indigenous peoples. Legal scholar Patrick Macklem explains: “European imperial practice was to deem territory occupied by [I]ndigenous peoples to be unoccupied, or *terra nullius*, for the purposes of acquiring sovereign power” (591). In the case of Canada, this practice was ideological as much as judicial; Jacinta Ruru (Māori) points out that while “Canadian case law has rarely dealt with the notion of *terra nullius* explicitly” (260), legal and political discourse has nonetheless “mythologized Aboriginal peoples in Canada in some sort of undeveloped . . . ideological *terra nullius*” (261). Whether by delegitimizing Indigenous claims or by omitting the fact of Indigenous occupancy altogether, the concept of *terra nullius* has been deployed throughout Canadian history as a rhetorical tactic meant to secure “vacant” land and “unused” resources for the benefit of European powers and, later, for the settler-colonial state. The HBC advertisement promotes this fantasy of *terra nullius* by effacing Indigenous presence from the land, from the very history of HBC, and from its “timeline” detailing how Canada and Canadians came to *be*.

The advertisement presents a condensed visual history in which HBC’s original corporate mandate to explore, discover, possess, and trade “Furs, Minerals, and Other Considerable Commodities” is linked implicitly to the making of the archetypal Canadian (“Text of HBC’s Royal Charter”). Resourceful, hardy, and resilient, this mythic figure is celebrated as both the reason for HBC’s success and as a success story for which HBC takes credit. The Canadian has established belonging on the land through hard work and perseverance, the

commercial suggests, transforming this place of “rock, ice, and snow” (“Text of HBC’s Royal Charter”) into the more hospitable and yielding landscape we know today. For instance, at the outset, the moment of apparent discovery, agents of this “Company of Adventurers” are shown rowing ashore in a small boat bearing a weather-worn HBC crest (“Text”; “HBC 2010” 00:00:09). Through a subsequent series of rapid cuts, men, often solo, can then be seen running, sledding, or snowshoeing overland, sliding down snow-covered slopes, and advancing over rugged terrain while shouldering—in one case—a large pack crowned with a rolled HBC blanket striped in iconic blue, yellow, red, and green (00:00:27–28). “We outfitted a nation of pioneers, explorers, and dreamers” (00:00:21–31), the voiceover explains, midway, to the swell of a spare orchestral accompaniment. Meanwhile, centuries pass as snowfall over bleak landscapes offers a contiguous backdrop against which early traders become the picture of rugged Canadian resilience.

It is a fantasy of settler ascendancy, and Indigenous peoples figure nowhere in it—except as objects of erasure. The idea is that the Canadian has made it by his own steam. Like Margaret Atwood’s Lois in “Death by Landscape,” who reflects with amazement on a childhood canoe trip at how “they’ve traveled so far, over all that water, with nothing to propel them but their own arms” (16), the imagined Euro-Canadian viewers of “Timeline” are invited to take “a long view . . . back the way they’ve come” and to marvel at the strength and tenacity entailed by those early feats of exploration and settlement (16). At once retrospective and forward-looking in its orientation, the commercial’s wistful account of historical settler self-sufficiency is then complemented in its second half by a vision of continued progress for Canada on the world stage. For, while the first half of “Timeline” traces a romantic history of settler resilience in early travel and trade, the second half imagines as the natural outcome of this history Canada’s imminent Olympic success. In neither instance are Indigenous peoples or lands acknowledged, despite the fact that both HBC’s corporate success and Canada’s very existence as a nation-state depend entirely on the historical and ongoing expropriation of Indigenous knowledges, labour, and lands.

As gold-medal hopefuls at home, Canadians are poised for victory in the Vancouver 2010 winter Olympics because, as the commercial’s

tagline suggests, “We were made for this” (00:000:52). It is a matter of destiny, it would seem: just as surely as settlers were predestined to “discover” and expand across the continent, Canadians are now fated for winter Olympic success in the western reaches of the nation. The hardscrabble life of early settlement and expansion has prepared them; the present-day Euro-Canadian inherits the spirited athletic constitution of pioneers, explorers, and prospectors whose recent arrivals on this coastal peninsula have transformed the unacknowledged traditional territories of the x^wməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́lilwətaʔɫ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples into a thriving, so-called global city fit to host the world. Once guests to Indigenous territories, settlers have now become the hosts. Meanwhile, the very means of early colonial travel—formerly adopted by newcomers for reasons of necessity in Canada’s past—are now repurposed for recreation and competitive sport. The commercial’s voiceover explains: “We are the skiers. We are the sledders. We didn’t just survive the elements; together, we thrived in them” (00:00:34–48). The now-superfluous nature of these once-necessary winter sports stands as a testament to the inevitable march of settler progress, while the skill and tenacity entailed in their mastery under adverse conditions attests to the true worth of the Canadian Olympic contender. In its culminating moment, then, the commercial implicitly affirms Canadian sovereignty as something at once *fated* and *earned*: “We were made for this.” Its emphatic use of the present simple form of the verb *to be* brings the point home: “We are the skiers. We are the sledders.” These are not merely things that Canadians do; it is *who we are*.

As a tale of settler triumph, “Timeline” enacts what Eva Mackey has called “fantasies of entitlement” (238)—a nationalist prerogative inspiring among viewers not only the expectation of Canadian winter Olympic success, but also a fundamental “trust in the territorial integrity of the nation” (239). The commercial packages for Euro-Canadian viewers the security of complete belonging, while effacing the instrumental role of Indigenous peoples in assisting early settlers in all matters of survival, way-finding, diplomacy, and trade (Episkenew 21). This makes it an approachable example with which to introduce concepts like *terra nullius* into the literature classroom, whether as legal concept or as national myth. It is also a useful

illustration of how settler ascendancy is often dependent upon Indigenous “disappearance” in the settler-colonial myth of progress. If one were seeking an accessible way to teach settler-colonial myth-making in contemporary Canada, one could hardly ask for a better teaching text. But is this the work of the *Indigenous literatures* class?

To pose this question in another way: Should teachers bring examples from the canon of settler myth into the Indigenous literatures classroom when this move puts “colonialism at the centre of the discussion” (Monture 157)? To be sure, there are risks associated with choosing a mainstream, commercial example like “Timeline” for this instructional purpose, rather than one of the many Indigenous-authored texts that provide a critical take on settler-colonial history. And yet, for the classroom comprised of diversely positioned Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, many of whom may be approaching these topics for the first time, there are pedagogical reasons why a text like HBC’s “Timeline” works. In the goal of enlivening critical consciousness, there’s a kind of foundational analytical work that can be accomplished with a close reading of this commercial, and which allows the more Indigenous-centred approach of a text like Armstrong’s “History Lesson” to resonate all the more clearly. As Waziyatawin puts it, “One of the most pernicious aspects of every colonial power is its capacity to shape perceptions of reality,” and, in doing so, to create the “illusion of permanency and inevitability” (“Paradox” 76). “History Lesson” pierces this illusion in ways that exceed decolonial critique and instead illuminate Indigenous perspectives on space and time. With “Timeline,” we can teach and learn approachable methods for diagnosing settler-colonial power and its expression in narrative form; with “History Lesson,” we can then experience something different—something that both responds to and exceeds the crises of settler-colonial time.

The difference between these approaches can be understood as the difference between a decolonizing analysis and an Indigenous paradigm for knowledge-making. Cree/Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach elaborates:

Decolonizing analysis is born of critical theory found within the transformative paradigm of western tradition. It centres the settler discourse, whereas an Indigenous

paradigm centres Indigenous knowledges. While a decolonizing perspective remains necessary and can be included as a theoretical positioning within research, it is not the epistemological centre of an Indigenous methodological approach to research. (127)

I find it helpful to put Kovach's distinction into conversation with the instructions Armstrong offers non-Indigenous and Indigenous writers respectively—that is, to “turn over some of the rocks in your own garden for examination” (“Disempowerment” 243), and to “examine the past and culturally affirm toward a new vision for all our people in the future” (244). Taken together, these distinct projects empower diversely positioned students and teachers to analyze, write, and act from where they stand. They also form a useful meta-narrative for understanding the pedagogical work accomplished by the pairing of “Timeline” with “History Lesson”: through their juxtaposition, an instructive conversation emerges around the difference between the critical project of diagnosing and unpacking settler-colonial myth, and the project of affirming sovereign Indigenous pasts and futures. Each project has value in its own right, but, as Kovach shows us, they come from distinct epistemological traditions. Interrogating “Timeline” as a precursor to my classroom's discussion of “History Lesson” allows me to distinguish between these traditions of thought so that the stakes of each become clearer. And from this place, we are then able to more deeply engage the insights that a close reading of “History Lesson” affords: that from an Indigenous epistemological perspective, critical consciousness is not separate from material forms of transformation—and that it is possible to learn chronologies of settler-colonial history without relying on dominant, linear-progressive constructions of time.

“History Lesson”: Beyond Chronologies of Settler-Colonial Time

Written by a Syilx intellectual, knowledge-keeper, and poet whose home territory in British Columbia is also where I live and teach, Jeannette Armstrong's “History Lesson” is a short, free-verse poem that requires its students to rethink settler-colonial histories of contact, expansion, development, and ruination, showing how the

trope of progress structures this unfolding in the dominant imaginary. But, in doing so, the poem not only undermines the seeming inevitability of settler triumph represented in the climax of “Timeline”; it also centres contemporary Indigenous thought on the topic and practice of historiography and on the nature of time itself. In these ways, “History Lesson” is engaged in visionary work. In applying this term, I’m guided by the insights of activist-organizer and Afrofuturist adrienne maree brown, whose work with science fiction and other “visionary fiction” is grounded in a regard for such writing as “political, sacred, and philosophical text” (37): “I see massive patterns of violence and inequality in history,” brown says—and visionary fiction “is where I go when I need the medicine of possibility applied to the trauma of human behavior” (37). While “History Lesson” is not fiction, I do see it as a form of visionary narrative that offers the medicine of possibility in the face of world-ending environmental extraction, racial capitalism, and colonial dispossession. A fitting place to begin a close reading of this poem, then, is with the poem’s end.

I begin at the end because this is a poem that documents the end of the world. It culminates in a scene of ruination: “Somewhere among the remains / of skinless animals” (Armstrong, “History” lines 39–40). More than detailing the excess, greed, and violence of forcibly imposed, extinction-based economies, however, it also records their logical *conclusion* as the necessary “termination / to a long journey / and unholy search” (lines 41–43). Having begun an account of this journey with the arrival of “Christopher’s ship” (line 1), the poem’s ending “among the remains / of skinless animals” may at first appear beholden to the same narrative practices of chronology that structure normative, linear-progressive approaches to history. For example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses how Western history is “assembled around a set of interconnected ideas,” including “[t]he idea that history is one large chronology” which “charts the progress of human endeavour through time” (31). As a method, she explains, chronology is closely linked to universalizing discourses of human progress and development, concepts that have had devastating implications when deployed in the dismissal of Indigenous peoples as primitive and Other. But when “History Lesson” engages the narrative practice of chronology, it does so with a difference.

Smith goes on to explain how, for Indigenous peoples, “Transforming our colonized views of our own history (as written by the West) . . . requires us to revisit, site by site, our history under Western eyes. This in turn requires a theory or approach which helps us to engage with, understand and then act upon history” (36). “History Lesson” offers such an approach, and one of its most vital interventions into dominant historiography is to revisit sites of historical trauma through a distinctly Indigenous epistemological lens. These sites include the Christianizing efforts of missionaries; the weaponized introduction of infectious disease; the decimation of traditional food ways; and the introduction of industrial agriculture and resource extraction, among others. By revisiting these sites, however, the poem offers more than a narrative account of historical events as written from an Indigenous perspective; that is, “History Lesson” grounds its very approach to history in Armstrong’s imperative to “examine the past and culturally affirm toward a new vision for all our people in the future” (“Disempowerment” 244). At the level of narrative content, the poem documents the violence and chaos inherent in the colonial march of “progress.” Yet, through the elliptical compression of time and space made possible by the free-verse poetic form, “History Lesson” also engages a methodological approach that both centres Indigenous perspectives on the nature of time and—as I’ll discuss further in closing—implicitly envisions a world beyond the crises of colonial power.

In their work on decolonizing the Anthropocene, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd draw on Indigenous philosophies of time “as fluid, malleable, and circular” (771). In their formulation, the “seismic shock of dispossession and violence that colonialism employed . . . kept rolling like a slinky—pressing and compacting in different ways in different places as colonialism spread outwards” (771–72). From an Indigenous perspective on time, then, the effect of this seismic shock was to “compact and speed up time” (772). “History Lesson” captures this radical sense of compaction and the quickening of space-time, covering the entire span of colonial dispossession since contact in the space of forty-seven short lines. The abrupt arrival of “Christopher’s ship” (line 1) is followed swiftly by the intercessions of “Father mean well” (line 8), the world-building efforts of “Red coated knights” (line 11), and the death-dealing gifts of “Smallpox, Seagrams / and rice

krispies” (lines 17–18). As in the example of HBC’s “Timeline,” centuries pass quickly here, hurtling readers headlong into the colonial present. Unlike in “Timeline,” however, the poem’s imagery imbues time with a quality of compaction that—particularly when held against linear rather than spiralic constructs of time—seems almost to move backwards. The effect is deliberately destabilizing to normative models of temporality in which, as Blackfoot philosopher Leroy Little Bear remarks, time is “conceptualized as a straight line” of quantifiable units (523): instead, farmers are here seen “sowing skulls and bones” (line 25), while miners are “pulling from gaping holes / green paper faces / of a smiling English lady” (lines 27–29). As time accelerates, disaster manifests in the present continuous tense with grim immediacy. The costs of industrial agriculture are made plain in this jarring imagery, while the defamiliarized portraits of extraction and the monetization of mineral-kin show how these contemporary colonial practices are intimately linked to both the fur trade and the “buffalo genocide” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hubbard 295), as witnessed in the first stanza. Notably, these earlier atrocities are also rendered in the present tense: “a mob bursts / Running in all directions / Pulling furs off animals / Shooting buffalo / Shooting each other” (lines 2–6). When we arrive to rest at the end of the poem, “Somewhere among the remains / of skinless animals” (lines 39–40), we are confronted by the simultaneity of these multiple genocides—each unfolding in the wake of “Christopher’s ship” (line 1), their implications felt in the present as the rolling seismic shock that Davis and Todd theorize.

Reading “History Lesson” alongside such theorizations of time opens for my classroom the possibility of seeing the poem as a space of theory-making in itself. Implicit in how the poem’s content interacts with its form is an uncoupling of the projects of decolonial critique, on one hand, and Indigenous theory-making, on the other. As Kovach outlines, the transformation of settler discourse is an important goal, but it is not the same practice as one that centres Indigenous perspectives, knowledges, and futures. Comparing the poem’s first stanza to the opening of “Timeline” helps illuminate this distinction with yet more texture and depth, moving readers through a decolonial analysis and towards one that affirms Indigenous visions of time and futurity. For instance, both “Timeline” and “History Lesson” begin with the image of a ship’s arrival. Contrary to the picture of orderly,

dispassionate progress represented in the HBC commercial, however, Armstrong's opening stanza envisions first meetings and the subsequent imposition of extraction- and extinction-based economies as a frenzied and violent business. The diction emphasizes brutality, devastation, and waste. Overtly, then, the opening stanza overturns popular settler myths steeped in developmental perspectives presenting a sanitized view in which the "evolved" economic imperatives of Euro-Western origin were naturally poised to replace the "primitive" systems of Indigenous peoples. In this sense, the poem primes its readers for a decolonial engagement with dominant history at the level of how events are remembered and interpreted. Yet its visionary potential—to again evoke adrienne maree brown's term—is to foreground Indigenous presence both forwards and backwards through time: in beginning with the apparent moment of discovery, the poem does not so much reify this moment as conjure, implicitly, the eons that predate it; the narrative power of chronology is mobilized so that readers can witness the presence of Indigenous places and peoples that pre-exist the arrival of European explorers. From this perspective, then, it is possible to read the journey's end witnessed in the final stanza as only "the end of *this* world, that is, the world that white supremacy built" (Maynard and Simpson 26). And to insist on the termination of this journey is to offer two visionary insights: one, that for Indigenous peoples the apocalypse has already long-since arrived—and been survived—and two, that the end of *this* world is necessary for a future beyond the crises of colonial power.

On the first point, I find Whyte's analysis of climate change and dystopian or post-apocalyptic narrative to be highly instructive. In "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene," Whyte explains how mainstream fictional portrayals of our climate futures tend to envision dire "dystopian times of rationing, government assistance, major extinctions, social unrest, drastic measures, and defaced landscapes" (226). Yet, for Indigenous peoples who have already survived "environmental destruction, land dispossession" and the end to "local relationships to thousands of plants, animals, insects, and entire ecosystems," the apocalypse has already arrived (226). As Whyte goes on to elaborate, "Some Indigenous peoples, then, offer the idea that we confront climate change having already passed through environmental and climate crises arising from the impacts of

colonialism” (226). A powerful example of this offering in fictional form is the following reminder, imparted by Auntie and Elder Aileen in Waubgeshig Rice’s novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow*:

[A]pocalypse! What a silly word. I can tell you there’s no word like that in Ojibwe . . . Our world isn’t ending. It already ended. It ended when the Zhaagnaash came into our original home down south on that bay and took it from us. That was our world. When the Zhaagnaash cut down all the trees and fished all the fish and forced us out of there, that’s when our world ended. They made us come all the way up here. This is not our homeland! But we had to adapt and luckily we already knew how to hunt and live on the land. We learned to live here . . . Yes, apocalypse. We’ve had that over and over. But we always survived. We’re still here. (149–50)

Aileen’s statement insists upon Indigenous presence and futures. It also powerfully undermines the presumption of exceptional urgency that is the privilege of white-centred climate change discourse. As the ecological consequences of longstanding colonial practices are made increasingly tangible to the average citizen of the so-called first world, “whiteness remains the unmarked centre of apocalyptic anxiety” (Hobart 4). By contrast, as Aileen’s words and Armstrong’s poem make clear, Indigenous people have *already* survived the apocalypse. In this view, the crumbling of colonial capitalism, as depicted in “History Lesson,” emerges as different kind of world-ending altogether. And as the poem reveals with prescience, the “termination” to this journey is now (line 41).

This is a second visionary insight implied by the poem’s culminating scene of ruin and collapse: as Robyn Maynard puts it, not all world-endings are bad. In fact, she says, in order to make “earthly planetary survival possible, some versions of this world *need* to end” (Maynard and Simpson 25). With the “courage to envision the end of *this* world” (26), Maynard says, comes the possibility—already in play—of radical world-making secured in the move “toward futures that are premised on life rather than (human ecological, animal, microbial) waste” (26). A world premised on life is the promise and

the challenge that “History Lesson” ultimately offers its readers. It is a vision of a world beyond the crises of colonial power, a world in which Indigenous futures are not foreclosed by settler ones. This is a vision and a practice already shaped by Indigenous philosophers, activists, artists, and writers whose work, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang point out, articulates “Native futures without a settler state” (13). And this is one of the most instructive ways in which “History Lesson” can be read within and beyond the critical lens of decolonial analysis: the poem refuses to reconcile settler guilt, or to provide “a gateway for non-Indigenous thinkers to re-imagine their world” (Watts 26). Instead, with unambiguous allusion to the Christian origin story of the Garden of Eden, the poem names the end of *this* world as “the termination / to a long journey / and unholy search / for the power / glimpsed in a garden / forever closed / forever lost” (lines 41–47). The devastations of a now-crumbling empire are traced in origin to that foundational narrative by which humans were falsely established in hierarchical relation to “nature” and to all non-human kin. Meanwhile, the poem’s chronology refuses to narrate a settled future in which land will continue to be “scaled and modified in term of progress and advancement” (Watts 26).

Sylx scholar and educator Bill Cohen defines Indigeneity as the practice of living in a given place, with “lifeways [that] are in balance with the region’s capacity to regenerate.” “History Lesson” implicitly insists upon this balance as the only possible future premised upon life. In this sense, land, and (inseparably) the health of human relations with it, is at the centre of “History Lesson.” The power glimpsed in the garden—forever closed and lost—is named as the originary loss in Euro-Western cosmology which propels the settler in such frenzied, violent, and unholy search; the poem then shows the consequences of living in exile from relationality and regeneration, an exile for which the pursuit of progress is the cause rather than the cure. In offering a vision of ruin beyond which settler-colonial futurity is a literal impossibility, the poem asserts balanced and regenerative lifeways as a pragmatic solution that, despite its unwillingness to narrate them for settler readers, are the tacit contribution of Indigenous knowledges developed in place since time immemorial.

Conclusion

In their landmark essay “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” Tuck and Yang interrogate how metaphorical forms of decolonization are mobilized in ways that ultimately safeguard settler innocence and “rescue settler futurity” (3). In deploying decolonization as a discursive lens through which progressive action is framed, they argue, settlers preserve the status quo while true decolonization—defined as nothing less than the repatriation of Indigenous land and life—is endlessly deferred (21). This argument helps to delineate the limitations of settler-led social justice projects that are often individualized and primarily intellectual in orientation. It also makes visible the failures of decolonization as a metaphor to deal tangibly with land and relational ontologies around it. As Tuck and Yang elaborate, “decolonization in the settler-colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, *all* of the land, and not just symbolically” (7). Despite the different way in which the term *decolonization* circulates in this discussion when compared with Kovach’s framework for distinguishing decolonial critique from Indigenous paradigms, each of these thinkers insists on the incommensurability of these frameworks and cautions against their conflation. For Tuck and Yang, “learning to see settler colonialism, to articulate critiques of settler epistemology, and set aside settler histories and values in search of ethics that reject domination and exploitation” is important work with powerful implications; however, it is not the work of repatriating Indigenous land and life (19). Beyond the refusal of settler futurity and the critique of settler moves to innocence, then, their analysis has direct implications for this discussion in that it distinguishes true decolonization—the repatriation of Indigenous land and life—from the “cultivation of critical consciousness” (19).

When I invite the analysis of settler-colonial histories, imageries, and narratives in the classroom, I engage the exercise of critical conscientization around “what really happened” (Armstrong, “Disempowerment” 244). As a pedagogical process attempting to “foster critical awareness of the truths of oppression” (Yazzie and Baldy 4), this conscientization is, however, but one of the distinct

projects embedded in Armstrong's "History Lesson." That is, while the poem deals thematically with history in ways that can teach its readers a critical perspective on the settler-colonial past and present, its form and approach engage historiography, time, and memory in ways that centre Indigenous land and life. And in doing so it also emphasizes the role of creative and visionary work in making other worlds possible. This is the power of storytelling, and of the literary arts—particularly in Indigenous paradigms where, as Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan explains, "the word is not an abstract but is the thing itself; there is no abyss between what is said and what it materially represents" (23).

Normative models of conscientization are very often embedded in linear-progressive views of social change (where one moves from ignorance to awareness) and mechanistic understandings of language as mere communicative device (where language names problems and envisions possibility in the abstract, but does not embody felt, material change). "History Lesson" makes possible a non-linear experience of consciousness in which language itself could be transformational; that is, it enacts a form of visionary narrative in which the "medicine of possibility" resides not only in its diagnostic relation to settler-colonial trauma (brown 37), but also in its capacity to evoke "breathing forests and fields" despite their being buried "beneath concrete and steel" (lines 33–34). In her essay "Land Speaking," Armstrong memorably explains how, within Syilx world views, "words contain spirit, a power waiting to become activated and become physical" (183). To name the breathing land in this poem is a kind of evocation, where the breath of the word is irrevocably connected to the breath of forests and fields. To whatever extent students and teachers do enter the Indigenous literature classroom as the breathing animation of settler-colonial history and its scripts, then, to read this poem aloud is to breathe life into a different set of possibilities—both for understanding and for being.

Notes

1. To quote genocide scholar Patrick Wolfe: "settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event" (388).
2. For a detailed discussion of close reading and "Indigenous-informed" methodologies for reading and research as taught in the university context, see Deanna Reder, "Using Indigenous-Informed Close-Reading and Research Skills to *Unlearn*."

3. See, for instance, the section on “Position” in *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures* (edited by Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra).
4. Throughout this essay, I refer to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers in order to distinguish between these broader subject positions from which students and teachers approach Indigenous-authored texts. These terms signal Indigenous knowledges as epistemologically distinct while also echoing Armstrong’s directions to “Native” and “non-Native” writers respectively. When I refer to “settler” structures, identities, and practices, I mean something linked to—but not synonymous with—the term *non-Indigenous*. That is, *settler* is a deliberately “relational term” that suggests a specific relationship to colonial systems and processes (Flowers 34). As Leey’qsun critic Rachel Flowers puts it, *settler* “is a critical term that denaturalizes and politicizes the presence of non-Indigenous people on Indigenous lands” (33). Beenash Jafri, in their formulation of “settlerhood . . . as a field of operations into which we become socially positioned and implicated,” further nuances the idea of settlerhood—and of settler privilege specifically—by demonstrating how the “logic of a settler/non-settler binary” is insufficiently attuned to the ways that people of colour can be at once complicit with settler-colonial structures of power while never experiencing (or experiencing very little) settler privilege (“Privilege vs. Complicity”). In this sense, not all non-Indigenous peoples have the same relationship to “settlerhood,” despite the fact that all non-Indigenous readers are in some way visitors to Indigenous lands, knowledges, and texts.

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Reading Chelsea Vowel's "âniskôhîcikan" Alongside Current Indigenous Language Revitalization Efforts

Indigenous Language Revitalization Today

Indigenous language revitalization is community based and multifaceted; immersion schools, language nests, podcasts, online learning platforms and dictionaries, maps, Indigenous-created and -led museums, as well as art and literature ranging from virtual reality installations to novels, are just a few examples. Whereas increasing attention is paid to the maintenance of Indigenous languages, the movement to uphold them is of course not new. Leanne Hinton and Barbra Meek place one starting point of organized "Indigenous language revitalization in the USA and Canada . . . in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s," and "the American Indian Movement" in particular (61). Language is central to practices of knowledge transfer: "It's not only loss of language but, more importantly, loss of traditional knowledge distilled from the Beginning of Time" (Yakeleya 145). The attempted erasure of Indigenous languages by the settler-colonial Canadian state thus disrupts intergenerational practices of knowledge transfer dependent upon orality, e.g., in the form of songs and stories. Louis-Karl Picard-Siouï (Wendat) argues that language revitalization should not only be the responsibility of Indigenous peoples: "the education system is failing Canadians. There are absolutely no reasons why most Canadians shouldn't be fluent in both colonial ('official') languages AND the traditional Indigenous language of their region" (Castonguay-Bélanger).

Learning the Indigenous language(s) of the land one lives on is one part of anticolonial action that opens avenues for relationship-

building. The resulting increase in language learners would likely also result in more resources allocated to Indigenous language learning. Large-scale fluency in an Indigenous language in the public sector would enable Indigenous people to access services in their native languages. Chelsea Vowel (Métis) has written extensively on language revitalization. For instance, in an opinion piece where she points to the importance of not only Indigenous people reclaiming and maintaining their languages, but also non-Indigenous people learning them and understanding the epistemologies and science contained within them, she writes:

Embedded within our languages are cultural concepts that have the potential to give all Canadians a deeper understanding of our place in relation to the world around us . . . [M]any of the concepts currently being explored by Western medicine, environmentalism, and the humanities are foundational within Indigenous cultures and languages. Holistic health and teachings, understandings of interconnectedness with human and non-human beings, and ways of being in good relation with one another are all described in our various Indigenous languages. (“Why Indigenous Languages”)

Here, she connects language revitalization to Indigenous epistemologies that continue to be undervalued in academia. Moreover, she highlights how languages can serve as a basis for anticolonial practices and rebuilding relationships.

Languages are intimately connected to the land and to particular places. According to Shelley Knott Fife (Anishnaabe), “It has not been understood that this is the homeland of Canada’s original people . . . This is the only place in this world where Anishinaabe, Haudensaunee, Dene, or Inuktitut languages, for example, still live or can ever hope to be retrieved” (127). This showcases that the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages—which contain and are dependent upon land-based knowledges—are highly localized. Their revitalization and the reclamation and continuation of land-based practices are thus intimately connected. At the core of Indigenous future imaginaries (Lewis 247), the presence of Indigenous languages in the future speaks

to the future presence of Indigenous people, stories, and knowledges. In this article, I analyze Indigenous language revitalization practices in Vowel's "âniskôhôcikan," reading it alongside current language revitalization efforts on Turtle Island. Analyzing Vowel's story, which she categorizes as "Métis-futurist" (Preface 18), together with other current language revitalization projects aligns with Danika Medak-Saltzman's (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) argument that "narrative and filmic imaginings of Indigenous futures" constitute "the creative arm of the Indigenous futurist movement, which joins the more overtly political arm of the movement" (144).

Indeed, language revitalization takes many forms, such as *The Language* podcast by Jessica Miigwanaabiikwe Shonias (Hoof clan from Rama and Atikameksheng) and Mskwaankwad Menoomnii (Ojibwe). As the description of the podcast reads, the hosts engage in "the revitalization of Anishinaabemowin" ("The Language") and emphasize that they are "second language learners" who address the podcast to "second language learners" ("The Language"). Most of the sixty- to ninety-minute-long episodes focus on a linguistic aspect of language learning. However, the podcast also includes thematic episodes focused on, e.g., unmarked graves at former residential schools or translation. The podcast functions as a way of learning collectively and orally passing on knowledge related to language learning. Similarly centring Indigenous languages, the *Voices from the Land* podcast publishes interviews with Indigenous individuals working towards the revitalization of several Indigenous languages in Canada. Various other podcasts thematize Indigenous language revitalization on Turtle Island in individual episodes, for instance through shining the spotlight on Indigenous communities engaged in innovative language revitalization projects, as is the case for the CBC's *Unreserved with Rosanna Deerchild* podcast.

Next to podcasts, platforms for Indigenous language learning include other forms of audio-based materials, such as the website *Nimkii Aazhibikong*, which offers three different types of material for Anishinaabemowin learners: "Audio Lessons," "Vocabulary Boosters," and "Ear Tune Ups" ("Language Resources"). Anishinaabemowin is not only taught via audio content, but also through gatherings in the form of "[t]he Nimkii Aazhibikong Eshkiniijig (Youth) Group" that "has hosted a Natural Fiber Weaving Camp, two Moose Hide Camps, a Medicine

Camp, Quillbox Making Event and a Maple Sugar Camp as well as land-based language lessons and the recording of words and phrases in Anishinaabemowin” (“Nimkii Aazhibikong Youth”). Video games like *Karihonniennihtshera* by Revital Software, a company created by Mohawk sisters Kahentawaks and Wennekerakon Tiewishaw and Frederyk Kowalczyk, constitute another medium for language revitalization. In the game, players take up the role of Ietsistohkwaró:roks, who learns about her culture and her language from her grandmother. The game is available in Kanien’kéha and English.

Selected episodes of the children’s TV show *Molly of Denali*, which so far “has been airing in English,” are now set to be “dub[bed] . . . into the Gwich’in and Koyukon languages” (Robyne). Since two different groups are working on translating the episodes and the groups selected different episodes to be dubbed in their respective language, there will be four Indigenous language episodes of *Molly of Denali* in total. The plan is for the “cartoons . . . [to] be used in Doyon region language revitalization efforts. They will likely air across the state and perhaps in the Athabaskan-speaking areas of Canada” (Robyne). Hence, this language revitalization effort is clearly community-based, localized, and addressed to as well as co-produced by Indigenous youth. Generally, *Molly of Denali* integrates individual Gwich’in words.

As scholars like Blaire Topash-Caldwell (Pokagon Band) have argued, it is crucial for Indigenous youth to see positive representations of themselves in media. Another well-known example is the hugely popular TV show *Reservation Dogs*—while most of the TV show takes place in English, the protagonists frequently use Muscogee and Native slang. Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan) notes that “Rez English from any part of the country, if examined, will display the sound and syntax patterns of the Indigenous language of that area” (154). In a US context, the recently published Netflix show *Spirit Rangers* includes individual words in Native American languages like the Chumash language. The variety of these activities demonstrates that language revitalization is intricately connected to other forms of resurgence and that there are many projects taking place at present in terms of Indigenous-led language learning. Indigenous languages are becoming more visible in Canadian and US mainstream media landscapes in ways that are Indigenous-created and -led with an all-Indigenous writers’ team on *Reservation Dogs* and *Spirit Rangers*,

instead of appropriating decontextualized parts of Indigenous cultures and languages for entertainment purposes, as has been the case for many non-Indigenous TV productions. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) questions the notion of purely “cultural revitalization,” arguing that “[c]ommunity-based resurgence projects like . . . language nests are inherently political and cultural because the intent is to facilitate radical transformation rather than just a cultural revitalization” (50). I argue that this type of radical transformation is represented in Vowel’s “âniskôhîcikan.”

Cree Language Revitalization in “âniskôhîcikan”

I hesitate to categorize “âniskôhîcikan” as a short story, as the short story constitutes only one of three variations. Vowel has written three different versions of the same story: a hint-fiction version, a microfiction version, and a short-story version. In each version, the story implies or portrays Cree language revitalization in a Cree/Métis community that is made possible by futuristic technology. The longer versions of the text, the microfiction and short story, emphasize communal forms of living and raising children. It is only in the short story that the reader learns about the challenges associated with this technology. I discuss how Vowel imagines the future of learning Cree, how Métis and Cree epistemologies and both queer and intergenerational kinship structures are integrated with language learning in the stories. Language revitalization is both envisioned through Vowel’s imagination of Cree language learning in the future and enacted through the inclusion of Cree words and epistemologies in “âniskôhîcikan.”

Vowel explains the different forms of the story in an afterword that she terms an “Exploration.” She writes,

Short stories in general seem to allow for more collaborative space between the story and the reader. I’ve thought of the many unanswered bits to this sort of technical “solution” to language decline and even have some potential answers, but I deliberately did not include more than the bare bones of

the situation, because I want the reader to ask those same questions. (“âniskôhâcikan” 215)

Thus, Vowel highlights the relationship between the story and the reader. Her hint-fiction and microfiction stories resemble oral storytelling by raising questions and depending strongly on the engagement of the reader. Oral storytelling is a collaborative form of narration, through which the audience is more immediately and vocally involved than readers reading a text, an activity that often takes place in isolation. After all, the two formats (hint-fiction and microfiction) that might be less familiar to some readers than the more conventional short story and that visually leave a substantial blank space on the page, implicate readers differently. Indeed, the hint-fiction version in particular can provoke readers to think about language revitalization in their own communities, if applicable. For Sophie McCall and colleagues, “[r]eading and interpreting var[y] enormously depending on how much background information and knowledge you as a reader bring to the page” (4). In my position as a non-Indigenous researcher within the colonial space of academia—e.g., in terms of which knowledges and forms of knowledge production are legitimized and valued and who has access to funding—there are specific cultural nuances that are not, and should not be (instantly) accessible to me. As Vowel writes, “Many of the references [in my stories] . . . aren’t necessarily legible to the ‘outsider,’ and that is deliberate . . . I chose not to translate them within the story because I want non-Indigenous people to engage with our stories, symbols, language, and history on our terms” (“Dirty Wings” 123).

The first, hint-fiction version of the story is told in a first-person plural narrative voice, while the microfiction version is told by an omniscient narrator, and the short-story version is told by a third-person limited narrator. These different narrative perspectives highlight the communality of language learning through the first-person plural narrator, provide the reader with an overview of the technology through an omniscient narrator, and enable them to gain intimate insights into the feelings of the short story’s protagonist, Kat, through the third-person limited narrator. The three versions of the story emphasize the idea that a story changes each time it is told or read. The hint-fiction version only consists of four lines, or sixteen words, including the title:

The Ancestors Spoke

We didn't understand.

They spoke again.

This time, the nanites ensure our comprehension. (203)

The hint-fiction version suggests a scene of language revitalization in which unidentified listeners—possibly a community—learn from “[a]ncestors.” In the beginning of the story, the community is not fluent in the language and a technology helps them understand and communicate with the ancestors. Questions that came to my mind were: Who is “we”? Which language is implied in the story? How do the ancestors communicate (with their descendants)? How does the nanite technology work? Who developed the technology? How far in the future is the story set? What is the message of the ancestors? What do these intergenerational kinship relations look like? Where does the story take place? Is the technology readily available to everyone in or beyond the community? What does the temporal shift within the story, from the simple past of the first three lines to the simple present of the last, signify? Reflecting upon the questions I raised after reading the hint-fiction version of the story, it is noteworthy that the microfiction and short-story version do not provide all the answers. The shift in temporality in the hint-fiction version centres the present of the story while establishing a link between past and present. It outlines the process of language revitalization that is facilitated by technology and that enables intergenerational kinship relations.

In contrast to the other two versions, the hint-fiction version does not include any Cree words. It hence is more open and could potentially address various Indigenous languages. The hint-fiction version, which differs from the other two by presenting a brief snapshot focalizing intergenerational communication, can be understood through Armstrong's argument that

[t]hrough my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same

stories in different patterns . . . I hear words speak old stories. (146)

Having read all three versions of the story, one understands that the ancestors are speaking through the new generation of Cree and Métis children. These intergenerational kinship relations are similarly reflected in Armstrong's outlining of ancestors and "the land" communicating through language. She decentres human agency in both communication and storytelling and points to the collective stories transmitted through language. Neal McLeod (Cree) affirms that "[s]torytellers have to remember the past, and they have to remember the language. They have to remember the stories that made their ancestors the people they were. Their bodies become houses of ancient sound" (100). Language is hence a mediator of collective memory.

The microfiction version consists of roughly 160 words and is titled "Her Name Is the Cree Word for Spring." Compared to the title of the hint-fiction version, there is a temporal shift from the simple past to the simple present. This aligns with the title putting the focus on the baby, while the hint-fiction version focalizes the ancestors. Thus, the story shows different perspectives on intergenerational kinship relations. Only upon reading the microfiction version does the reader learn that the Indigenous language in question is Cree. Moreover, the nanite technology is explained as "microscopic machines, introduced in utero at nine weeks," and based on "standard Athelas rule-based programming for nanorobotics" (204). Vowel includes the programming commands in the Athelas programming language and translates them into narrative English. This is how the nanites translate everything the children hear or want to say into Cree. Another layer that is added through the microfiction version is a kinship structure beyond the heteronormative nuclear family, an extended understanding of kinship that has always been central to Indigenous communities and that continues to be attacked by settler colonialism (Justice 78; see also Morgan; Whyte).

Imagining a future of language transfer dependent on invasive nanite technology might seem dystopian, in that it suggests that the intergenerational transfer of Cree as it is practised today has alleviated, but not resolved, the language's endangerment; in the future, Kat explains, "the need for first-language speakers has become critical"

(205). On the other hand, the technology facilitates and even guarantees the resurgence of Cree: “This cooing baby, like all the others, will only ever hear *nêhiyawêwin*” (205). The two Cree words in the microfiction version, *nêhiyawêwin* (“Cree”; 204, 205) and *sîkwan* (“spring”; 205), are translated in the title, enabling a broader range of readers to learn a few words in the language, but also to address the story to Cree language learners who might not yet, or may no longer, be fluent in their language, due to the legacy of residential schools and assimilationist policies. Despite not learning whether the technology is Indigenous- or, more specifically, Métis- or Cree-created, the reader understands that the technology is a result of communal deliberation. This is one part of Indigenous epistemologies¹ that is incorporated in the nanite technology.

At first, having read only the hint-fiction and microfiction versions of the story, I erroneously assumed that the learning of Cree through traditional forms of knowledge transfer would—at least partially—be replaced by the nanite technology. However, my assumption was countered through the short-story version, which details one of *sîkwan*’s eight co-parents, Amber, “studying Cree” at university (207). Moreover, “[t]he nanites could impart the language but not that vital cultural context” (209). In this instance, the knowledge transmitted through Indigenous languages is emphasized. The fact that the school teacher, an Elder, is “one of the only fluent Cree speakers . . . who had also been raised in the culture” highlights the still endangered state, but also the survival, of the Cree language in the future (209). As Hinton and Meek contend, “[l]anguages . . . spoken mainly by elders—and there are hundreds of such languages now in the USA and Canada—are in the . . . situation where the speakers are not teachers and the teachers are not speakers” (64).

In addition to that, the new technology can only lend fluency to newborns; the older generations cannot use this technology to learn Cree. The portrayal of language learning in the short story demonstrates that the nanite technology is not an easy solution. Nonetheless, the story’s depiction of language revitalization is encouraging: the technology enables communication between the children who speak and understand only Cree and their co-parents, who are in the process of (re)learning their language. Community remains foundational to language revitalization, and technology can be

thought of as an additional resource for language learners, rather than a substitute for the interpersonal transfer of language and knowledge.

The short-story version is around two thousand words long and is titled “âniskôhôtikan,” which translates to “string of beads” (207). The short-story version describes the communal life of sîkwan’s co-parents, including Kat, who engage in traditional Cree and Métis practices such as beading (207). Co-parents Amber and Josh use beading to explain the nanite technology, which equips the children to only hear and speak Cree. Their analogy shows how traditional practices are crucial to the development of future technologies which draw from Indigenous epistemologies. Similarly, Angela M. Haas reads Haudenosaunee wampum belts as “hypertext” (89), arguing that

wampum beads are technologies, just as sinew, hemp, and tree bark twine are—all of the technologies needed to craft wampum belt multimediated stories. Such an argument can be extended to the other sign technologies we build via an assemblage of other technologies, all which come along with their own set of “literacies,” from birch bark scrolls and canoes, winter counts, petroglyphs, star quilts, songs, drums, double-wall and double-woven rivercane baskets, and more to Web sites, blogs, and instant messaging. (94)

Parallel to “âniskôhôtikan,” Haas demonstrates that beading, traditionally practised by various Indigenous nations such as Anishinaabe, Cree, Kanien’kehá:ka, and Métis, anticipates and can inform present and future technological innovation. She also advocates for beading as a craft that can inform future technologies in a way that is similar to Vowel’s story.

Not only does the short story depict communal living that goes beyond the nuclear family, but it also centres queerness, describing “a house full of Métis and Cree queers” who form “a queer Indigenous feminist collective” (207, 210). In the “Exploration,” Vowel writes, “Centring chosen family in an LGBTQ2S+ context as a form of cultural resiliency is a future we can imagine and act on much more easily than creating . . . nanobot technology” (214–15). She explains in a footnote that, “[i]n Cree, there is no gendered pronoun equivalent to she or he.

Instead, the third-person singular pronoun is ‘wiya’ (207n84). This makes apparent how Cree language revitalization is not only present in the future imaginaries of the stories, but also in Vowel’s present envisioning and writing of future imaginaries: for instance, in her use of “wiya” throughout the text, Vowel actually already enacts language revitalization and subverts settler-colonial gender binaries.

Vowel’s story, then, touches upon language revitalization in relation to Indigenous LGBTQ2S+ identities. In their essay, Kai Pyle (Métis and Anishinaabe) outline the connection between language revitalization and “Two-Spirit history,” writing: “In communities where language loss has been significant . . . looking to Two-Spirit history offers the possibility of finding words and roles for ourselves that make us legible within the context of our own cultures and shows the continuity of our presence within our communities” (585). Thus, Pyle demonstrate Indigenous languages’ capacity to create and make visible kinship ties in the past, present, and future. As Manuela Lavinás Picq and Josi Tikuna (Tikuna) write, “Indigenous intimacies were repressed, pathologised, and erased by violent processes of colonial dispossession. Yet Indigenous languages resist so that Indigenous sexualities can resurge” (68). These arguments connect language revitalization to broader Indigenous social justice movements and show how LGBTQ2S+ experiences are not only reflected in languages, but how these languages function as a strategy to reclaim “Indigiqueerness” (see Whitehead 46). Indigiqueerness reflects the transformation of language to refuse legibility vis-à-vis the colonial state, a refusal that Joshua Whitehead (Oji-Cree/nêhiyaw) describes as a “futuristic key of Indigenous sexual . . . [and] environmental sovereignty” (Whitehead and Abdou 18).

It is noteworthy that the use of Cree words in Vowel’s short-story version defies the rules of standard English in terms of neither names nor words at the beginning of sentences being capitalized. Vowel thus disrupts the grammar of settler colonialism and privileges Cree grammar, including pronouns, even within the overall English text. In the same vein, Whitehead breaks up the mostly English flow of his book chapter through Cree syllabics (44–55), calling for a privileging of “the sovereignty of ‘traditional’ language . . . and terminology” to describe queer Indigenous identities (46). Attesting to the inclusivity of Indigenous languages, Joanne Barker (Lenape) observes “multiple

... identificatory categories of gender and sexuality within Indigenous languages” that go beyond dualist terminology (13).

The role of technology in Indigenous language revitalization is increasing (Hermes et al.). Jason Edward Lewis (Cherokee, Native Hawaiian, and Samoan) argues that “[t]ech-savvy Natives can participate in [the] shaping [of cyberspace]: in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing the technology as well as in using it” (242). Addressing the inherent bias and racism encoded in (many) settler-colonial technologies, Archer Pechawis (Plains Cree) raises the concern of “anonymous hyper-intelligences working for governments and corporations, implementing far-reaching social, economic, and military strategies based on the same values that have fostered genocide against Indigenous people worldwide and brought us all to the brink of environmental collapse” (Lewis et al.). Lewis and colleagues put forth the question “how to treat these new non-human kin respectfully and reciprocally,” understanding technology in a network of kinship relations. Pechawis, similarly to Vowel, imagines an integration of artificial intelligence into the transfer of Indigenous languages: “Once an AI was fluent in our language it would be much simpler to share *nēhiyaw nisitohtamowin* and welcome it into our cultural processes” (Lewis et al.).

This tension between technology and the interpersonal transfer of language is vocalized in *âniskôhîcikan* by Kat who expresses a certain hesitation towards the nanite technology:

“They’ll only ever speak Cree. That’s what the nanites did. Do. Unless I speak Cree, our own daughter doesn’t even really hear my voice. She hears the translator. Not me.”
The Elder pursed her lips. “You think you aren’t the ones teaching her? Raising her? Is the sound that important? She won’t hear you sign, either.” (211)

Kat’s Cree learning experience guides the reader through the short story and might be encouraging to language learners. The conversation between Kat and the Elder highlights how some of the co-parents struggle with their children being fluent in a language other than the co-parents’. The Elder points to the intricacies of communicating with one’s children and how communication is not only verbal. The fact that

most of the co-parents' first language is English relates to the loss of language fluency and the "inherited shame that is part of the intergenerational effects of the linguistic genocide that Indian residential schools attempted to carry out" (Robinson 96). Having internalized the colonial perspective of Indigenous languages as inferior, no longer being able to fluently speak their languages, or fearing that their children would face discrimination when speaking an Indigenous language, many residential school survivors did not teach their children their native language.

At present, language revitalization is increasingly being reclaimed by Indigenous parents like Emmaline Beauchamp (Mshkogaabwid Kwe), who teaches her children Anishinaabemowin despite not yet being fluent in the language herself ("How Indigenous People"). Further examples of language transmission by parents who are not yet fluent speakers themselves are Louellyn White (Kanien'keha:ka) and Amber Hayward (Puyallup and Salish). White affirms: "Like most Kanien'keha:ka, I don't know how to speak or understand much of our language, but I'm making a conscious effort to pass on what I can in hopes my son will grow up with a stronger sense of self and cultural identity as Onkwehon:we than I did" (McCarty et al. 167). Hayward explains that she is working with the concept of "language nests" and establishing particular rooms in her home as English-free zones where she exclusively "speak[s] Lushootseed" ("Can Our Ancestors"). She notes that upholding these English-free zones outside of the home can be challenging within settler-colonial infrastructures. In her book, *Bringing Our Languages Home*, Hinton further includes case studies of individual language reclamation initiatives by Indigenous parents.

Similar to many of these language learning practices taking place at home or "family language policy" (McIvor and McCarty 433)—"âniskôhîcikan" centres the communal living space as a site for language revitalization. While the debate around language revitalization tends to focus on settler-colonial institutions, the role of the home and community is sometimes overlooked by mainstream media. Three of sîkwan's co-parents discuss and engage in language revitalization at home in a conversation about the word *âniskôhîcikan*, which one co-parent glosses as "string of beads" (207), a potential Cree term "for the nanites" (207). Vowel uses the co-parents' conversation to highlight how the nanites are "just infrastructure. The translator,

mostly. Doesn't work without the data" (207). The proposed term is deemed fitting, as "[b]eads are just infrastructure, too" (207). As Josh, one of the co-parents, explains, the beads function as the container for places, stories, and knowledges. These stories and knowledges must be activated by a person's experiences or memories, such as Josh's beadwork, which illustrates the land he grew up on. These debates about naming highlight the community's engagement with the language and careful consideration of naming practices. Understanding the beads as infrastructure, and thus expanding what is usually considered infrastructure in Western epistemologies, provides an avenue for thinking about alternatives to the harmful and violent infrastructures of settler colonialism.

In fact, the discussion points to how the futuristic language technology is understood through and designed according to Cree and Métis epistemologies. Hence, *âniskôhôtikan* asserts the relevance and resurgence of Cree and Métis epistemologies in the future. Whereas, in the beginning of the short story, Amber translates *âniskôhôtikan* as "string of beads" (207), the Elder adds to this meaning by explaining that "âniskôhôtikan is a string of beads tied end to end, like the hanks you can buy . . . âniskê refers to being linked together end to end. âniskôtapanak means the ancestors, but also our descendants" (212). The statement adds layers of meaning to the word. The meaning of the story's title being slowly contextualized for the reader mirrors the language learning experience within the story. The Elder's explanation also addresses non-linear temporality as a central tenet of Indigenous futurisms, a term coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon. Indeed, Indigenous futurisms—and Indigenous epistemologies more generally—understand the past, present, and future as fluid and not as strictly separated from one another (see Gombay and Palomino-Schalscha, Raheja, and Runnels, qtd. in Lutz 105).

By comparing Vowel's titles of the three versions, one notices that Cree is integrated with increasing prominence. There is a development from a solely English title, to the translation of a Cree word, to a Cree title. This mirrors the language development highlighted in the three versions and represents an increasing language fluency. This is underlined by Vowel's choice to use *âniskôhôtikan* as the umbrella term for all three versions of the story in her anthology. However, I do not want to assume a sequentiality or linear temporality of the stories.

Often, Indigenous stories follow non-linear, cyclical patterns. For Kyle Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi Nation),

an Anishinaabe perspective on intergenerational time . . . [is] a perspective embedded in a spiraling temporality (sense of time) in which it makes sense to consider ourselves as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously as we walk through life . . . Experiences of spiraling time, then, may be lived through narratives of cyclicity, reversal, dream-like scenarios, . . . [or] slipstream. (228–29)

Whereas the individual versions of the story are not written in a cyclical structure, one can think of them all existing at the same time.

Although the co-parents “often just respond [] in English” (211) to *sikwan*, the child at the centre of Vowel’s story, they are also learning Cree through “listening and understanding” (210). The children will teach their parents Cree—and do so, at present, by communicating in Cree—rather than the other way around. This quotidian teaching is exemplified in the following instance: “When they were one on one, *sikwan* tended to speak much slower for her mother’s benefit” (210). The language learning process is further illustrated through the dynamic meaning of words, correction by more fluent speakers, as well as stumbling over words. These practices can be described as “the trial and error experimentation opportunities that a healthy speech community provides” (Hermes et al. 276).

Some Cree words that are not translated in the text are *mooshum* (208), which translates to grandfather, *tôhtô* (208), which translates to bosom, and *kookum* (209), which translates to grandmother,² the approximate meanings of which the reader can more or less gather from context. Before the Elder starts speaking in English to Kat, Kat tries to speak Cree:

“Uh, I don’t, um, *apisîs nêhiyawêwin*.”
“*apisîs kinêhiyawân*,” the Elder correct[s] her gently.
Kat flushes[s] and nods[s], “*apisîs ki . . . no. apisîs nînêhiyawân*,” she [says] back dutifully. (210)

Based on the context of the conversation, the reader can conclude that Kat explains she is not fluent in Cree yet. In fact, the sentence translates to “I only speak a little Cree.” (The prefixes “ki-” and “ni-” signify “the first person” and “the second person,” respectively [“NI-1 Regular Stems”].) The story addresses the complex emotions connected to (re)learning one’s language—“the syllables tug [] at a grief [Kat doesn’t] often acknowledge” (213)—as well as the envy towards more fluent language speakers. The reader learns that Kat feels “embarrassment” at not yet being fluent in Cree (210). These descriptions of Kat’s feelings show yet another facet of language learning: feelings of discomfort and shame are the result of colonial assimilationist and genocidal policies. Depicting these emotions in the future speaks to the intergenerational impact of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, for instance. A question that the story does not answer is whether the technology would also work with other Indigenous languages.

The Western infrastructure of a school that predominantly accommodates learning inside has been adapted and learning takes place in a “greenhouse” with “small areas within the greenery to sit, play, and learn” (209). Cree/Métis architecture, then, aligns the infrastructure of the school with Cree/Métis epistemologies. This is a particularly powerful image when we consider the history of residential schools, which suppressed Indigenous languages and violently punished Indigenous children for speaking them.³ Moreover, the learning environment described in “*āniskôhōcikan*” ensures that Cree and Métis children can stay in their communities and do not have to attend schools that are structured by the priorities of non-Indigenous decision makers far away from their communities, and, significantly, their land and waters.

The separation of education from community becomes even more precarious when taking into account the centrality of land to Indigenous education. As Armstrong contends:

In [a] sense, all Indigenous peoples’ languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it. Over time and many generations of their people, it is their distinctive interaction with a precise geography which forms the way indigenous language is shaped. (144)

Armstrong emphasizes how (hi)stories of land are reflected in and transmitted through Indigenous languages. Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) writes that, “if the land speaks, too, then there’s something even more profound at work here, possibilities for continuity unavailable in a world where humanity is the only form of personhood” (51). Taking the agency of land seriously involves engaging with epistemologies contained in Indigenous languages, including the understanding of land as kin. These examples highlight how important it is that education take place not only indoors, but also out on the land, and how teachings need to be connected to land-based knowledges. Vowel’s story imagines a school that does precisely that.

Similar to Lewis’ outlining the agency of Indigenous people in designing technology, Vowel’s story places the agency and authority for Cree language revitalization within the community, with no mention of the involvement of the settler-colonial Canadian state. The only information the reader learns that evokes this context is that three of the co-parents are studying at a university, but that might also be an Indigenous-created and Indigenous-led university. Hence, the future imaginary of language learning in “*âniskôhôtikan*” is not noticeably restricted by settler-colonial boundaries, institutions, or laws. However, these Indigenization practices do take place within the settler-colonial state. The Elder affirms of her students: “They’re Cree and Métis children in a colonial state. Their lives were never going to be normal” (213). The story is hopeful in terms of language revitalization and shows a future in which Cree and Métis children are born as fluent Cree speakers, placing the younger generation at the forefront of language revitalization. However, the children equipped with the nanite technology are no longer capable of learning other languages (211). This raises complex questions in terms of the Canadian state, officially bilingual in English and French, and the variety of Indigenous languages in Canada alone.

Deafness and Language in “*âniskôhôtikan*”

It is rare to see disability featured in settler-colonial futurist imaginaries, at least in terms of disability not being portrayed as a barrier. A few of the children born with the nanite technology have

“experienced gradual hearing loss or been born deaf” (211). As a result, “everyone, including all the parents, would be learning Plains Sign Language” (211). The short story thus points to an increasing prominence of Indigenous sign languages, many of which are also endangered (cf. Senier 11). Parents learning sign language to be able to communicate with all the children further attests to this web of kinship relations that transcends the heteronormative nuclear family.

This prioritization of fluency in Plain Signs Language speaks to the need, as Sage Lovell attests, for

more Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) [to] work[] as interpreters . . . Deaf BIPOC communities need interpreters that represent them; to have BIPOC interpreters understand what it’s like to experience racism; and to minimize the racist experiences that Deaf folks have with white sign language interpreters. (170–71)

Indigenous children at residential schools sometimes used sign language to be able to communicate with their peers from other Indigenous communities. Vowel’s inclusion of Plains Sign Language as one of the languages that is being revitalized speaks to an increased visibility and support for disabilities. Siobhan Senier argues that an “insistence on tribally specific, grounded disability practices can be seen as another way of asserting sovereignty” (11), referring to the importance of American Indian Sign Language. The way in which Vowel narrates deafness as an unquestioned part of her future imagination speaks to Indigenous communities “not necessarily constru[ing] disability as a category of otherness” (Senier 18). Similarly, Lavonna L. Lovern notes that “most Indigenous languages have no word for disabled or impaired and so the ideas and associations or relationships often do not have translations outside of the specific communities’ language.” Taking into account that a wealth of Indigenous knowledges is contained in language, Lovern’s argument points to disability being a settler-colonial designation or category. While deafness is not a central theme in Vowel’s story, the integration of deafness expands the notion of language revitalization.

Future Imaginaries of Language Learning

Drew Hayden Taylor's (Ojibway) anthology *Me Tomorrow* centres Indigenous visions for the future. One of the topics raised by several contributors is language revitalization. Interestingly, Tae:howęhs (Mohawk), also known as Amos Key Jr., refers to the Indigenous Languages Act, which was passed in 2019 and provoked criticism from various Indigenous communities. This federal initiative was preceded by "the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (2005), the 2007 Nunavut Official Languages Act, and the Inuit Language Protection Act" (McIvor and McCarty 424). The Indigenous Languages Act has encountered criticism, for instance, for not supporting "immersion schools" in Indigenous languages (Fontaine, Leitch, and Nicholas), being underfunded, and not including Inuit languages (cf. Brake). The future that Tae:howęhs imagines sees Canadian policies rethought and adapted to reflect the diversity of Indigenous communities: "The official languages of Canada will include the more than seventy Indigenous languages of the Indigenous Civilizations of Canada" (175). Hence, this future vision counters the imaginative geography (as theorized, e.g., by Edward Said and Derek Gregory) of Canada as a bilingual country and addresses the lack of both funding and public services in Indigenous languages, compared to French. Tae:howęhs envisions concrete changes to the Indigenous Languages Act:

The Commissioner of Indigenous Languages will have the authority to hear appeals and will enact policy for an arbitration mechanism to remedy these appeals that the original Bill C-91 did not include. The Office of Indigenous Languages will be expanded to appoint three Language Commissioners, one each for the Métis, Inuit and First Nations. (175)

By contrast, Vowel's short story does not focus on state-mandated transformation. Rather, she imagines language revitalization as Indigenous-led. This future imaginary of education closely mirrors current practices and traditions of Indigenous language revitalization, which Knott Fife outlines in *Me Tomorrow*:

There is good news in that an optimal place of learning is being created in some degree in many First Nations today. While many communities likely do not have the desired physical structure that encompasses all that they dream of within their desired 'learning lodge,' our communities have worked with what we've had at hand since time immemorial. (126–27)

The fluidity of past, present, and future language learning is thus present in both "āniskôhōcikan" and Knott Fife's essay "Our Education Tomorrow." "Our Education Tomorrow" also includes both a more theoretical discussion and a final section that resembles a short story, or perhaps even microfiction, titled "Kinoomaagewgamig" ("learning lodge" 135). Just like Vowel's "āniskôhōcikan," Knott Fife's piece thus resists strict categorization and highlights the role of storytelling as theory-creation and transfer. It is striking how similar Vowel's vision is to the one mapped out by Knott Fife:

There is a class there now with Shomis, Grandfather, instructing the group in how to assemble the layers of a sacred fire that represent family and community and sharing why there are differences between types of fireplaces and fires. Across the small clearing beyond the fire area, a group of students is preparing to walk the kilometer or so to the marsh for today's teachings on the land. The horrible stories that Nokomis had been told by her mother of the clinical and cold school that Kob'de had attended far away from her family were becoming distant memories . . . (Knott Fife 136–37)

Knott Fife's and Vowel's future imaginaries both centre land-based learning, the teaching by Elders, impressions of past sterile and claustrophobic settler-colonial school structures, and the importance of cultural context in pedagogy (Vowel, "āniskôhōcikan" 209). In "Kinoomaagewgamig," language revitalization is enacted through the use of Anishinaabe words and a learning environment that is reflective of and shaped by Anishinaabe epistemologies. Not all words

are translated, but the reader can glean the meaning of the words from the context.

Conclusion

“âniskôhôtikan” is exemplary of a Métis future vision of language revitalization that works within, makes use of, and transcends settler-colonial borders and technologies. In this future, Cree language learning takes place in an Indigenized environment that highlights practices of education, community, and kinship. This alternative form of learning is reflected in the three versions of the short story that contest settler-colonial temporalities and, partly, linguistic norms. To different degrees, the three versions of Vowel’s text leave room for the reader to fill the blanks through their imagination, encouraging them to ask questions.

Technology continues to be essential to many Indigenous language projects, be it podcasts, TV shows, or art installations. Hence, though the technology Vowel imagines is not realized yet, it is indicative of current language revitalization efforts that can be characterized through their multimodality and their grounding in community. Something that is prominently represented in all language revitalization projects discussed in this article is land: the interconnection between languages and the land, the kinship relations with the land, and language revitalization taking place on the land. Technology can be seen as rooted in the land, as Suzanne Kite (Oglala Lakota) notes: “AI is formed from not only code, but from materials of the earth” (Lewis et al.). While language is the focus of “âniskôhôtikan,” the story also presents queer and disabled future imaginaries. In consequence, it addresses the active role of language in community-building, in shaping technology, and thus in creating material possibilities for the future. Despite “âniskôhôtikan” being accessible to readers who are not fluent in Cree, Vowel does not translate everything. Thus, arguably, the story is primarily addressed to Cree speakers and language learners. Indigenous creative work such as Vowel’s increases the visibility of Indigenous languages and question how—and in which language—the future is narrated.

Notes

1. For many Indigenous communities, communal deliberation is key to decision-making and future envisioning practices. On the one hand, this takes place in a community-specific, e.g., Nishnaabeg, context (Simpson 22–25). On the other hand, using the example of workshops, Michelle Lee Brown and colleagues outline how these considerations can be mobilized to design future technologies that are more in line with aspects from various Indigenous epistemologies.
2. Vowel explains that this designation is actually not grammatically correct in Cree: “Oh but it’s bad Cree, hey? We’re actually saying ‘my your grandmother’! Doesn’t matter really, I still say kookum so that people who aren’t fluent Cree speakers know who I’m talking about. But I also say nōhkom, which is how you say ‘my grandmother’ properly. I say things like, ‘nōhkom, my kookum used to etc. etc.’” (Vowel, “Cree Kinship Terms”).
3. See, for instance, Hinton and Meek’s book chapter “Language Acquisition” in which they address the multidimensional impact of residential and boarding schools on language transmission.

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Lines, Lineage, and Belonging in Louise Erdrich's Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country and Lisa Bird-Wilson's Probably Ruby

The marvel of a basket is in its transformation, its journey from wholeness as a living plant to fragmented strands and back to wholeness again as a basket. A basket knows the dual powers of destruction and creation that shape the world. Strands once separated are rewoven into a new whole. The journey of a basket is also the journey of a people.

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

In the passage above, Potawatomi author Robin Wall Kimmerer provides a thoughtful depiction of the intertwined relationship between the individual and the whole and offers a compelling understanding of the journey of lines. In this description of basket weaving, each strand, or line, comes together and interacts with those around it; it is a process of becoming part of a whole while remaining separate, not unlike each relationship that contributes to the formation of identity. These strands within the basket are also helpful in providing examples of lines that are considered connective, rather than viewed as barriers. However, this productive process is not without its difficulties, and the pieces are not always whole or uninterrupted. Indeed, Kimmerer observes “fragmented strands” and the “dual powers of destruction and creation” that contribute to the transformative product of the basket. Not unlike the weaving involved in the making of the basket, she also remarks that a “certain amount of tension” is required in the process of braiding (ix). A balance between wholeness and separation, as well as stress and ease, is reflected in both processes.

Similar to the woven creation of the basket, the metaphor of a braid grounds Kimmerer’s monograph. She explains how, in her text, three strands are braided together— “[I]ndigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist

trying to bring them together in service to what matters most” (x). She braids these distinct strands into the stories across the pages to “imagine a different relationship” between the human and more-than-human that is based on healing, reciprocity, respect, and animacy (x). However, when strands are braided, parts of each strand are in direct contact with one another but remain hidden from an outsider’s view. Without a consideration for these hidden parts of each strand (or line), the strands would appear fractured. The braid therefore produces encounters and interactions between these individual strands, only some of which an outsider is privy to. If each strand is a story, as Kimmerer identifies, I seek to emulate the approach of Métis scholar Warren Cariou in his influential article “On Critical Humility,” and acknowledge that many interactions between stories—and lines—are not meant to be fully known or understood. As a settler scholar, I seek to engage deeply and ethically with Indigenous stories but also to acknowledge that, as in the braid, there are interactions, readings, and interpretations I am not privy to.

This paper delves into the connective power of lines and their contributions towards lineages and belonging. Like Kimmerer, whose anecdotes about braids and baskets acknowledge the importance of fragmented strands and their return journeys to wholeness, I interpret the diverse representations of lines in Turtle Mountain Chippewa author Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* and Métis and nēhiyaw author Lisa Bird-Wilson’s *Probably Ruby* as evidence of interaction across barriers—of generative processes that link rather than divide.¹ As Erdrich herself explains in her observation of an island’s pictograph, images of lines “express relationships” and hold “power and communication” (45). This essay demonstrates how Bird-Wilson’s and Erdrich’s texts encourage us to interpret lines in a more expansive way, as something connective rather than divisive, as a non-linear, non-dominating, and, occasionally, fragmented form.

Bird-Wilson’s *Probably Ruby* explores both the generative and the destructive potential of relationships as they contribute to the formation of identity. The 2020 novel follows Ruby’s journey into understanding her unknown Indigenous ancestry and, notably, begins with a hand-drawn illustration of “Ruby’s Relationship Web.” This central, prefatory image conveys what *probably* makes up *Ruby*, depicting a convoluted and interrupted web of lines with Ruby figured

at its centre. Ruby appears as a distorted drawing at the web's interior, and the exterior is made up of the names of characters within the novel, each name listed in a different font or handwritten style that surrounds the web.

The relationship web uses various styles of line—some bolded, dashed, coloured in, or even multiplied. Each line, and the relationship it symbolizes, differs from the next and are often connected to additional characters in a way that negates clear endings and beginnings. The diverse lines that construct Ruby's web foreshadow her search for a sense of belonging—of *lineage*—throughout the text, but also reflect the novel's form, which is similarly complex, non-linear, and relational. This web, a variation on a typical family tree, also presents a confrontation and complication of how lines are commonly understood: rather than a straightforward and divisive presentation—which is typical even of lineages and family trees that depict a linear, easy-to-follow progression—Ruby's relationships, like the web, are complex and rarely clear-cut. The webbed lines illustrate fragments as well as unity, absences as well as presence. Bird-Wilson's approach to lines from the outset demonstrates how lines, even when fractured, have restorative and relational potential. Ruby's web conveys how lines can be simultaneously broken and whole.

In her memoir, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country: Traveling through the Land of My Ancestors* (2003), Erdrich points to a similarly expansive perspective on the power of the line. In this memoir, Erdrich visits the (is)lands of her ancestors, connecting the space to Ojibwe traditions through her observations of the landscape while outlining the inescapable presence and force of books in her life. One chapter of her memoir is devoted to the islands' rock paintings, each of which represents an Ojibwe story or teaching recounted by Erdrich. Erdrich explains that rock paintings depict "major forms of communication with the spirit world," and points to the vibrant form of the line that constructs these paintings:

The line is a sign of power and communication. It is sound, speech, song. The lines drawn between things in Ojibwe pictographs are extremely important, for they express relationships, usually between a human and a

supernatural being. Wavy lines are most impressive, for they signify direct visionary information, talk from spirit to spirit. (45)

Similar to Bird-Wilson's opening image, Erdrich's observations of the rock paintings foreground relationships, pointing to the connective capabilities of lines. These reflections are also prompted by further images of lines, recreated in printed works, which encourage readers to not only read descriptions of these lines' potential, but also to experience it.

Identity is particularly relevant to Erdrich's and Bird-Wilson's narratives, and both texts feature a protagonist exploring her relationship to her Indigenous culture. Erdrich reveals her ties to books, places, and people in a confident manner, expressing her understanding of what constitutes her home, her land, and her family. *Probably Ruby*, in contrast, follows protagonist Ruby and her attempts to understand her obscured Indigenous heritage after being adopted by a white family. In an interview with Shelagh Rogers, Bird-Wilson explains Ruby's quest for connection through kinship as "her driving motivation." Bird-Wilson constructs Ruby's narrative into a fragmented, non-chronological structure, with the story being told from a third-person point of view but following a different character in each chapter. Most of these characters interact directly with Ruby, yet there is never a chapter devoted explicitly to her perspective.² Compared to *Books and Islands*, *Probably Ruby* depicts a less confident account of self-discovery, wherein Ruby must navigate the outside force of her adoption and how it instills a sense of unfamiliarity within her.

While *Probably Ruby* has yet to be analyzed in a scholarly form, scholarship on Bird-Wilson's other works emphasizes themes of dislocation and identity. Alison Calder, in particular, contemplates the struggles that Bird-Wilson's Métis characters experience in asking "what home is, and what it is to be Métis" when "you don't have land to return to" (3). In contrast with this uncertainty and dislocation, many scholars have remarked on the reciprocity between Erdrich and her Ojibwe culture, concluding that she contributes to a certain reclamation—of language (Knoeller), genre (Krivokapić), and mapping (Rymhs). Placing these scholarly conversations in juxtaposition highlights the differences between Erdrich's more

tangible ancestral connection and Ruby's more abstract one. In my investigation of the nuanced depictions of belonging, identity, and relationships in these texts, however, I seek to transcend these potential binaries through the power of fragments or ruptures.

In his 2018 monograph *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Cherokee Nation citizen and scholar Daniel Heath Justice devotes his last chapter to analyzing ruptures. While the rest of his chapters focus on the presence of Indigenous stories and their abilities to confront stereotypes or absences of representation, in "Reading the Ruptures," Justice considers how to navigate moments or events of erasure. Justice explains that "ruptures, too, can be read. The absences tell stories of their own" (186–87). Rather than viewing ruptures as inherently negative, he hopes to view them as "formative" and to consider their meanings: "By reading the ruptures as well as the presences, the intact as well as the broken, we may come to a humbler sense of wonder, and, I hope, a generosity towards ourselves and each another, a recognition of the myriad ways our experiences likely shouldn't reach across our difference but thankfully so often do" (204). Like Kimmerer, Justice emphasizes a balance between wholeness and fractures, and he also points to the possibility of moving towards continuity and strength while acknowledging these broken lines. Ruptures and presences, then, do not have to contradict one another. In this analysis of lines, lineage, and belonging, I hope to reflect Justice's sense of recognition and wonder in confronting this division that associates lines and absences with ruptures and fragments.

My relational comparison, lastly, takes inspiration from NunatuKavut scholar Kristina Bidwell's literary approach entitled "narrative relationalism." This approach promotes "looking at diverse stories, not only to compare them, but to think about how they relate to one another, create social meaning, circulate to various audiences, and influence human actions" (1). Rather than employing oppositional or extractivist thinking, Lisa Brooks (Abenaki) explains that a relational approach recognizes "relationships to other humans with whom we share common experience and common bonds. Identity is thus always relational, and grounded in a particular place and its history" (241). Broadly speaking, Bidwell asserts how relationality is "grounded in Indigenous experiences, values, and histories" (Bidwell and Charlton 185), but she recognizes its potential to create a "deep" and potentially

“discomfort[ing]” engagement “across differences” (186-87). In other words, relationality refers to the ability to connect across differences, including across peoples and the more-than-human, to recognize shared experiences, stories, and/or spaces. Rather than focusing solely on positive connections, a relational analysis acknowledges that relationships can also be defined by conflicts or other instances of tension (194). By bringing together Bird-Wilson’s Métis and *nēhiyaw* story with Erdrich’s Ojibwe one, I seek to highlight the productive potential of pairing them to expand an understanding of lines as boundaries, but also to negotiate and respect the works’ differences.

Nevertheless, the tension of difference often discloses unexpected or overlooked connections. A relational comparison of Ojibwe and Métis histories, for instance, might consider the contact between these groups that occurred in the eighteenth century. As a result of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s expansion of the fur trade, the Ojibwe migrated westward towards Cree and Métis populations (McCollough 137). The Plains-based Ojibwe thus often coexisted with the Cree and the Métis, aiding them in various conflicts, even in the resistance of the Red River Métis, as well as engaging in trade and intermarriages (“The Anishinaabe”).³ In the same spirit, my relational analysis takes into account the ability to connect across differences and comprises a consideration of shared experiences, stories, and spaces that refutes a conception of lines simply as restrictive boundaries.

Moving Beyond the Line as Boundary

In both works, Ruby and Erdrich demonstrate the ability to refute the limits of borders in favour of more fluid alternatives. For Ruby, in an account of her fenced-in childhood, she discovers an opportunity to break free of her restrictive environment. The fence around her childhood yard initially holds true to its expected purpose: a boundary that keeps Ruby, according to her adoptive mother, Alice, “where she [is] allowed to be” (Bird-Wilson 17). Working under this restriction, Ruby makes various attempts to complicate this threshold defined by her mother’s reach and observation, and she comes to find a “small square patch of grass” that is out of view of the kitchen window and keeps her “invisible” from Alice’s gaze (16). Ruby turns

the “small space just for her” into “a hideaway, a place of her own to curl into, out of her mother’s sight” (16). In her hideaway, the lines of the fence mark out a safe space, granting Ruby freedom from Alice only a slight distance from her careful watch. However, the small space also provides her with the opportunity to explore new spaces, in a new sightline, with her neighbour David: Ruby identifies how “David’s eyes, locked on hers, were more reassuring than alarming. Also comforting was the way David showed up every day at the same time, like she could count on him” (18). Their locked gaze overcomes the “fence between them like a force field” (17), and produces feelings of reliability and comfort for Ruby. She observes how David meets his own boundary on his daily bike rides with his older brother as they are required to stop at the mailboxes as though hitting “an invisible fence” (19). She interprets his experience as similar to her own, expressing a desire for understanding and reciprocity as they each overcome their spatial restrictions through this sightline. And in what she labels a “naked gaze” (18), Bird-Wilson seemingly confronts the separation of a fence with an intimate descriptor, highlighting how Ruby herself yearns for and finds, albeit briefly, a form of connection she has lacked until now. The emphasis on the sightline over the fence reconceptualizes the boundary line not meant to be crossed into a space rooted in relationality and closeness rather than division.

Furthermore, Ruby finds the opportunity to physically extend past the fence and connect with something and someone new, that is, an Indigenous language, Cree, and an Indigenous language-speaker. Her neighbour, Mrs. Fisher, waves Ruby over, stating, “Astum. Come,” with “a generous smile” (29). The wave presents an interaction between people, with Mrs. Fisher’s gesture extending towards Ruby. For the first time, Ruby climbs over the fence and experiences a new space and a new language, encounters that will remain with her. Rushing back to her yard to avoid being caught out-of-bounds by her mother, Ruby falls, and the wooden fence bruises “her bony groin” (31). After her mother sees her bloody underwear, she questions Ruby as to whether anyone touched her and calls the doctor. The doctor’s visit reduces Ruby to an object of study, a body “that is no longer hers” (34). As she is “prodded” and “commanded,” her pleas go ignored and eventually hushed (34). Despite Ruby’s adventure resulting in a horrific visit from a doctor, she remembers and vows to keep inside, “most of all, the way

Mrs. Fisher laid her hand on her head like a warm ray of sunshine” (34). Not letting go of this memory, “Ruby holds on” to it to prevent a return to the present moment (34), recalling also Mrs. Fisher’s pond filled with “swirling orange fish” (34) that are “alive with movement” (30). Although Ruby feels remorse for their repeated and trapped swirling, the way they “endlessly [curl] in on themselves and [flip] the other way to try anew” (30), she projects this image of animate, swirling lines onto the “flaking” ceiling (34). While representative of the “same dance, [where] over and over they got the same result” (30) that Ruby later experiences in her repeating, trapped relationships, Ruby finds strength and an extension from her current limiting surroundings. These interactions with David and Mrs. Fisher, depicted through sightlines, waves, and trapped swirls, provide Ruby with a temporary escape from her spatial restrictions.

While Ruby overcomes boundary lines such as fences, Erdrich negotiates and troubles a settler-colonial border. Erdrich’s memoir sees her travel in her traditional homelands around Lake of the Woods on both sides of the US-Canada border. As the subtitle indicates, Erdrich’s memoir relates its author’s travels through the land of her ancestors. To overcome the current settler limitations of borders, Erdrich prefaces her text with a map whose presentation confronts lines as boundaries. In “Across Borders,” Deena Rymhs recognizes that Erdrich’s depiction of “borderland spaces . . . challenge[s] settler mappings” and astutely notes how Erdrich emphasizes the bolded “Ojibwe Country” label over the smaller size (and, therefore, significance) of colonial territorial markers such as Canada, the US, and the border itself (121–22). The border, however, certainly exists, despite the lesser significance Erdrich grants it in her map, and it is one that she must navigate throughout her travels. In Erdrich’s recollection of one of these crossings, despite her attempts “not to be nervous,” she finds that she “can’t help it” (Erdrich 83). Her experience of crossing the border is not pleasant, with Erdrich recollecting the “hate” she feels regarding “the questioning, the scrutiny, [and] the suspicious nature of the border guards” despite the Jay Treaty, “which guarantees Native People the right to cross the Canadian-US border without hassle” (84–85). Erdrich infuses this recollection with horror, asking by the end of this section, “What have they done to me?” (85). The border line here is a dividing one and is crossed physically

through Erdrich's eventual movement into Canada, but a line is also crossed metaphorically, as the guards ignore the Jay Treaty and go so far as to question Erdrich about whether her baby daughter with whom she is travelling is actually her own.

To extend past the Western conception of the line, Erdrich returns to her Ojibwe ways of living by going "back onto a lake" (85). Countering the dehumanizing experience at the border, Erdrich expresses the power of the wavy line through actual waves with her travels through the Ojibwe lake, as the "[w]avy lines are most impressive" from the pictograph lines (45). Erdrich is joined on her island travels by her partner, Tobasonakwut, the father of her youngest child, with whom she navigates these literal waves. Recalling Tobasonakwut's history with and understanding of the lake, Erdrich repeats a phrase from Tobasonakwut's father that asserts a generative power of waves and establishes a connection between waves and people: "The creator is the lake and we are the waves on the lake" (27, 64). Water is not only mere waves, but a space full of movement and life. When "Tobasonakwut shows [Erdrich] how the waves are creating underwaves and counterwaves," he conveys the waves' layered complexity which he takes into account when travelling across the lake (64), while furthering the comparison between people and waves. The counterwaves, for instance, reflect the various and occasional opposing feelings within relationships in a manner similar to the "shifting mutability of human nature" (65). Even the continuity or generational aspect of waves is alluded to through its underwaves, evoking an image of growing a child under the initial layer of skin or adding another line to your *lineage*. Erdrich's travels with Tobasonakwut through the waves to the islands reveals their relational consideration of the lake as a living thing they must respectfully encounter and respond to. Not unlike the wave offered by Ruby's neighbour that results in the initial contact with her Indigenous roots, these wavy lines produce alternatives to the strict and harmful lines of fences and borders, offering a respectful—rather than a domineering—opportunity for movement across these spaces.

Lines, Lineages, and Belonging

While Erdrich's travels lead her across the islands and bring her closer to her Ojibwe roots, Ruby's direction is not as conventionally linear. Bird-Wilson's fragmented narrative aligns with Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle's discussion about forced changes and the resulting "horror" that occurs "having had change foisted upon you from outside" (13). Because of her adoption into a non-Indigenous family, Ruby is dislocated from her Métis roots; once she learns of her background, she realizes, "*I'm not who I think I am*" (Bird-Wilson, *Probably* 149).⁴ Her narrative resonates with Maracle's notion of forced transformation because of Ruby's forceful removal from her kin, which is shared with the reader through her biological mother's chapter "Grace." A phrase that Ruby later learns from her therapist, "*wounded at dawn*," sticks "with [her] all these years" (86), pointing to her adoption as a potential root of her problems with intimacy. Reading Ruby's sense of having being "*wounded at dawn*" through an Anishinaabe lens presents an additional, relational interpretation considering the larger pairings between the Ojibwe-authored and Cree- and Métis-authored texts of this analysis. In *As We Have Always Done* (2017), Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson associates dawn with the concept of *biidaaban*, which refers to "the verb for when day breaks, the actual moment daylight appears at dawn, not as a prolonged event but the very moment. My own interpretation of this is that the present, then, is a colliding of the past and the future" (193). Through dawn and *biidaaban*, Simpson reveals the potential of the "present, this *presence*, that will create flight paths out of colonialism" because of its spatiotemporal affiliation (193). In other words, this moment that merges time and space produces alternatives to colonialism. This understanding of dawn as *biidaaban* can relay both the destructive power of Ruby's initial wounding as well as indicating the possibility of moving beyond the woundedness that haunts her.

Ruby attempts to decipher her relationship web by frequently returning to the idea of lineage, of family and roots. The narrator affirms this search for kinship in Ruby's relationship with Moe, Ruby's ex-husband and father to her two boys:

It was important to [Ruby] that Moe [is] Métis. His [is] essentially the only Native family she [has]. That [is] why it [is] so impossible for her to leave Moe even though he [gives] her so many reasons to want to. He [is] tied to all the things she misse[s] and wishe[s] for. He [is] still her “big Métis hope.” Moe [is] part of her fantasy about his family, about finding out that they [are] somehow connected—related, maybe, in a distant way. That really, truly, and by blood, she belong[s]. (146)

Unlike Erdrich, who directly engages with Ojibwe knowledge in her memoir, Ruby fantasizes about understanding her Métis heritage. Moe acts as a potential avenue but remains, at most, a hope. Ruby expands on this hope for belonging, though, through her elaborate fabrication of the “mythology” she creates for her children (77), with her careful curation of “Native art, cheap prints from second-hand stores, portraits of children and Elders from villages she [doesn’t] know where” (76). She tries to ensure her children do not feel “the weird amnesia” that Ruby herself feels (77). And “Ruby’s attempt to dream herself back together” reveals her attempts to fill in the fragments, to make present what is absent and alter the narrative for her own children (77).

Ruby’s search for a relational line culminates with her constructing a lineage for herself, within herself. When meeting her ex-girlfriend, Gwen, Ruby has trouble recognizing herself in a bar bathroom mirror and exposes her concerns regarding her identity:

“Fuck *lost*.” Ruby [is] quite drunk now. “I didn’t lose anything,” she poke[s] her finger at herself in the mirror for emphasis. “*They* did.” Ruby picture[s] herself as a baby, swaddled in messy blankets, being passed from one set of hands to another. No. *Lost* was what *others* did. (89)

In this moment of drunken reflection, Ruby turns within to find some form of answer to and relief from her missing lineage. By pointing the finger at herself, she realizes that the line to her ancestry is something she must construct on her own, inciting a challenge within. As a result, Ruby creates her own fictional family, “lin[ing] her tiny nest of

mythology with each fragment she pick[s] up, twigs and leaves and bits of string; she hoard[s] each scrap and [builds] from them what she [can]. Scavenge[s] a narrative. Account[s] for herself. As faulty as it [is], as draughty and full of holes" (107). Her invented lineage is incomplete, scavenged and full of holes, but, as the novel progresses, Bird-Wilson shows how it is a lineage nonetheless. These metaphorical twigs and strings bring Ruby a more grounded narrative than the one provided from her adoption. The details of her process also reflect the nesting of a bird, and just as birds may construct or find various nests throughout their lifetimes, they are responsible for developing their own home, for creating their own nests or webs. Ruby's imaginary lineage thereby reveals a potential for contributing to her search for belonging.

Books and Islands sees Erdrich employ a similar strategy of grounding through lines when immersed in a setting that removes her from Ojibwe land-based traditions. Once she finishes traversing the Ojibwe islands, Erdrich resigns herself to spending a night at the Skylark Motel on her way home to Minneapolis. Here, she encounters "an island . . . of a very different sort" (77), where she notices the "unattractive nature of the towns and buildings" that form a "belligerent streak . . . [of] ugliness" (77). In this secluded setting, Erdrich returns to her frequent and, in this moment, comforting, question: "Books. Why?" (79). She answers herself: "For just such a situation. Marooned in this uneasy night, shaken by the periodic shudder of passing semi trucks, every sentence grips me. My brain holds onto each trailing line as though grasping a black rope in a threatening fog" (79). When visibility is low, Erdrich turns to the line to give her something to grip to guide her through a threatening fog. The book's lines, or "twists," invoke an "intimacy" that is comforting for Erdrich (79), granting her, in this instance, an escape from the physical towards the abstract not unlike Ruby's experience with the doctor. The lines grab her attention, connected to one another without end. Erdrich goes back and forth as she rereads or turns to the beginning of a new line, emphasizing the way reading can be a process of complex movement instead of a linear action. Erdrich's non-linear, repetitive reading pattern overcomes the separation that each end of the line and the blank border of a page may otherwise mark. She also displays how the process of starting over, a return of sorts, does not necessarily indicate weakness. The lines here are not only a distraction

but a thread of “calm” that guides her and distances her from the setting (79), extending past it. They act as more than a story, creating an intimate relationship between reader and words, one capable of removing Erdrich from the isolating motel and placing her in a comforting space.

Erdrich also reveals the function of lines in books that bring her closer to her ancestors. In addition to detailing the islands’ rock paintings, Erdrich relates her knowledge of, and her difficulty in learning, the Ojibwe language. Listing the various meanings of *Ojibwe*, Erdrich expresses the interactive power of writing. Erdrich explains how

the meaning [she likes] best of course is Ojibwe from the verb *Ozhibii’ige*, which is “to write.” Ojibwe people were great writers from way back and synthesized the oral and written tradition by keeping mnemonic scrolls of inscribed birchbark. The first paper, the first books. (8)

The lines made on the birchbark act in a similar way to the lines in any book, entangling past and present, as well as self and other, for whichever new reader interacts with the narrative. Indeed, one of the purposes Erdrich assigns to books when repeating her memoir’s guiding question, “Books. Why?” is communication beyond boundaries. She explains that books allow the reader and author to “talk . . . even though [one is] dead. Here we are, the writer and I, regarding each other” (43). The physical lines in the book cross temporal and physical boundaries as they relate a story and unite people through one object.

In listing the various meanings of *Ojibwe*, Erdrich also evokes another physical line, the thread of the moccasin. This line of thread binds fabric and tradition as it crosses the boundaries of time. Erdrich recalls the way she has “heard that Ojibwe refers to the puckering of the seams of traditional moccasins, or *makazinan*” (7). While not perhaps obvious at first glance, a line is formed by the seam and the thread that is used to sew the moccasin pieces together, not unlike the strands that weave into braid or basket. The maker of traditional moccasins creates a relationship in the act of sewing, bringing the sewer closer to Ojibwe culture with what is created when stitching the shoe with thread. The line is not straight, however. The thread goes

through one piece of fabric to the next, returning in either a wave or spiral pattern to achieve such an effect: in each stitch, the thread extends outwards and returns closer to the sewer. The stitch connects and continues, rather than separating as a boundary. This line therefore expresses the relationship between past and present in a process that merges past and present—that extends and returns.

In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Justice refers to one's "process of becoming" (33), which follows a similar movement of extension and return. As he argues for the power of Indigenous stories, he refers to the transformative potential of *Books and Islands*, explaining:

The aloneness of reading isn't loneliness. With books and other stories, whether experienced in solitude or lived community, we abide in human presence beyond the flesh and blood of personal experience. It's a remarkable alchemy, this storied transformation of self to other, and back again.

When we're in the presence of stories, we're never truly alone. (36)

The relationship between identity and the movement from self to other and back again mirrors Erdrich's reference to sewing as well as her interactions with her various books. The transformation achieved by the movement from self to other and back again, effected by words on the page, illustrates the way the boundaries of the self and the physical book are transcended through reading. The process occurs between the reader and the words on the page—or the subject of the text—momentarily uniting the two before extending back to the self. This action is reminiscent of bringing together two disparate pieces of cloth through sewing, with the moving thread extending outward, connecting pieces, and returning. And in the moments when thread is not visible, these absences and fragments are one-sided, a reflection of our positionality. Moreover, Justice explains that our "process of becoming" is based on "teachings" and "stories" that contribute to "what makes us human" (33, 34, 60). A broadening of our understanding of seemingly fragmented lines allows us to see these interactions, offering a method by which to understand the process of becoming within and beyond these two texts.

Lines that Extend, Connect, and Return

This pattern of extension and return is apparent in the two texts, and Erdrich's returns bring her back to books. She travels back to the bookstore she owns in Minnesota, but she also returns to her frequent "Books. Why?" question. To answer this question, she explains that "to be an Ojibwe" is to be "raised on stories and to contain many books in mind" (118). The stories within books, then, offer the transformative potential Justice outlines, connecting Erdrich to her culture while surrounding her with, between, and as part of these other stories held within her mind. She explains an additional significance of books and the feelings of belonging they can impart when she elaborates on the role of her bookstore, Birchbark Books: "This little bookstore is where I belong and where anyone can belong. It is a home for people who love books and a place that cannot be duplicated by any bookstore corporation—it is just too personal. It is an island, as lovingly itself as any in a lake" (116). The intimacy of the bookstore, of the books themselves, evokes Justice's sense of becoming, with Erdrich's individual process—her identity—affected and made up by the stories she includes, even one by British author George Eliot. And *this* island, that is, the memoir itself, as Erdrich extends away from her house into the islands of Ojibwe country, eventually leads to her coming back to the familiar scene of books. She finds a sense of home with these comforting, thought-provoking, and relational lines.

Aligning with Erdrich's trajectory in *Books and Islands*, *Probably Ruby* similarly depicts a return home for Ruby and her unknown (to her) family. The reader is given access to Ruby's actual lineage—to the other sides of the unseen, fragmented strands of Ruby's identity. Ruby's biological parents, Grace and Leon, show a similar pattern to Ruby of negotiating tense, fragmented lines in their various ruptures. In her chapter, Grace endeavours to leave what she terms "the Asylum" in order to keep her unborn baby, hoping to leave the group home her mother and stepfather brought her to. When preparing to give birth, Grace learns that the phrase "going over" (126)—which others at the institution frequently say—means *getting* over her pregnancy as if it did not occur. According to everyone but Grace, she will leave the "Asylum" remorseful but alone, as if virtuous principles will fill the absence left by her baby (126). Grace, however, "[knows]

better,” and she recognizes that her child cannot be completely separated from her: she “[knows] it [is] forever—[feels] its perpetual shadow on her insides. It [is] a scar, and she [is] marked. Her time in the Asylum now part of her permanent record” (129). The scar, in this case, represents simultaneously both a rupture and a presence, not unlike the previous fragmented lines. This line’s presence indicates her child’s absence, but Grace is the sole viewer of this line, with others pretending the pregnancy did not occur. And while this scar represents a rupture in the adoption that forcibly took Ruby from her birth mother, Justice affirms the abilities of scars to “tell their own beautiful and terrible truths of continuity, and only living flesh forms scars” (203). Grace’s scar represents a story that is supposed to remain hidden, a wound and an absence. However, as Justice identifies, the scar also represents an animate continuity and there is potential for Ruby to understand and reclaim these fragments.

Like Grace, Ruby’s father experiences an inability to return caused, for him, by distraction and divergence from a line. The chapter “Leon” is one of two chapters in the novel where readers are aware of the subject’s relationship to Ruby, but Ruby is absent from the narrative. Here, the narrator outlines Leon’s death by detailing his movement away from his intended course through a car accident caused by Leon driving off the road. After learning of his girlfriend Cynthia’s infidelity, Leon leaves his home in the middle of the night to drive into the city, although he cannot recall why he felt the desire to leave his home (36). On his way, Leon picks up two young hitchhikers and, while attempting to drive safely, he emphatically commands himself: “Just. Keep. Your eye. On. The dotted. Line” (38). His mind returns to thoughts of Cynthia, and these memories interrupt his narrowed sightline: he “should have been driving the centre line but he [loses] his concentration” (45), resulting in the accident that causes his death. He drifts away from this dotted line and remains unknown to Ruby, away from the central line of her life. Leon knows of his daughter and his failed responsibility, Ruby only a “foggy memory” that appears of “a long-ago daughter . . . A baby he never met. An unfulfilled promise” (44). He also offers Ruby no relief, even when she learns of his death. And while Ruby never meets her biological father, Leon is “[b]ound up in her creation, at the root of her web of being, he [is] substantial and yet fleeting” (104). He contributes to Ruby’s identity, rooted in her

Relationship Web, but he exists as a line without clear definition; his line is more uncertain. Her relationships with her parents are fragmented, yet Bird-Wilson's inclusion of their stories, even though they are outside Ruby's view, offer the potential to understand the cause of Ruby's fragmented history.

However, it is through Ruby's grandfather, Johnny, that a return to an Indigenous way of living is conveyed.⁵ Dated 1950, the chapter "Johnny" details the grandfather's escape home from residential school. Revolving around Johnny's experience at a residential school as a young boy, the chapter results in a priest's violent death and Johnny's escape. His return home is not an easy endeavour: Referring to Johnny by the nickname given to him by the boys at the residential school, which means "old man" in Cree, the narrator explains how "Kisciyiniw walk[s] over a hundred miles to return to his family. He [doesn't] die" (191). His return functions in a similar manner to Erdrich's border-crossing: navigating beyond the horrific boundaries imposed by settler colonialism precipitates a return to land and to an Indigenous way of living and learning, as Johnny arrives "back home and learn[s] about the old ways from his grandfather. The way a boy should" (191). He also reclaims the space as Erdrich does, travelling through the land to an alternative way of knowing, and giving hope to Ruby's own return.

In the novel's final chapter, Ruby, like Johnny, finds a way home. The novel ends non-chronologically, with Ruby about to travel to meet her biological family for the first time. *Probably Ruby* finishes where *Books and Islands* begins, with the protagonist leaving on a trip to explore, per the latter's subtitle, the "land of [her] ancestors"; both end with the traveller recovering a sense of home. In a phone call with Rose, her paternal grandmother, Ruby finally learns about where she belongs:

Half-blood, Métis—like she always thought she was. And Cree. The trip to the wedding would be like a salmon swimming upstream. In her blood to go there. An irresistible pull. Only she didn't swim away in the first place. That's why it was so hard to know the way back. She was a little salmon scooped up in a big net. (237)

While her lineage was obscured from her, her thoughts indicate that her imaginary and scavenged, fragmented lines represent only the side of the thread that she could see. The line connects, like Kimmerer's braided basket strands and Erdrich's moccasin thread, to this other side, revealing what was woven out of sight. Now, she travels "[u]priver. Back to where she came from. Where she'd soon find out how her concoctions through all those years, her family pictures, the partial stories she'd fleshed into narratives, had turned out" (250). The image of her lineage shifts positions beyond her perspective to reveal the absent fragments were indeed present.

The novel, then, follows Ruby on her journey through distanced relationships, and sees Ruby establish her own sense of belonging until her eventual encounter with her Métis and Cree roots. However, as Kimmerer affirms of the process of braiding, tension remains throughout this line(age). While Bird-Wilson presents Ruby's return in the novel's last chapter, there are events that occur chronologically afterward: the reader is aware of Ruby's relationship with Rose before Ruby first leaves to meet her in the final chapter. In Rose's chapter, though, the narrator reveals Ruby's lingering feelings of unbelonging even after she locates her family: "[Ruby] didn't tell Rose what it was she ran away from, or that, even though she didn't have anything to run from anymore, the instinct to bolt from intimacy remained" (103). Although Ruby learns of her heritage, she continues to feel a certain amount of unease. Rose, however, has had similar experiences, and running away brings "a moment of affinity" between the two of them (103); only with Rose does the feeling of being chosen feel "nearly true" for Ruby (103). By ending the novel with Ruby's excitement to meet Rose and to return, as if she is a salmon swimming upstream, the lines of the book lead the reader towards Ruby's lineage in a hopeful manner, as if it will eventually bring her the belonging that the reader knows she later struggles with. The non-linearity suggests that, even if she does not fully overcome her experiences of loss, Ruby has found the people who understand her process of belonging. And in thinking of Erdrich and her bookstore, "where anyone can belong," we might think of Ruby's story shifting from one of isolation to one in a library that contains many stories interacting with one another. In this way, Ruby finds a route towards belonging and connection that reveals the other side of the seemingly fragmented line.

Conclusion

Books and Islands and *Probably Ruby* depict lines as transformative, with each line extending beyond the immediate self, interacting with another, and returning, now affected by this encounter. Even when meeting isolating, binaristic lines, such as enclosing fences or settler-colonial borders, Bird-Wilson and Erdrich centre lines around relationships as a form of grounded continuance that presents alternatives to alienating settings and scenarios. By positioning lines as fluid and interactive, Erdrich and Bird-Wilson allow even fragmented or absent lines to tell their own stories. Lines of books, thread, seams, and returns, then, do not divide or enclose. Even with fragments, Ruby and Erdrich are able to connect and relate to their ancestries in a way that transcends linearity and binaries. Even with fractures, lines can still come together.

Notes

1. Thank you to Reader B for their helpful suggestion of incorporating *Braiding Sweetgrass* into this paper.
2. Except, perhaps, the chapter “Blondie.”
3. For a thorough explanation of the Ojibwe’s western relationships and westward movements, see Laura Peers’ *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780 to 1870*.
4. The remainder of Bird-Wilson’s quotations are taken from *Probably Ruby*.
5. There are two outlier chapters that do not include Ruby: “Johnny” and “Leon.”

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A Romance of Denialism: In the Skin of a Lion as a Settler Literary Land Claim

In January 2023, a rupture occurred in the fabric of reconciliation at the University of Lethbridge in southern Alberta. Former Mount Royal University professor Frances Widdowson, who had been invited to speak at the University of Lethbridge, was disinvited from speaking amid controversy over comments she had made about the educational benefits of the residential school system. Mount Royal University had dismissed Widdowson in December 2021 (Rodriguez),¹ after she questioned whether abuses of Indigenous children at the schools amounted to cultural genocide as described in the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (*Truth and Reconciliation Commission* 1). According to Daniel Heath Justice and Sean Carleton, “the rejection or misrepresentation of basic facts about residential schooling” is a form of “residential school denialism.” Such claims “protect the status quo as well as guilty parties” and result in “‘positive’ framings” of settler colonialism. According to Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, “a key benefit of being identified with [s]ettler society is the option to remain conveniently ignorant of the harms of colonization. This is a comfortable state in which [s]ettlers are insulated from the impacts of their actions and their silences, and the repercussions for these choices” (99).² By diluting any wrongdoing and undermining Indigenous claims to history, settler colonialism seeks to extend its authority and cause the erasure of Indigenous peoples.

The conflation of comfort with denialism has long been a feature of literary texts that engage in what Margery Fee calls “literary land claims” (8). As far back as 1965, Northrop Frye wrote: “To feel ‘Canadian’ was to feel part of a no-man’s-land with huge rivers, lakes, and islands” (“Conclusion” 346). The colonial desire for “no-man’s-land,” or *terra nullius*, has perhaps been Canada’s greatest form of

denialism. The logic behind recent efforts to dismiss the genocidal effects of residential schools can be traced through such narratives as Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, which erases Indigenous claims and portrays the colonial project "as being forever under construction" (Dobson 109). Ondaatje's novel about the establishment of Toronto, Canada's largest settler city, has been lauded as a working-class, pro-immigrant novel with a focus on, in Ondaatje's own words, "reclaiming untold stories" (Bush 96). How could such a vaunted, canonical text contribute to the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples? What is the connection between residential school denialism and the novel? By seeking answers to these questions, I hope to contribute to the process of decolonizing Canadian literature and uncover how the historical tendency to invisibilize Indigenous peoples impacts the present and obstructs genuine efforts at reconciliation. While Ondaatje's text may not be as prominently recognized as it once was, since its publication in 1987, it has helped reinforce settler colonialism's orientation towards Indigenous peoples up to and including the present day. This paper argues that one explanation lies in the novel's enactment of the settler desire to be recognized as Canada's original indigenes on *terra nullius* in pursuit of a "long green garden" (Ondaatje 243), innocent of any Indigenous claims to land.

In her introduction to *Literary Land Claims*, Fee asks, "How has the formation of a Canadian literature been complicit in the colonial process of occupying and claiming land?" (4). Below, I suggest this process begins with the stories a nation tells itself about its origins and establish how *In the Skin of a Lion* answers Fee's opening question, "How does literature claim land?" (1). Works such as Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* or Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* demonstrate how narratives that centre settler logics become normalized through their circulation and reproduction. I argue that the desire to promote comforting narratives has been one of the key ways that modern Canadian fiction in English has operated in tandem with the goals of settler colonialism. I read *In the Skin of a Lion* as a seminal example of a "settler text" that embodies a literary land claim. It does this by foregrounding a postmodern ahistoricism that operates through a non-chronological narrative structure to detach Indigenous peoples from the ongoing story of Canada's origins.

“A Model of Modern Canada”

According to Gillian Roberts, when Ondaatje won a Governor General's Award in 1970 for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the text was regarded as “so difficult to categorize that a new category—‘Prose and Poetry’—was invented to celebrate it” (24). For the first half of his career, both Ondaatje's work and his identity evaded easy categorization. He has since been heralded as a “perfect model of modern Canada” (*Toronto Star* qtd. in Roberts 3). As a South Asian immigrant from the Burgher class, “the most westernized ethnic grouping in colonial Ceylon” (Spinks 1), now Sri Lanka, Ondaatje's relationship to settler colonialism has been complex. He has been criticized for sacrificing his “experience of otherness” for literary success (Mukherjee 113), as well as being “as defining of what is Canadian as the Atwoods or the Findleys have ever been” (Hutcheon 13). The preoccupation with Ondaatje's identity reveals how individuals who are perceived as non-white, who, like Ondaatje, are racialized as purveyors of the “exotic” (Atwood xxxviii), have been received within the Canadian settler state; they have often been subjected to scrutiny over the legitimacy of their work and identity. With *In the Skin of the Lion*, some saw Ondaatje as having narrativized that tension, writing a “story of all those exiles and émigrés who, like him, had come to another country and worked to make it their own” (Spinks 12). But the text appears ambivalent at best about its relationship to Indigenous peoples. While the novel failed to win the 1987 Governor General's Award, as Roberts notes, “Ondaatje was honoured in a different manner by the federal government when he received the Order of Canada in 1988” (79–80). She adds, “Part of his role as a Canadian cultural figure depends upon this external validation, his representative status for Canadian culture within an international circulation” (80). As a result, Ondaatje has represented the diversity the nation desires in its elect citizens, and *In the Skin of a Lion* has achieved a place in the echelon of Canadian literature reflective of a national multiculturalism that invisibilizes Indigenous presence.³

Below, I argue that the concept of “electability” as developed by Erich Auerbach's analysis in *Mimesis* (1953) of Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century romances, is present in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*. To achieve the status of “one of the elect” is to focus on

“inner values” and pursue “a doctrine of personal perfection” (Auerbach 136). Christopher Bracken develops this concept within the contemporary Canadian context of reconciliation politics to explain how subjects are encouraged to retreat from the social world into the realm of deep feeling (2015). The character of Patrick demonstrates these attributes in his rejection of radical politics and what he calls “ideology” (Ondaatje 135), with a focus on cultivating a private life of domestic comfort. By the novel’s end, Patrick achieves the status of one of the elect, or a model Canadian citizen, through his willingness to conform to society’s bourgeois values that emphasize comfort over conflict.

The novel’s message, therefore, conveys a pedagogical function, which, according to Bruce Meyer, is one of the elements of the romance genre mentioned above. The novel thus resembles a “school” that helps readers achieve “moral perfection” (194). I argue the novel operates as an example of what G. W. Hegel refers to as “romantic fiction” (592),⁴ centred on “the education of the individual into the realities of the present” in order to be a productive participant in society (593). *In the Skin of a Lion* presents an inward quest for self-perfection as a preferable quality for the ideal citizen to pursue to succeed within the contemporary context.

“Making Invisible”

According to Julie Beddoes, although *In the Skin of a Lion* is set in the early twentieth century, “it is an artifact of the 1980s” (204). Indeed, the novel conveys the preoccupations of its time of publication in 1987, such as immigration and the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from constitutional talks during the Meech Lake Accord negotiations, just prior to the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. When Canada’s Constitution Act was introduced in 1982, it was celebrated by Indigenous groups for Sections 25 and 35, which ostensibly affirm the “Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada” (Government of Canada, Constitution 57; see also 55). This was seen as “unprecedented” (Peach 5) and Canadians were provided a chance to witness “Indigenous leaders articulating their people’s concerns and aspirations . . . within the norms of political discourse” (5). These

efforts were so successful that by 1987, “61 percent of respondents to a Decima poll supported the idea of the right of Indigenous peoples to govern themselves” (5). However, these gains fell short of confirming or referring to any right to self-government and, according to Stephan Marquardt, “participation by [A]boriginal peoples in the constitutional amendment process was never formalized and . . . they were thus denied to effectively participate in it” (256). In April 1987, when the federal government convened Meech Lake to address Quebec’s inclusion in the Constitution as a distinct society, “the Accord had the effect of making invisible, for constitutional purposes, Aboriginal groups” (Peach 6). Ironically, perhaps the most iconic image from the Meech Lake process emerged in its defeat in 1990: “Manitoba MLA Elijah Harper, a member of the Red Sucker Lake First Nation, standing in the Manitoba Legislative Assembly with a single feather in his hand, refusing consent to hold a vote on a resolution to ratify the Meech Lake Accord” (2). The invisibilizing of Indigenous peoples continued the year after Meech Lake in 1988, with the establishment of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, despite its brief acknowledgement that “the Constitution of Canada recognizes rights of the [A]boriginal peoples of Canada” (Government of Canada, Multiculturalism 1). According to David B. MacDonald, the Act “privileges integration into dominant English and French settler societies” as a form of “colonial multiculturalism” (65). In *In the Skin of a Lion*, multiculturalism’s role as an assimilating apparatus is precisely the effect of its neglect of Indigenous peoples.

“Reclaiming Untold Stories”

Speaking about *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje has said, “I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer . . . One of the things a novel can do is represent the unofficial story” (Bush 96). While Ondaatje attempts to channel the “untold stories” of the unnamed immigrant workers responsible for building public works like Toronto’s Bloor Street Viaduct, the novel has provoked criticism that it suppresses politics in favour of aesthetic preoccupations. Frank Davey argues the novel reinforces an “emphasis on individual action and mistrust of collective politics” (150). For Glen Lowry, the novel

perpetuates the notion of “‘race’ blindness” (62) and “the assumption that ‘whiteness’ signifies some kind of neutral position” (69). The novel’s “emphasis on individual action” and “‘race’ blindness” stem from the romance genre, which prioritizes the inner quest of the individual and homogenization in its appeal to universalism.

Kit Dobson suggests the novel encourages “becoming a property owner” to gain “full participation in politics, in society, and in history” (108). This is what I refer to as the novel’s pedagogical function, in which figures like Patrick Lewis, by the novel’s end, demonstrate how to become one of the elect, or a successful Canadian citizen, by accepting the conditions of settler colonialism and posing no threat to its project. Jody Mason argues the novel’s homogenization of differences between “native and foreign workers” is a symptom of its “failure to grasp the complexity of transnational labour migration” (263, 278). From an Indigenous perspective, a settler’s country of origin may be irrelevant when it comes to the dispossession of land and resources. As Justice writes, whether immigrants have come to Canada willingly or not, “the results have generally been the same for the People: displacement and alienation from land and relations” (11). When Indigenous perspectives are “not just *included* but *privileged*” (Brooks xxxv), what may appear like homogenization may actually be an accurate depiction depending on the point of view. I therefore concur with Jodi Lundgren’s observation that the novel expresses “an implicit critique of the ongoing racial stratification in contemporary Canadian society” (17). As with Canadian multiculturalism, the novel participates in the erasure of Indigenous presence at the expense of valourizing immigrants.

Terra Nullius

The epigraph from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* at the beginning of the novel suggests Patrick figuratively wanders “through the wilderness in the skin of a lion,” grieving the loss of Alice Gull, after she dies. Alice is one of Patrick’s lovers and represents a zealous commitment to radical politics in the novel. She was originally a nun before leaving the faith to devote her life to social activism. The “wilderness” is the *terra nullius* of settler desire, where Gilgamesh or the biblical story of Adam

and Eve can be restaged. In fact, there are parallels between Patrick's life and the figure of Adam, who is expelled from Eden and "wanders in the labyrinth of human history until he is restored to his original state by the Messiah" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 191). Patrick eventually loses Alice to the temptation of radical politics and, like Adam, he intends to replicate her "sin" until he is redeemed by Harris near the end of the novel. Like Adam, Patrick eventually regains the promise of paradise, while the death of Alice renders her forever lost. The novel opens with Hana, Alice's daughter, and Patrick driving to Marmora to reunite with Clara. The "wilderness" is transformed into a "countryside . . . unbetrayed" (3), where "a castle" and other fairy tales are projected onto the landscape over the traditions of the Wendat, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee/Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation Treaty Territory who actually have title to the land (3). This reference to a castle on the novel's first page prepares the reader for the romance saga that will follow.

The novel is set in southern Ontario, near Kingston, from the late-nineteenth century to the early-twentieth century, and opens in winter, a season conventionally associated in romance with "darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 188). Patrick is a young boy living in a rural homestead with his father, Hazen, "an abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus" (Ondaatje 15). The whereabouts of Patrick's mother are unknown, and the setting therefore lacks "the union of male and female" that would ensure "the victory of fertility over the waste land" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 193). The implication is that the land resembles *terra nullius* and needs something or someone to fulfill its potential and that Indigenous peoples are lacking, or unable to achieve, this "union." This gendered reference to a traditional family structure evokes the colonial imperative to assimilate difference, with force if necessary, groups like Indigenous peoples and their children, through such violent means as the residential school system. This challenge is addressed at the end of the novel when a union between Clara and Patrick is promised as a component of the elusive dream at the heart of the settler romance but is never actually represented. Like an unsatiated desire, the romance is forever promising fulfillment but it remains elusive to perpetuate the colonial project and propel its

mandate into the future.

John Borrows writes, “Canadian law still has *terra nullius* written all over it” (702). It forms the basis for the discovery doctrine, first promulgated by Chief Justice John Marshall in 1823, which declares “lands to be legally empty, allowing European law to control Indigenous peoples” (702).⁵ According to Christopher Bracken, with the stroke of a pen, Marshall invented a new way of acquiring territory: “Discovery . . . gave the discovering nation ultimate title and the ‘exclusive right’ to acquire the land from its occupants” (“Sui Generis” 14). As Audra Simpson argues, settler states are structured by “Indigenous dispossession” (R.A.C.E. 2014 Keynote 39:00:39), and this dispossession is aided by *In the Skin of a Lion*’s reproduction of the story that land is available in abundance for European settlement. The settler romance requires land on which to stage such colonial desires as electability, and the assumption of *terra nullius* is a prerequisite for this performance.

The novel’s reification of land ownership relies on Western assumptions. Patrick, as a child, watches several “strangers” who, we later learn, are new immigrant labourers. As a way of distinguishing earlier immigrants from newer arrivals, he observes: “They do not own this land as the owner of the cows does” (Ondaatje 7). Land possession is framed in terms of private ownership, with the novel thus expressing the logic from John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, where Locke explains a legitimate claim to land:

God gave the world to men in common, but since he gave it them for their benefit and the greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational (and labour was to be his title to it). (21)⁶

The implication is that the newly arrived immigrants are progressing in the immigrant-to-elect track that the cow-owner has completed. The novel helps to reinforce what Mark Rifkin identifies as “settler common sense” (xvi) and the assumptions of entitlement that shape the outmoded notion of *terra nullius*. This common sense naturalizes the dispossession of Indigenous land, which colonizing nations then

acquire for their own national stories. Rifkin defines settler common sense as a “set of sensations” generated by “institutionalized relations of settlement . . . that enable nonnative access to Indigenous territories” (xv–xvi). As Rifkin investigates how these enabling institutions are “lived as given” (xvi), his concept also helps explain how questions of dispossession are disappeared by assuming Indigenous territories to be “given” to settlers like Patrick and Nicholas. This obfuscation of settler politics in favour of a “set of sensations” demonstrates how comforting narratives operate in a present settler context.

While the settler state frames colonialism as an event in the past, subject to forgiveness in the present, the novel frames this story of European immigration to English Canada as a golden era, when grand public works miraculously appeared across the landscape regardless of Indigenous possession. The Prince Edward Viaduct “goes up in a dream” (Ondaatje 26), and the text’s focus on the immigrant-settler experience erases Indigenous claims and situates settlers as the founding peoples of a Canada located on land previously unclaimed by anyone. The crucial question of “Who owns the land?” is made redundant, and the assumption that *terra nullius* is available for settlement is sustained. Indigenous presence persists everywhere in the form of the land, but the text is silent about it. While the same can be said of any number of texts from this time, the fact that *In the Skin of a Lion* purports to be concerned with “untold stories” (Bush 96), yet completely neglects Indigenous peoples, makes the oversight all the more perturbing. Ultimately, the subject of Indigenous peoples is a topic the text avoids, and it is through this erasure that the novel makes its literary land claim.

In the text, romance conventions normalize Indigenous dispossession while reducing Indigenous peoples to what Jodi Byrd calls “*homo nullius*” (xxi). Byrd argues that at the centre of “European conquest” are “discourses of savagery, Indianness, discovery, and mapping that served to survey a world into European possession by transforming [I]ndigenous peoples into the *homo nullius* inhabitants of lands emptied and awaiting arrival” (xx–xxi). Placing Indigenous peoples into a “non-recuperative category” exemplifies the grave state of settler and Indigenous relations that are deeply ingrained in settler common sense.

Also embedded in settler common sense are narratives that continue the tradition of Hegel's notion of romantic fiction (592), which has a pedagogical function centred on "the education of the individual into the realities of the present" (593). *In the Skin of a Lion* portrays subjects who are "conveniently ignorant" (Battell Lowman and Barker 99) of settler colonialism's denialism and model the inward orientation of ideal citizens. *In the Skin of a Lion* makes its literary land claim through its formulation of such romance conventions as electability and *terra nullius*. These romance conventions operate as enticements or appeals on which to model ideal behaviour aimed at achieving the status of "one of the elect" (Auerbach 136). Through a series of tasks, the candidate progresses until they successfully complete their quest and achieve the status of electability. As Bracken writes, "The romance promises the elect of any era hope of redemption through self-transformation" ("Reconciliation Romance" 7). The figure of Patrick prioritizes an inward move away from political engagement that preserves existing political structures. Auerbach notes the romance's "emphasis on inner values" offers "an escape into fable and fairy tale" that ultimately "serves no political function" (139, 138, 134). Elements of the romance genre, such as the inward quest away from the social world into deep feeling, serve to sustain existing power structures. The novel demonstrates how Patrick's journey takes him from the darkness of isolation into the light of domestic comfort by retreating from politics. As an allegorical representation of the Canadian colonial subject, Patrick's demonstration of ideal citizenship at the novel's end functions as his country's definition of electability. He has embraced a life of bourgeois comfort rather than pursue any political engagement that might challenge the status quo.

As a romance, the novel privileges heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism through its omniscient point of view that conveys the perspectives of three male characters: Patrick, a white Anglo settler; Nicholas Temelcoff, a "daredevil" immigrant from Macedonia (34); and David Caravaggio, a thief of Italian descent. Two women also feature prominently: Clara Dickens is a radio actress whom Patrick describes as "the perfect woman" (61), and Alice Gull is a former nun who becomes a stage actress and political activist after nearly falling to her death from Toronto's Prince Edward Viaduct. For Patrick, Alice is an

oblique mystery who “reveals no past” and “remains sourceless” (74). Clara, her name Latin for “clear” or “blank,” is less politically involved than Alice, which enables Patrick to resume his relationship with her near the end of the text. Both women are friends and engage in affairs with Patrick, while millionaire Ambrose Small, a personification of “blatant capitalism” (59), and Rowland Harris, Commissioner of Public Works (29), operate as foils playing pivotal background roles. Clara primarily functions to serve Patrick’s journey, and resembles a *terra nullius*-like blank space to be filled by his desire. The settler romance is fundamentally a conservative aesthetic and, like settler colonialism itself, it reinforces a repressive heteropatriarchy through fixed representations of traditional gender roles and social norms.

Rather than a working-class theme, the novel amplifies a European immigration or settler narrative that centres whiteness, while focusing on the establishment of Toronto. This cultural theme overtakes the political or economic concerns represented by individuals like Alice and Cato, Alice’s union-organizing husband who is murdered. The role of class struggle in the novel, under conditions of settler colonialism, confronts the economic variables inherent in capitalism’s unequal distribution of resources. Unions pose a threat to settler institutions and to figures like Harris, whose colonial public-work projects rely on the exploitation of an alienated working class. While the novel has little to say about working class solidarity, the death of both Cato and Alice strongly suggest its incompatibility and their unelectability within the context of this settler romance. These characters do not share Patrick’s “languor” (123) and their union politics are too disruptive and noisy to fit in.

A Settler Romance

By adhering to the attributes of what Fredric Jameson identifies as the “romance mode” (154), *In the Skin of a Lion* offers a comforting narrative that situates settlers as legitimate possessors of land. Jameson credits Frye for giving the “fullest account of romance as a *mode*” (138). A mode for Jameson emphasizes the portability of the romance to transcend different ages and contexts. He writes, “a mode [. . .] persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range

of historical periods" (142). As Frye notes, "In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance" (186). In Canada, this idealized romance involves the manifestation of a multicultural nation with Indigenous subjects either erased or assimilated. According to Auerbach, the romance creates a world that is "decidedly unfavorable" for the apprehension of "reality in its full breadth and depth" (142). This inability to capture reality aligns with Linda Hutcheon's contention that Ondaatje writes "historiographic metafiction," a genre that "brings to the fore the fictionalizing . . . processes involved in any attempt to reconstruct the past" (82). Ondaatje's settler romance fictionalizes Auerbach's "reality" to invisibilize Indigenous presence.

The character who provides the novel's salvation is Commissioner Harris. He is the novel's benevolent capitalist, a friendlier, more state-sponsored version than the type of capitalist represented by Ambrose Small. Harris is a public servant and he reconciles the renegade ruthlessness of unbridled capitalism and its industriousness. As an elect subject within the Canadian settler context, he lacks Small's extremity and is meant to convey a more temperate or polite variant of capitalism. He is a man of such vision that the workers on his projects toil in his "dream" as part of "that community of men . . . who are also part of the fairy tale" (Ondaatje 111, 39). Namely, immigrant settlers are united in the common purpose of building a new city on land that the novel neglects to mention is also claimed by Indigenous peoples. This oversight permits the characters to effortlessly assume a Lockean entitlement of indigenes on *terra nullius*. Harris is responsible for overseeing and managing the construction of the viaduct and the waterworks, a.k.a. the "Palace of Purification," and water is his "great passion" (Ondaatje 29). Frye identifies water as a symbol of life and rejuvenation (*Anatomy of Criticism* 191), and this is how water appears in *In the Skin of a Lion*. However, Harris is not a flawless character, and the implication is that while he may not be as ruthless as Small, he is still responsible for the deaths of many unnamed workers. Exactly how many workers died remains unknown. When Harris is confronted by Patrick, who asks, "Do you know how many of us died in there?" Harris replies, "There was no record kept" (236).

After growing up in the country, Patrick arrives at Union Station in Toronto as "an immigrant to the city" (Ondaatje 53). At twenty-one,

Patrick has “been drawn out” from Bellrock, Ontario, “like a piece of metal” (53), or an armoured knight. He figuratively bears the “little seeds of explosives on his apparel” from his father’s occupation as a self-taught dynamiter (19), foreshadowing events that will occur involving the death of Alice and the attempted bombing of the purification plant. He eventually takes a job as a “searcher” to find the wealthy businessman, Small, who has mysteriously gone missing (59). The image is of Patrick as a questing knight, and his quest eventually leads him to Small’s mistress, Clara, whom he eventually settles with at the end of the novel when his quest is over. The two begin an affair and Clara then introduces Patrick to Alice, and their love triangle represents “[a] study for the New World” (79). This reference to the New World signals the characters’ potential to be transformed into elect members within the Canadian settler context. Patrick and Alice eventually fall deeply in love, and, after being separated for a time, they reunite after Alice becomes a widow and is raising Hana alone. They meet again after one of Alice’s dramatic stage performances, which leaves Patrick so spellbound he “had forgotten where he was” (118). He mistakes her acting for reality, going so far as to climb up on the stage to interrupt her performance. This incident suggests Patrick is easily misled by performative gestures, in a similar way that colonialism misleads settlers with romances involving *terra nullius* or promises of electability. At this point, Patrick has moved into an immigrant neighbourhood in the “southeastern section of the city . . . deliriously anonymous” (112), where he is frequently greeted by the local Macedonian immigrants with “Hey Canada!” (135). Despite his attempts to blend in, Patrick’s neighbours recognize him as an established citizen of their new country. This recognition suggests Patrick is the novel’s personification of Canada, and that he stands in as an allegory for the country’s model of electability. As a recognizable subject of the new land these immigrants have arrived in, Patrick appears as a “native” settler Canadian, thus obfuscating the positionality of genuine Indigenous peoples. This obfuscation helps the novel establish a literary land claim that prioritizes the settler-colonial myth of *terra nullius*.

The text refers to Clara and Alice as “witches” and “magicians” (76, 79), figures who are, in Frye’s terms, “antagonists of the quest” Patrick is on (*Anatomy of Criticism* 193). Alice, like one of the “Weird sisters”

from *Macbeth*, disrupts Patrick's life with radical politics, which function as the dragon in need of slaying, while Clara, as a magician, facilitates his journey by presiding over his transformation into one of the elect. Patrick first loves Alice, who initially serves as a nun and then as a committed activist, and he pursues what he perceives to be her political beliefs until they almost kill him. Alice's "duty" is transferred from a religious to a secular commitment when she transitions from nun to become a political radical and marries Cato (Bracken, "Reconciliation Romance" 3). As a "lady of duty" (3), Alice disrupts Patrick's "languor" with her devotion and commitment, and by losing her he gains the comfort of political indifference. As she argues to Patrick, "Compassion forgives too much. You could forgive the worst man. You forgive him and nothing changes" (Ondaatje 123). Alice rejects compassion and therefore poses a threat to the comfort the romance mode promises. Her transition from nun to political agitator maintains the degree of zeal required for such extreme commitments, which proves too intense for Patrick to sustain. After Harris forgives Patrick for attempting to bomb the filtration plant and, at the end of the novel, provides him a second chance, Patrick gives up radical politics to settle down with Clara, who represents what Bracken calls "the lady of pleasure" (Bracken, "Reconciliation Romance" 3). According to Bracken, "the lady of pleasure and the lady of duty . . . are stock characters in romance" (3). He notes, citing Derrida, "Behind the pleasure doctrine lies the fact of sovereign ipseity," or "the capacity for self-causation: 'the power that gives itself its own law'" (2). By settling for Clara, the lady of pleasure, Patrick attaches himself to this form of ipseity and obtains the ability of self-transformation to transcend his historical conditions.

Once Patrick's quest is completed, the final stage is rebirth (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 192). After Alice's death, Patrick experiences a figurative death. Her loss is like "a moat" which "he will never cross again" (Ondaatje 164). He resembles a broken knight who has lost his purpose. As a result, he wanders aimlessly like Gilgamesh after Enkidu dies, detached from any community. We learn Patrick "has always been alien" (156), and that "he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community" (157).

“The Language of Politics”

For Frank Davey, as we have seen, *In the Skin of the Lion* “reinforces an emphasis on individual action and mistrust of collective politics” (150). Harris is not depicted as a serious villain, despite his complicity in the death of the unnamed workers, and he appears to extend his authority apolitically through visionary leadership, rather than through the power politics of a capitalist economy. Alice’s husband, Cato, the lone figure in the novel who engages directly in a political struggle, appears only in passing and is executed while attempting to unionize workers (Ondaatje 155). Alice articulates the radical politics of the text. She points out Patrick’s privilege as a Canadian settler compared to the newly arrived immigrants in his adopted neighbourhood and suggests his “languor” may be a reason for his lack of revolutionary spirit (123). Patrick resists her appeals, saying, “I don’t believe the language of politics, but I’ll protect the friends I have” (122). Later, she asks what it will take to “convert” him to her politics and he dismisses her, adding, “The trouble with ideology, Alice, is that it hates the private. You must make it human” (135). The humanizing of ideology, or what Walter Benjamin calls the “aestheticizing of political life” (41),⁷ is precisely what settler colonialism accomplishes through affective modes of governance, where public apologies replace legislation as forms of change.⁸ Audra Simpson argues that the settler state “uses affect, it uses performance, it uses good feelings, and it expects you to have those feelings” (“Reconciliation and Its Discontents”)(00:01:11–00:01:44). This is what the text finally accomplishes at the end by replacing politics with private feelings, in the figure of Harris forgiving Patrick for attempting to bomb the purification plant while sustaining the modes of production that claimed so many workers’ lives.

Palace of Purification

After Alice dies in an explosion while carrying a “clock bomb, not even knowing what it was” (Ondaatje 240),⁹ Patrick is hired to help construct the tunnels for the filtration plant beneath Lake Ontario, where, we later learn, many of his fellow workers die. Only passing

reference is made to these deaths, and this history cannot be verified because, as Harris says, “There was no record kept” (236). Despite this cold affirmation, Patrick is redeemed and born again through the mercy of the older, paternal figure of Harris, the Messiah of this romance. His name is also an echo of Patrick’s father, Hazen, suggesting the latter has been replaced or reincarnated. Like the settler government’s version of reconciliation itself, the novel’s romance blurs the distinction between secular and Christian thought. For Vine Deloria Jr., “Western secular thought is essentially Christian in its foundations” (qtd. in Simpson and Smith 4). He writes, “Christian religion and the Western idea of history are inseparable and mutually self-supporting” (4). As Carl Schmitt notes, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” (36). Therefore, while Frye may suggest “the Messianic hero” is not as common in “secular quest-romances” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 192), *In the Skin of a Lion* nevertheless blurs the secular-religious distinction in its representation of Patrick’s “salvation” at the hands of Harris and in the figure of Alice, who gives up the life of being a nun only to die as a radical activist.

The novel’s focus on “individual action” rather than “collective politics” that Davey observes elevates Patrick’s emotional condition over any working-class concerns. From a settler-colonial perspective, Patrick’s atomized state is ideal for elect individuals, as they are more susceptible to affective appeals and are less of a political threat to the status quo. When Harris says, “What you are looking for is a villain” (Ondaatje 237), Patrick’s personal feelings eventually intervene to cancel out any effort to find one. He ultimately forgives Harris and dismisses the need to hold anyone accountable for the deaths of the workers. Forgiveness and compassion, when manifested without reference to historical conditions, are qualities that Alice earlier identified as problematic (123). Patrick is prepared to finally dismiss Alice’s political influence and is ready to receive the mantle of electability by making ideology “human” (135).

In his exhausted state, Patrick recounts how Alice died. Harris listens intently to the gripping final moments of Alice’s life (Ondaatje 240), providing the recognition of the hero that is a crucial element of the quest (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 192). Harris recognizes Patrick’s humanity in this intimate confession of private grief. In the romance

of denialism, personal feelings of compassion overtake political differences. After finishing his story, Patrick falls asleep and Harris, rather than turning him over to the police, takes the detonator away and asks a nurse to care for him (Ondaatje 242). The setting of the text's climactic scene of recognition and reconciliation is within Commissioner Harris' office, deep inside the public water purification plant. Not only is Patrick redeemed, but Harris is as well, from his complicity in the deaths of the workers, and he re-emerges as a compassionate state-capitalist. By handing Patrick over to a figure of care, the nurse, rather than one of justice, a police officer, Harris demonstrates his adherence to humanizing ideology. In the context of this settler romance, he now embodies the status of electability. Both he and Patrick redeem each other through forgiveness and are afforded a second chance. This is a romance of reconciliation involving settlers from different economic classes rather than Indigenous peoples. The novel's conclusion suggests that Patrick settles for the structures that sustain the class politics that exploit workers, confirming Alice's belief that "nothing changes." The conditions which led the workers to their death, and those that dispossess Indigenous peoples, remain in place.

When the narrative picks up again six months later, we find that Patrick has been "saved" and is with Alice's daughter, Hana, on their way to meet Clara. He has been reconciled to the "realities of the present" (Hegel 593) and has achieved the status of one of the elect. While the novel begins in a winter wilderness, it concludes in the spring setting of a "landlord's long green garden" (Ondaatje 243), resonating with order and hope recalling "the victory of summer over winter" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 183). The fact that Patrick appears as propertyless as the field workers from his childhood suggests that the status of electability need not depend on class, but on political commitments. The winter ice at the beginning of the novel has figuratively thawed, and water, associated with life (Ondaatje 199), is flowing freely. On the final page, a neighbour, Mr. Rivera (River), is hosing his garden, "private as they passed him" (244). The private domesticity of this settler romance flourishes, and Patrick, an example of the settler subject devoted to the "lady of pleasure" (Bracken, "Reconciliation Romance" 3), with her capacity for ipseity, reigns supreme. He began the novel estranged from community in the wintry

wilderness of alienation, but has now found salvation in a fairy tale devoid of Indigenous peoples, oblivious to any historical conditions that structure settler colonialism.

By the novel's end, both immigrant settlers, Patrick and Nicholas, have become model citizens, the former abandoning radical politics for suburban domesticity, and the latter becoming a successful entrepreneur running a bakery. Harris, the benevolent capitalist, forgives Patrick and enables him to pursue a new life. The characters who die—Ambrose Small, Cato, Alice Gull—are the irreconcilable subjects who are too extreme to fit into the settler project's romance. At the conclusion of this romance of denialism, the immigrant settler is reborn, committed to pleasure and duty after having been redeemed by a benevolent, state-sponsored form of capitalism regulated not by policy, but by affective governance. Patrick, the settler, has achieved the status of an elect indigene at home on Indigenous land in the New World of Canada.

Notes

1. "[A]ccording to Duane Bratt, who was department chair during her tenure, Widdowson was not fired because of her research or public comments but 'for her personal conduct towards faculty and administration, and especially students'" (Steward).
2. Tuck and Yang suggest these "[s]ettler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all" (10).
3. As Audra Simpson writes, "where there is a language and a commitment to 'multiculturalism' as the protection, preservation and perhaps even celebration of one's 'cultural' difference, there is a simultaneous commitment to the taking of territory" ("Whither Settler Colonialism?" 440).
4. The Knox translation of "die moderne bürgerliche Epopoë" reads, "modern popular epic," but Speight, citing Knox, translates it as "modern, bourgeois epic" (24). See Speight.
5. Alternatively, notes Taiaiake Alfred, "The land was created by a power outside of human beings, and a just relationship to that power must respect the fact that human beings did not have a hand in making the earth, therefore they have no right to dispose of it as they see fit" (470).
6. According to Cole Harris, Locke believed "European sovereignty and settlement would be good for Aboriginal peoples because it would introduce them to civilization in the form of private property, commerce, and the profit motive" (xxii).

7. The “aestheticizing of political life” (Benjamin 41) involves “resolving the challenges and tensions of real human societies in aesthetic terms while endlessly deferring them in political terms” (Manderson 6).
8. As Mackey notes, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s 2008 apology makes no reference to land, territory, or treaty, and addresses Indigenous peoples as one of many cultural groups dependent on Canada for its sustenance (53).
9. The details of Alice’s death are not divulged until the very end, when Patrick recounts them from memory to Harris (Ondaatje 238–41).

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Alison Braid-Fernandez

Notes Before a Departure

At a bus station cafe in Spain, a bartender wrestles the dishes;

Blue fabric flowers blossom from a vase by the door;

It's cold all over Spain today, the weathercaster says;

The friend presses a phone to the flower of her ear and listens to the tone;

The friend is homesick and depressed and I feel no help at all;

So that's how to refill a napkin dispenser;

In the city I left, the man I love is deciding to build a pinhole camera;

Peach! Plum! Watermelon! the slot machine chimes out of its dark corner;

A boy is going to jail for convincing other boys to cut shapes into their skin;

The man has a decision to make, our new life or returning to the old;

Bowl of red bean soup, uncovered;

Decades of smoke wait to emerge from wall and seat cushions;

All summer the man sits on the same couch and either calls or waits for my call;

Time fast forwards when the bartender sneezes; rain falls;

Women turn newspapers into ink-dense umbrellas;

Through binoculars, a girl watches a magnificent pigeon eat from
another girl's hand;

The friend calls home, forges the sound of the dial tone with her
mouth, a low guttering hum;

Drawn into the room, the voice of the operator, tired, full of salt;

No pinhole camera is ever built;

He calls me;

My body is adrift at the bar, a wedge of lemon bright in seltzer;

He doesn't call;

A cyclist killed, an argument, a metal barricade;

My hands two open pages in my lap;

He calls me;

The woman in the Dove commercial turns off the water to lather;

My lap a garden grown snarled and tired of waiting;

Now I know we're far from home;

My body adrift at the bar;

The bartender shatters a wine glass that hung by one slendering stem;

By its fifth repetition, I'm beginning to understand the morning news;

One dark cartoon cloud settles over Spain's right shoulder;

The friend comes back from the phone holding rain in her throat;

The forgotten worry resurfaces: the pain the man feels is not the pain I
think he feels;

I call him, imagine I'm speaking through roses, imagine a bouquet in
my mouth;

In the town where we're going, it has never rained;

| *Alison Braid-Fernandez lives and writes in London, England. Recent work has
appeared in Best Canadian Poetry, West Branch, and The Massachusetts Review.*

M. V. Downey

On Let Bide

Trill, the anxious silhouette
Fills the seabound swallow
Shout for feeling, it will set
Doubt my meaning, make it shallow

Let no mawkish word appear
Get a rock to decide
Which way to emote or fear
Stitch opinion to on let bide

Ocean-directed descent
Opens, closes objective
To abyss these thoughts are sent
Flew away; in nothingness, live

Brine swallows thoughts—I don't care
Blinded criticism
Living water—I don't mind
Giving thoughts to no charity.

| *Matthew Vernon Downey lives and writes in Victoria, British Columbia.*

John Wall Barger

Impossible Household

Jill and I had no secrets.
We spoke everything out loud
like toddlers. One day
out of pure boredom
I told a lie. As I said it, my voice
creaked like a rotten stair.
Jill noticed, smiled.

That lie was so fun
I did it again. Secrets collected.
I buried them in the yard.
As Jill and I sat in the evening,
it was hard to pretend
not to notice the mounds of dirt,
wasps flying out of them,
swarming us.

I admired Jill's honesty
but when she died
I found a map to her
island of secrets
in the pocket of her jeans.
At noon the next day
I stepped off the ferry.

Villagers spoke of a statue
of a traumatized bed-
wetting girl. In the school,
rooms of gas masks,
disintegrating desks,
one tennis sneaker
on a pillow of needles.

Below a Ferris wheel
overgrown with wildflowers:
Joan of Arc, in the flesh,
with Jill's face. Is that you,
she said, Son of Man?

Yes, I cried, it's me!
We hugged and sat
and talked all night.
We confessed our lies
and wept as we parted.

In the morning
the humble boatman
ferrying travellers
across the stormy waters
told me to go fuck myself.

I swam to the coast,
emerging naked on the sand,
my skin giving off
a minute light.

| *John Wall Barger is the author of six collections of poetry, and a book of essays, The Elephant of Silence (LSU Press, 2024). He lectures in the Writing Program at Dartmouth College.*

Doras na sióg (The Fairy Door)

Beneath our line of sight, pink plastic
cast cold and tacky against the ruffles
of the white oak's trunk. A door

for the unseen, an offering
shaped by children, our archaic
superstitions huffed hot in the soft

seashells of their ears. They say
lost gnomes might make their homes here.
Merciful, the fantasy, but foolish too—

another pandemic pastime
to jam in the cracks of our blunt prattle—
instructions proffered by local libraries,

news outlets, innumerable
Google searches. I swear I never saw them
in the bright haze of our before,

though as a girl I had Polly Pockets,
a powder blue dollhouse built by my mother,
countless Barbies, and Tinkerbelle,

all lessons in the femininity
I couldn't care to imitate.
And I think first of these,

not of Celtic myth or Mi'kmaw lore—
something about the petroleum products,
their colour, the guts of earth

hardened and shiny
in this enduring form—
how to trust in a fairy world

that would enter such a scene,
settle in the chubby chairs,
sip from the tiny tea sets,

put down all their wickedness,
their perfect shadow genius, to dwell
among cheap bagatelles

scattered through the neighbourhood?
Still, I look for them after the hurricane,
the same way we turn

to the nacreous night, pupils dilating
before the sprawling absence,
searching for Jupiter

and his three moony conquests
on the date they draw the closest
they've been to us in decades.

In Fiona's wake, an aftermath
already wracked by thunder,
the threat of tornado, the news

of neighbours washed away by sea
like lovers in a medieval saga,
an ocean of clouds thickening above,

their edges overlapping like waves
with nothing left to tug away
but the light. The dog pissing

on the corner, my mind flits
to those homes, our rooms
for the unseen, prayers to the absent,

a belief like holding breath
while underwater, and waiting,
waiting.

| *Annick MacAskill's books include Shadow Blight (Gaspereau Press, 2022), winner of the Governor General's Award, and Votive (Gaspereau Press, 2024).*

Moni Brar

Do not forget ॐ¹

because it's the first word your father learns to scratch into the dirt
with a stick on the packed earth floor of the village school where the
children sit on burlap sacks, brown faces upturned towards a master
they beg to teach them a way out and someday, decades later, they
replace those sticks with pens and then hope and then forgetfulness—
but the first ॐ² remains etched in their hearts

because your dirty five-year-old fist clutches a popsicle given to you by
the farm owner who never says this word and you notice its omission,
so you say it for him: ॐ³

and you believe the last word to ride the last breath out of your father's
broken body is the one he cherished most: ॐ⁴

and you wonder if ॐ⁵ is the first word your mother learned to cling to

and when in the dead heat of summer they place 80 pounds of fruit on
your mother's 105 pound frame again and again because what migrant
body does not know how to labour and she walks from one end of a
field to the other it's the word she recites ad nauseum like an addendum
to a litany for survival that your lips will learn too: ॐ⁶ ॐ⁷ ॐ⁸

and it's the only word you can use to staunch the to heal the :ॐ⁹

but it's the one word that fails you when you're attacked on the street
and the cells in your body scream flee far, flee fast, flee now

endless nows that string together to walk you through that single word
and to the other side of fear: ॐ¹⁰

Footnotes

- 1 *Ik Onkar*, also spelled *Ek Onkar*
- 2 in Gurmukhi: *ੴ* or *ਇੱਕ ਓਅੰਕਾਰ*
- 3 Punjabi pronunciation: [ɪk: ɔ:əŋka:r³]
- 4 literally, “There is only one God or one Creator or one Om-maker”
- 5 a phrase in Sikhism that denotes that there is one supreme reality
- 6 the only written word recognized by an illiterate Punjabi woman
- 7 an uttering used while foraging for strength
- 8 a word embedded in your head
- 9 and sometimes your heart
- 10 a soothing balm

Moni Brar comes from a long lineage of illiterate subsistence farmers. She is the winner of writing prizes from Grain, The Fiddlehead, PRISM, Room, CV2, and The Ex-Puritan.

Mary Kelly

I am a Mother's Daughter

I call my mother on my walk home.

Dusk has settled, and I am
reciting the ground I walk on.

How different it feels now that
my birthing hips have grown in.

She asks me how my day was,
What I ate for dinner last night.

I tell her how I engaged in polite sex.

Whispering a lord's name in the ear of the man
from the bar who asked if I was a religious person.

The air is cold and it bites at my
ankles, but my mother does not
know pain even if I sing it to her.

Instead, she anticipates the echo
of her voice across the phone-line.

I have never owned her interest.

Yet her opinion serves
a potent influence.

I rehearse my week in the mirror so maybe
tomorrow my words will sound like a poem.

I can hear the salivation in my
Mother's voice as she vomits
names my Father has not heard.

In Bogotá, she was known as Senōra but
I knew she preferred Senōrita in El Campo.

I am not very good at this game;
detangling the conversation,
finding common footing.

My voice grows swollen, and she tells me I am
to pronounce my words like a true Northerner.

I ask her where my college
bible lives, as folded within
the pages is a four-leaf clover.

I should consider myself lucky she kept it safe
and I pray for a life luck could never grant me.

| *Mary Kelly is an Aotearoa-born poet, editor, and reader. Her work has been
| featured in various magazines and journals. She lives in Vancouver.*

Ellie Sawatzky

An Anthology of Saturdays

That's the sun in my coffee.
Or it's the ghost of my last good idea,
or the novel I'll never write,
or the texture of my days
before Gilmore Girls flattened them,
the slowing of the roller coaster for an episode
or five and when I look up all the leaves
have fallen off my life.

That's the ocean in my dream.
Or it's a rumour I spread within myself
that my body's a raft and won't float
unless I make my mother
proud with my love
life or creativity,
or it's romance, or the virus,
or both.

That's an old oak tree in my yard.
Or it's a new lover dropping seeds
or the fragrant edge of sleep
where I'm looking
at grainy versions of myself
through a Fleetwood Mac rainfall,
which is to say, I'm trying
to be vulnerable but it's hard
or I'm trying not to dissociate,
and failing.

That's the night sky in my phone screen.
Or it's a ballroom dance class last
time Venus went retrograde

or it's the glow of a story my mother
never told me about falling
in love with my father or else
it's a glossy anthology
of Saturdays I flip through
when I'm lonely.

That's wildfire smoke in my breakfast.
Or it's another side effect
of Cipralex. Or it's the hot sex
that's changed the taste, or else
my microbiome's devastated
and I'm wasting away
or my hometown's phoning
with an emergency and I'm still
half asleep.

That's the sun in my coffee
or it's the physical manifestation
of Libra Season, or the vaccine,
or some gleam of maternal wisdom or
it's my hottest smartest self
or my mother telling me I'm not plain
but I'm not pretty either
or else it's the ghost of the future,
swimming quietly, saying don't hurry,
but here I am, have courage,
drink me.

| *Ellie Sawatzky is an award-winning writer and poet, and the author of the poetry collection None of This Belongs to Me. She lives in Vancouver and works as an editor and poetry teacher.*

Kelly Shepherd

The Raven-Necklaced Sky

A man walks out of the forest. What walks out of him?
A good question is a snail, carrying its own answer on its back.

Making a home inside. Words are little houses;
words are caves. The man walks into the city,

but before he gets there, the city has already walked into him.
When he was young, people thought he had feathers

on his head instead of hair. Fable is a verb: from *fabulari*, to talk.
Many years later, it turned out to be leaves—

the kind of new green you see after fire or rain. Green fire.
What is magic, but the process of making something

that has become dull incandesce again?
A lie breathed through silver. Descending into the unconscious,

and following those who know more than we do. Feathers, leaves—
now that the man is a baby again, no one is certain.

| Kelly Shepherd's third collection, *Dog and Moon*, is forthcoming from Oskana.
| Insomnia Bird, his second, won the 2019 Robert Kroetsch City of Edmonton
| Book Prize.

Counternarratives of Migration

Matsuki Masutani

I Will Be More Myself in the Next World: Poems. Mother Tongue Publishing \$19.95

Caroline Wong

Primal Sketches. Signature Editions \$17.95

Reviewed by Rina Garcia Chua (University of British Columbia)

Forgetting and remembering are strong diasporic themes that surface in poems of migration by racialized immigrants. Yet the lyric often betrays a singular metanarrative of success and abundance that settled migrants are framed with. The migrant's experience of movements—departures, arrivals, settling, and returning—are never simple nor homogenized; these experiences are wildly messy, joyous yet painful, and sometimes interrupted by dreams (or nightmares) of what was left behind. Further, these lived experiences move beyond the frames of multiculturalism and diversity that Euro-American nations assert to project a utopia of cultural acceptance; in fact, they offer counternarratives that are crucial to comprehending the intense self-reflexive inquiry that builds a migrant's identity. These counternarratives not only manifest in the lyric through the discourse of what was forgotten and remembered, but also build a world fraught with dreams, voicelessness, myths, and the elusive search for home.

The counternarratives in Matsuki Masutani's poems are reflected in confessional verses. With its nine sections, the collection delves in and out of different phases of the poet-persona's life: Marriage, Japan, Island Life, Chemo, Parkinson's, Old, and Grandchildren. Each section is a poignant and honest narrative of a life lived outside of one's heartland, of a person vying to create an identity on foreign soil. Curiously, the sections Marriage, Chemo, and Parkinson's are accompanied by their Japanese translations. Reading these parts in English and glancing at the right-hand pages' Japanese translations, which combine logographic kanji and syllabic kana combinations, is a curious interrogation of the reader's ability to accept what cannot be translated, especially when the translations appear longer than the English text. The English texts, as narratives, flow in a simple way; Masutani is not one who uses institutionalized techniques. He expresses simply, directly, and without fuss, welcoming the reader into the world he is crafting. In part seven of the section Marriage, he shares how his wife dreamt that he abandoned her in the middle of a strange city by forcing her out of the car. It was a "hell of a time" for her trying to get home, so he thinks he "should apologize somehow" for that dream (22). The juxtaposition of that moment in Marriage, together with the escalating small arguments of a couple from different cultural backgrounds, solidify the counternarrative that migrants are faced with: reckoning intimacy with differences. The translations seemingly ground those moments with a reminder that these are *his* moments, his interpretation of the events, and no one else's.

Similarly, the sections Chemo and Parkinson's relate the poet-persona's inner realizations and turmoil over battling and living with terminal illnesses. In part two of

Chemo, he mentions how it occurs to him that he is dying of cancer, but the young doctor insists that he will live. He also fears the chemo bottle with tubes that the nurse calls “baby bottle” (70). In the final line, he declares: “I must make my life more worthy” (70). With this realization of mortality, the poet-persona then pines for his heartland, his native soil; the collection pivots to soft, tender verses in the sections Old and Grandchildren, with the last lines of the poem “Newborn, She Is Sleeping” seeming to respond to the title of the collection: “Sometimes she shudders / like a bewildered insect, / a mystery from the other world” (114). Perhaps, for the poet, the turmoil within stops the moment he sees his granddaughter sleep in the world he is inhabiting; perhaps that is where he feels that he is able to step into another world beyond the one he has already made, and where he can be “worthy” by his, his ancestors’, and his grandchildren’s standards.

In contrast to Masutani’s honest counternarratives, Caroline Wong’s *Primal Sketches* provides visceral and violent counternarratives that mark a poet with a keen eye towards the world she has built and the environment she is inhabiting. If Masutani’s collection is stellar in its simplicity, Wong’s verses are a masterful demonstration of owning the standard techniques and running away with them. With five sections, namely, Living at the Edge, The Animals That Serve Us, What Runs in My Veins, Unmarked Paths, and The Way Home, *Primal Sketches* is not so much confessional as it is self-reflexive. It explores the poet-persona’s identity *after* she has lived with this persona for most of her life. She is unafraid to narrate what has happened to the sacred places of her childhood, the experiences that have brought her to North America, or the alienating feeling of returning to her native land after so much change. She recounts myths, translates poets of the Tang and Song Dynasties, and creates her own world that is full of curiosity, wonder, and pride.

In the section What Runs in My Veins, Wong writes: “but we have only what we carry: / wounds that never heal / scars left by lack and aggression / a thirst for reason and sanity // memory of lost homes” (39). This poem, “What We Carry,” introduces the reader to the realities of migrants as they try to find their space in foreign soil. From this general description of a migrant’s embodied experiences, Wong then delves into the specificities of her own immigration and what she cannot deny: a mortality that perseveres. She states in “Enduring Will” that, despite being a fragile being, the persona is “driven by an unstoppable imperative / a will to endure, carry on” (43). This tenacity to survive, no matter the challenge, is reflected upon in the last poem of that section, “Ancestor Worship,” where the poet-persona describes how her “father remembers his first boat journey” with his clan brothers (52), which took two days and a night just to bring offerings to their ancestors’ graves. That perilous journey ends with her father’s solemn prayer, which, unbeknownst to him, will lead to the “uprooting sojourn that await[s] him” (52). The collection then swerves to Unmarked Paths, which recounts the poet-persona’s own journeys to foreign countries as a curious tourist, visitor, and settler. Perhaps these are also an uprooting, but of her own agency and choice.

Parts of Wong’s collection are hard to read and digest, such as the section The Animals That Serve Us. This part creates an anthropocentric environment where slaughterhouses and fish farms become assembly lines and drive societies to interrogate the sentient experiences of animals that are bred for our consumption. Often, these verses depict violence that is hard to read; however, Wong does not disappoint in her navigation of these metaphors. She weaves in and out of visceral

descriptions by creating a space where the reader can question their own interpretations of how food is produced and how the process is rendered invisible to us. This is what perhaps Wong is most accomplished at: giving the reader a startling but gentle nudge of reality.

In her last poem, “Joy of Flying,” she returns to the Yangtze River, also the title of the collection’s first poem. For the first time, the poet-persona is not anchored to the world she has built, but is secure enough to let go. She does not know who wrote the lines about the Yangtze River, the one who says that the moon is like a hook, but she is “rising, rising to the moon’s crystalline hook” despite it all (83). The lightness in the section *The Way Home* is sharply different from the grounded and anchored verses of the first four sections, which also shows how the poet-persona has evolved as she begins the journey to where her heart is.

Both Masutani and Wong have had to build worlds in which they can feel safe on foreign ground. Sometimes, this world is never really home for them, and their counternarratives in these two collections show realities beyond the homogenized portrayals of migrants in North America, especially Canada. Forgetting and remembering become a process that they must contend with in order to secure their own identities, despite the difficulties of migrancy; further, as they find themselves accepting that their lives are now shifting to another strange new world, they allow themselves to dream of returning home. In part seven of *Chemo*, Masutani recounts how an old cherry tree outside his living room window stretches out its neck to ask how he is doing during the thick of his chemo sessions (80); in Wong’s “Footfalls,” she talks to her children and reminds them that in their “veins, a river of stories and memories / illuminates [their] ancient paths” (81). These reckonings are a pathway for the poet-personas to reclaim their lost identities, to own their myths, and to forge into a new world with those they have chosen to help carry their stories and memories. It is these reminders that surface counternarratives so they can be shared with the generations that need them and hunger for them.

The Witty and the Weird

Amber McMillan

The Running Trees: Stories. Goose Lane Editions \$19.95

Paul Edward Costa

God Damned Avalon: Flash Fiction. Mosaic Press \$17.95

Reviewed by Krzysztof Majer (University of Łódź)

Costa and McMillan both arrived at fiction via poetry. Having debuted with a volume titled *The Long Train of Chaos* (2019), Costa is currently Poet Laureate for the City of Mississauga; the Fredericton-based McMillan’s first book was also a volume of poems, *We Can’t Ever Do This Again* (2015). Unsurprisingly, what connects *The Running Trees* and *God Damned Avalon* are principles of brevity and compression, albeit deployed very differently. While McMillan usually condenses her narratives to a sense of voice and its quirks, Costa is more interested in the essence—or perhaps, by now, the debris—of genre fiction. The tenor, too, is strikingly different. Even at their darkest, McMillan’s pieces are propulsive and often witty, the humour deriving as much from

the unusual plots as from the characters' struggle to verbalize their awkward confusion. Costa's gloomy, unsettling stories, on the other hand, deliberately tend towards stasis: they are exercises in prolongation, in which even the ostensibly comical is weighed down with philosophical conjecture and baroque description. While McMillan's work effectively generates an illusion of fullness—of a fictional world existing safely behind the verbal facade, and barely squeezed into the exacting form of a very short story—Costa's agonizingly self-conscious, anti-mimetic flash fictions explore void after void, in repeated gestures of emptying out.

In *The Running Trees*, McMillan uses her terrific ear for dialogue to lovingly exploit the idiosyncrasies of human communication, the slight shifts that alter its dynamic. Although her pieces are all described as "conversations"—with apparently random numbers, suggesting a much larger "dossier"—this aspect is variously represented on the page. Many texts are reduced to dialogue, either drama-fashion (e.g., "Missing Feathers"), sometimes with what appears to be stage directions ("The Arsonist"), or with unnamed speakers, differentiated only by font style ("Pick Up"); bookending the collection are two straightforward narratives ("The Dinner Party," "Daniel and Julia and Me").

Many of McMillan's fictions offer an anxious backward glance at failed relationships; a recurrent theme is a clash of differing perspectives on the same event. In one of the most affecting of these, "Pluto of Happiness," a pair of ex-lovers—a professor and his once admiring student—end up dissecting a pivotal moment in their affair, now years in the past. Intriguingly, the disparities in their accounts of a passionate evening concern not so much statements or gestures, but the emotions behind these, entirely misconstrued by the other person. The motif resurfaces in tonally and thematically similar stories (e.g., "Coffee Date"), but also in narratives of a very different kind, such as the titular "Running Trees." In this story, McMillan not only imagines a cat's perspective, defamiliarizing ordinary scenes (such as the landscape seen from a moving car on the way to a vet), but also allows for conflicting philosophical positions to emerge in a dialogue between the feline leads.

Incompatible perspectives are also at the heart of "The Book Club," a mini-play, the three acts of which are spaced out through the volume. Here, the matter of contention is a memoir titled *The Many Faces of Withanu Lake*—by one Sarah Hilderman, an "unhappy stranger" (184)—which many inhabitants find inaccurate and offensive. "I know I just moved here and who am I to say," ventures one of them, "but this stuff doesn't seem respectful to me" (180). In this viciously funny piece, touching on artistic licence and the prickliness of tight-knit communities, one finds McMillan lampooning the local reception of her own 2016 memoir, *The Woods: A Year on Protection Island*, gleefully complicating even further the porous boundary between fact and fiction.

If many of McMillan's stories offer insight and consolation, Costa actively works towards the opposite goal. Mining genre literature for mood and imagery, he strips it of some of its most comforting features, such as a coherent structure and linearity, constructing instead defiantly convoluted tales. Bringing to mind Robert Coover's or Steven Millhauser's metafictional experiments with fable and fantasy, Costa's plots wind in on themselves, incongruous elements shatter the illusion of logic, while syntactical repetitions reinforce the sense of stillness, countering the narrative pull. There is a Borgesian fascination here with labyrinths, gardens, and ruins. Despite frequent religious allusions (e.g., to ascension, angelic figures, prophecies), evident

also in the imaginative title, no eschatological perspective unifies the bleak, shattered, irretrievably postmodern world. Generically, the volume is also unstable: marketed as “flash fiction” on its cover and spine, even though Costa himself identifies some of the pieces as “short stories” (84–85), it is referred to on the back cover as a “debut novel”—a label which this reviewer finds dubious.

Inevitably, given its generic leanings, numerous stories here channel H. P. Lovecraft’s brand of “weird fiction.” At times both the tone and the plot resemble those of Providence’s infamous misanthrope, as in “The Widening Maw,” a first-person account of a man who lingers long enough after confession to confirm his worst fears about the old priest—a “humanoid figure” who “crouched on the floor,” while “a thick tail flickered through the dimness” (57). Familiar evocations of hazy origins crop up in other pieces, even when inflected by more contemporary diction: “I don’t know my beginning” (1); “I don’t remember the day I travelled to the island” (23). Nods to Arthur Machen, perhaps again via Lovecraft, are evident in stylized, late Victorian Gothic descriptions of landscapes with “ever present dusk above the forest of colossal pine trees” where “spores of black fungi spewed green mist above the treeline” (28).

All this would have sounded woefully out of place in a forward-looking set of flash fictions published a hundred years after “The Outsider,” if not for the highly autotelic quality. Even so, there is an uncomfortable heaviness and unyielding homogeneity to Costa’s writing. Although Gothic tropes soon stack up, as in Neil Gaiman’s parodic, tellingly titled story “Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire,” no irony successfully penetrates Costa’s dark pages. Even if intended, any irony is muffled by the consistently murky tone. Despite shifts in perspective and focalization (sometimes within the same text), experiments with first-person subjective, third-person omniscient, or even second-person narration, and the implied variety of style (an apocalyptic chronicle; a committee hearing; a sermon; a transcript of a spiritualist séance), one encounters, again and again, sentences with the same rhythm, elevated diction, and brooding air. The inability to transcend the tedium of a heavy voice is a serious flaw in *God Damned Avalon*. As a result, ingenious ideas—a clock with deadly designs upon its owner; a reverend’s gospel of dust; an evolved civilization encroached on by a desert amassed from its own sand mandalas—are marred by stylistic monotony. Perhaps the most successful story in this volume, albeit not free of the same heavy manner, is “Rainbows and Black Tumours,” with just enough of a balance between Biblical plague accounts, Kafka’s hauntingly incomplete allegories, and Lovecraft’s “Colour Out of Space.”

From an intellectual point of view, there is much to admire in *God Damned Avalon*, the work of a highly literate poet acknowledging his debt to the likes of Beckett and Pynchon, with ambitions to expand the possibilities of literature. One naturally wonders if what is missing here is the author’s impassioned performance during his spoken-word events. Nevertheless, offered in print, these pieces live or die on the page.

A Dual Longing

Sadiqa de Meijer

alfabet/alphabet. Palimpsest Press \$15.95

Reviewed by Dani Spinosa (York University)

I'm a bit late to this game, and at the time of my writing, there are already several reviews out of Sadiqa de Meijer's latest book, *alfabet/alphabet*, from the delightful gem that is Palimpsest Press. These reviews basically all discuss—and rightfully praise—the book's careful analysis of language, multilingualism, the distancing and disconnection that results from speaking English as a second language, and from emigration from the place where one spent their childhood. The book has been called by formal and user reviews alike a careful academic study, an exploration of complex questions, an analysis of the relationship between language and belonging, a powerful mediation, a memoir. These are all accurate statements, and I'm not interested in critiquing them. I have, however, come to this book from a different angle, and even so, it has brought me the same joy as it has brought to these other reviewers. After all, we find what we come to books looking for, so often.

So, it is unsurprising, probably natural, that I, a staunch academic and avant-gardist who has only ever spoken English fluently, found in this book most of all a genre-busting experimentalism. This experimentalism, its pushing at the edges of genre, is not even in sheep's clothing. It is quite clearly out there, laid bare and baring its experimental teeth. This book has several strengths. But its most impressive, for me, has to be its ability to sneak that poetic, experimental, genre-busting so cleverly and so cleanly into the guise of an immensely readable, accessible memoir. So successful is this move that the book won the Governor General's Award for English non-fiction!

Look, for example, at how deftly de Meijer moves from that scholarly speaking voice to intense, internal intimacy. In recounting a conversation with the speaker's friend Sebastian, the speaker is astute and eloquent: "People who speak a language they learned after early childhood live in chronic abstraction" (85). This is contrasted starkly against the messy internal dialogue of a sentences-later reckoning with Sebastian, who *says* he disagrees with the statement, but becomes a vibrant, different person when speaking his first language, Polish, on the phone. The speaker says, not in dialogue, but internally, "You can argue, but I heard you, Sebastian. I heard that mazurka of your Polish voice" (85). The shift in tone is fascinating and shows how deftly de Meijer has learned to make these jumps, to move and shapeshift. This malleable writing voice is part of why, at its core, this book is deeply formal, experimental, radical, and academic without ever really seeming to be so while you read.

This ability to shapeshift and adapt is also quite clearly tied, in *alfabet/alphabet*, to an embodiment poetics that is inextricable from the personal and the political. In this book, "[c]onsonants are land; vowels are water" (30), and then again, not much later, "[c]onsonants are the body; vowels are breath" (36). It is a dual longing that the book keeps coming back to, a longing "for words and for landscape" (83), where the body is always already an inextricable mess of the two. This book is able to hold both at once, and that creates a satisfying inconsistency for me reading it as experimental and poetic literature. But it feels accessible the whole time. Are there some weaker

moments in the book? Sure. The “kennis/knowledge” section is confusing, and I’m not quite sure what it adds to the text overall; and there are times here and there where the work sags under the weight of too much theorization and not enough grounding in these personal or experimental moments. But these are quite rare and they are absolutely outweighed by the book’s overall strength and its uniqueness.

There are a few stand-out segments of this book for me, most of which are the more experimental and formal chapters. One such is the chapter “ik/I,” which is exploratory and idiosyncratic. This chapter engages in a working-through of the alphabet in what, at first, seems like it might be quite an academic and linguistic endeavour, but results in the speaker trying to read the vowel sounds of crows, only to find that “they seem to possess a vowel range beyond our alphabet” (48), or to separate the first hit of a cymbal from its subsequent crashes. This chapter contains some quite thoughtful and really engaging movement from the theoretical and general to the specific and personal, which makes it succeed. Look, for example, at the endearing moment when the speaker recognizes the use of the Dutch formal second-person pronoun, one that is at once articulated “in millions of other households at that same hour” and “seem[ing] to sanctify my Opa alone” (50). This moment captures both a childlike imagining of one’s own house at the centre of the universe—who among us did not do this as children?—and a careful meditation on language’s adaptability amid its shared uniformity. We see this same movement captured beautifully again in “Mio/Mio,” where “[n]ouns may lose specificity as we experience the world; bread is a rye slab, a rise flour loaf, a pale baguette, a slice from a bag; bread is money—but names burrow in the other direction; they progressively signify the close entities they represent” (71). This includes the English names de Meijer discusses learning upon arrival in Canada, which at first were “empty labels, strangely alike, and [she] made an effort to give them narrative moorings” (71). Throughout this book, the form of the work enacts its theoretical ideas, and she drops these personal moments as narrative moorings for readers making their way through the mess and multiplicity that is the book’s language.

My favourite section is “piano/piano,” though I am not sure I can fully enumerate why. Part of it is, absolutely, because of the poetic playfulness of the Dutch, the beautiful and childlike jumping from list to paragraph, from English to Dutch and back. Part of it is also how much this section reminded me of being an English speaker struggling in my youth to digest my grandparents’ Italian and the Italian I learned in my language classes, different as they were. Both forms of Italian have receded terribly into my Anglophone adulthood, and this chapter especially made me regret it, made me unearth my old textbooks and think about taking up the language again, despite the fact that my grandfather isn’t here anymore to secretly pay me five dollars for each Italian phrase I learn (*Nonno, ti voglio bene*).

Elegies for a Prairie Pastness, Rhythms of Desire

John McDonald

Kitotam: He Speaks to It. Radiant Press \$20.00

Tenille K. Campbell

nedí nezū (Good Medicine). Arsenal Pulp Press \$18.95

Reviewed by Aislinn C. McDougall (University of Regina)

Poetry with resonance both transports and transforms. This remains true of both John McDonald's *Kitotam: He Speaks to It* and Tenille K. Campbell's *nedí nezū (Good Medicine)*, two collections that move readers through memory and past with lovely devastation. While McDonald's collection is marked by elegy for poets, loved ones, and, perhaps most overtly, Saskatchewan, Campbell's collection embodies the distinct rhythms of fighting, fucking, and fondness in a stunning meditation on feminine desire.

Saskatchewan remains a central object of McDonald's mnemonic journey throughout *Kitotam*, wherein he transports readers to a poignant version of the province, pieced together by memory and story. Inaugurated by the pulsing rhythm of the collection's opening lines, *Kitotam* paints a prairie portrait wherein Saskatchewan is at once the "[s]wiftly flowing water" (3), "the sweet hiss between stations" (4), and "the hurting times" (13). McDonald's collection portrays the "feel" of Saskatchewan that only a prairie kid can place. "I feel suffocated by the open land," McDonald writes after describing the "strange" . . . [s]ummer smell of Southern Saskatchewan" (82). While McDonald certainly captures Saskatchewan's modest beauty, *Kitotam* emerges as a complicated letter to the prairies from a poet resentful of its failures. "The cold winter kills any love I have for this place / Although there is very little love left" (84), he writes towards the end of the collection, after having already catalogued the "sickening drift" on "that gravel road . . . in the middle of nowhere" (31), "[t]he ghosts of winter" (4), and "[t]hose days in Prince Albert" (9). The collection rebukes the things that make Saskatchewan insufferable. Of Prince Albert, McDonald writes: "The place has no future / And the past is just that" (9). But, ultimately, he pinpoints a distinctly Indigenous resilience in such a "hateful place" (84).

While McDonald overtly admonishes readers of the prairies' treachery and shortcomings, his tone often remains elegiac, and it is his emphasis on memory—"I remember as a kid" (5), "Golden memories of childhood tainted" (9), "I have this memory" (17)—that allows for a certain tenderness to emerge. McDonald is overt with his elegy in pieces such as "My Dead Friends" and "Ode to Those Killed February 11, 2015," two beautiful tributes to lost loved ones. Elsewhere, memory serves as a means for him to write back to his youth. "I haven't seen that girl in 16 years," he writes in "Eights and Aces," where he navigates fragments of teenage intimacy, "warm and high" (17). Much of *Kitotam* relies on a theme of record-keeping through analogue media. This is arguably best illustrated in "Mix Tape 1993," which details the "teenage basement dwellers" hoping and praying "that there is enough tape to record the whole song" (25). In "The Arcades," McDonald shares a detailed memory of a childhood spent at the arcade, but the piece works to lament other details of a lost moment in time: "the SAAN store" that "burned down," "Westside Coin Laundry," and even "the movie theatre" (22). In "Record Store Day," the language of catalogue and collection overtakes the form in a process of calculated listening: "All just to hear it on vinyl"

(43). This interest in records transcends a 1990s media ecology; in part 2 of the book—entitled “Masinahikatew (He Writes It All Down)” —McDonald’s poetry becomes about poetry, replete with odes to bygone artists, performers, and writers, including Maya Angelou (54), Mr. Dressup (55), Tom Thomson (57), David Bowie (66), and, of course, Leonard Cohen (72). *Kitotam*, then, becomes as much about memory and elegy as it does about writing itself.

McDonald’s *Kitotam* can be characterized as an elegiac outpouring to Saskatchewan, to childhood, and to poetry through a series of emotional recollections. Tenille K. Campbell’s *nedi nezu* (*Good Medicine*) is best described as a collection of epistles. Most of Campbell’s poems are directly addressed to the second-person “you,” establishing the poems as open love letters to lovers, to the self, and to Northern Saskatchewan, where the feminine body emerges as a vessel, a language, even, for sweet and heart-wrenching memory.

“[S]nagging while Indigenous / means . . .” (13), Campbell begins her collection, after which each ensuing text responds ardently to this inaugural statement, illustrating how sex, love, body, land, and kinship are all distinct languages for a particularly sensual set of communications. In the first section, “Language Lessons,” Campbell indicates how lovemaking is a language of its own, whether it is a lover’s “northern accent dripping / from tongue and lips” or their whole being (14):

. . . fresh river water
chilled by underwater glacial
pulsing through my mouth
over my tongue
down my throat
carrying story (15)

This exploration of sex as language permeates the collection and serves as a frame through which Campbell centres feminine desire. “I want to taste your language,” the speaker asserts, before offering the aural imagery to match: “let my tongue lick and suck / your vowels and consonants” (20). This focalization of feminine pleasure allows Campbell to present love and sex as languages for survival:

when your lips and tongue
taste me for the first time
knees spread before you
know that
we are in ceremony (17)

Sexual experience is tied to “reverence” and ceremony (17), but the languages for survival are best indicated by the speaker’s final words to a lover: “remember this moment” (17). Not only does feminine pleasure demand survival through spirituality and memory—“you need to recognize the ceremony / that my body holds” (76)—but it also emerges as that which satiates others: “you were thirsty,” Campbell writes, “and my desire / quenched you” (19). The body, here, is sustenance, presented to a lover as a “feast” for the taking (19), but this satiation transcends the bedroom as it presents feminine desire as a life-giving force as well.

Beyond a gorgeous celebration of the feminine body as language, Campbell's collection explores place and land as offering similar avenues for dialogue. Often, the northern lights become a crucial medium for sexual and romantic communication, as to be "wrapped up in northern lights" (42) or "kissed / like the northern lights" (45) is to be loved deeply. Similarly, the speaker declares, "I want . . . lips that kiss under pine trees / and tell me they love me / in accents from the land" (87). But often this meditation on land as language is inherently tied to memory and pastness. Campbell details listening to a lover's speech: "rolling your ancestors' words / out of throat through teeth" (94). She frames these details through a desire to be sustained by language: "I wanna . . . listen to your laughter / echo with your ancestors" (102). And the roll of language is also quite literal, as Campbell frequently oscillates between English, Cree, and Dene in a way that foregrounds the collection's feelings of longing.

Campbell's emphasis on language is supported by her formal play with continuity, repetition, and rhythm. Her poems exude fluidity through their titles, which pour into ensuing poetic lines, framing the speaker's voice conversationally rather than with constraint. Many of Campbell's poems utilize a structure of repetition and return. For Campbell, this repetition embodies a musicality that ornaments her meditations on sex, love, and the body, such that where she begins, whether in title or first line—"you wouldn't have fit in on the rez," for example—is where she ultimately arrives: "you wouldn't have fit in on the rez" (75). Each repetition is a process, a return, ornamenting her collection with a distinct rhythm that begs readers to re-evaluate poetic meaning with each cyclical return. In "the first time I fell in love," the speaker begins by describing "[falling] fearlessly . . . your tongue teaching me / new ways to say *negħanitā*," while she ends with increasingly more Dene and an altogether new perspective on the relationship: "the first time I fell in love / I gave you all my wild and reckless // *kõndue denegħanitā hurēsīle*" (44).

Both collections dwell on a fascination with pastness, but Campbell's emphasis on memory is productively juxtaposed with a twenty-first-century digital dialect wherein she navigates sex through "snapchat streak[s]" (22), late-night DMs, and contemplations on whether or not to text (25). Where McDonald resurrects a distinctly 1990s relationship to media via vinyl records, Campbell establishes social media as a means for "making relations / traditional-like" (22), with an attention to digital technology's ephemerality that makes the collection shine with raw, twenty-first-century digitality. These moments of social media contemplation are often paired with the less fond side of the collection's romantic epistles. In poems like "when you come to the door" and "men are trash," Campbell frames an "I'm not raising / a grown-ass man / again" attitude with moments of social media failure (72): "ring hiding DM deleting" prefaces "how you like my insta story" in this reminder that "we are worth more" (68–69). And while social media permeates these frustrated lines about less-than lovers, Campbell cleverly pinpoints her position as a successful poet as the disingenuous reason for lacklustre affection. Whether these lovers "wanna be the inspiration / for that next line in the next poem" (68) or whisper "by the way, I'm a fan I love your poetry" (70), Campbell's poetry emerges as a clever stand-in for the they-only-want-one-thing trope in these more biting poems. Unlike McDonald, with his sincere and elegiac meditations on his role as a writer and artist, Campbell positions her poetry as sexual desire.

Both collections resonate; they transport and transform. While, for McDonald, memory is crucial to artistry, for Campbell, it is inherent in kinship. “I make a deal with myself,” McDonald writes,

As my eyelids begin to close,
That if I remember it by morning
I will put it down
Somehow. (50)

And McDonald does recall, and he does so deeply, putting it all down with more conviction than “Somehow” suggests. With similar conviction, Campbell’s collection closes with hopefulness in “we met in late spring,” a gorgeous love poem that moves creatively through time in a way that reflects the temporal play of the entire collection. Campbell inaugurates the poem with a sweet memory of when “my heart was his,” but she also establishes “right now” as a space for future ancestors, a gorgeous juxtaposition that captures her themes of resilience and survival: “when he smiles / I see echoes of the Elder / he will be” (110). The hope in this penultimate poem is communicated by a pastness that must resonate in the future: “I will tell our grandchildren / we met in late spring” (111). Campbell returns, again, to the title of her poem in this moment of continuity.

A Chorus of Marginalized Voices

Dukesang Wong, David McIlwraith, ed., Wanda Joy Hoe, trans.

The Diary of Dukesang Wong: A Voice from Gold Mountain. Talonbooks \$18.95

Kim Davids Mandar

In/Appropriate: Interviews with Canadian Authors on the Writing of Difference. Gordon Hill Press (Chinese University of Hong Kong Business School)

Reviewed by Botao Wu (Chinese University of Hong Kong Business School)

This essay reviews two books—*The Diary of Dukesang Wong: A Voice from Gold Mountain* and *In/Appropriate: Interviews with Canadian Authors on the Writing of Difference*—side by side, as they both concern the micro-histories of under-represented populations and seek to give voice to marginalized people and restore their individuality, humanity, and honour.

The Diary combines Dukesang Wong’s diaries before and after his immigration from China to Canada with editor David McIlwraith’s commentary. McIlwraith divides Wong’s diary into two parts: “The China Diary,” about his life in China, and the “Gold Mountain Diary,” about his life in Canada. Wong lived in late Imperial China and was well educated in the Confucian tradition. His father, a magistrate, was poisoned and died. His father’s “glorious banner,” symbolizing his social status, was taken away, and the family house was seized by local officials (Wong 25). Soon, the family was further dishonoured. When Wong’s mother died by suicide a year later, she was not buried in the family graveyard, but in a common one—a source of shame in Chinese culture. One of Wong’s sisters became a man’s third wife, causing disrespect and disgrace. In his diary, Wong laments that his good days were forever lost. He

chose to write a diary to help overcome his sadness and confusion, and the habit lasted over fifty years.

The second half of Wong's diary serves as the "only primary source" for the perspectives of Chinese workers constructing the Canadian Pacific Railway (McIlwraith in Wong 3), who faced underpayment, racism, exploitation, deprivation, and humiliation. McIlwraith reconstructs part of an 1883 *Yale Sentinel* article from Pierre Berton's quotations in *The Last Spike* (203), sharing the unnamed reporter's account of Chinese workers "fast disappearing under the ground" due to maltreatment and lack of medication (qtd. in Wong 72). Wong tried to use wisdom, empathy, and poetry to help himself and his peers overcome violence and tragedy. The later years of Wong's diary depict his roles as tailor, teacher, husband, father, and grandfather in a relatively optimistic tone. After more than half a century, Wong's maternal granddaughter, Wanda Joy Hoe, translated a major part of the diary for a sociology assignment at Simon Fraser University. The seven notebooks containing the handwritten diary were destroyed in a fire in the Wong clan office, as if to confirm McIlwraith's comment that a "first-person account of the Chinese workers who built railways across the North American continent is not supposed to exist" (4).

In/Appropriate carries out, in the form of interviews between Kim Davids Mandar and Canadian writers of fiction, a collaborative exploration of such important issues as the impact of fiction on social and political reality, the function of artists in society, the connections between arts and politics, racism and anti-Indigeneity, the appropriation of Indigenous cultures and identities, and the (mis)representation of marginalized populations. The book explores these profound topics in a conversational tone.

Both books are phenomenological documentations of marginalized people's lives and representations of their states of mind, contributing to the re-emergence of the silenced and absent histories of marginalized populations. When discussing social reality, *The Diary* is more critical in tone and more pessimistic in mood than *In/Appropriate*. Wong's difficult life in China and Canada contributed to the profound disappointment evident in his writing. For marginalized workers on the CPR, Canada was a Gold Mountain in their imagination and laborious work in daily reality. In comparison, the contemporary authors interviewed in *In/Appropriate* to some extent can have their concerns and needs heard and addressed. Today, respect for multiple voices and perspectives has become increasingly widespread and accepted.

Adhering to art's supposed independence from external factors—art for art's sake—is a reaction to contemporary social reality, especially in its refusal to connect the arts to political, moral, and didactic realms. As Daniel Heath Justice observes in the introduction to *In/Appropriate*, the original, late-nineteenth-century practitioners of art for art's sake in England "were rebelling against the dominant values of their time, but they brought their own biases, cruelties, and limitations to their arts as well" (in Mandar xvi). Or, as Mahak Jain puts it, "Writers don't live in a void" (in Mandar 16). Art—whether the art of writing, painting, song, or theatre—can never fully escape social realities. Arts-based research provides a methodology for the application of art in the social sciences and humanities. Non-fiction, fiction, and other works of art may not be the driving forces for social change, but they open people's eyes, provide crucial perspectives, and equip people to think differently about their experiences and the world.

Regarding cultural appropriation, the opinions that appear in *In/Appropriate* span the full spectrum, from the views of those who deny the very existence of cultural appropriation to the perspectives of its strongest opponents; Waubgeshig Rice, for instance, recommends that white writers stay away from Indigenous cultures so as to avoid reinscribing patterns of dominance and inferiority and “disregard[ing] . . . the diversity amongst Indigenous cultures and nations” (Mandar 135). Overall, contributors to *In/Appropriate* generally discourage white writers from representing marginalized cultures. The interviewees point out that white writers often represent non-white populations in a stereotypical and one-dimensional way, thus depicting them altogether incorrectly. According to several interviewees, white authors should start by writing from their own perspectives if they really want to write about under-represented populations, both because there are nuances that an outsider may not be able to understand and represent well and because seeking permission from an under-represented community is not realistic. Authors from under-represented populations hold the advantage of writing from an insider’s perspective, and their works are multi-dimensional and representative at the same time. Jael Richardson, for example, visited her father’s birthplace in Portsmouth, Ohio, and then wrote the novel *Gutter Child*. She comments: “mining that experience of what it’s like to grow up with little choice and little power is a way for me of coping and asking questions and coming to terms with who I am” (in Mandar 10–11). However, authors of colour are not as numerous as white authors in Canadian publishing, where “there still seems to be an unspoken sense of quota” (Ian Williams in Mandar 88). Furthermore, authors from marginalized communities simply write about their personal truths; they do not necessarily represent a whole community, people, or nation.

In her introduction to *The Diary of Dukesang Wong*, Judy Fong Bates reminds us that people of colour have been marginalized in social activities and forgotten in broader histories (xvii). For some people, this is racism and injustice; for others, it is a consequence of a type of self-centredness on the part of the marginalizer, for whom any opinions and experiences different from their own are gauged and treated according to their needs and understanding of the world. Many mainstream authors and authors from under-represented populations have sought to have their voices heard and their concerns addressed, and the negotiation and confrontation between the two groups demonstrate conflicting viewpoints, ideologies, and social and political interests. As Justice points out, however, the “issue of voice is inextricably connected with that of power and resources” (xv).

Mandar encourages people to accept differences and to reach for “the essential oneness of humanity” (ix). This point of view echoes many scholars’ thinking as a solution to conflicts among people of different identities. However, it takes time to accept that we all partake in this essential oneness. In neither the West nor the East, for example, are children taught to accept a global common culture; Bates comments that in Canada she was systematically educated in Western history, but was not even introduced to Asian history. Any overlapping or conflicting historical or cultural events are taught differently in different countries. For example, Bates was taught in public schools in Canada that the Second World War lasted six years, but she notes that the duration of the war was eight years according to the Chinese educational system (xix). Wong wrote in his diary in 1879 that he might have dishonoured his traditional Chinese education, as he had the unorthodox thought that Christian teachings are just another way of understanding life. Such long-established, nuanced, and deep-rooted

cultural and historical disparities curb the realization of the essential oneness of humanity, and effective efforts should be exerted to break biases, misinformation, and obstacles to the unification of the human species.

This collection marks how the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are blurring, and many interviewed writers explore anew, and with varied opinions, the common challenge of how truth relates to fiction. Though some fiction is research-based, writers of fiction have the space and flexibility allowed by invention. Yet, while many fiction authors give their writing verisimilitude by basing their stories' details in reality, Wayne Grady contends that "readers positively want to suspend their disbelief. They want to believe that what they're reading is reality, and they will believe that fiction is reality even when what they're reading goes against what they know to be the truth in 'real life'" (in Mandar 35). Arif Anwar suggests that because non-fiction writers can arrange their material to lead readers in a certain direction, in some ways fiction is a more effective vehicle for truth than non-fiction (in Mandar 68–69). So, while Angie Abdou suggests that fiction is "made up" (in Mandar 94), Chelene Knight comments that "in fiction we hold the assumption that everything is made up, but I don't think that's true" (in Mandar 157). Other contributors agree that fiction can contain elements of truth, consist of truths that are pieced together, though some contend that it can accommodate the choice of not including any truth.

Eden Robinson admits that "fiction has less of a social impact than it used to" (in Mandar 152), and she comments that authors should consider the younger generations' needs and the world's new social circumstances. In our digitalized and multimodal world, the recreational reading of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry in print is declining (National Endowment for the Arts). Reading now takes varied forms. Regarding the interaction and interconnectedness of writing and society, we should extend our discussion to ask whether traditional writing should adapt to new communication channels, such as online writing platforms and image-based media, and whether traditional authors should cater to contemporary readers' newly developed reading habits, such as multi-tasking, skimming, and so on (Fitzpatrick). The digital world has also brought to the fore controversies around representation. In the age of social media, Alicia Elliott thinks that "a lot of [writers] are, yes, intimidated, but also aren't really sure what their responsibilities are" (in Mandar 50).

In light of this situation, authors of fiction and non-fiction collaboratively have to defend a common front line for writing. Grady mentions that "it was Shelley who said that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind" (in Mandar 37). In the Middle Ages, meanwhile, ancient authors were considered superior authorities who could exercise insight that was not only secular but also divine. Now, the urgent issue is to make creative writing more suitable for and representative of the contemporary world, and *In/Appropriate* begins to address this need. Authors should conscientiously enhance connections between writing and social reality, making writing "more accountable to the communities from which we write and speak" (Cisneros 97).

The influence of writing goes beyond borders, while the drive to write comes from within. Some authors write for personal satisfaction and fulfillment and do not even have their readers in mind when they compose their works. Writing is romanticized as spontaneous, yet also mistrusted as artificial and manipulative. Ultimately, however, writing reflects the writer's understanding of social and cultural dynamics. "Writing is an act of empathy, and reading is an act of empathy," according to Ayelet Tsabari (in Mandar 3). By writing from a place of empathy, writers can represent those of another

culture in a way that invites in audiences of that culture (4–5). These efforts at representation may not always be satisfactory. “We’re flawed human beings. Our artistic output is also going to be flawed,” observes Abdou (in *Mandar* 105). Some may think of criticism as censorship, but as Elliott writes: “Everyone is going to make mistakes . . . you have to be humble when you’re writing about a community that’s not yours, and open to criticism, because that’s ultimately going to make you a better writer” (in *Mandar* 57). Bates observes the (un)intentional misinterpretation and misinformation created by different educational, political, and cultural interest groups. The micro-histories of people and communities and the macro-histories of nations and states are unstable and multivocal. Writers’ representations and reinterpretations of history play an important role in conveying its complexities.

Both *The Diary of Dukesang Wong* and *In/Appropriate* explore the interconnectedness of, and interaction between, the word and the world. They also reveal the mistreatment of marginalized populations in Canada. Finally, the books echo Mikhail Bakhtin’s belief in the liberatory power of language and exemplify how authors can initiate, advance, and lead campaigns and projects to write difference and promote respect and equality. In reading and writing stories about under-represented peoples, we have “a role in not maintaining the status quo” (Farzana Doctor, qtd. in *Mandar* 124). Others can then “grow beyond those stories” and “emerge stronger” in turn (Amanda Leduc in *Mandar* 180–81), realizing our abilities and our unique existence.

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Haida Manga and Beyond

Nicola Levell

Mischief Making: Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, Art, and the Seriousness of Play. U of British Columbia P \$29.95

Reviewed by Emma Morgan-Thorp (York University)

This dense and gorgeous book is a republication of Levell’s 2016 *Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas: The Seriousness of Play* (Black Dog Press), with a new foreword by Nobuhiro Kishigami (executive director, National Institute for the Humanities;

professor, National Museum of Ethnology). An expanded introduction by Levell places greater emphasis on the concept of mischief, in place of the earlier edition's interest in play, with Levell asking: "What does mischief mean when applied to an artist's practice?" (12). From the work of Marcel Duchamp to that of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Levell identifies the role of mischief in providing entertainment "while [being] simultaneously serious in its intent to disrupt the status quo, to unsettle dominant power relations, to transform and even reverse our cultural categories, our naturalized behaviours and norms" (12–13).

The book is divided into five sections. The first, aptly titled "Backstory," provides a biography for Yahgulanaas, describing his lifetime of activism and turn to artistic practice. This section details his artistic lineage and describes his mixed heritage, influences, and inspirations as a means to introduce the concept of hybridity, a core preoccupation in Yahgulanaas' oeuvre and, by extension, in Levell's text. The second section, "Haida Goes Pop! Playing with Formlines," delves into Yahgulanaas' use of the comic form. Here we learn more about his creation, Haida manga, through which he "deliberately set out to circumvent the North American comic-aesthetic . . . and declare an elective affinity with manga and more generally the visual culture of the North Pacific" (42). Section three, "Cool Media: The Art of Telling Tales," sees Levell dig deeper into Yahgulanaas' influences and artistic lineages, and also describes an intended outcome of the artist's use of accessible forms:

With his customary idealism, which is always tempered with a political accent, Yahgulanaas hopes that his graphic novels and artworks can foster a form of "conciliation." Through their universal significations, they can help bridge the gap of cultural misunderstanding or the tendency we have to distance and dissociate ourselves from cultures and peoples whom we think of as "other." (68)

The fourth and fifth sections, "Culturally Modified: Precious Metals, Cars and Crests" and "Visual Jazz: The Adaptability of Forms," tackle the artist's attentiveness to the Haida worldview as well as the rhythm, movement, and use of colour, collage, and light in Yahgulanaas' works.

With attention to such crucial topics as art's potential to overwrite colonial narratives and the role of the viewer as active participant, along with compelling passages on technique and form, Levell's own wide-ranging art-historical and critical interests reflect her subject's, revealing Yahgulanaas as an artist with both a broad range of influences and a diverse reach of his own. *Mischief Making* demonstrates not only a deep appreciation for Yahgulanaas' breathtaking and provocative body of work, but also an incisive understanding of the role of art in the creation of political change.

Disorderly Conduct

Patricia Robertson

Hour of the Crab. Goose Lane Editions \$22.95

Marion Quednau

Sunday Drive to Gun Club Road. Nightwood Editions \$21.95

John Krizanc

Tamara. House of Anansi Press \$19.99

Reviewed by Penelope Hetherington

In their 2013 film *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness*, Ben Rivers and Ben Russell ask, “Is storytelling essentially a way to mark temporal movement? Or is its point to make time stand still long enough to yield hidden meaning?” The three works considered here all provoke these questions. Two short story collections, although quite different in tone and subject matter, allow narrative to fall away, while a theatre work reveals the inadequacy of a single path through any story.

Not far into Patricia Robertson’s *Hour of the Crab*, one senses that the author is playing a long game. Her agenda reveals itself sneakily across ten stories in three carefully curated sections, each story a set-up for the destabilization and refocus that await in the next. At times, a tale will trail off as if hijacked by a teller who has lost the plot. Although there is no discernible trajectory, the reader always seems to end up in the so-called pocket. Exactly what this is remains unclear, and we ratchet between being sutured into the expertly told stories and popping out to try and grasp what drives the collection’s overall structure.

The first section positions us as onlookers in violent or desperate landscapes against which our first-world privilege shields us. In the title piece, a Canadian traveller literally stumbles upon the corpse of a drowned refugee on a beach in Spain. An almost preachy tone pushes to the threshold of annoyance, then fades in importance as shifts in perspective refresh our own. The simple fact, for instance, of a character reappearing in a subsequent story, while their point of view does not, can remind us of our flattened significance in another’s narrative. Each story contains the seed for the next until the section’s end, when a student, imprisoned for resisting state tyranny, experiences visions from an unknown past that conflates with his present.

The trope of unfinished history seems to recur—but not exactly. In fact, *not exactly* might serve to describe the slightly off-beam way in which Robertson writes. When a semi-retired linguist discovers indelible marks on her skin that only fade because, as her grandson’s friend observes, she “just didn’t figure them out in time” (147), it’s clear that the notion of a past is irrelevant. In Robertson, things stick around, but often only a few are able to see them. The narrative variously bestows such ability as challenge, as opportunity for redemption, or as generational privilege, but is always rooted in the synchronic moment.

The final three stories bring yet another tonal reset and confound any attempt at a landing. Reading like transcriptions of old myths and legends, they feel hermetic, almost resisting engagement. The section title, “Holding Patterns,” seems apt. In “The Old Speech,” a character states, “That is what our words are. They use us for

protection” (240). It’s an idea both humbling and thrilling for our language-heavy species, and one that might be at the nerve centre of poetics.

With a title that scans like an alt-country lyric and stories that would be at home in the best American indie films, Marion Quednau’s *Sunday Drive to Gun Club Road* both keeps and tilts its promise. Quednau observes characters with an acuity that borders at times on the painful. Whether conjuring the dark side of a 1980s small town, the creepily misguided behaviour of a lonely man, or a brutal reversal of status in the publishing world, Quednau acknowledges the unique lexicon of each milieu. Her nimbleness with language hits its peak in the collection’s most hilarious piece, “Onion.” Here, she actually switches lexical modes via the central character, a doctor of linguistics, who visits the peeler bar where her husband and his workmates claim to hang out “for the food” (80). Arriving in cowboy drag, she performs an out-of-control striptease, narrating her way through it in word-perfect argot and making excruciating observations about everyone in the landscape as choreography and language become one.

The collection’s twenty pieces have an unresolved quality that leaves room for the reader. It’s what most of us want, and have come to expect, from fiction. But Quednau doesn’t stop there. Her stories often end with a sense of being bumped off-course, the reader ushered through the wrong door into a place where the channel has been changed. This might take the form of a character exiting into another phase of their life, but without the customary development that a story usually offers. It can feel like a chord change or an architectural slippage in which random events have realigned the coordinates of the real and sent things tipping into an oblique elsewhere. Yet Quednau writes in the book’s acknowledgements that fiction “forces a writer toward endings that help us move on” (205).

All of this might suggest that there is no conclusive validity to the way we arrange events into narrative at all, and that the most promising places to search for ways to move on are in the spaces between. But even that might be too easy. There is something mysterious and compelling about those spaces in Quednau’s storytelling. They emulate the sudden disconnects usually associated with rambling but with none of the negativity or loss of agency. Perhaps they are a waiting area where our de-subjectified stories float until something else happens.

Reading a play without having seen it in performance isn’t uncommon. Students, directors, actors, and entire production teams do this often. What initially felt odd to me was reviewing a theatrical work straight from the page. First published in 1981, John Krizanc’s *Tamara* premiered the same year in Toronto, and has had productions since in the Americas and Europe. This edition of the playtext was released in 2021 with an introduction by scholar and novelist Alberto Manguel.

The play’s structure sets it apart and makes navigating the text an interesting exercise in itself. At any given time, multiple scenes are taking place simultaneously in various rooms and performance spaces. Unlike other variations on this conceit, where spectators might wander in and out of playing areas at will, *Tamara*’s audience members are instructed to choose a character to follow and to enter and exit playing areas with them. Either way, the play’s structure makes clear the impossibility of complete knowledge: we are always missing a part of the story happening elsewhere. A reader can get a taste of this fragmentary experience and still enjoy a degree of omniscience by following several characters in succession until the entire script has been covered, but, in a nod to Mallarmé, it’s still a dice throw. To experience *Tamara* as live theatre would be optimal.

Set in late 1920s Italy as Mussolini's grip was tightening, the story takes place at the villa of a poet and war hero who has commissioned the titular character, Tamara de Lempicka, to paint his portrait. Whirling around are his servants and guests, all with their own secrets and agendas. The period of totalitarianism's rise arguably offers a more story-rich landscape than its full-blown phase, not least because it can expose the oblivion and denial that allowed such politics to flourish unchecked. At first, a Fascist policeman among the guests seems the lone embodiment of the regime's evils but, by the final scene, nearly everyone has been implicated. Personal ambition and ridiculous vanities play out in overblown dialogue that often feels at odds with the play's weighty themes, although resonant moments break through nonetheless. When Tamara presents the portrait to D'Annuncio, for example, it's an empty canvas. The poet has allowed Mussolini to "pay my bills" in exchange for the complicity of silence and has thus become "nothing" (241). By playing with our limited vision in a world of simultaneity, Krizanc asks us to interrogate the points of view we choose to follow. Now would be an especially good time to bring Tamara off the page and onto the stage.

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