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How to Be at Home in Canada: Placemaking in Indigenous, Diasporic, and Settler Texts

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Guest Editors: Heather Macfarlane, Sophie McCall, and Basmah Rahman

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Entangled Belongings

The large number of submissions to this special issue of *Canadian Literature*, “How to Be at Home in Canada,” is a testament to the continued centrality and ever-evolving questions of belonging in lands claimed by Canada. Diasporic populations negotiate complex relationships between their ancestral lands of origin and adopted homeland of Canada, which, while it claims to welcome diversity through its multicultural policies, systemically excludes Indigenous, Black, and racialized populations. Indigenous communities struggle to escape the colonial project of Canadian nationhood while asserting their own sovereign affiliations and rights to land. White settler populations, meanwhile, undertake the contradictory task of acknowledging their history as colonizers while simultaneously finding a place of belonging. The articles in this double issue consider narratives from communities in Canada that assert or contest relations between land, story, ownership, and belonging—in both rural and urban environments, and in forms as varied as traditional Indigenous stories, religious documents, poetry, prose fiction, and government policy.

In the landmark 1997 Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en land claim brought before the Supreme Court of Canada, *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, the Court ruled that traditional Indigenous story was admissible in court as evidence of land ownership, legitimizing what settler scholar Margery Fee has called “a literary land claim.”¹ The essays in this collection examine the ways literary texts claim space and explore questions of belonging for Indigenous, diasporic, and settler populations. Processes of claiming or challenging narratives of belonging are clearly different for every community; what unites them is the urgency of finding ways to be at home in Canada. Syilx

(Okanagan) scholar, author, and activist Jeannette Armstrong writes, “I am claimed and owned by this land, this Okanagan” (174). Here Armstrong reverses and calls into question the colonial process of claiming land to demonstrate the way land claims us, and her poetry and prose embody the intimate process of living in relationship to the land. In *Literary Land Claims* (2015), Fee traces how texts use strategies to claim—or problematize the act of claiming—land, story, and belonging. Black scholar Rinaldo Walcott, in his essay “‘A Tough Geography’: Towards a Poetics of Black Space(s) in Canada,” signals the importance of such an undertaking: “It seems that one of the challenges facing contemporary black Canadian art is to move beyond the discourse of nostalgia for an elsewhere and toward addressing the politics of its present location” (46–47). By centring the politics of the present, the authors in this collection demonstrate the ways writers address the politics of place through literary land claims. Connecting community to place both engenders and demonstrates belonging; yet the forces of unbelonging, with multiple national imaginaries working in tension with one another, continually undermine the ongoing process of finding, making, and feeling at home in Canada. The pieces we have gathered from among the strong and timely submissions consider the politics of claiming stolen land, and the ways that class, race, cultural practice, gender, and sexuality intersect with questions of territorial belonging, nationhood, and connection to place. Through the mobilization of decolonial, antiracist, queer, and ecological perspectives, these articles aim to resist settler-colonial claims to land, bodies, and homes; reckon with systemic racism and extractive methodologies; and make room for art, cultural expression, and conversation in open, inclusive spaces. The work of making and supporting these open, inclusive spaces is occurring at a crucial time when finding a sense of home and belonging in a broader world engaged in war and the wholesale destruction of homes underlines the high stakes of these debates. Questions of justice, complicity, and the politics of literary production in lands claimed by Canada are as urgent as ever.

As much as CanLit, as an institutional formation, maintains hegemonic structures of white settler-colonial society in Canada, it is also contested; writers have often been at the forefront of pushing the boundaries of protest and dissent. Their work is implicated in deep

political and moral questions, ones that have become starkly relevant over the past year. We released the call for papers in September 2023, just before October 7, the start of Israel's war on Gaza, and we have continued working on this special issue over the course of the war, which Amnesty International, among others, has described as a "genocide against Palestinians in Gaza" ("You Feel Like" 35).² Many writers and artists are speaking out at this moment of crisis and contestation and, in acts of protest, are refusing those institutional supports whose funding is directly connected to the total destruction of lives, homes, lands, and waters.³ Many activists, faculty, students, and organizations are suffering severe consequences for articulating their dissent in a chilled climate of fear and silencing.⁴ Meanwhile, the work we do as scholars in universities—like reading, writing, and teaching—takes place alongside the dismantling of knowledge systems in Gaza, amounting to what Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi has called "scholasticide,"⁵ including the destruction of all twelve universities in Gaza, as well as Palestinian archives, museums, and libraries. In this context, we have special responsibilities in speaking out as scholars who have classrooms and lecture halls in which to think, study, and teach, as well as books to read, discuss, and share. This heated moment has ignited a sense of urgency—how, indeed, does one claim home in the shadow of genocide?—but it speaks to the work that many have engaged in over decades.

Part of the impetus in creating this special issue were two panels exploring "How to Be at Home in Canada," organized by co-editors Heather Macfarlane and Basmah Rahman, as part of the Association for Canadian and Québec Literatures conference at the 2023 Congress in Tkaronto.⁶ We were inspired by the overarching themes of that year's Congress, "Reckonings and Re-imaginings," and the way that convenor Dr. Andrea Davis and the other conference organizers put energy into "centering the experiences, knowledges and cultures of Indigenous and Black communities as valuable and critical modes of thought fundamental to the realization of racial and climate justice" ("Congress 2023"). We heard some outstanding papers and, in developing these sessions into a special issue, we hoped to create a noisy, lively forum for diverse perspectives on literary arts in Canada. We pictured a mix of full-length articles and shorter, conference-length papers making sharper, more pointed political critiques. We

imagined research creation and autotheoretical pieces side-by-side with scholarly articles. We hoped for a diverse engagement with literary forms, and we envisioned a robust dialogue between papers focusing on complex interrelationships within and between Indigenous, settler, racialized, and diasporic voices. We encouraged submissions from graduate students and junior scholars.

While we were gratified by many submissions that exceeded our expectations, we also faced challenges bringing our vision into reality. Though we received a large and diverse number of papers, many were written by settler scholars. By soliciting papers through our own community networks and students we work with, we received some powerful papers by Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars; but these submissions remained few. The peer review process added further complexity, since the shorter papers, more experimental pieces, and papers written by graduate students did not always successfully get through the peer review process. The peer review process was also challenging because of the tremendous effort it requires from the academic community and the difficulty we faced in securing appropriate reviewers. We were reluctant to call upon over-burdened colleagues who were already doing so much. In addition, due to its funding terms, *Canadian Literature* requires a minimum of two positive peer-review reports in order to publish an article. We knew that we had to find ways to counter these structural barriers and we worked hard with the editors at *Canadian Literature*, especially Christine Kim and amanda wan, to mitigate the effects of these impediments.

With an issue focused on solidarities, dialogues, and fostering community, we were motivated to create space for junior scholars and to implement a mentorship program to help demystify the peer review process. At almost every meeting, we spoke about the experiences of isolation that new academics face as they seek to publish in increasingly competitive spaces while simultaneously navigating reviewer comments. These feelings of isolation are only amplified for those of marginalized backgrounds, whether it be because of race, sexuality, or social class. Junior scholars are still in the process of fostering bonds within their specialized fields; not everyone has a community to turn to once they've received reviewer comments. In working towards creating academic communities, having direct dialogue with reviewers then increases accessibility for new scholars. Such an approach supports a

community-based model, creating a space of what feminist scholar and activist bell hooks calls “radical openness” (114), which helps break down ideals that maintain hierarchical structures of knowledge and empowers marginalized scholars. With this methodology of radical openness at the forefront of our minds, we prioritized synthesizing peer review comments for the submissions and encouraged ongoing dialogue in the form of mentorship groups.

In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice addresses the challenges of articulating humanity within various social, institutional, and environmental structures. Justice urges his readers to take action in decolonizing and making academic publishing more accessible. He writes, “Multiplicity is inherent in kinship; good relations require acknowledgement and, importantly, mindful accommodation of difference” (38). These kinship principles are essential for fostering dialogue within the publication and review process, and they can help demystify academic publishing. With that in mind, we decided that once we had narrowed down potential papers for our special issue and anonymized peer review reports were submitted, we would write letters consolidating reader reports for the submissions while emphasizing which suggestions would be manageable to implement. After sending out the letters for recommended edits, we held a workshop for the authors of the papers under consideration for the special issue and organized them into paper clusters. In these clusters, scholars working on similar research topics were encouraged to read one another’s papers and map how to begin the editing process. Each group also included a co-editor of this issue or the editor-in-chief of *Canadian Literature* to guide the discussion and address questions about publishing practices. Drawing inspiration from Asao B. Inoue’s practice of labour-based grading (107)—which prioritizes the labour and reflexive nature of writing to create reciprocal classroom ecologies based on “compassion” (120)—our process sought to embrace the supportive potential of academic communities. By fostering reciprocal ecologies, we aimed to develop one another’s skills through dialogue and mentorship.

Encouraging dialogue between authors influenced our process of organizing the papers into the table of contents, in which our priority was to initiate provocative conversations through the papers. We created three groupings of papers in order to best facilitate such

conversations. Parts 1 and 3 focus on essays that engage with Indigenous literatures and confront white settler-colonial privilege, while part 2 brings together papers that address questions of diaspora, make connections between diasporic and Indigenous literatures, and search for unconventional comparative methods to think across boundaries of identities, histories, and disciplines.

Part 1, “Terristories: Grounding Home in Story,” gathers three essays that show how narratives of belonging are deeply contested in lands claimed by Canada, particularly with respect to Indigenous-settler relations. Métis scholar Warren Cariou’s portmanteau, *terristory*, suggests that literary approaches that take stories and language seriously, and that ground these in a deep awareness of land and place, create alternative pathways that assert Indigenous peoples’ presence on the land (Cariou, “Terristory” 4). All three papers in part 1—by Kristina Bidwell, Isabella Huberman, and Sarah Wylie Krotz—pay close attention to the relations between land, stories, and language. Each one reads widely across genres and forms, from poetry, fiction, and drama; to documentary films, performance, and land-based art; to public hearings, testimonies, and oral histories. And all three argue for the importance of listening across differences, as Cariou urges in his landmark essay, “On Critical Humility,” including attending carefully to nonhuman ways of communicating from land, water, plants, and animals (6).

NunatuKavut scholar Kristina Bidwell’s “Soup Kitchen or Kitchen Table?” addresses how “debates over uses of the word ‘Métis’” have intensified conflicts between communities, and Bidwell makes the case for how “an Indigenous literary studies approach can bring nuance to these debates” (20). Meticulously researched, this paper relates a little-known history of coalition-building between Indigenous peoples, in which Métis organizers from the Native Council of Canada visited Labrador in the 1970s and encouraged southern Inuit to use the term “Labrador Metis.” Not only has this solidarity-building largely been forgotten outside of Labrador, but Bidwell also confronts how communities in Labrador with strong kinship ties have since become fractured. She makes a strong case for using a “kitchen table methodology” of visiting, sharing a meal, and recording oral histories, in order to help Indigenous people resist settler-colonial erasures and restore connections within and between Indigenous communities.

While Bidwell focuses on how alliance-building between Indigenous communities can become compromised by colonial forces of division, settler scholar Isabella Huberman addresses how deep divides between settler and Indigenous narratives become reinforced through the state's single-minded pursuit of capital accumulation and resource extraction. Huberman's "Reading the River" addresses how the clash between environmental and Québécois-nationalist arguments in public debate over a deeply controversial hydro project built on the Romaine River contributed to the marginalizing of Innu anticolonial, sovereigntist arguments. Like Bidwell, Huberman uses a literary-critical toolbox to illuminate divergent stories, this time of hydro in Québec. In analyzing a variety of narrative forms—including a play, a public hearing, a novel, a collection of poetry, and even an article said to be co-authored by the river itself—Huberman eschews comparing, evaluating, or reconciling the many differences between these productions. Rather, her hope is to dwell in their cacophony, thereby "destabiliz[ing] the dominance of a single hydro story that enables extractivist and colonial regimes to function" (52).

Settler scholar Sarah Wylie Krotz, in "Homely Entanglements," searches for ways to conceptualize settler belonging that do not continuously reassert a white supremacist regime of property, exclusion, appropriation, and erasure. She does so by learning from and "thinking with caragana," a bush introduced into the prairies to act as a hedge, windbreak, and property divider. From one perspective, caragana is an "invasive" species that displaces prairie grasslands, negatively impacts biodiversity, and facilitates settler-colonial transformations of land into property. On the other hand, it provides shelter, food, and a sense of home for a wide variety of human and more-than-human beings. Krotz sets herself the challenge of tracing caragana through its many representations in literature, art, and film, paying close attention to its natural history and reckoning with its complex role in settler-colonial discourses and practices. Through this process, Krotz's own "sense of home and place expands, branches, and becomes more tangled alongside (and into) caragana's own story" (78). Krotz asks herself: "With caragana as my guide, I wonder, can I learn new ways of understanding home, not as a palisade, but as a penetrable shelter—a passage—more like my own living, breathing, permeable skin?" (93). She resolves to learn how "to

sit with the discomfort of unsettling my secure and comfortable sense of place” and “to consider the ways in which my love for my home is implicated in colonial white supremacy” (89). As difficult as this challenge is, the benefits are learning how to co-habitate and “shar[e] a space I call my own but that isn’t mine at all” (97).

Part 2, “Be/Longings: Liquid Movements,” brings together four articles that ruminate on finding “home” through acknowledging and honouring cultural traditions. These articles explain how “home” is not tied to a static space but is a fluid notion, much like water that flows with experience and is shaped by its surroundings. Black scholar and poet Jhordan Layne’s work of poetic autotheory, “Black Out,” traces colonial histories and decolonial possibilities through acts of literary creation. Offering an autobiographical account of his relationship to Kingston, Ontario, he interacts with Indigenous lands and treaties while intimately contemplating the layers of emotions that come with living on these lands, moving beyond superficial understandings of territory and instead “searching for the true skin” of place (107). Centring community and place, Layne offers glimpses of Kingston-based poets such as Sadiqa de Meijer, Carolyn Smart, Otoniya J. Okot Bitek, Dylan Robinson, and Armand Garnet Ruffo and their contemplations of intersecting discourses of colonialism and imperialism as they relate to “Kingly locales” (102). By acknowledging this community of poets, Layne conveys a sense of complex loneliness that intertwines with hopes for alternative futures. In practice, Layne encourages a slow reading that pulls readers into a sense of liminality and builds towards decolonial thought and research as it relates to Indigenous place, treaties, and responsibilities.

Expanding on themes of decolonizing place, Latina settler scholar Nicole Flores also discusses decolonial place in her article “‘The Sea Is History’: Anticolonial Place-Making in the Water Spaces of Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* and Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*,” which examines the decolonial possibilities of water as it relates to dialogues between Black and Indigenous communities. She suggests that water methodologies are “shared instruments of a collective, anticolonial possibility” (112). Centring Haisla and Black traditions, Flores asserts that water acts as a space of communication for the past, present, and future that transcends settler-colonial memory and understanding: “[W]ater is a place that addresses the

trouble of inaccurate and limiting cartographies, static spaces, belongings, and national origins” (120). To find home is to respect knowledge and reciprocal exchange rather than asserting ownership.

Settler scholar Melanie Braith’s paper examines portals to different worlds in Canadian children’s literature through a comparative analysis of Cree author David A. Robertson’s *The Barren Grounds* and Vietnamese Canadian author Linh S. Nguyễn’s *No Place Like Home*. It explores the “interplay of place, story, and body” and highlights the relationships and responsibilities of immigrants in a settler colonial context (134). Offering a brief overview of the literary history of Canadian children’s literature, Braith critiques the genre for promoting multicultural ideologies without critical engagement and emphasizes the importance of reciprocity. Braith suggests that Robertson’s Cree protagonist, Morgan, finds home through Askí, or blood memory, while Nguyễn’s Vietnamese protagonist, Lan, understands home as a fluid multiplicity embodied gradually through respectful interaction with land and its caretakers. Home is not tied to a constructed nation-state; it can exist in multiple spaces through relationships with others and the land.

Turning to refugee literature, Bangladeshi settler scholar Basmah Rahman examines Souvankham Thammavongsa’s short story collection, *How to Pronounce Knife*, in her article “‘Work Hard’ to Find ‘Home.’” Rahman suggests that homemaking is complicated by refugee subjecthood and uniquely implicated in Canada’s multicultural discourse because of an imposed and often compulsory narrative of gratitude toward the nation-state. Centring Vinh Nguyen’s seminal concept of *refugeetude*, which describes a “continued state of being and mode of relationality” (“Refugeetude” 110), Rahman argues that this consciousness can lead to prolonged states of loneliness within second-generation refugees. Rahman further asserts that despite this loneliness, Thammavongsa’s collection refuses “refugee narratives to be subsumed into a national fabric” (172). Indeed, refugee claims to anger, joy, silence, and living beyond survival are necessary to finding home in the nation-state.

Part 3, “How to Read Home and Imagine Otherwise,” demonstrates four scholars’ approaches to decolonizing literary analysis in order to promote ethical scholarship and ensure Indigenous cultural continuities. Olivia Abram models a settler approach to reading

Indigenous comics that respects “positionality, location, and limits” (176), suggesting that settler readers step back from a typical close reading, which can impose meaning on a culturally different text and thus recolonize it through analysis, and acknowledge “the layers that exist between the story’s historical subjects, its multiple tellers, and its recreation” (197). By examining distance—spatial, temporal, relational, and constitutional—in an ethical-relational reading of Sonny Assu’s comic “Tilted Ground” from the collection *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, Abram suggests a movement away from what Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang call metaphorical decolonization and its associated, performative positionality statements, and towards a direct connection with the land and the people being studied.

Jaron Judkins, a settler scholar, also attempts to establish ethical distance and acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty in their analysis of Dawn Dumont’s memoir, *Nobody Cries at Bingo*. By breaking down their own complicity in colonialism in their former role as a Mormon missionary in the Plains Cree territory that is Dumont’s home, Judkins offers a personal perspective. From this unique position, Judkins reads *Nobody Cries at Bingo* as an assertion of territory that rebuffs “Mormonism’s literary land claim” (205). Through an analysis of the *Book of Mormon*, they demonstrate the erasure of Indigenous origin stories and reveal Mormonism’s attempt to justify land theft through its own story of Indigenous-Hebrew relations. Dumont’s text uses humour, Judkins claims, as an invitation to Mormons to be “better guests” in Cree territories (214).

Settler scholar Laurel Ryan, meanwhile, looks at the ubiquity of colonial renaming of North American spaces to reflect the legends of King Arthur in her essay “Locating Camelot in Canada.” Ryan examines the way North American settler populations are primed—through generations of co-opting the legends of Arthur in the name of English imperialism—to accept colonial mythologies imposed on the land. An analysis of the medieval imagery in British-born North American settler John Reade’s 1870 poetry collection gives insight into colonial erasure of Indigenous presence, whereby “Canada takes on the timelessness of Avalon, with its rulers inheriting the qualities of Camelot” (241).

The final article in this section, by Métis scholar Tianne Jensen-Desjardins, concludes our special issue with a turn to a discussion of

Indigenous futurisms through an analysis of Chelsea Vowel's *Buffalo is the New Buffalo*. Like the other articles in part 3, it outlines academic and personal approaches to decolonization in both the literal and metaphorical senses. The essay also brings us full circle to the articles in part 1 to highlight the way living is grounded in cultural experience and story, thus ensuring the same attention to and hope for Indigenous futurisms we see in Vowel's text. Jensen-Desjardins looks in particular at the way *Buffalo is the New Buffalo* embeds Métis and Cree teachings into academic conventions, such as footnotes and reference lists, in order to make a place for Métis literatures in the academy. In the context of this special issue we, the co-editors, hope to make space for multiple conceptions of home in both the academy and in broader national discourses. We thank the authors and the editorial team at *Canadian Literature* for their efforts in ensuring this happens. Their dedication and intellectual vision have steeled our resolve to work harder to shift the culture of CanLit and to create meaningful spaces for making, being, and feeling at home.

Heather Macfarlane is an associate professor and settler scholar of English at Queen's University. A comparatist by training, she works on questions of space and place in Canadian, Quebecois, Indigenous, and diaspora literatures.

Sophie McCall is a settler scholar in the English department at Simon Fraser University. Her main areas of research and teaching are Indigenous literatures in Canada from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She is the author of First Person Plural: Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship (U of British Columbia P 2011). She has published widely on a range of topics and she has edited or co-edited several collections of essays, stories, and visual arts. She is currently co-authoring In Collaboration: Building Futures in the Indigenous Literary Arts with NunatuKavut scholar Kristina Bidwell.

Basmah Rahman is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Queen's University. Her research, funded by SSHRC, focuses on Black, Indigenous, and people of colour literature based in Canada, with an emphasis on diasporic literature and intersections of identity representation within public education systems. Currently, her articles appear in Studies in Canadian Literature and The Conversation. As a former Ontario Certified Teacher and English Language Learners' teacher, Basmah prioritizes inclusive literacy models to further student engagement and representation in classrooms. Her research uses an interdisciplinary framework of literary and pedagogical studies.

Notes

1. *Delgamuukw v. Canada* [1997] 3 S.C.R. 1010. See especially paragraph 87. See also Napoleon; Borrows.
2. See Amnesty International's report "You Feel Like You Are Subhuman," as well as recent rulings by the International Court of Justice, "Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024," and the International Criminal Court, "State of Palestine."
3. See, in particular, *Canlit Responds* canlitresponds.ca and *No Arms in the Arts* noarmsinthearts.com.
4. Across disciplines, censorship is being imposed systemically. See, for example, the report by Sheryl Nestel and Rowan Gaudet for *Independent Jewish Voices Canada*, *Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada*.
5. Nabulsi is credited with coining the word *scholasticide* in 2009 (Moody). The term *scholasticide* describes the systematic destruction of educational institutions and the arrest or killing of teachers, staff, and students (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights).
6. Thank you to the graduate students in the fall 2022 offering of Queen's University's ENGL 870 course, "Literary Place and Space in Canada," for inspiring and contributing to these panels.

Works Cited

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Kristina Fagan Bidwell

Soup Kitchen or Kitchen Table? A Relational Approach to Understanding the Use of “Métis” in Labrador¹

Debates over uses of the word “Métis” have led to increasing conflicts between communities who have identified as Métis.² This essay explores how an Indigenous literary studies approach can bring nuance to these debates. Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice has argued that, for Indigenous people, telling and hearing our stories “resist[s] settler colonialism and its erasures” and “help[s] to restore our relations” within and between Indigenous communities (*Why* 204). In the hope of such resistance and restoration, I seek to deepen understanding of the term “Labrador Métis” by listening to stories from the Inuit community that has used that term and, in so doing, to bridge conflicts around it.

To show how debates over the term “Labrador Métis” have insufficiently attended to Indigenous stories, I will focus on the influential work of Métis sociologist Chris Andersen. Andersen’s 2014 book, *“Métis”: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*, challenges the notion of the Métis as “mixed race” and argues instead for the “dense complexity of [Métis] nationhood and peoplehood” (204, 5). Most of the book analyzes the use of a racialized meaning of “Métis” by federal institutions like the Supreme Court and the Census. However, in the book’s last chapter, entitled “A Case of (Mis)recognition,” Andersen critiques the use of “Métis” by the Inuit of southern Labrador, my community. For over thirty years, based in part on our coalition with Red River Métis to fight for constitutional rights for under-recognized Indigenous people, my community called

ourselves the “Labrador Métis,” though, in 2010, we clarified our identification as Inuit by renaming our government the NunatuKavut Community Council (NCC).³ Andersen does not attend to this history of coalition and instead asserts that the community made an “unconscious investment” in a “racialized self-misrecognition as Métis” (195). This argument is part of his broader critique of the use of “Métis” by Indigenous people who are not rooted in the historic Red River community, expressed most memorably with this metaphor: “[T]he category ‘Métis’ is not a soup kitchen for Indigenous individuals and communities disenfranchised in various ways by the Canadian state” (24).

Nisga’a writer Jordan Abel responds to Andersen’s soup kitchen metaphor in *Nishga*, which explores Abel’s disconnection from his Indigenous community. When he read Andersen’s words, Abel recounts, “I had this overwhelming feeling of both frustration and despair. . . . [T]he thing that really frustrated me—was that this was just one more article in a long list of articles and books that seemed to be uninterested in addressing disenfranchised and dispossessed Indigenous Peoples” (247–48). I had a similarly frustrated reaction to reading Andersen’s chapter on my community, which does not reference any voices of people identifying as Labrador Métis or Inuit, nor any peer-reviewed scholarship by, with, or about community members. Abel writes that his response to Andersen’s words was a “catalyzing moment” that inspired him to tell his own story (249). Similarly, my response to Andersen’s chapter has clarified for me the importance of sharing NunatuKavut Inuit stories. Because he did not listen to our stories, Andersen only describes us in terms of what we are *not*; he writes about us primarily as *not Métis*. Justice calls such narratives, which present Indigenous people in terms of “lack,” narratives of Indigenous “deficiency” which “erod[e] our capacity to hold one another up and build affirming relationships through and across difference” (*Why* 3). I seek to build such affirming relationships by bringing context and community voices to a discussion of the term “Labrador Métis.” To be clear, I am not arguing that the Inuit of southern Labrador *are* Métis. Rather, I seek to understand our use of “Métis” in a historical, relational, and story-based context.

This approach emerges from listening to my community’s stories, but also from my field of study. As a literary scholar, I assume that words do not have essential meanings. Rather, words’ meanings are

created in relationships across time, space, and cultures, and are therefore layered, changing, and contested. When it comes to terms of Indigenous identification, like “Métis,” these meanings are historically rich, emotionally saturated, and politically motivating. However, as settler historian Alexandra Harmon has pointed out, such terms also carry “misleading connotations of naturalness, clarity, homogeneity, and permanence” (250), obscuring that “their usage and meanings change over time” and that “internal disputes about the defining traits of group members” have been part of the history of every Indigenous people (250, 259). Therefore, in this discussion of “Labrador Métis,” I seek to historicize the term and, as “realist” identity theorists have articulated, to “register and analyze the *complexity* that resides at the heart of identity-based political struggles and the subjective experiences on which these struggles draw” (Alcoff and Mohanty 6). Only based on such analysis, I would argue, should we judge the accuracy or value of people’s terminologies, categorizations, and self-understandings. Before making conclusions about the validity of a group’s identification as “Métis,” we should make every effort to understand that identification.

In working towards such understanding in the context of political and emotional conflicts about the meaning of “Métis,” I am guided by the call for “critical humility” from Métis literary scholar Warren Cariou (“On Critical” 8), an approach which he describes as “a mode of listening. A way of showing respect” (6). Cariou’s recommendations remind me to listen carefully to Andersen’s words, and to respond in forms that are “*more story-based and less argument-based*” (10). In this spirit, the first body section of this essay shares oral stories of how NunatuKavut Inuit worked with the Métis towards the recognition of Métis rights. Cariou adds the caveat, however, that work based in critical humility “*will not be softball criticism*. . . . It will ask the hard questions” (11). As such, the second body section asks “hard questions” about Andersen’s work, arguing that his concepts, methods, and language contribute to a narrative of deficiency about NunatuKavut Inuit and perpetuate colonial research practices. Finally, the third body section examines the influence of Andersen’s work on politicized divisions between Indigenous peoples within and beyond Labrador.

While “Métis” draws on the metaphor of the soup kitchen, I frame this essay using the metaphor of the kitchen table—a place of visiting,

storytelling, and nourishment. Cariou writes that a critical practice that involves “*more visiting* . . . will help us to understand the critical situation as being part of a relationship” (10). Indeed, Andersen begins his book by placing the “critical situation” of the meaning of “Métis” within relationships. He recounts his experience at the Halfbreed Ball, part of the 2013 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association’s conference, where the Métis community lavishly shared their foods, clothing, music, and dance. He recalls that he struggled to “turn off [his] brain” and enjoy himself because, he writes, “I found myself grumbling internally about what I saw as an overly racialized narrative that connected Métis nationhood to fur trade society” (4). In that moment, his “brain’s” concept of Métis nationhood was at odds with his experience in community, and such tensions between the conceptual and the experiential are present throughout much of his book. Métis scholar Dane Allard suggests that Métis people regularly negotiate such tensions between “livedness” and concepts of “authenticity” through what he calls “Métis common sense” (38–39), and Anderson deftly does so when writing about his own people. In contrast, in his chapter on the Inuit of southern Labrador, Andersen’s reading of the “critical situation” ceases to be “part of a relationship” (Cariou, “On Critical” 10). Self-reflective narratives and productive tensions disappear, and his work becomes distanced from “livedness.”

I was also at the Halfbreed Ball in 2013. As a thought experiment, imagine that I had been sitting with Andersen at the Ball and that, over food, we had shared stories of our “halfbreed” families and of the word “Métis” in our communities (Bidwell, “Well Done” 49n3). We might have disagreed. But perhaps we could also have listened and come to deeper understandings of one another’s people. Cariou suggests that we can also visit through text (“Towards a Hermeneutics” 172). And so I invite Andersen, Métis readers, and all readers to gather at the kitchen table for a conversation about the term “Labrador Métis.”

The Kitchen Table: A Relational Approach to “Métis”

Because the Inuit of southern Labrador are often misunderstood and misrepresented in academic and public discourse, before delving into

our coalition with the Métis, I want to provide brief historical context to explain how the southern Inuit became distinct from their Inuit relatives farther north, a division which, in turn, led to the term “Labrador Métis.” Inuit have inhabited all of coastal Labrador, including southern Labrador, since before contact.⁴ The resources of the southern coast were desirable to Europeans, but the Inuit protected their southern lands from colonizers through a two-century, well-organized “guerilla war” (Pope 16; see also 25) or “revolution” (Stopp, “The Spirit of Revolution” 1) during which many Inuit were captured as slaves or as exhibits.⁵ In 1765, to enable British access to the region, Newfoundland Governor Hugh Palliser formed a Peace and Friendship Treaty with Inuit in southern Labrador.⁶ After the treaty, Moravians sought permission to establish missions among the Inuit (Handcock 28–29), but the British worried that southern Inuit would continue to interfere with resource development. In the hope of encouraging Inuit to leave the south coast (Stopp, “Eighteenth” 46), Palliser decreed that Moravians would only be permitted to missionize on the north coast, but many Inuit refused to move north (Procter 54).⁷ Economically and morally, the ongoing presence of the southern Inuit represented a threat to Moravian control (Procter 54–55), and so the missionaries tried to restrict contact between “their” Inuit and the “heathern [*sic*] . . . who lived to the southward of us” (Richling 154, qtd. in Brody 314). Meanwhile, the southern Inuit were impacted by British, Newfoundland, and Hudson’s Bay Company resource exploitation. Under the influence of diverging colonial trajectories, the northern and southern Inuit began to follow differing cultural, religious, and political paths. It is important to recognize that this division was deliberately created and fostered by colonial forces.

This division of the Labrador Inuit was deepened by Newfoundland and Labrador’s Confederation with Canada in 1949. The terms of union contained no reference to the Indigenous peoples—Inuit, Innu, and Mi’kmaq—in the new province, an act of erasure that these peoples have been fighting ever since. Over the course of the 1950s, the province agreed to deliver federally funded services to “designated” Inuit communities in Labrador (Tompkins 16, 39; see also Hallett 171). To determine which towns would be “designated,” however, the Newfoundland-centred government relied on faulty scholarly assumptions and administrative convenience (Hanrahan 236–40).⁸

The resulting separation of interrelated Inuit communities was widely opposed in Labrador,⁹ but the formation of the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA; now Nunatsiavut Government) to represent only the “designated communities” served to further legitimize the division. Excluded from the LIA, the Inuit in southern Labrador began to organize and to advocate to federal and provincial governments in the 1970s and 1980s.

In this period of political organizing, the southern Inuit were part of a national movement of under-recognized Indigenous peoples, a movement that achieved the federal recognition of “Métis” rights. One outcome of this broad Indigenous movement was the establishment of the Labrador Metis Association. Andersen claims that the “Labrador Metis Association was created in 1985, following the constitutionalization of Métis identity in 1982” (183), implying an after-the-fact effort to take advantage of others’ rights.¹⁰ In fact, the beginnings of the LMA can be traced to Labrador organizers’ work with the Native Council of Canada beginning in the 1970s. In 1970–71, the Native Council of Canada was formed in Western Canada to represent Métis and non-Status Indians, and then spread to other regions to “strengthen [their] collective voice” (Belcourt 129–30). In that period, Métis organizers from the Native Council of Canada visited Labrador and encouraged southern Inuit to use the term “Labrador Métis” (Bird; Sawchuk 22).¹¹ Among the organizers was Harry Daniels, Métis President of the Native Council of Canada from 1976–1981, who later wrote, “At that time we held a more accommodating view of what a Metis person was and is. . . . In my view, the people of Labrador who identify as Metis are expressing their right to self-identify as an Aboriginal person and are included in the people who I negotiated into the Constitution in 1981” (Daniels 262). In an interview from the seventies, Métis writer and activist Maria Campbell described the southern Inuit as “Métis”: “I am a resident of Alberta, yet I can sit down with a man from Labrador (we are both Métis) and through talking we will find out things about each other—what the system is doing to us” (3). By 1975, there was a Native Council of Canada-affiliated office of the “Indian and Metis Association of Newfoundland and Labrador” (IMANL) in Happy Valley-Goose Bay (Kennedy, *Encounters* 327). In the same year, the IMANL newsletter had the front-page headline, “Am I a METIS?!” and reported an Association

discussion, led by Bill Shiwak of Rigolet (now in Nunatsiavut territory), about whether, as a “half Eskimo,” he was “Metis,” showing the widespread interest in this term in Labrador (“Am I a METIS?!” 1). The first meeting of the Labrador Metis Association, which one attendee described as “filled to capacity” (Blake), was held in 1978.¹²

This brief historical summary provides context for my argument, but this essay is not primarily concerned with documenting historical facts. Rather, I am interested in how southern Inuit express their understanding of their own history, identity, and values through storytelling. My own understanding of the history of the term “Labrador Métis” began with the stories that I heard in 2006, when, as a new faculty member at the University of Saskatchewan, I travelled to central and southern Labrador to study the connection between storytelling and identity in my community.¹³ I visited with people of Inuit descent in their homes, often sitting at their kitchen tables, enjoying homemade delicacies like caribou soup or bakeapple cheesecake, and asked them what they called themselves and why. In response, people told me stories of their lives, families, and community.

While the notion of a visiting methodology has been much discussed (e.g., Gaudet; Cariou), my own kitchen table methodology draws specifically on my own family experiences and stories. As an example of how stories can guide methodology, I turn to an account of my ancestor, Inuk writer Lydia Campbell, written by Methodist missionary Arminious Young. Young recalls that, when he first arrived in Labrador, the local people gathered around the house where he was staying while he remained shyly inside:

I saw, through the dining-room window, that as [Lydia Campbell] came along she had a word to say to everybody, and everybody had a word to say to her. She entered [and] . . . clasped me by the hand and gave me a hearty welcome to Labrador. In about ten minutes she poured into my ears more information about Labrador and its people than I had received up to that time. “I must go now,” she said, thinking she had given me all the information I needed, and putting her hands upon my shoulders, said:

“Now, my son, you must go out into the kitchen and talk to the people as the other ministers used to do.”

“Is that so?” I replied.

“Yes,” she said, “if you don’t the people won’t like you.”

I followed her into the kitchen[.] (39)

Through her actions to him and others, Campbell demonstrates to Young the value of acknowledging one’s relations and building new relationships. She advises the minister that, instead of watching the people from a distance, he should go into the kitchen to be with them. Drawing on Campbell’s teachings, then, I view a kitchen table approach to research as one that, instead of seeking detachment and distance, acknowledges our relationships, seeks to connect with those we are researching, and accessibly communicates the results of our work.

As I sat with interviewees, some of whom identified as Inuit and some as Métis, they told me stories that placed their own senses of self and identity within an extensive web of kinship ties that often crossed and challenged Indigenous membership categories. It was only in the 1960s that southern Inuit lifestyles had been transformed from seasonal movement in family-based groups to settlement in towns (Borlase 282–83). Indigenous organizations, territorial boundaries, and political categories of Indigeneity were still relatively new to the community in 2006; the older interviewees, especially, thought about their identity not primarily in terms of concepts such as race, nationhood, membership, or rights, but rather in terms of relationships. For example, Richard Michelin, a trapper of Innu, Inuit, and European ancestry from Northwest River who identified at the time as Métis, emotionally expressed a relational understanding of his identity that crossed political boundaries between northern and southern Labrador:

Well, in my father’s day, and even the way I feel, there was no—you’re born in Labrador—it don’t make no difference if you’re born in Rigolet [within Nunatsiavut territory] or born here, you’re still one person, you’re part of the land. . . . So then, the government and that bunch made a dotted line down across the bay there and that’s it. On that side you’re one person and on this side you’re another

person. Separated the people, you know. . . . Sometimes when you think about it, it kinda hurts, you know? The majority of the people in Rigolet and north coast is related to me. . . . Real funny how things work. Divides the people.

Michelin went on to explain to me that working together on the land and waters—hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering—is a central and traditional way that people in the community build and maintain relationships. This sense of the value of working together also grounded the stories that I heard about the political organization of the “Labrador Métis.” Many interviewees told me that they identified as Métis because of the relationships that formed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Indigenous people across Canada were working together towards constitutionally recognized Métis rights. Their stories reveal a self-reflective, historicized, and relational understanding of the word “Métis.”¹⁴ I will focus here on two representative stories of that period. The first is from Joe Goudie, a Labradorian of Innu, Inuit, and European descent, who was present at the amendment to the Constitution as a minister in the provincial government. When I interviewed him in 2006 he was retired and was building traditional trapping canoes. In response to my question about what he called himself, he offered this story:

I call myself Métis now, and I’ll explain why I do that. I’m still Labradorian, always use the term “Labradorian.” . . . But, in 1982, I had the pleasure, and the honour really, of accompanying Jerry Ottenheimer, who was the late Minister of Justice, [and] Brian Peckford, who was Premier—I was the minister responsible for Aboriginal people—to attend the First Ministers’ meeting in Ottawa. . . . And our objective—and there were ministers there from all over the provinces, and the territories, and the federal government—we wanted to do two things, make two amendments to the Constitution. . . . And [at] that time under the Indian Act, then, “Inuit” was included, Métis were not. And that was the second thing, to include “Métis,” the word and the description of Métis, in the Constitution of the country. And we were able to

accomplish that that weekend . . . So, out of respect for that process, 'cause I do respect the law, and I respect custom as well, I refer to myself as Métis.

For Goudie, being Métis was about an experience that had a shared meaning in law and for his community. He had been deeply engaged in the process of coming to understand how his own community could be recognized within the nation that they had so recently joined. His story focused on his feelings of “honour” and “respect” for those involved and for the process. By respect for “custom,” he meant community expectations and understandings, including local understandings of the meaning of the Constitution.

The second narrative, also from 2006, is from Silas Bird, a Labradorian of Inuit and European descent who was also involved in the early organization of the Labrador Metis Association. Bird recalled that, in addition to Goudie's presence, there was a delegation from the LMA at the constitutional talks:

Prior to 82, I know that there was a small delegation that went to one of the constitutional talks, actually sat behind the Native Council of Canada. . . . Who represented the Native Council of Canada, of course, was Harry, Harry Daniels and Bill Wilson. Sitting behind them was the delegation from the Labrador Metis Association, as it then was. Sitting across the table from them, representing the province of Newfoundland, was none other than Joe Goudie, sitting with a membership card in the Labrador Metis Association in his back pocket. I know that well because I was the one that gave him the card. And the contention used to be—and the reason that I tell you that story is, to sort of set, to draw that picture out for you—is that the contention for years and still is by the Newfoundland government and to some degree the federal government, is that the term “Métis” was something that we sort of lifted off the shelf and sort of wore someone else's coat. Well, the bottom line of the story goes, is that, you know, sitting around that table, Harry Daniels knew who he was representing. . . . Well,

obviously the people who stand behind Harry from the Labrador Metis Association knew who they were. Joe Goudie clearly knew who they were, representing the province. . . . The only people we can figure out that may not have known who was being talked about, when Harry talked about the Métis in the Constitution, may have been the Prime Minister and the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs.

Bird directly confronts the idea that, in using the word “Métis,” the southern Inuit “wore someone else’s coat,” either through theft or by mistake. Bird’s language instead emphasizes shared purpose and mutual understanding. Harry Daniels is remembered as a friend: as “Harry,” as a “saintly soul,” as someone who “knew who he was representing.” Bird repeatedly refers to those who “knew who they [the Labrador Métis] were,” emphasizing the mutual recognition between the Indigenous people at the meeting. He also draws the physical space, describing who sat where. As with Goudie’s story, Bird’s emphasis is on a physical, experiential, and relational moment, when people sat together and came to an agreement.

In contrast with Andersen’s description of the Labrador Métis as trying to “get [their] foot in Canada’s ‘constitutional door’” (12), Goudie and Bird stress that, as Inuk Elder and political leader Chris Montague put it to me, “We were there!” (Interview). Their stories describe the LMA as literally “at the table” for the constitutional negotiations. In naming the individuals around the table and emphasizing their mutual recognition, they underscore the specific and embodied relationships between the Red River Métis and southern Inuit at that time. While this meeting table in Ottawa was very different from the Labrador kitchen table, I would suggest that, for these storytellers, it was connected. The NunatuKavut Inuit did not see themselves as coming to the Métis or to the government table empty-handed, as to a “soup kitchen.” Rather, they saw the constitutional table as a place where Indigenous leaders from across the country were engaged in a collaborative and reciprocal effort to “feed” their peoples. As such, the Inuit of southern Labrador saw the recognition of Métis rights as a formal agreement of relationship, much like a treaty, between themselves, the Métis, and the

government, remembered through the Constitution and through oral storytelling. This agreement had deep and collective meaning for the people of Labrador and was interpreted by many Inuit as a meaningful and ethical basis for their identification as Labrador Métis.

The Soup Kitchen: A Conceptual Approach to “Métis”

I have argued that the meaning of “Labrador Métis” has been formed by complex layers of historical circumstances, relationships, experiences, and stories. However, in “*Métis*,” Andersen presents such complexity as a problem. In response to what he describes as the “ambiguity that has come to surround the meaning of ‘Métis’ in contemporary Canadian society” (90), he writes that his book’s goal is to make the word’s meaning “crystal clear” (23). In Andersen’s attempt to achieve this clarity, he creates a *concept* of the Métis, “a mental representation of the essential or typical properties of something” (“Concept”). As Métis historian Brenda MacDougall confirms in her review of his book, to maintain this concept, Andersen downplays the varied uses of “Métis” over time (367). Andersen admits that the meaning of “Métis” has changed over time (56, 82), but he seeks to fix this instability by tying the word’s definition to a limited period that excludes more recent events and coalitions: “I use ‘Métis’ to refer to the history, events, leaders, territories, language, and culture associated with the growth of the buffalo hunting and trading Métis of the northern Plains, in particular during the period between the beginning of the Métis buffalo brigades in the early nineteenth century and the 1885 North West Uprising” (24). For Andersen, the essential meaning of “Métis” was created in this period, and anyone not tied to that history cannot be Métis (19, 25). When writing about his own people, however, this concept is enriched and complicated by story. A highlight of Andersen’s book is his account of the historic events that have grounded Métis Peoplehood (109–18), and he muses that he could have equally focused on Métis language, art, song, or poetry (109–10). This inclusion of Métis history and stories provides a strong basis against which he contrasts and critiques institutionalized and racialized concepts of “Métis.”

When it comes to “A Case of (Mis)Recognition,” however, this grounding in Indigenous stories disappears. Cariou writes that critical humility means “showing up without an agenda, without a preconceived notion of what we want to gain” (“On Critical” 11). Rather than this open-ended approach, Andersen seems to have come to his research on Labrador with a fixed concept of Métis, and his chapter does not acknowledge any sources that could complicate this. Settler historian Ann Laura Stoler has pointed towards the dangers of such “conceptual terms held too tightly and deactivated, depleted of their relational predicates” (21). We must, she argues, be continually critical of our concepts and maintain “vigilant watch over what is strategically excised from the imagined colonial order of things and what is affirmed as clear, reasonable, and common sense” (24). Justice has similarly articulated the danger of such “clear” concepts for Indigenous scholars. Analyzing the “struggle between different definitions of [Indigenous] community,” Justice argues that even Indigenous scholars have used “bigger concepts”—“the ones we so often assume to have a uniform meaning among all readers”—to deny the legitimacy of other Indigenous peoples and experiences (“Go Away” 153–54).

Remembering Stoler’s advice to be vigilant about what is not included, we can see how Andersen’s methodology in his chapter on Labrador differs from his other chapters. His final chapter argues that the southern Inuit, in calling themselves Métis, were not seeking government recognition of a pre-existing identity, but instead were “misrecognizing” themselves through the process of seeking such recognition. To support this argument, the chapter focuses on documentation from the community’s relationships with federal and provincial governments: provincial court records and a land claim submission.¹⁵ In this focus on institutional documentation, this chapter is like others in Andersen’s book. However, in the rest of the book, institutional definitions of “Métis” are contrasted with an understanding of Métis peoplehood grounded in experience, history, and scholarship. The Labrador chapter makes the opposite move, in that Andersen equates institutional categories with the community’s self-understanding, arguing that community members made an “unconscious investment” in those categories (195). Rather than

looking to the southern Inuit community as a source of knowledge, Andersen instead argues that we do not know who we are.

And yet, while making this claim about our lack of self-understanding, the chapter shows no evidence of Andersen having been to Labrador or having listened to or read anyone identifying as Labrador Métis or NunatuKavut Inuit. It also does not cite any of the extensive peer-reviewed scholarship about Labrador or any scholarship by NunatuKavut Inuit.¹⁶ Its only scholarly source on Labrador is a university- and government-sponsored, anonymously authored web page on provincial heritage (180). The chapter's only evidence of community views is the anonymously authored website of the Combined Councils of Labrador, which Andersen speculates is widely representative: "I doubt the logics contained in the web page are limited to those of its authors" (195).

The chapter's lack of any voice of the Inuit of southern Labrador leads to a distancing from the community's humanity. Compared to his other chapters, his chapter on Labrador is especially dense, formal, and theoretical. He positions the author as a detached observing eye, includes no personal narratives or self-reflection, and repeatedly objectifies the question of Labrador Métis identity as "interesting" (169, 185, 190).¹⁷ The chapter's diction also has negative connotations which imply that the Labrador Inuit stole "Métis" from its rightful owners. "Labrador Métis" are described as engaging in "racialized pilfering of Métis Nation rhetoric" (54), as well as "intrusion into and . . . cannibalization of Métis nationhood" (173). The community's political and legal advocacy are described as trespassing or begging: trying to "get [their] foot in Canada's 'constitutional door'" and seeking benefits from a "generously" inclined court (12, 189). Like the "soup kitchen" image, these word choices invoke stereotypes of Indigenous people as greedy, dishonest, hungry, and impoverished, while the descriptions of the community as cannibals and thieves recall racist and colonial tropes about Inuit.¹⁸

Andersen's use of a fixed concept of Indigenous identity, his non-relational method, and his detached and degrading language all resonate with a history of non-relational scholarship in Labrador. As explained in NCC's submission to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "For many decades, and for reasons designed to displace and alienate us from our lands, we

have had outsiders tell us who we are, or rather, who we are not. We have had academics and policy makers attempt to erase and minimize our history” (“Closing”). As one of many examples of this erasure, in 1910, historian W. G. Gosling influentially described the Inuit as only present in southern Labrador because of their desire for the goods of others, writing that “they did not move south until some time after the coast began to be frequented by Basque, French, and English fishermen, and that it was the desire of obtaining iron tools and weapons and other European articles which induced them to do so” (165–66). Gosling assumed that the Inuit were culturally deficient, and that they were thus drawn to the south by “their desire for and appropriation of the boats, the wonderful new weapons and implements which the white people possessed” (165). Gosling’s thesis became a working assumption for scholars until the 1990s, when it was conclusively disproven by archaeological evidence.¹⁹ Inuit, meanwhile, have long been sceptical of such scholarship. For example, in 1979, Doris Saunders, an Inuk community-based researcher, was asked for her advice on a study of “spatio-temporal concepts among biannually migratory south Labradorians” (Bill Saunders, qtd. in Hallett 168)—in other words, of her people’s traditional knowledge. Saunders wrote in response, “It has been my experience, during the past four years of research in Labrador, that the worst problem has been with people who have been exposed to the clinical methods of overeducated academics” who had not returned their research to the community and who had made Elders feel that “they were [being] made fun of by an outsider” (qtd. in Hallett 168). Saunders dedicated her life to documenting the stories of her community in resistance to such “outside interpretations and definitions of Labrador ways of life” (Hallett 167). As settler scholar Vicki S. Hallett explains,

“As a member of that association [the LMA] Doris Saunders knew herself to be Indigenous, and, as Labradorian, she struggled to survive on the literal and figurative edge of Canada—against those who would deny her heritage, uproot her culture, and repudiate her right to self-determination.” (174)

The Influence of the Soup Kitchen Approach

Unfortunately, non-relational research in Labrador is not only historical. Andersen's chapter is part of a persistent lack of attention to NunatuKavut Inuit voices in some of the research about us. This lack of attention can be seen in the fact that, of the sixteen reviews of Andersen's book, all but one either do not mention the Labrador chapter or merely repeat its claims, with none questioning the chapter's lack of individual local sources or community engagement.²⁰ This kind of conventional, non-relational research has concrete effects, as seen in how Andersen's chapter has influenced subsequent research on and attitudes towards NunatuKavut Inuit. While Andersen described the community as the "south and central Labrador Inuit" (194), his work has since influenced politically motivated research and statements that deny our community's Indigeneity. To be clear, Andersen did not cause the current political divisions between Inuit in Labrador, which have deep colonial roots and have been exacerbated by the Crown's ineffectiveness in dealing with overlapping land claims and with the "the merging and division of groups and the forging of new identities" (Turner and Fondahl 475; see also 485). However, non-relational research practices certainly have fed these divisions.

In 2021, the Nunatsiavut Government commissioned settler sociologist Darryl Leroux to produce a non-peer-reviewed report on the NunatuKavut Inuit land claim, which overlaps with their own settled land claim territory. In a previous peer-reviewed publication, Leroux and his co-author had described NunatuKavut Inuit as an Indigenous people:

While postcontact Indigenous peoples later came into being, such as the Métis Nation on the northern prairies or the NunatuKavut in Labrador, they exist not as societies unified with settlers through intermarriage but as Indigenous peoples who emerged through self-conscious historical development *as a people*. (Gaudry and Leroux 116)

Once hired by Nunatsiavut Government, Leroux reversed his position and argued that the NunatuKavut Inuit are not a people.

Leroux had previously extensively cited Andersen's book and described it as "seminal" (*Distorted* 20; see Gaudry and Leroux 118–20). And, like Andersen's chapter, Leroux's report shows no evidence of Leroux's having been to Labrador, uses a formal and detached writing style, and does not cite any NunatuKavut Inuit scholarship or voices. The report does not mention the southern Inuit's coalition with the Métis, instead claiming that the use of "Labrador Métis" began as a strategy to counter Innu protests against military expansion (*Examining* 5), a claim unsupported by primary or secondary sources.²¹

Shortly after the release of Leroux's report and seemingly on its basis, Natan Obed, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and a member of Nunatsiavut, wrote to the Prime Minister that "archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the territory claimed by NCC has never been permanently occupied by Inuit" ("Letter"), a claim that even this essay's brief review of the scholarship on southern Labrador shows to be unsupportable. Obed further claims that the term "Labrador Métis" is evidence of the illegitimacy of NCC:

Before 2010, NCC called itself the Labrador Métis Nation, and its members, including president Todd Russell, identified as Métis. During the period when this group called themselves Métis, the Métis National Council did not recognize the Labrador Métis Nation and did not include them in their governance. ("Open Letter" 1)

The letter does not mention that the Red River Métis and the southern Inuit were both part of the Native Council of Canada prior to the splitting off of the Métis National Council in 1983. Instead, using arguments like those presented above, ITK has engaged in increasing attacks against NunatuKavut Inuit, claiming that we are not Inuit. In late 2023, the Métis National Council publicly supported and echoed ITK's claims: "During the period when this non-Indigenous group called themselves Métis, the Métis National Council (MNC) did not recognize the Labrador Métis Nation" ("Métis National Council"). The MNC's statement is an unfortunate forgetting of the Métis people's historic connection to the Inuit of southern Labrador. Justice, analyzing similar public dismissals of the Indigeneity of the Pequots, describes "an enduring prejudice that presumes the inauthenticity of

the Pequots and other eastern Native communities—and [that is] given unfortunate voice by high-profile Native people” (“Go Away” 156). Justice elaborates, in words that resonate here, that such dismissal depends on a lack of engagement with “the histories or contemporary realities of [Pequot] communities” (156), neglect of the historical relationships between the Pequots and other Indigenous peoples, and “widespread avoidance of kinship and context” (157).

The use of Andersen’s work to authorize the denial of NunatuKavut Inuit rights is more explicit in a recent debate about NCC between two Nunatsiavut members, William Andersen and Bill Flowers. In a local newspaper, William Andersen challenges the legitimacy of NCC, writing:

I encourage Mr. Flowers, and others interested in this debate, to read Chapter 5 of Chris Andersen’s book, *Métis: Race, Recognition and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*.

Dr. Andersen, a Métis scholar, provides a very clear history on the NCC and who they are and are not.

In seeking to support his argument, William Andersen does not look to local writers, researchers, or storytellers. I suspect that this is because Chris Andersen’s chapter provides a simplified narrative—“a very clear history on the NCC and who they are and are not.” And yet, the situation of the Labrador Inuit as originally one people divided by centuries of colonialism is far from clear. Inuit families have traditionally moved across the boundaries of what are now NunatuKavut and Nunatsiavut territories, and there are kinship ties between members of the two organizations. Labrador Inuit have used various self-identifying terms over time and, in the face of changing policies, many have also moved from one organization to the other. In fact, Max Blake, once one of the strongest advocates for the term “Labrador Métis” (“L. M. A.”), is now a member of Nunatsiavut. Because of such interconnections, the political fractures between Labrador Inuit communities have caused deep harm.

In the face of non-relational research on my community and related political conflict, I return to Justice’s argument for why Indigenous stories matter. Our stories, Justice writes, “don’t make everything neat and tidy,” but they do “connect us to one another,

build imaginative possibilities for and between our varied forms of community, show us possibilities we didn't know existed, or return us to knowledge we had forgotten or put to the side" (*Why* 211). Inspired by this hope for possibility and return, I believe stories of past connections between NunatuKavut Inuit and Métis people can offer visions for how we might again work together as Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion: Soup Kitchen or Kitchen Table?

In this essay, I have critiqued Chris Andersen's "A Case of (Mis)recognition," which describes my people as dishonestly or mistakenly misusing the word "Métis," and have presented evidence that the Inuit of southern Labrador identified as Métis as part of a coalition advocating for the rights of under-recognized Indigenous peoples. This disagreement could be viewed as no longer relevant, since NunatuKavut Inuit have moved away from the use of "Métis," and since Andersen and I agree that my community has "a far more valid claim to Inuit ancestry, identity, and *peoplehood*" (Andersen 195). However, because my community's past use of "Métis" is still being used against us in political debates, its history remains a pressing issue. Moreover, my concern is not with the question of *whether* the NunatuKavut Inuit are Métis, but with *how* we should approach that question.

The metaphors of the soup kitchen and the kitchen table reflect very different approaches to thinking and writing about the relationship between the Métis and NunatuKavut Inuit. Andersen positions the category of "Métis" as "not a soup kitchen" for disenfranchised Indigenous people and peoples (24), and in 2017 he elaborated in a Twitter post:

The point about the soup kitchen metaphor is not just to suggest that while Métis are legendarily generous we are not limitlessly so (i.e., we can't feed everyone nor should we be obligated to); It is to ask us to think about the ethics that ground our willingness to feed those who we do. Any of us that come from Métis families know that in nearly all situations, those in need get an extra plate at the table—food (and generosity) can always be stretched.

But . . . : what are the responsibilities of those who are being fed? What does it mean to act ethically when you are being fed in accordance with someone else's generosity? (qtd. in Adese et al. 5)

This post equates the soup kitchen with the Métis family table, describing both as places of one-sided giving to those "in need" and expressing the concern that, in such a one-sided relationship, there will not be enough for all. This comparison underestimates the reciprocity of the family table. To be fed at a family's table is not just to receive generosity, but to engage in a relationship in which food and company are shared over time. With a different metaphor, Andersen might have reflected differently on his responsibilities in researching the NunatuKavut Inuit community. Perhaps he might have visited Labrador, enjoyed our food and stories, and learned that he was not the first Métis to come for a visit. And if he had, I suspect that his chapter would have been quite different. As Justice writes, approaching contentious issues "through a relational lens might provide us with an option beyond false either/or binaries, where the conversation and the opinions it elicits become part of the process of kinship" ("Go Away" 160).

I agree with Justice that the study of Indigenous storytelling can offer a "relational lens" that we can bring to polarizing issues of Indigenous identity, territory, and nationhood. I have tried to use the tools of literary scholarship to build a kitchen table where we can listen to the stories of NunatuKavut Inuit, remember past connections, and imagine future solidarities. So, in the spirit of centring stories, I would like to end with a story from my family and community. In her *Sketches of a Labrador Life*, Lydia Campbell remembers when she and her daughter shot a deer near their home while her Scottish husband and her son were away hunting:

When Mr. Daniel Campbell and Thomas Blake, my eldest son, came home with two deer hearts I give them their dinner. While they were eating i went out to the door slyly and took in my deer's heart and put it with the other two, and when i asked them how many deer they killed they said only two. I said what 3 deer hearts is this? They

looked foolish like. They said soms mountaineers must have brought it hear . . . They asked each other who killed it. I said i killed it to-day. Then we all had a laugh over it.²²

Campbell's husband and son underestimate her and her daughter and so cannot make sense of the meal. Rather than asking the women where the meat came from, the men only ask each other, and conclude that Innu ("mountaineer") visitors must have brought it. Their lack of recognition of the women's contribution shares much in common with Andersen's suggestion that the NunatuKavut Inuit came empty-handed to the Métis "soup kitchen." Campbell's critique of the men's assumptions is expressed through her serving of the third deer heart, and, likewise, this essay has been an effort to bring the "hearts" of NunatuKavut Inuit to the table. For if we can recognize one another's hearts—our relationships, our contributions, our shared work, and our full and common humanity—then there will be enough for all, and we can feast together.

Notes

1. This essay has been many years in the making and I'm grateful to the many people who contributed to it and helped bring it into the world. First, a big thank you to Silas Bird, Joe Goudie, and Richard Michelin for generously sharing their stories. Nakummek especially to the late Chris Montague, President of the then Labrador Métis Nation, for his strong support of this research. This work has also greatly benefited from feedback and ideas from friends and colleagues; thank you to Olivia Abram, Keith Carlson, Adar Charlton, Aubrey Hanson, Amy Hudson, Debbie Martin, Sophie McCall, Gregory Mitchell, and the staff at the *Them Days* archives. This research was made possible through the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
2. As just one example, the Manitoba Métis Federation withdrew from the Métis National Council in 2021 over disagreements about whether some communities in the Métis Nation - Ontario are Métis. Beyond the specific question of the meaning and history of the "Labrador Métis," it is outside the scope of this essay to deal with ongoing questions about the boundaries of Métis identity and citizenship in other regions.
3. There is variation among Métis peoples around the use of "Métis" versus "Metis." I use the accent throughout, except when referring to the LMA or when quoting texts where the accent is not used. To describe my community, I use the terms "Inuit," "NunatuKavut Inuit," "Inuit of southern Labrador," or "southern Inuit." The Labrador Metis Association (LMA), which I discuss at length in this essay, did

- not use an acute accent. In 1998, the organization's name was changed to the Labrador Métis Nation, with the accent.
4. For archaeological evidence, see Brewster; Fay; Rankin; Rankin, Beaudoin, and Brewster; Rankin, Stopp, and Crompton; Rankin and Murphy; and Stopp, "Reconsidering." For Inuit language and place names in southern Labrador, see Dorais; Stopp, "The Complete"; and Rollmann, "Introduction."
 5. For discussions of this war, see Barkham; Pope; Stopp, "Eighteenth Century." For discussions of the capture of Inuit, see Pope (21) and Rollmann, "English-Inuit." As of the publication of this paper, Gregory Mitchell and Amanda Compton have documented the frequent capture and enslavement of southern Labrador Inuit in the eighteenth century.
 6. For discussion of the treaty, see "British-Inuit Treaty"; Hiller; Kennedy, "Introduction"; Mitchell, "The Palliser"; Whiteley.
 7. For discussion of British concerns about and treatment of southern Inuit, see Hiller; Kennedy, Introduction; Rollmann, "English-Inuit"; Procter; Stopp, "Eighteenth."
 8. The government believed outsider "experts" that all Inuit in Labrador were "under the fostering care of the Moravian Missionaries" (Gosling 427), and that any Inuit in southern Labrador had been assimilated (Hanrahan 236–37). The "designated" communities were therefore deemed to be those served by the province's existing Northern Labrador Trading Operation, which was originally operated by the Moravians (Tompkins 35).
 9. The 1974 Royal Commission on Labrador recommended "that eligibility to specified communities under the [federal-provincial] Agreement be dropped immediately so that the Governments can meet their original intent of providing for the Indians and Eskimos of Labrador" (qtd. in Hallett 161, brackets in original).
 10. While the LMA formed a board in 1985 and joined the Native Council of Canada as separate from Indigenous Newfoundlanders in 1986 ("Labrador Metis"; Kennedy, "Our Heritage" 29; Kennedy, "Being" 230), this activity was, as Chris Montague described it, evidence of the group having "renewed the struggle to gain recognition" (General address 1).
 11. Yvon Dumont, a Plains Métis organizer who was then a Native Council of Canada leader, recalls that it was he who first suggested "Labrador Metis" (Sawchuck 22).
 12. Blake writes that he had been building interest in a "Metis Association" and that, "by the time I held that meeting in 1978 at the trade school, the interest was [so] built up that the trade school was filled to capacity with interested people. The meeting went from interest to a work plan. Ford [Lethbridge] was just back from out West, and his mother and family put his name forward to become the first president." Montague recounts that, in the same period, he was working on the southern coast to develop interest in a Métis association; he emphasizes that the Labrador Metis Association grew through periods of organizational energy in 1978, 1981, and 1985 (Interview).

13. This work was carried out in partnership with what was then the Labrador Métis Nation, now NunatuKavut Community Council, of which I have been a member since childhood. I am deeply grateful to the Inuit community members who welcomed me into their homes and shared their food, space, and stories.
14. Minutes from a meeting of the LMA, held in February 1981, also reveal how carefully, consciously, and relationally the people of southern Labrador considered the term “Métis” (“L. M. A.”). In addition to “Métis” and “Inuit,” they discussed the terms “Labradorians” and “Native,” and one complained that this debate had been going on for eight years (“L. M. A.”). Max Blake advocated for “Métis,” while others expressed concerns that the term had been insufficiently discussed, would not be widely accepted, and would “further divide Labrador” (“LMA”).
15. The land claim document argues that the “right-holders of NunatuKavut . . . hold and assert Inuit Title and Treaty,” and so does not delve into the community’s past self-identification as Métis (Clarke et al. 310).
16. Scholarly sources written by Labrador Métis/NunatuKavut Inuit about their community that existed at the time of Andersen’s research include Bidwell; Bull; Brunger and Bull; Fagan; and Martin, “Now We Got.”
17. “Interesting” is used only one other time in the book outside of this chapter, and never in relation to the Red River Métis.
18. For discussion of the stereotype of Inuit cannibals, see Steckley (22). There are many colonial historical references to southern Inuit “pilfering” from Europeans (Pope).
19. For archaeological evidence, see n3, above. For critiques of Gosling, see Stopp, “Reconsidering” (73), and Rankin, Stopp, and Crompton.
20. White notes that the chapter “overlooks the history of pan-tribal collaborative tactics” (136).
21. Southern Inuit were organizing as “Métis” at least five years before the Innu campaign against low-level flying began (Kennedy “Redbaiting” 803; Martin, *We Have* 21). To try to support his claim, Leroux cites Armitage and Kennedy, who actually make no such causal connection (814), but merely say (incorrectly) that the protests and the formation of the LMA occurred in the same period. Anthropologist John C. Kennedy once speculated, without providing a source, that the formation of the LMA was brought about by “an influential white civil servant . . . who actively promote[d] military expansion” (“Changing” 103), but Kennedy later retracted claims that he had made about the early formation of the LMA (*Encounters* 332). Inuk scholar Debbie Martin’s detailed rebuttal of Leroux’s report reveals other factual and methodological errors (*We Have*).
22. I present Lydia Campbell’s non-traditional spelling and grammar without the use of “*sic*.”

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*Reading the River: Currents of Home in Narratives of the Romaine River Hydro Project*¹

My people wrote millions of books
scattered across the land
encyclopaedias of rivers
dictionaries of mountains
geographies of forests
every line my people wrote
kept their memory alive
their minds sharp and their hearts light
—Rita Mestokosho, *Atik^u utei. Le cœur du caribou*²

The 2023 documentary *Après la Romaine* (“After the Romaine”) opens with the following scene: in a dramatic overhead shot, the camera pans over a massive concrete retaining wall holding one of the four reservoirs of Hydro-Québec’s Romaine Complex megaproject. Rita Mestokosho, Innu poet and community leader from Ekuanitshit, drums and sings in Innu-aimun on a ledge overlooking the place where the Romaine River used to run, now a large boulder bed where shallow pools of stagnant water sit. Next to her is Roy Dupuis, Québécois actor, environmentalist, and documentary filmmaker. When Mestokosho ends her song, Dupuis turns to her and, with a trembling voice, says: “I almost feel like asking you to explain what’s happening to me” (*Après* 00:01:21–00:01:24).³ He bursts into tears, turns away from the camera, his body shaking with sobs. A caption appears on screen, “For the first time since 2008, Roy Dupuis returns to the Romaine” (00:01:29–00:01:35).⁴ After a moment, Mestokosho speaks in Innu-aimun, relating that it is difficult for her to be in this place and see the transformation. She hadn’t expected to feel this way. When she switches to French, Dupuis falls apart again. Once he composes himself, he explains: “I never thought I’d feel like this, you’ve definitely triggered something that surprised me. But”—he sighs—“I can’t help but feel guilty. Also, sad. But somewhat guilty.”

Mestokosho asks, “Guilty for loving the river? Or guilty for—” Dupuis interjects, “Guilty to be seeing her in the state she’s in now. I tried, you know, to prevent it, to stop it, to inform, but I couldn’t” (00:03:10–00:03:56). The sequence ends with a shot from 2008 of a rushing waterfall; the next shot shows the same place on the river today, now a steep cliff face, stripped of the falls, and behind it, the large gravel retaining wall. Mestokosho closes the scene, saying “I think we will carry this pain for a long time to come, because we saw it [happen]” (00:05:56–00:06:00).⁵

Dupuis’ emotional discourse, behaviour, and tears in this scene are a display of the fragility of the white ally, who remains unable to recognize settler privilege in a moment when divergent histories of belonging are brought to the surface. His multiple outbursts before the devastated landscape that, as he reminds viewers, he “tried to stop,” centres his experience rather than Mestokosho’s, whose family travelled Unamen Shipu (the Romaine River) on their annual migration from the Gulf of the St. Lawrence to their northern hunting grounds inland. Dupuis’ “urge to ask” Mestokosho for her wisdom, healing, and labour to help explain his own response to seeing the river post-development is a settler move for recognition and validation, in particular from Indigenous women, that he too is part of a shared struggle (Flowers 38). However, in requesting that Mestokosho assuage settler shame or guilt, Dupuis reveals how the terms of his imagined shared struggle are uneven: his environmental activism is not anticolonial, as it can be conducted while ignoring Indigenous land dispossession. This exchange between Mestokosho and Dupuis is significant in that both became figureheads of two dissenting publics—Innu and Québécois environmentalist—throughout the drawn-out public debate over the Romaine Complex, which garnered extensive attention in the Quebec media (see Vincent; Desmeules and Guimond). Mestokosho, as a published poet and Innu of Ekuanitshit, the community for whom Unamen Shipu is an ancestral waterway, became the spokesperson for the Innu communities impacted by the project,⁶ and for Indigenous rights more generally in the province. Dupuis, a celebrity actor known for his lumberjack ethos echoing the *coureur des bois* figure of a certain Québécois imaginary, is also involved in the environmental movement in the province as co-founder of the non-profit Fondation Rivières.

His documentary film *L'Empreinte* (2015) explores his sincere “feelings of being more Indigenous than French” and his intuition that the specificity of Québécois identity is its cultural métissage with Indigenous peoples.⁷ Dupuis’ interest in the Romaine crystallized in his 2008 documentary *Chercher le courant* (“Seeking the Current”), which frames the debate over the hydro project from an environmentalist perspective, highlighting the five-hundred-kilometre-long Romaine River as “one of the few remaining big wild rivers in Quebec” (“l’une des dernières grandes rivières sauvages du Québec”; *Le Devoir*). The exchange between Mestokosho and Dupuis in the opening scene of *Après la Romaine*, a film that takes stock of the consequences of the megaproject, can serve as a metonym for the confluence of place-making narratives that emerged in Quebec over the course of the Romaine debacle. Different attachments to the river were revealed and remained present in public discourse in the province, from initial rumours in the 1970s, to the proposal of a megaproject in 2006, until its completion and inauguration with all four generating stations in operation in October 2023, as I was first writing these lines.

In this article, I explore how a contemporary hydro development project can invoke dissonant narratives that attempt to give meaning and legitimacy to conflicting relationships to territory. I argue that divergent stories of hydro in Quebec bring to the surface the very questions of connections to land that for some legitimize and for others debunk the distinct form of ongoing colonialism in the province. The announcement of the Romaine River project generated many responses, in public forums as well as in narrative and audiovisual cultural production. The years-long debate in Quebec over the Romaine can be understood as an “event,” in the sense that it constituted a deep-seated political conflict, with disparate and at times antagonistic discourses that emerged in its wake (St-Amand 4). I frame the Romaine project as an event in an attempt to make sense of it from different angles that, taken together, reveal how they relate to one another. In order to attend to the polyphony of voices and cultural productions that addressed this event, I turn to several stories of the Romaine, both Innu and Québécois, that convey at once contrasting and overlapping feelings of belonging to the Côte-Nord region and to the province of Quebec more generally. I consider a variety of

narrative forms: a documentary play by Montreal-based actor Christine Beaulieu, briefs from the public hearing on the environment held in Ekuanitshit, an autofictional novel by Côte-Nord author Erika Soucy, and the most recent collection of poetry by Rita Mestokosho. In gathering different cultural texts from both Innu and Québécois voices, I propose a practice, a method, and a metaphor for reading the river itself through the narratives that claim it. Bringing these voices together is not a project of direct comparison, nor an evaluation of the legitimacy of their claims, nor an effort to reconcile settler and Indigenous stories. Rather, *reading the river* highlights the cacophony of positions in a context of ongoing settler colonialism (Byrd). By addressing the cacophony, we can destabilize the dominance of a single hydro story that enables extractivist and colonial regimes to function. I will first situate the Romaine project within the history of hydro development in Quebec to underscore hydro's role in francophone settler nation-building.

“On est Hydro-Québécois”⁸

The controversial Romaine River megaproject, located in Minganie, a county on the Côte-Nord, reawakened histories, nationalisms, and attachments in the region and rippled throughout the province. In 1975, the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement was signed by the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and the Northern Quebec Inuit Association (now Makivvik), and in 1978, by the Naskapi Nation of Kawawachikamach. However, Nitassinan, the ancestral homeland of the Innu Nation—the nine Innu communities in the region of the Côte-Nord—remained without treaties or agreements, despite forty years of negotiations (Farget 924). In 2011, then-Premier Jean Charest declared Hydro-Québec's Romaine project the linchpin of the “Plan Nord,” an economic development plan targeting the entire territory north of the forty-ninth parallel. To move forward the damming of the Romaine, Hydro-Québec was now bound by the 1982 *Constitution Act* that prescribes the duty of federal and provincial governments to consult and accommodate First Nations' rights and interests (*Constitution Act*, 1982, s 35.1). The Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE), a provincial organization

tasked with overseeing environmental inquiries, led the consultation, representing both levels of government. The Band Council of the Innu of Ekuanitshit submitted a brief that condemned the way environmental evaluation now replaced the land claims process and undermined Indigenous rights (BAPE, *Mémoire du Conseil* 7). In the meantime, before the hearings began in 2008, Hydro-Québec had already signed agreements with three other Innu communities: Nutashkuan, Unamen Shipu, and Pakua Shipu. This left Ekuanitshit as the sole publicly dissenting Innu community. Thus, before the BAPE came to hold its hearings in the Innu communities and settler villages in the region, the consultation process had divided the Innu. Legal scholar Doris Farget argues, based on a series of interviews with Innu who participated in the consultation process, that the application of the duty to consult framework in the lead-up to the Romaine project was ultimately a continuation of earlier experiences of territorial dispossession, indicative of government indifference to Innu voices (935). After considering 116 testimonies and briefs, the BAPE published a final report in February 2009 that recommended the project. Seven weeks later, construction began on the Complex (BAPE, *Projet d'aménagement*).

Scholars have pointed out that the entire Plan Nord project, within which the Romaine must be situated, is a continuation of the nationalist push for northern expansion during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (Voyer 26). The spirit of this era is encapsulated in the words of then-Premier Robert Bourassa, who led the campaign that established hydroelectricity as the symbol of Quebec's nascent emancipation movement:

Me, my political credo when I was elected, was, well, "What can we do for the strength of Quebec?" Several things, but we can develop its strategic assets . . . this means its energy resources, hydroelectricity. Developing hydro means to conquer the North of Quebec. So, what's the sentiment here? I'll say it with great humility. It's being a conqueror. We've found ourselves conquering the North of Quebec, economically speaking. (*Sur le dos* 00:04:51–00:05:30)⁹

Bourassa's explicit rhetoric of conquest and domination of northern territory underscores how the drive for hydroelectric energy sources is an exercise of political power. The Premier's vision produces a "frontier account" of the North (Hall 4), in which settler labour carves a resource economy out of wild and rough terrain. Political scientist Dalie Giroux observes that the Quebec settler-colonial mentality of this period could not conceive of an alternative framework for relations between North and South, between Québécois and Indigenous peoples, to that of domination: "The Quebec of this era seems to have been incapable of thinking of its independence other than through a hoarding of the position of master" (38). The "master" Giroux evokes here is inscribed in the rallying cry of the Quiet Revolution: "Maîtres chez nous" ("Masters in our own house"). Geographer Caroline Desbiens notes: "Whatever territory was gained by the Québécois through hydro development was in turn lost by the Innu, who saw many of their traditional lands irrevocably altered or vanish underwater" (35). Desbiens underscores the paradox of "declaring the Québécois masters in their own house in a place the Innu call Nitassinan and that they identify as their cultural homeland has not been fully unravelled in Quebec" (36). In fact, while the Romaine project was made official in the mid-aughts, the river had been identified for its economic potential during the 1970s. In their brief submitted to the BAPE, the Band Council states that the project "has been a matter of concern for the Innu of Ekuanitshit for more than fifty years now, when the first real surveys of the land were carried out, without their consultation or authorisation" (BAPE, *Mémoire du Conseil* 1).¹⁰ Located within this history, the event of the Romaine Complex is a means by which to unravel the larger paradox of Québécois belonging through hydro development, when read alongside Innu narratives of Unamen Shipu.

Debate and Exchange in Documentary Theatre and Consultation Briefs

The debate among the white-majority public in Quebec on the Romaine is perhaps best captured by Christine Beaulieu's play *J'aime Hydro*—or, rather, by the sensation it generated. Created as a one-act play in 2015, its first full-length stage production toured in 2016, the

same year it was published in book form. A five-episode podcast followed in 2019, and a second edition of the book, updated and expanded, was released in 2022, the same year the live show toured again. When I attended that year's performance at Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier in Montreal, the audience was in raptures, laughing, calling out, and engaged for the entire three hours and forty minutes. For all its local acclaim, the play remains untranslated into English, placing it as a Québécois story for a francophone audience.

Labelled “documentary theatre” (“J’aime Hydro”), the play blends research and expository journalism with personal narrative and humour. It follows Beaulieu, the lead actor and writer, who inserts herself as its eponymous main character, as she conducts her investigation into Quebec’s “love story” with Hydro-Québec (“relation amoureuse”; Beaulieu 54). In asking whether Hydro-Québec is relevant today to the collective Québécois identity, Christine likens the relationship between the province, the Québécois, and the state corporation to a romance: “[O]ur position in the relationship we have with Hydro-Québec is looking more and more like that of a dejected lover” (54).¹¹ The group referred to in Christine’s “we” is the Euro-descended francophone population, the *Québécois de souche* like herself, for whom hydro’s role in the Quiet Revolution is part of the fabric of Quebec history. In a refrain that opens and closes each of the play’s five episodes, Christine lists the reasons she persists with the investigation, despite personal and bureaucratic roadblocks, beginning each segment with “Because I’m Québécoise.” This passionate mantra ties her identity to that of the hydro question in Quebec, implying a causality between being Québécois and having a duty to care about Hydro-Québec.

Beaulieu’s Christine represents an urban Québécoise, one who is aware of the collective loyalty in the province towards the state enterprise, yet has never asked the question of how that loyalty has been cultivated, or by whom. The announcement of the Romaine project launches her investigation, which, while beginning as an unbiased exploration, grows gradually more critical of Hydro-Québec over the course of various interviews. The playwright’s main point of criticism is the corporation’s surplus of electricity, which is sold at a loss. Beaulieu creates informative dialogues based on her interviews with numerous actors in the Romaine story. Each character has

different stakes in the project, and Beaulieu gives each voice equal measure to form a forum of voices: the vice-president of Hydro-Québec's corporate affairs; the president of Hydro-Québec; Quebec's minister of energy and natural resources; as well as scientists, economists, engineers, construction firm representatives, and environmentalists. The protagonist reflects often on her own lack of knowledge in self-deprecating remarks, noting that she "would need to do three undergrad degrees" to fully understand the hydro question (105), or that she is "starting from zero and [is] not at all credible as an energy information officer" (15).¹² Advertised as a "thrilling political soap opera" that does not shy away from "thorny and passionate discussion" ("J'aime Hydro"), the play follows a Québécois tradition of public debate that extols the free exchange of rational arguments and the voicing of different positions as a model for establishing consensus. Yet Christine's portrait of Hydro-Québec misses the colonial nature of its relationship with the Innu, an oversight that is symptomatic of Quebec's silence around settler colonialism more generally. After attending a performance of *J'aime Hydro*, one audience member declares: "[T]his pride [Christine] has in being Québécoise, and that Hydro-Québec belongs to us, [is] something I also feel, because I've visited the dams too, and it's the feeling we have, as Québécois" (qtd. in Morrisette 00:20:21–00:20:31).¹³ These words correlate belonging as a Québécois person with feelings of possession. The speaker here identifies with the province through the symbol of Hydro-Québec's big dams, monuments of nationalism by which Québécois lay claim to the North. The play does not problematize the colonial force of hydro; rather, it renews the collective sense of identification with Hydro-Québec, ensuring the settler imaginary remains intact.

While the documentary play foregrounds an exchange of rational deliberations about the project's impacts and benefits, another forum of voices is captured in the transcription of the public hearings held by the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE). The BAPE commission's mandate is to collect the opinions of different actors and experts regarding the environmental soundness of proposed development projects within Quebec and to uphold the public's right to information and consultation. It attempts a form of participatory democracy based on the idea that "the citizen is an

essential partner in the decision-making process for projects likely to have a major impact on the environment” (Gouvernement du Québec).¹⁴ However, in recent decades, Innu leaders have expressed their concern that the BAPE is a strategy of the Quebec government to avoid nation-to-nation discussions over Aboriginal title (Voyer 104). In deploying the BAPE prior to launching a major resource extraction project, the government evades legal negotiations over Aboriginal title by reframing the terms of reference as sustainable development. As the Ekuanitshit Band Council had pointed out in the brief they submitted, when couched within a sustainable development framework, “[a]t most, the interests of Indigenous peoples are treated as part of the ‘ambient environment’ of living species” (BAPE, *Mémoire du Conseil* 15).¹⁵ At the hearings in Ekuanitshit, the BAPE heard from members of the Band Council, several community corporations and organizations, as well as individuals (including Rita Mestokosho). Each representative was given fifteen minutes to summarize the brief they had previously submitted and fifteen minutes to respond to questions from the commissioners.¹⁶ While the latter were expected to have read the full written submissions, early in the hearing the commission’s then-president confessed: “I skimmed through your brief very quickly, and of course I really did skim through it in just a few moments” (BAPE, *Audience publique* 15).¹⁷ This early statement on behalf of the government’s lead representative set the tone of the hearing in Ekuanitshit as one of indifference bordering on dismissal of Innu perspectives, rather than of listening and dialogue.

The Band Council’s written submission makes the point that their ancestral title has been ignored and the project is therefore unconstitutional under Canadian law.¹⁸ The Council reminds the commission that “the Supreme Court decided [that] until a treaty is concluded, the honour of the Crown requires negotiations leading to an equitable settlement of Aboriginal claims” (BAPE, *Mémoire du Conseil* 5).¹⁹ The Band Council repeatedly states that the community cannot conceive of the project without the recognition of their title. Speaking on behalf of the Council, Vice-Chief Vincent Napish condemns the province for having authorized Hydro-Québec to carry out its investigation work, thereby avoiding the question of Aboriginal rights and title. Napish points to the long-standing history of the state corporation going ahead with development projects without a

territorial agreement: “[W]e know, everyone here knows, I think, that Hydro-Québec is not inclined to discuss the issue” (BAPE, *Audience publique* 6).²⁰ In reiterating the need for a land claims process, the Band Council deploys the Canadian legal framework before the commissioners, themselves representatives of a governmental body, in an attempt to transform the hearing into a space for asserting their legal and ancestral rights.

The Band Council also follows traditional protocols by inviting three Elders to describe their lives on the land. The Elders speak in Innu through a translator, although only the French is transcribed in the hearing’s minutes. The Elders speak from direct experience. Their oral histories present evidence of Innu land-use practices. For example, Patrick Michel states, “I used this land for my traditional activities, and I lived there . . . [the river] was our way of entering the land . . . we used that territory, the Romaine River, it’s where we got . . . the resources to make snowshoes, for food, for fishing. The land was not used in just any way” (BAPE, *Audience publique* 9–10).²¹ Elder Michel here emphasizes the uses of the land and reaffirms *Innu aitun*, the Innu way of life. Going further, Louis Lalo alludes to the sovereignty of Innu land: “The first thing I want to say [is] the doors of our home have been opened” (10). The presence of the Elders transforms the hearing into a space of teaching and sharing the Innu way of life. The Elders make known the vast extent of their knowledge of the land. Patrick Michel ends his statement with, “I’ll stop here for now. I could talk about this for a very long time” (10). Louis Lalo concludes, “[T]here’s a lot I could tell you” (11).²² The Elders’ statements remind the commissioners that they have much more to say, beyond the limitations set by the consultation process. Vice-Chief Napish confirms, “They [the Elders] would have liked to tell you more about their sense of belonging to this region, but perhaps due to a lack of time—perhaps we would have had time last night—but you heard them, they are here, they are alive, they are in front of us” (11–12).²³ Napish addresses the commissioners directly and reminds them that they have now “heard” the Elders, despite apparent efforts to disregard their statements. Napish calls the BAPE commissioners into accountability, letting it be known that the Elders’ voices, and very existence, cannot be ignored. The Band Council’s presentation to the Commission thus includes both the statements of the elected council,

advocating for Aboriginal title and sovereignty, and statements from Elders, the traditional knowledge keepers. In this way, the Council makes strategic use of the environmental commission to advance claims to title and assert the value of Innu knowledge.

However, these efforts to transform the space of consultation are thwarted by the structure imposed by the BAPE. From the outset, Vice-Chief Napish denounces that the schedule for the hearing had been set by the Commission without conferring with the Innu. Napish draws attention to the fact that he is filling in that day because the Commission made a last-minute change of schedule:

Yesterday, he [Chief Jean-Charles Piétacho] was ready to attend the hearings, last night, he was here, he had changed his entire schedule to be here *yesterday*, except when we found out that the meeting had been moved to today, to this afternoon, because he still has two major files to deal with outside the community. (5; emphasis added)²⁴

Indeed, in their brief submitted to the Commission, the Band Council objects that the timelines for the hearing have been “at all times [those] of the government” (BAPE, *Mémoire du Conseil* 10),²⁵ and that documentation wasn’t translated into Innu-aimun. Speaking on behalf of Ekuanitshit Innu who oppose the project, Mestokosho and David Basile point to the bureaucratic tactics used by Hydro-Québec to alienate community members:

Who among the population has the opportunity to read the fifteen hundred pages of the impact study we have to comment on today? And it’s not the information meetings that have helped us better understand what’s at stake in the project. Because each of Hydro-Québec’s speeches gave answers even before the questions were asked. So where did dialogue fit in? Did you really think we weren’t interested? No, we didn’t feel listened to or truly consulted. And the Elders who attended every meeting on behalf of all of us can testify to that. (BAPE, *Audience publique* 22)²⁶

In pre-emptively providing answers, Hydro-Québec obstructs dialogue. The feeling of not being listened to or “truly consulted” calls into question the genuineness of the entire consultation process. Indeed, Corporation Nishipiminan, the organization Ekuanitshit tasked with negotiating the Impact and Benefit Agreement with Hydro-Québec, conveys similar skepticism:

Despite our most sincere wish to see this project subjected to the most rigorous analysis this Commission can offer, it is difficult for us not to have doubts about the value of the exercise we have embarked upon. Indeed, when we realize that all the science deployed in this exercise comes up against the Government’s political aims, we can only wonder whether this does not seriously compromise its value. What are we to make of the fact, for example, that just as we were deciding to take part in this process aimed at objectively determining the acceptability of this project, Premier Jean Charest told the media, during a visit to the region on 17 March, 2007, that the project was going ahead? . . . To be honest with you, Commissioners, we had then and still have the feeling that we, just like you and the battery of analysts contributing to the study of this project, are actors in a gigantic play in which everyone plays their part and whose script and predictable ending have been written for a long time. (BAPE, *Corporation Nishipiminan* 5)²⁷

The Corporation’s statement exposes the process as a sham and the commission’s outcome as sealed. The community’s awareness of the predetermined nature of the project is echoed in the Band Council’s brief, which attests that “the Quebec government has repeatedly indicated its intention to authorise the project *in any case*” (*Mémoire du Conseil* 17; emphasis added). In fact, both the Ministry of Natural Resources and Wildlife, and the Ministry of Sustainable Development, Environment and Parks had previously told the Band Council that the project was part of Quebec’s energy strategy, and that, therefore, “there was no alternative solution” (10). The phrase “There is no reasonable alternative to the Romaine project” was also used in Hydro-Québec’s

impact study, published the previous year (HQ Production 13).²⁸ The rhetoric of finality that circulated in these bureaucratic documents reveals that both state corporation and government had already determined to move ahead with the Romaine project.

J'aime Hydro was critically acclaimed for celebrating a Quebec tradition of establishing consensus by means of the exchange of rational arguments. The briefs of the BAPE commission reveal how the actual process for consultation favoured the government's agenda, despite efforts of the Ekuanitshit Innu to transform the space of consultation into one of knowledge-sharing and affirmation of Aboriginal title. Read alongside one another, these two texts reveal an irony: *J'aime Hydro* is a comedic play, where the trials of its protagonist advance her along the path to knowledge, while at the BAPE consultation, Corporation Nishipiminan identifies Innu and analysts alike as "actors in a gigantic play," exposing the consultation itself to be a performance, a kind of puppetry. When hydro enters public spaces, settler audiences enjoy a comedy. The Innu, however, find themselves bit players in a farce.

Family Stories: Intergenerational Ties in Autofiction and Poetry

In *Les murailles*, an autofictional novel by Québécoise poet and playwright Erika Soucy, the Romaine River project is the backdrop for a family story rather than the site of political debate. Soucy, who grew up in the remote hamlet of Portneuf-sur-mer on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, writes in the dialect of Québécois spoken in the region, heavily inflected with slang, idiomatic expressions, and anglicisms: *checke-ça* (33), *les trucks* (47), *slicée* (47), *watche* (56), *starté* (68). Soucy uses this vernacular in all her writing. In this way, she works to develop a realist aesthetics to depict the Côte-Nord, which is underrepresented in Quebec literature (Lagacé 22). The title, *Les murailles*, meaning "high walls" or "ramparts", refers to the massive hydro infrastructure looming over the land and the *chantiers*, the construction work sites. The walls are both literal and figurative: Soucy's father, a seasoned jack-driller, built a separation between himself and his daughter as his work contracts required him to be absent for much of her childhood. The novel displays clear

autofictional elements: the story is narrated in the first person by a young woman, Erika Soucy (29), from a small Côte-Nord village. The narrator has received a grant to write a book of poetry about the North. Using this project as a pretense, she travels to the Romaine-2 work camp. Her goal is to experience the everyday life of a camp, the legendary place her father disappeared to throughout her childhood: "I'm on my way to the mythical work sites where it seems to be always cold: Mont-Wright, Eastmain, La Romaine . . . It was all the same to me when I was a snotnosed kid. . . . I'm on my way to the wall he built that still separates us" (Soucy 10).²⁹ In the interplay between fact and fiction that autofiction affords, Soucy explores not only her family history, but also the everyday life of workers in a hydro camp. Unlike autobiography, autofiction is less about "mining [the subject's] consciousness" than it is a means for the author to "represent and interrogate the communities in which they are embedded" (Bloom 6, 13). Soucy's narrator, Erika, takes on the dual role of insider—being from a family of hydro workers—and observer, as her personal journey of reconnection with her father leads her to document life at the camp.

For Erika, the greatest consequence of a hydro project is its impact on workers' families. She is marked by childhood memories of her father being away more days of the month than he was home. This family dynamic was shared with her peers in the hamlet: "[W]e were in the same boat, me'n my friends from school, all of us orphans of Hydro's work camps. Conceived fly-in, raised fly-out. I promised myself I'd do better than him" (Soucy 10).³⁰ Erika's "orphaned" experience is both individual and collective; through it, she is connected to a way of life in a region dominated by the fly-in/fly-out rhythm of the resource economy. This family history establishes her as an insider to the reorganization of social and gender relations that hydro work brings. As a hydro daughter, Erika experiences the physical distance of her hydro-worker father as an emotional coldness:

I write poetry that warms the heart a little, 'cause for going on twenty years now, every time my dad comes back from the North, he brings a bitter wind with him, a big cold February wind that numbs your face and keeps you from opening your eyes. Put like that, it's not easy for us to talk. (32)³¹

Other men in her family work on the fly-in/fly-out regime. Not only is her father on contract at the Romaine-2 site, but so are her uncle, her cousin, and her brother. This tradition dates back to her grandfather, who was a superintendent on a hydro project in Labrador and is a respected figure in family lore: when Erika tours her uncle's worksite, he "goes on to tell a story about my grandfather, which happens all the time in the family whenever we talk about construction" (102).³² The stories told within her family assert intergenerational ties to the industry. These stories in turn produce a narrative of belonging to the province's northern region, where extractive industries are a way of life.

Yet the protagonist's observations of the land itself call into question her narrative of belonging. For Erika, "the Romaine" is synonymous with the work camp, not the river. In her words, the camps are "all the same" ("du pareil au même"; 10) and Romaine-2 is indistinguishable from any other northern work camp. On the chartered flight up to Romaine-2, she observes the land below, trying to establish a relationship to the Minganie, a part of the Côte-Nord she's never seen: "I'd like, somehow, *to feel at home*. To begin to understand, just by seeing the land from my window, why the men around me agree to spend their lives here" (13; emphasis added).³³ But her initial impressions of the land lack the affective resonance she associates with home: "On the ground, it's not tundra yet, but that's the idea I'd've had. The same little spruce trees as back home but in muddier soil. It's all right. I mean, it's fine; it's not that ugly or depressing or majestic. It's not boring either, I don't mind seeing it. It's just . . . what it is" (12).³⁴ Erika's assessment reveals her indifference to the land, which doesn't live up to the "mythical work sites" constructed in family tales ("chantiers mythiques"; 10). As she discovers at Romaine-2, the land is there to be destroyed. When her uncle points to a rock formation, he says: "That Christly big mountain blocking the way, watch her good: we're gonna make her jump" (103).³⁵ These words liken the land to an inconvenience on which to enact violence. More specifically, to work on the land is to transform it into a resource: "There's a team that blasts, another that cleans up. It's a steep slope, still on bedrock. For my uncle, it's a way of life, the beginning of his success" (103).³⁶ In the State's pursuit of capital accumulation, the hydro worker remakes the land. The men's work of

destruction and cleaning up, and their feelings of building individual success, serve as a metaphor for how resource extraction creates “a way of life” and enables the characters “to feel at home.”

Family connection to land, and especially with the river, is a central theme in Rita Mestokosho’s poetry, beginning in 1995 with her first collection, *Eshi uapataman Nukum (How I See Life, Grandmother)*. Mestokosho is one of the first Innu poets to publish in Quebec (Gatti). Her most recent collection, *Atik^u utei. Le cœur du caribou* (2022), which won the 2023 Governor General’s Award for poetry, is a meditation on Innu culture and land. In *Atik^u utei*, rivers are the “blue roads” (“routes bleues”; 9) of the homeland of the Innu. The rivers flow from the North (42) and are “welcomed . . . by the sea” (“la mer les a accueillies”; 106). The poems are replete with water and, in particular, river imagery, which runs throughout the collection: “even the rivers whisper your name to us” (61); “the river plunges into my dreams” (63); “I heard the river in its desire / melt into the arms of the earth” (110).³⁷ In these visions, the river communicates with Mestokosho’s poetic subject: it has a voice that can be heard and its power and desire are embodied. The river’s transmissions, utterances, and physical expression resonate with what Warren Cariou calls “the first translation, that process by which the stories move from the land into language” (“Sweetgrass” 342). Cariou draws on Syilx writer Jeannette Armstrong’s early essay “Land Speaking,” and Rocky Cree Elder William Dumas’ characterizations of the land as the “originator of stories and language” (340). In doing so, Cariou underscores how a land-speaking perspective transforms colonial understandings of the land as “simply one of many ‘things’ that can be gestured toward using language . . . Indigenous philosophies of language and belonging reverse the trajectory of Western mimesis, starting with the land as the source of not only sustenance but also of knowledge” (341). This philosophy is at play in Mestokosho’s river poetry:

we all have a river that
calls to us
yes, I would return to the North
to die in the river of memory
red (44)³⁸

In the communal “we all,” the speaker refers to a shared Innu experience of the river as collective memory. The line break’s emphasis on “red” conjures imagery of the river as a vein, correlating its waters to the blood of a living body. “Red” also evokes the knowledge, affect, and connection conveyed in N. Scott Momaday’s “memory in blood” or “blood memory.” This dual concept describes at once a capacity for remembering things beyond one’s own bodily existence and an attention to genealogies of stories passed down through generations about a specific landscape.³⁹

Reflecting on the power of memory the river holds for the Innu, Mestokosho writes,

If I were to pay homage to the sacred water
I would sail North to find
the river where the Innu hunter was born (42).⁴⁰

The river is thus not only the resting place for memory, but also the birthplace of her ancestors. In paying “homage to the sacred water,” she also acknowledges her role as a water protector.⁴¹ Mestokosho explores the relationship of Innu women with the watershed in poems such as “Nipi: The Memory of Water” (“Nipi: la mémoire de l’eau”; 103), in which genealogies of water live within the subject’s body. In “Shipek^u Ishkueu,” the poet writes to her “sister,” the “woman of the sea” (“sœur”; “femme de la mer”; 99). In yet another poem, “Mishtamek^u” (“The Whale”), she summons the river as a place of dwelling:

I kept the river water
carefully
as if the river were in my home
as if my home were the river (105)⁴²

The antimetabole created by the repetition in reversal of “home” and “river” foregrounds a deep association with the river as an affective centre for the speaker and a carrier of cultural memory. The reference to the *river* as a *home* is also an assertion of Innu political orders, akin to Ekuanitshit Elder Louis Lalo’s declaration at the BAPE commission that “the doors of our home have been opened” (“on vient d’ouvrir les portes de notre maison”; *Audience publique* 10), which conveys the

breach of Innu sovereignty created by the arrival of hydro. In other words, Mestokosho's river-home gestures to political orders that are inscribed in Innu relationships with water. The mirrored verses that call attention to the poet's responsibility to water assert what Mushkegowuk geographer Michelle Daigle describes as Indigenous governance practices that resurge through water relations (169). When Mestokosho writes of keeping the water "carefully," the speaker acts according to protocols that form the basis of Indigenous water laws according to which taking care of the water ensures mutual survival (Wilson and Inkster 526).

The river water brings to bear not only a set of political responsibilities but also of kinship relations (Daigle). The river connects the poet's family with non-human kin:

Yes, my daughters are the river
they swam with the salmon
as children they laughed with the river (106)⁴³

The speaker's descendants embody the continuity of Innu relationality with the river. In a poem titled "Takuan," meaning "that which exists," Mestokosho alternates lines in Innu-aimun and French (translated here into English) to evoke a web of relations:

Takuan niteit
there exists my heart
Takuan nuashkum
there exists my sky
Takuan nishipim
there exists my river
Tau nikuss
there exists my son
Tau nitanish
there exists my daughter
Takuan nitipatshimun
there exists my story (23)⁴⁴

The translated lines follow those in Innu-aimun, a bilingual approach Mestokosho uses throughout *Atik' utei*. This structure reminds the

reader that the words emanate first and foremost from Mestokosho's Indigenous language, asserting the essential role of Innu-aimun in the poet's relationship to land and community. The poem takes the form of a glossary of terms, or a language lesson, describing Innu existence, as emphasized by the recurrence of the verb *to exist*. Still, the repetition of the possessive "my" renders the verses deeply personal. Writing of the river alongside mentions of her children and her body, Mestokosho captures the elements that make up her world, her home, her "story." The poem, then, is a declaration of personal sovereignty as well as a reflection on narrative itself. In order to convey her connection to the river, Mestokosho composes her own life story.

Cariou's conceptualization of the way land relates to story warns of the greater implications of this connection: "When we consider land and stories to be aspects of the same energy, then the appropriation of stories is essentially indistinguishable from the theft of land" ("Territory" 8). I understand this to mean that the coercion of stories about the land has the effect of transforming how the land is known, understood, and, ultimately, used. We can see an example in Erika Soucy's autofiction, where the river is synonymous with a single meaning: hydro power. In Rita Mestokosho's poetry, the river is polysemous, signifying memory, kinship, governance, and dwelling. Soucy's Romaine River is claimed through tales transmitted among generations of a hydro family. When Mestokosho tells her story, she asserts her title to the Ekuanitshit Innu homeland. In her poetry, to live as Innu is to be claimed by the river's features:

I want to live as an Innu
as strong as the torrent
as high as the cliff (34).⁴⁵

To Read the River

In 2021, the journal *River Research and Applications* published an article co-authored by Unamen Shipu Romaine River. Writing in the first person, Unamen Shipu, or the Romaine River, explains:

“I flow from my source to my estuary. I flow through the ancestral territory called Nitassinan by the Innu. I flow through the territory of the Minganie of the Minganois. I flow through the Québec of the Québécois. Even if I am stolen, I do not belong to anyone. I flow on the Earth and in the sky. I am who I am. I am River.” (RiverOfLife et al. 429)

The river’s voice situates the water’s pathway in multiple scales of geography and nationhood—Innu, regional settler, and provincial. The river speaks of contesting claims made to its waters, claims I have sought to highlight by exploring a contemporary event of large-scale extractivism that, to my mind, reveals how hydro as an industry continues to conjure a nexus of belonging in twenty-first-century Quebec. Yet, when told through the river’s voice, the Romaine belongs to itself, despite and amid this event of extraction. To recognize the Romaine’s sovereignty, the River’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous co-authors developed a method of writing *as the river*, which they describe as a positionality “underpinned by Indigenous narratives as riverine expressions of place-based love” (422).

In this article, I have formulated a method of *reading the river* by bringing together different stories people tell about it. My initial idea was to create a forum of voices to tease out divergences and points of resonance that clarify and complexify attachments to the Romaine. In my first attempts to conclude this article, I thought I would address how these narratives speak to celebration, critique, and resistance in the face of the event of resource extraction that is hydro development in Quebec. Yet reading these cultural texts together exposes how some stories are valued and heard more than others. Joëlle Papillon asserts: “Writing the land, writing the territory, cannot mean the same thing for Indigenous and settler writers” (25). I find myself unable to read Innu and Québécois voices on the Romaine side by side without drawing attention to the incommensurability of the kinds of belonging they express and the resulting material consequences. Dams have been built on the Romaine River. The Romaine is now a hydro river. One narrative has remade the landscape. Other stories uphold the Innu struggle to keep Unamen Shipu and Nitassinan alive, “their mind sharp and their heart light” (“son esprit vif et son cœur léger”; Mestokosho 35).

Notes

1. None of the primary material cited in this article exists in translation; all translations are my own. Due to the quantity of translated material in this paper, the original French for all but the briefest quotations above appears in endnote format, rather than immediately following the English translation in parentheses, as would be typical for MLA style. I work towards making these narratives available to English readers in an effort to resist isolating the Romaine story solely within Quebec, in order for it to enter into future conversations with stories of hydro and other forms of resource extraction across lands claimed by Canada.
2. Mon peuple écrivait des millions de livres
éparpillés sur le territoire
des encyclopédies de rivières
des dictionnaires de montagnes
des géographies de forêts
chaque ligne que mon peuple écrivait
gardait sa mémoire éveillée
son esprit vif et son cœur léger (Mestokosho 35)
3. “J’ai quasiment le goût de te demander de m’expliquer ce qui se passe avec moi.”
4. “Pour la première fois depuis 2008, Roy Dupuis retourne à la Romaine.”
5. DUPUIS. Je pensais pas ressentir ça, c’est sûr que t’as enclenché quelque chose qui m’a surpris. Mais . . . je peux pas faire autrement que me sentir coupable. Aussi, triste, mais en partie coupable.
MESTOKOSHO. Coupable d’aimer la rivière, ou coupable de . . .
DUPUIS. Coupable de la voir dans l’état qu’elle est présentement. J’ai . . . j’ai quand même essayé, tsé, de . . . ben, d’empêcher ça, d’arrêter ça, enfin, d’informer, j’ai pas réussi.
MESTOKOSHO. Je pense qu’on va porter cette douleur longtemps encore, parce qu’on l’a vue.
6. The Innu communities impacted by the Romaine project are Ekuanitshit, Nutashkuan, Unamen-Shipu, and Pakua-Shipi.
7. Corrie Scott explores the “Métis feeling” illustrated by Dupuis and other white male authors in Quebec in her article “Le ‘feeling’ métis au masculin au Québec.” Darryl Leroux’s extensive genealogical research also contests the narrative of métissage in Quebec history; see, for example, Leroux’s monograph, *Distorted Descent*.
8. “On est Hydro-Québécois” (“We are Hydro-Québécois”) was a slogan used in a Hydro-Quebec publicity campaign from 1973 (Perron 251). The triumphant catchphrase built on the national identity contained in the word “Québécois”—a term that was introduced into public discourse during the Quiet Revolution (1960–1980)—by merging it with the energy source that would serve the new nation’s economic emancipation.
9. “Moi, mon crédo politique quand j’ai été élu chef du Parti, c’était, ‘Bon, qu’est-ce qu’on peut faire pour la force du Québec?’ Plusieurs choses, mais on peut développer ses atouts stratégiques . . . c’étaient ses ressources énergétiques, l’hydroélectricité. Et développer l’hydroélectricité, c’est conquérir le Nord du

Québec. Alors vous dites . . . quel sentiment? Je le dis d'une façon très humble. C'est le conquérant. On se trouve à conquérir le Nord du Québec économiquement parlant."

10. "[U]n sujet de préoccupation pour les Innus d'Ekuanitshit depuis maintenant plus de cinquante ans, alors que s'effectuaient, sans leur consultation ni leur autorisation, les premiers véritables relevés sur le terrain en fonction d'un éventuel projet de développement."
11. "[N]otre position dans la relation que nous vivons avec Hydro-Québec ressemble de plus en plus à celle d'un amant déchu."
12. "[I]l faudrait que je fasse trois bacs"; "je sais que je pars de zéro et que je suis pas crédible comme agente d'information sur l'énergie."
13. "[C]ette fierté qu'elle avait d'être québécoise et qu'Hydro-Québec ça nous appartient, ce que moi je ressens, parce que j'ai visité les barrages aussi, pis c'est ce qu'on a comme sentiment, les Québécois."
14. "[L]e citoyen est un partenaire indispensable dans le processus de prise de décisions concernant les projets susceptibles d'avoir un impact majeur sur l'environnement."
15. "Tout au plus, les intérêts des autochtones sont traités comme un élément du 'milieu ambiant' des espèces vivantes."
16. The briefs submitted to the BAPE from Ekuanitshit are from the Ekuanitshit Band Council, Corporation Nishipiminan, Mamit Innuat Inc., Société de gestion Ekuanitshinnuat Inc., and Rita Mestokosho with David Basile. These briefs are public records, available among the 419 documents that comprise the BAPE's file on the Romaine River hydro project (see BAPE, "Documentation").
17. "[J]'ai survolé très rapidement votre mémoire, bien entendu je l'ai vraiment lu en diagonale en quelques instants."
18. The Ekuanitshit Band Council's critique that BAPE consultation circumvented the land claims process was echoed by the Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, Ghislain Picard (Innu), who condemned the Charest government for launching the Plan Nord before a formal territorial agreement in Nitassinan had been signed. Picard criticized the government of Quebec for consulting with First Nations in the same way it would consult a local chamber of commerce or municipality (Desbiens 211). In Picard's view, the government ignored its obligation under the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples to obtain the free and informed consent of First Nations "prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources" (NationTalk).
19. "[L]a Cour suprême a décidé [que] tant qu'un traité n'a pas été conclu, l'honneur de la *Couronne* exige la tenue de négociations menant à un règlement équitable des revendications autochtones."
20. "Parce que nous savons, tout le monde sait, je pense, ici, qu'Hydro-Québec n'a pas l'habileté de discuter de ces questions-là."

21. “[C]’était notre chemin de pénétration sur le territoire . . . [L]a rivière Romaine, c’est là qu’on . . . utilisait les ressources pour faire des raquettes, de la nourriture pour faire de la pêche, on n’utilisait pas le territoire de n’importe quelle façon.”
22. “Première chose que je voudrais dire, on vient d’ouvrir les portes de notre maison”; “Pour le moment, je vais arrêter ici. Je pourrais vous en parler très longtemps”; “je pourrais vous dire bien des choses.”
23. “Ils auraient voulu s’étendre pour vous faire part justement de leur sentiment d’appartenance qu’ils ont sur ce territoire, mais par faute de temps peut-être, peut-être qu’on aurait eu le temps peut-être hier soir, mais vous les avez entendus, ils sont là, ils sont vivants, ils sont devant nous.”
24. “[N]otre chef actuel est à l’extérieur de la communauté. Il est rendu à Montréal. Hier, il était prêt à assister aux audiences, hier soir, il était là, il avait tout modifié son agenda pour être ici présent hier, sauf quand on a su qu’on avait déplacé la rencontre à aujourd’hui, à cet après- midi, parce qu’il a quand même deux (2) gros dossiers à traiter à l’extérieur de la communauté.”
25. “L’échéancier était en tout temps celui du gouvernement.”
26. “Qui a la possibilité au sein de la population de lire les 1500 pages de l’étude d’impact que nous devons aujourd’hui commenter et ce ne sont pas les réunions d’information qui ont pu nous aider à mieux connaître les enjeux du projet. Car chaque intervention d’Hydro-Québec donnait des réponses avant même que soient posées les questions. Quelle était donc la place à la concertation? Est-ce que vous avez pu croire que cela ne nous intéressait pas? Non, nous ne nous sommes pas sentis écoutés ni véritablement consultés. Et les aînés qui étaient présents à chaque réunion et en notre nom à tous peuvent en témoigner.”
27. “Malgré notre souhait le plus sincère de voir ce projet soumis à l’analyse la plus rigoureuse possible que cette Commission puisse offrir, il nous est difficile de ne pas avoir de doutes quant à la valeur de l’exercice dans lequel nous nous sommes engagés. En effet, lorsque nous réalisons que toute la science déployée dans cet exercice se confronte aux visées politiques du Gouvernement, nous ne pouvons que nous demander si celles-ci ne compromettent gravement la valeur. Que penser, par exemple, qu’au moment où nous décidions de participer à ce processus qui vise à déterminer objectivement l’acceptabilité de ce projet, le premier Ministre Jean Charest déclarait aux médias, lors d’une visite dans la région le 17 mars 2007 que ce projet allait se faire. . . . Pour être honnête avec vous, messieurs les Commissaires, nous avons alors eu et avons toujours le sentiment que nous, tout comme vous et la batterie d’analystes contribuant à l’étude de ce projet, sommes les acteurs d’une gigantesque pièce de théâtre où chacun joue son rôle et dont le scénario et sa fin prévisible sont écrits depuis longtemps. Nous doutons fortement que quel que soient les recommandations que vous pourrez formuler au terme de ce processus d’évaluation environnementale, rien ne viendra compromettre l’issue de ce dossier à moins que les autorités politiques décident qu’au moment où les recommandations seront soumises, le projet ne servirait plus leurs intérêts.”
28. “[L]e gouvernement de Québec a indiqué à maintes reprises son intention d’autoriser le projet dans tous les cas”; “il n’y avait pas de solutions de rechange”; “Il n’y a pas de solution de rechange raisonnable pour le projet de la Romaine.”

29. “Je suis en route pour les chantiers mythiques où c’est qu’y a l’air de faire toujours frette: Mont-Wright, Eastmain, La Romaine . . . Du pareil au même quand j’étais ti-cul . . . Je suis en route vers le mur qu’il a construit et qui nous sépare encore.”
30. “[O]n était dans le même bateau, moi pis les amis d’école, orphelins toute la gang des chantiers de l’Hydro. Conçus fly in, élevés fly out. Je me suis promis de faire mieux que lui.”
31. “Je fais de la poésie qui chauffe le cœur un peu, parce que ça fait vingt ans au-dessus qu’à chaque fois que mon père revient du Nord, il traîne un grand vent avec lui, un grand vent frette de février qui t’engourdit la gueule pis t’empêche d’ouvrir les yeux. Amancher de même, ça va mal pour se parler.”
32. “[I]l enchaine avec une histoire sur mon grand-père comme ça arrive tout le temps dans la famille quand on parle de construction.”
33. “J’aimerais, en quequ’part, me sentir chez nous. Commencer à comprendre, juste en voyant la terre de mon hublot, pourquoi les hommes autour de moi acceptent de passer leur vie icitte.”
34. “Au sol, c’est pas encore la toundra, mais c’est l’idée que je m’en serais faite. Les mêmes petites épinettes que par chez nous dans une terre plus vaseuse. C’est correct. Je veux dire, c’est ben correct; c’est pas laid ni déprimant ni majestueux tant que ça. C’est pas ordinaire non plus, ça me fait pas rien de voir ça. C’est juste . . . ça qui est ça.”
35. “La grosse crisse de montagne qui empêche d’avancer, watche-la ben: on va la faire sauter.”
36. “[C]’est une pente abrupte, encore sur le bedrock. Pour mononc’, c’est un mode de possibles, juste le début de sa réussite.”
37. “[M]ême les rivières murmurent ton nom jusqu’à nous”; “la rivière plonge dans mes rêves”; “j’ai entendu la rivière dans son désir / se fondre aux bras de la terre.”
38. “[N]ous avons tous une rivière qui / nous appelle / oui je retournerai au Nord / pour mourir dans la rivière de la mémoire / rouge.”
39. The term “blood memory” is attributed to Momaday, who first referred to it in *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and went on to expand the concept throughout much of his work. Chadwick Allen explains blood memory as Momaday’s appropriation of the US government’s attempt to control Native American identity through blood quantum, transforming this colonial classification into “an unfolding and self-reflexive discourse on the complex corporeal meanings of contemporary American Indigenous identities based in [I]ndigenous memory” (98). More recently, Cree author David Robertson also evoked blood memory to refer to “the memories and lives of [one’s] ancestors” that live within (257).
40. “Si je devais rendre hommage à l’eau sacrée / je naviguerais au Nord pour retrouver / la rivière qui a vu naître le chasseur innu.”
41. The role of Innu women as water protectors is described and affirmed by Innu Elders such as Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue, whose lifework has been to care for the water despite government and corporate incursions in Nitassinan (see Penashue).

42. “J’ai gardé l’eau de la rivière / précieusement / comme si la rivière était dans ma maison / comme si ma maison était la rivière.”
43. “oui mes filles sont la rivière / elles ont nagé avec les saumons / enfants elles ont ri avec la rivière.”
44. “Takuan niteit / Il existe mon cœur / takuan nuashkum / il existe mon ciel / takuan nishipim / il existe ma rivière / tau nikuss / il existe mon fils / tau nitanish / il existe ma fille / takuan nitipatshimun / il existe mon histoire.”
45. “Je veux vivre en Innu / aussi fort que le torrent / aussi haut que la falaise.”

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Homely Entanglements: Thinking with Caragana

This is the contra-diction of the place, the home place, the not-home place.
That it is bounded in part by a plant so invasive,
So bound to the movement of people from
Elsewhere to the home
Place of
Planting feet in soil seeds in ground to make a
Shelter
Belt of trees a hedge
Hedging Bets on this place.
On believing.
—Sydney Lancaster, “More Medicine”

My house in Edmonton is bordered on two sides by a two-metre-tall hedge of *Caragana arborescens*, or Siberian peashrub. Through the window across from where I sit at our dining room table each morning, I absent-mindedly register the daily progress of its small, delicate oval leaves unfurling through the spring, turning from bright, new green to dark and smooth, then dusted with a fine powdery mildew as an unusually wet summer wears on. A neighbour with a particular aversion to our scraggly hedge (which, likely planted not too long after the house was built in 1914, is admittedly past its prime) suggests that we pull it out, replace it with a fence. We have an affection, however, for these aging branches that surround us with a nest of green while letting the light and breeze pass through, providing shelter for pine siskins, juncos, and migrating warblers, among other creatures. A similar hedge abutted my childhood house in Winnipeg. Indeed, I cannot recall a time when my sense of home was not connected to this plant.

I am not alone. Many prairie-dwellers associate caragana with their own roots here. “My creation story is a Labrador retriever barrelling under caragana / rows after coveys of grouse and pheasants,” writes the Métis Ukrainian poet Conor Kerr (53). The word “caragana” might not have much resonance for far-flung readers, but for a local one it leaps off the page, clinging to the imagination like a burr. In her review of *Old Gods* (Kerr’s 2023 collection that includes this poem), Candace Fertile remarks: “The specificity of the word ‘caragana’ immediately transports me to my grandparents’ home in northern Alberta, creating a concrete connection to place” (“Review of *Old Gods*”). Caragana is ubiquitous across the prairies, particularly where settlers built their homes. Not surprisingly, when the eco-artist Sydney Lancaster sought organic materials for an art installation on the poet Jannie Edwards’ century-old homestead northeast of Edmonton, “[w]hat she found in abundance was caragana” (Edwards, “About”).

Despite its ubiquity (or perhaps because of it), for much of my life I hardly gave caragana a second thought. My recent turn to habitat studies—an ecocritical approach to bioregional reading pioneered by Laurie Ricou—changed this. In his book *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*, Ricou wonders whether “a regional culture” might be illuminated by tracing “a single . . . uncharismatic species” in its ecological and storied habitat—in his case, the salal that grows throughout the Pacific Northwest (2). The prairies and its inhabitants have been defined by caragana in different but equally potent ways. In this essay, I follow Ricou’s suggestion that reading around and through a particular plant can be a means of reading my home more broadly and deeply.

My focus on caragana, however, forces me to replace Ricou’s original emphasis on a “native” plant with an ellipsis that all but conceals the native-and-newcomer relationships of which caragana is a part (2). Although now a familiar feature of its rural and urban landscapes, caragana is not indigenous to the prairies, or even to this continent. Originating in Asia in Siberia and Manchuria, the shrub was brought to North America via Europe in 1752. It arrived in Alberta in the following century, accompanying settlers as they moved west, helping them to create and protect the grid of farms and private properties that characterize the landscape to this day. Caragana thus became a signifier of prairie origins and homemaking that is

inseparable from Canada's colonial history. If caragana speaks to me of the stability of home, rooting me in place through memory and ecological relationship, it also speaks of what Alan Bewell refers to as "translated natures": "of natures mobilized; of natures uprooted, deterritorialized, and transplanted to new parts of the globe" (24). Informed by many of these modes of mobility and impermanence, my own sense of home—defined, in part, by the caragana hedge—becomes similarly complicated and unstable.

As I follow this plant into literature and art, attending to both its natural and literary history and its varied ecological and artistic meanings—what I think of as literary ecologies—my sense of home and place expands, branches, and becomes more tangled alongside (and into) caragana's own story. Caragana is many things. It is an introduced species. It is a shelter. It is a resilient and adaptive visitor with deep roots in this place. Planted along colonial property lines, it also demarcates and disciplines space, protecting some inhabitants while shutting others out. Some call it a "noxious weed." Others think of it as a "monster"—not in the sense of a threat to be defeated, but in the sense that it has become inextricably intertwined with our colonial, extractivist history, and yet it also exceeds human control (see Stewart, "A Monstrous Growth"). Negotiating these varied meanings is as tricky as the colonial nature of home itself. Caragana is perhaps above all feral: beyond my backyard and the streets of Edmonton, the plant thrives and propagates throughout the river valley, where its transgressions of human boundaries make it difficult to govern, exposing our own failures and vulnerabilities—both ecological and social—in the colonial creation of home.

Ecological Entanglement

Like Ricou's *salal*, caragana is not a particularly striking plant. Its original purpose in North America was primarily utilitarian: across the prairies, the Government of Canada distributed caragana seedlings to provide homesteaders with windbreaks and chicken feed. In decorative gardens, caragana often forms a backdrop for more visually impressive trees and flowers. Looking at it through our dining-room window, my attention doesn't linger long on our hedge before my eyes

wander beyond it to the blue spruce and ponderosa pines that punctuate the sky and the clouds passing overhead. What does it mean to “listen” to—or “for”—a ubiquitous but overlooked plant, as Ricou invites us to do?

Not unlike the names of this place, which we humans define variously as amiskwaciwâskahikan, Beaver Hills House, Edmonton, Treaty 6 Territory, or District 9 and 10 of the Métis Nation of Alberta, caragana is part of a language that has redefined the land. It is one of many introduced plants that have embedded new meanings into the soil: wheat, flax, and canola growing in orderly rows on perfectly square fields, for instance, render the prairie immediately legible as farmland, overwriting original grasslands as surely as “Edmonton” overwrote Indigenous names. In a similar way, caragana rings farmhouses and gardens in the countryside and follows the property lines of houses and yards in the city, inscribing vegetal language of colonial habitation into the land itself.

While this language is significant (and I will return to it in due course), it is also important to attend to the meanings that exceed human manipulation—“*to listen to what the world outside of (human) language systems might be saying*,” as Ricou puts it (“Disturbance” 163)—that is, to listen for the plants themselves. This is no easy task: as Pablo Neruda once wrote, the “law” of the plant kingdom is “silence” (qtd. in Popova). Hailing from closer to home, with roots among the Barren Lands Cree, the poet Randy Lundy avers that this quiet kingdom nonetheless possesses a subtle but unceasing articulateness: “The plants,” he writes, “are dreaming / tongues that speak all day, / every hour and every minute” (60). How might I decipher or translate the “dreaming tongues” of caragana? Of what do they “speak” in the hushed light of morning, or under a cold midnight moon, “all day, every hour, and every minute”? Although people have told stories about caragana, caragana also has its own stories to tell that are linked to yet also distinct from the human history in which it is entangled.

In his book *Tree*, Matthew Battles suggests that “[p]lants tell stories through their habits of growth, their manner of flourishing and dying back, their blossoming and seed-dispersal” (7). Many animals, including humans, have become adept interpreters of these stories. From the birds, squirrels, and insects who feed on and take shelter in their branches and leaves to the gardeners, farmers, and botanists who

cultivate and study them, the creatures who depend upon the planet's prolific vegetation listen carefully to plants, translating their stories into their own languages and incorporating them into their experiences in myriad ways.

Before I ever thought about its connections to colonial history, the caragana growing around my childhood home prompted early stirrings of ecological knowledge. The life of our hedge punctuated the seasons: the pale green leaf buds, followed by yellow flowers that remind me to this day of tiny bananas, were a welcome sign of spring. I can still conjure my disappointment and mild disgust when, as a child, I tried to sip nectar from one of these edible flowers and found a small green worm on my tongue. I paid the closest attention to the caragana hedge in the fall, diligently watching for the precise moment when the seed pods were brown and hardened to the point when a bit of pressure, deftly applied by thumb and forefinger, would cause them to pop, sending the seeds flying with a force I could never quite believe. A day later, you might catch the amber pods popping on their own, like fireworks. Thereafter, they hung brittle and twisted, spent remnants of the plant's exuberant feat of propagation.

I had no special language to describe this. Botanists, however, have forged a precise vocabulary of caragana flourishing:

The bark is smooth with prominent lenticels, green to grayish-brown in color, and somewhat shiny. Leaves are alternate or fascicled [clustered], evenly pinnate [arranged on either side of the stem], petiolate [stemmed], stipules spiny, and 1 1/2 to 3 inches long. Leaves are composed of 8 to 12 leaflets that are bright green in color, obovate to ellipticoblong shaped, 1/2 to 1 inch long, rounded at the apex, mucronate [pointed] pubescent [downy] when young, and glabrescent [hairless] as the tree matures. ("Caragana")

No botanist myself, I interpret this description with the help of Wikipedia's glossary of botanical terms ("Glossary"). A lover of poetry might revel in the sonic textures of the liquid and plosive consonants that join with soft vowels in multisyllabic words such as "petiolate," "ellipticoblong," and "glabrescent"—words that feel, on my tongue and

in my ear, as lacy and intricate as the caragana's proliferation of delicate branches and small, paper-thin, clustered leaves. Robin Wall Kimmerer cautions that the language of botany "should not . . . be mistaken for the language of plants," and yet, as such passages show (and as she also reminds us), it is through such vocabularies that "science polishes the gift of seeing" (48).

This botanical description of caragana draws my attention deeper into the thicket of branches where lenticels (lens-shaped pores in the bark) are facilitating the exchange of gases and moisture from the air to the caragana and back again. Could this exchange be another form of communication, of "listening" that occurs between the plant and its environment, like the communication between the sunlight that filters through blue spruce and mountain ash and the chlorophyll that responds in the caragana's delicate, petiolate leaflets? As I walk past the hedge, I breathe in the oxygen released through this process, and in return the caragana absorbs carbon from the atmosphere, including from my own breath. In this moment, we become intimately connected.

Caragana's ecological entanglements are many. Under hospitable conditions, the shrub can grow up to six metres tall and spread as wide as five and a half metres. It propagates easily via those small brown seeds that explode from narrow oblong pods. Its roots fix nitrogen in soil. Its edible (though not, I would say, especially delectable) peas and flowers have fed humans, their chickens, and other foraging animals. Its bright-yellow flowers attract pollinators like bees and, in some places, hummingbirds. We have seen migrating warblers, along with many other birds, seeking rest and protection in its foliage. Lichen clings to its branches. One cluster of stems at the end of our hedge shelters a pair of shaggy parasol mushrooms. Attending to caragana enlarges my sense of home: it is more than a shelter for my modest family of four; it includes a more-than-human community whose activities and processes are always occurring alongside or along with our own.

Home is made up of such entanglements, multiplied over countless species. Some of these species are known to us as we move through our daily lives; others remain unacknowledged, but they are there, affecting—and affected by—us in myriad ways. According to local nêhiyaw teachings about the wisdom and practice of wâhkôhtowin, these other species are our relatives. Honouring Treaty relationships

and responsibilities entails respecting them as such (see Donald, “We Need” 58–59). Across the prairies, nêhiyawak have protocols, ceremonies, and stories that nurture relationships with these nonhuman relatives. For many newcomers and descendants of settlers, developing a sense of ecological kinship and responsibility in our adopted home necessitates new ways of seeing and being.

Making Believe

The installation that Sydney Lancaster created with the caragana shelterbelt surrounding her friends’ homestead reminds us that renewed aesthetic and ethical attention to the more-than-human world can be cultivated not only by ceremony, but also by art. Inviting people into the spaces caragana occupies, the installation at once draws attention to and transforms human relationships with this plant.¹ Using the overgrown hedge as her primary medium, the artist wove living branches together to form a series of meandering tunnels and rooms. From deadfall, she also constructed nests, wayfinding markers, and apertures throughout the site. With the work continually shaped by and adapting to the caragana’s properties and ways of growing, Lancaster’s artistic manipulations of the plant embody a form of collaboration that evokes a hundred years of human interactions with this plant on the prairies, while also creating new experiences and perspectives of this relationship. Titled *Make=Believe*, the installation is reminiscent of childhood fort-building: an exploratory, playful practice that enacts a physical intimacy with nature as building material and hiding place. The tunnels and rooms expand the forms of shelter that the caragana creates, inviting childlike exploration and dwelling, while the apertures offer new views of the surrounding world. What, Lancaster prompts us to ask, does caragana invite us to see differently? What beliefs does it affirm, and what does it question?

One of the processes the apertures invite us to contemplate is ecological perception, which shifted as Lancaster worked so closely with the shrub. One day during construction, she recalls, she suddenly became aware of a snowshoe hare stretched out in a shady spot under the branches. They watched her work for nearly an hour. Her curiosity

ignited, she set up a motion-sensor camera and captured nocturnal images of other animals, including more hares, a weasel, and a deer. A sound recording made one summer day is a sweet cacophony of birdsong (“X-Camera” 00:16:19–00:20:00). These sounds, along with Lancaster’s ghostly images of animals caught moving through the shadows, attests to the ways in which caragana exceeds its human meanings, nurturing multispecies intimacies, however limited, in its new home.

While the caragana’s ecological story in this place might appear simple, there are many ways of looking at—and, as Lancaster’s installation, with its many apertures, intimates, through—this species. Like the branches that create the caragana’s form, the stories that can be told about this plant and how it has rooted itself and people to patches of ground are multiple and entangled. The relationship between these ecological stories and human practices of making-believe—particularly in the prairie contexts in which caragana now thrives—is similarly multifaceted. Together, they make a messy nest in which I have lodged my senses of place and home.

Caragana has supported humans for millennia. In its native habitats, which include forest edges, riverbanks, and sunny slopes across Russia and China, the plant has long been well known. The biologists Katelyn B. Shortt and Steven M. Vamosi report “a long history of using *Caragana* species to treat ailments such as headaches, asthma, cough, nosebleeds and strain-induced fatigue in East Asian folk medicine” (4). In Canada, the plant was not just transplanted but also “translated,” in Bewell’s sense of the word: drawn into new relationships with humans, it was given new environmental, social, and imaginative work to do.

Woven through diverse stories of human inhabiting, caragana takes on meaning as a companion species² that has held not just soil, but also people, to a particular patch of ground. Resistant to drought and cold, able to grow in disturbed and nutrient-depleted soil, caragana supported settlers who were struggling to survive in this place by stabilizing the soil, providing windbreak, and feeding their livestock. Its branchy, twiggy, resilient natural characteristics, along with its fast growth, made it an ideal plant to protect farm gardens and homes. Because of these features, it became one of several species of shrubs and trees grown at experimental farms and distributed across the

prairies in the early twentieth century as part of the Dominion Government's Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration. This soil-conservation program sought to rescue prairie agriculture from a decade of disastrous failures, when misguided colonial farming techniques depleted the soil, and a period of prolonged drought turned the prairies into a dustbowl. Thriving where many other plants would not, caragana held soil and snow in place while its branches provided a dense, shady thicket, conserving moisture and shielding houses and gardens from winds that could gather for miles across the flat and treeless expanses of land.

Promoting the successes of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, Evelyn Spice's 1942 film, *Windbreaks on the Prairies*, celebrates caragana as a co-creator of a new agricultural ecology that replaced ancient grasslands that had been the ancestral homelands of Indigenous nations such as Nèhiyaw, Siksika, Piikani, Kainai, Dakota, Stoney Nakoda, Saulteaux, Assiniboine, and Tsuut'ina, into a landscape defined by introduced monoculture crops, shrubs, trees, and settler homesteads. This transformation was aesthetic as well as utilitarian. Along with other plants that would turn the "treeless prairie" into a patchwork of orderly and sheltered farms, caragana was linked to an aesthetic of home that not only sought to recuperate the soil from the devastating agricultural practices of early settlers (who exhausted it by overtilling, overgrazing, and clearing the land of its native vegetation and wildlife), but also imagined a "future when man's will, and the bounty of nature, will make the prairies beautiful" (00:07:55; 00:16:24–32).

Premised on a perception of the prairies as a space defined by absence—by a lack of trees, farms, gardens, and towns—this future vision disregarded the beauty and abundance of life that the native grasslands had long supported before they were ploughed and divided into private property by settlers. Erasing a prairie ecology that for millennia had sustained and been sustained by as many as sixty million bison along with powerful Indigenous nations, *Windbreaks* represents this landscape as a blank slate upon which beauty was created by settlers who "saw in trees"—rather than in windswept grasses and wildflowers—"something which would give permanence to their belief in the Canadian West" (00:07:31–42). Rooting newcomers to the land, trees represented "the hope of the earth, like

healthy children to a home” that, protected by an “outer row of caragana,” promised to “change the bleak face of the prairies” and bring “beauty and permanence to farm homes” (00:15:57; 00:16:02; 00:10:20–22; 00:14:02–56). The resonant connection between making and believing that Lancaster creates with her installation reverberates in a more sinister way here: to “make” home in this way was indeed to “believe” in a particular ideal of the “Canadian West” that all but obliterated the prairie’s much longer ecological and cultural history.

Caragana’s proliferation across prairie farms and urban landscapes alike tracks settler histories of making believe. Along the upper banks of Edmonton’s North Saskatchewan River valley, shrubs planted to prevent erosion continue to protect some of the city’s most picturesque roads, viewpoints, and choice homes. Deep in the ravines, caragana is a subtle reminder that before these spaces were incorporated into North America’s longest urban park and left to return to some semblance of so-called wild nature, they were inhabited by humans. In Mill Creek Ravine, for instance, caragana is one of the few remaining signs of early-twentieth-century shanties from the ravine’s industrial past. In his recent study of this area, archaeologist Haeden Stewart sought out these shrubs, often planted alongside lilac, amid native vegetation such as saskatoon and wolf willow. Old hedges, some now grown as tall as trees, alerted him that a dig might reveal chicken bones, nails, and bits of china and crockery buried deep in the earth nearby: remnants of lives that were, for a time, rooted in the ravine—of shelters constructed, meals shared (Stewart, *In the Shadow* 84–85). These archaeological sites have been covered up again, but the caragana remains, forming, for those who can read beyond the ravine’s renovated park-like so-called wilderness, a living map of former shantytown life in the river valley.

The plant continues to shelter unhoused people who camp in the ravines (whose numbers can rise above four thousand, depending on the season, and who are here, as elsewhere in Canada, disproportionately Indigenous). As I write this during a hard winter of 2023 to 2024, the city’s controversial removal of encampments in Edmonton’s downtown core and parts of the river valley has forced those without housing to move along, either to crowded temporary shelters or to more secluded enclaves where they might escape notice for a while.³ In the woods adjacent to our neighbourhood, caragana’s

rooms and passageways enclose tents and piles of accumulated belongings. Offering meagre shelter in the coldest months of the year, the plant's spindly branches bear quiet witness to the dysfunctions of an urban system built on yet another form of make-believe in which capitalist ideas about public and private property determine who belongs and does not belong where.

The human will to survive under such adverse conditions mirrors caragana's own striking tenacity. "[K]nown for its tolerance of many environmental conditions including droughts, temperatures to -38°C , infertile soils, sunny sites, high winds, alkaline soils and saline conditions" (Shortt and Vamosi 3), caragana finds a home where many other plants struggle to survive. Writers have recognized and accentuated this quality. In Sinclair Ross' 1941 dust bowl novel *As for Me and My House*, "a stunted, bedraggled little caragana" flanks each side of the Bentleys' front stoop, where little else will grow (16). There, it catches something of the character of the settler community that is also struggling to take root in a drought- and Depression-ridden Saskatchewan whose barrenness is a product of those early-twentieth-century settler farming practices. The marriage that the novel describes is equally stunted, yet persists, however meagre and parched, despite all odds. Formally, too, Ross' narrative echoes the plant's persistence. Describing the hold that the narrator, Mrs. Bentley, has on her, the poet Lorna Crozier invokes this tough, resilient plant: Mrs. Bentley's voice has become "as hard to dispel from my imagination as a caragana rooted in soil," she writes (acknowledgements). As much as Crozier's simile is a statement about the power of Ross' writing, it also firmly emplaces readers in a colonial prairie landscape that caragana helped to build alongside settlers, whose determination the plant has come to symbolize.

The rootedness of caragana in a text like *As for Me and My House*, however, is the contradictory rootedness of settlers who perceive the land as, at best, indifferent; at worst, hostile. In a recent essay juxtaposing Ross' bleak depictions of Horizon and its surrounding farms with Maria Campbell's portrayal of the prairie as a place of life-giving abundance for the Métis, Naava Smolash emphasizes the "disconnect from the land" that keeps settler characters from being at home on a prairie that they exploit rather than respect (35). The

determination that the caragana symbolizes is, then, at odds with a reciprocal relationship to the prairie as home.

Hedging

While I've spent much of my life with caragana, it took a poem to make me notice its entanglement in legacies of colonialism. Caragana is not a plant one often comes across in poetry, but it features prominently in Alice Major's "What Is Buried Under the Walls," a poem composed in Edmonton as part of the sequence "Contemplating the City" in her collection *The Occupied World* (2006). Like the shrub (and like my own settler ancestors), Major hails from elsewhere—not Asia, but Scotland, from where she immigrated to Edmonton as a child. *The Occupied World* grapples with the complex history of her adopted home. In "What Is Buried Under the Walls," a caragana hedge gives homely form to the denial of relationships that are part of the ongoing colonial violence of this place. "*A town's foundations always bear / the burden of guilt*," read the ominous opening lines. This "burden" becomes this poem's primary affect:

Three hours past midnight
and a woman's voice arraigns the street.
Anger ripped from her throat.

"You're on Indian land, man.
You're all on fucking Indian land, man.
This is fucking Indian land."

The quiet residential street shudders,
turns its face aside into leaves and lilac bushes,
withdraws behind the carragana [*sic*] hedges. (19)

In this urban neighbourhood disturbed by the possibility of confronting its own complicity in the theft and loss of Indigenous lands, caragana shelters by creating a space of withdrawal, of turning "aside" into the vegetation and away from the woman and her

damning words that the inhabitants of this “quiet residential street” cannot face.

Major implicates caragana in the creation of a settler landscape of relationship denial. Characterized as “[a] tough colonial, / hunkering down through the hard winters, / planted in palisades against the native winds” (19), her hedge recalls not only the homesteading history in which caragana was an important shelterbelt, but also the palisaded architecture of the fur trade fort. Protecting the neighbourhood residents from “native winds,” the “palisades” are a potent metaphor that invokes the material and social conditions of settler colonialism. As Dwayne Donald has underscored, the fort is more than an architectural artifact of the fur trade and early colonial history; it persists as a mentality that separates settlers from Indigenous peoples. “The fort,” he writes, “is a mythic symbol in Canada . . . that recapitulates the perceived civilizational frontier—a kind of cultural ditch—separating Aboriginal from Canadian” (“Forts” 93). As both a symbol and a structure, Donald underlines, the fort embodies “[t]he intention” at the heart of colonialism, which “is to deny relationality” (91). Donald’s words echo those of Stó:lō author Lee Maracle, who writes: “The existence of the fort, the laws of this fort, the humanity of it are rarely questioned. Canadians,” she implores, “must get out of the fort and imagine something beyond the colonial condition” (206).

Maracle first published these words in 1992, but Major dramatizes an ongoing condition of relationship denial in the inhabitants’ refusal to heed the woman’s words:

The woman’s voice dies quickly
away. Not loud enough to overmaster
the past. Behind unreflecting windows,
we lie awake, uneasy, hedging.
Trying to disown.
Not prepared to give it back. (19)

With the woman decrying the colonial theft of “Indian” land on one side of the fortress of caragana, and on the other, the settler *we* “hedging,” like the plants we have cultivated to protect ourselves and

our property, there seems to be little hope of bridging the two communities without ripping out the plant and starting over.

As a verb, *hedge* has several meanings that convey the protective and isolating features of the colonial fort mentality. It means “[t]o surround with a hedge or fence as a boundary, or for purposes of defence” (“Hedge, V”). As such, *to hedge* denotes both “to shut or keep out, to exclude,” and also “[t]o hem *in*, so as to prevent escape or free movement, to confine, restrict.” In other words, those who hedge are themselves constrained—even imprisoned—by their fear and desire to keep others out. There is something duplicitous, moreover, in how hedging can “secure oneself against [financial] loss”: to hedge can mean “[t]o go aside from the straight way; to shift, shuffle, dodge . . . to avoid committing oneself irrevocably; to leave open a way of retreat or escape.” What would it mean to listen to this plant without hedging?

Like many of the colonial structures I live in and benefit from, caragana has been a ubiquitous but largely unacknowledged part of my everyday life. To listen without hedging is to commit instead of retreat, to sit with the discomfort of unsettling my secure and comfortable sense of place—in effect, to let go of a sense of home that has been part of my own caragana-hedging ways since I was a child. Doing so doesn’t mean that I love my home any less—only that this love is more complicated, more sad in the recognition that it has been forged not just by a desire for the comfort and rootedness of shelter, but by the defensive and divisive mythology of the frontier and of “Eurocentric versions of progress and development” (Donald, “Forts” 99). To listen without hedging is, then, to consider the ways in which my love for my home is implicated in colonial white supremacy: not the kind that marches in terrifying cloaked hordes, or that actively seeks to oppress or devalue or ignore, but the kind that looks as innocuous as a caragana shrub enclosing us in a comforting nest, keeping out the voices of the dispossessed.

Ecologies of Occupation

In a piercing critique of romanticized ideas of home (ideas to which, I realize, I am all too susceptible), Anna Tsing points out that even “love” can become “deeply entangled” with “[d]omination [and]

domestication" (141). "*Home*," she writes, "is where dependencies within and among species reach their most stifling. For all its hyped pleasure, perhaps this is not the best idea for multispecies life on earth" (141). Tsing's critique reminds me of the complicated love that many of us nurture for translated natures (often companion species such as house cats, but less beloved species as well, such as Kentucky bluegrass), whose North American presence similarly ties ideas of home to the colonial suppression of multispecies life.⁴

The spread of caragana across the West is tied to the widespread destruction of Indigenous ecologies and economies. In its opening lines, the narrator in Spice's *Windbreaks on the Prairies* brazenly romanticizes the transformation of the land that could only occur "[w]hen the white man drove the Indians from the great plains" (00:01:14–00:01:18). The caragana in Mill Creek Ravine, Stewart reminds us, is a localized marker of this widespread history of dispossession; this dispossession affected the Papaschase Cree, who inhabited the ravine before a Treaty Adhesion relocated them to Enoch, west of Edmonton (Stewart, "Monstrous" 206). "The trouble" with forts, Donald writes, is that they have come to signify "mythologized versions of the Canadian West that effectively cover over the many layers of historical interactions with Aboriginal peoples that brought the place into being, in the first place" (96). To listen to caragana without hedging is to recognize these dispossessions and fantasies of white supremacy, which the 1943 film celebrates, as erasures of complex relationships—between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and between Indigenous people and the land—that need to be acknowledged and restored.

Caragana is a quiet extension of these colonial dynamics. As Bewell underscores, "the struggle between European settlers and [I]ndigenous peoples" in North America "came to be powerfully registered in colonial environments and landscapes in the struggle between indigenous plants and animals and introduced or invasive biota" (327). Caragana "has spread extensively in North America since its introduction in 1752, and now occupies 21 states in the United States of America, and nine provinces and territories in Canada" (Shortt and Vamosi 5). A study of "[o]rnamantal plantings of caragana" in Elk Island National Park, about forty-five kilometres east of Edmonton, tells a dramatic story of consequent ecological change and biodiversity

loss (Henderson and Chapman 262). The study reveals that, “[f]rom an original population of ~50 plants, caragana invaded the adjacent forest and increased in abundance to ~60,000 plants after 75 years” (263). Like other “invasives,” caragana reduces biodiversity by outcompeting native species. In the aspen forest of Elk Island, a complexly layered understory of indigenous beaked hazel, saskatoon, pincherry, prickly rose, and snowberry gradually gave way to an increasingly homogeneous spread of caragana (262). Altered landscapes such as this one have a ripple effect on all inhabitants of the prairie. As Trevor Herriot laments in several books about endangered native grassland ecosystems, birds and animals were dispossessed by the loss and fragmentation of habitats that had also supported, and been supported by, Indigenous economies (see especially *Towards a Prairie Atonement* and *Grass, Sky, Song*). For all its sheltering, wherever caragana grows, multispecies life cannot thrive as it once did.

The arraiging cry of the woman in Major’s poem, “This is Indian land,” can be read through this environmental history. As Bewell underlines, to be displaced by settlers

was to lose a world, to see one’s nature made obsolescent, or reduced to an isolated patch reserved on the margins of the new natures that were coming into being. It was also to be forced to inhabit another nature, increasingly composed of “alien” plants and animals, which had never before been part of one’s culture or world, but which now tenaciously claimed their ground. (33)

Read in the context of the caragana behind which the newcomers “hedge,” the woman’s cry is seared with the losses this plant all but signifies: a lament for the erasure of entire ecosystems, ecological relationships, and ways of being in a multispecies world now occupied by the streets, houses, and hedges of those who fail to acknowledge their own complicity in the destruction of myriad lives and lifeways. What is being condemned is not only the appropriation of land, but also the transformation of ecologies and habitats.

Throughout much of North America, hedges like ours that run either along or parallel to property lines, fences, roads, sidewalks, and other “lines of occupation” inscribe the Earth with a vegetal language

of possession (Ingold 85). Major is not the only writer to draw attention to the social divides that this language reinforces. In David Carpenter's short story "Luce," in the collection *Welcome to Canada* (2009), caragana is an expression of class divisions in early-twentieth-century Edmonton society. In this story, the Bothwells, a wealthy English couple whose social status has "a particular hold" on the narrator's less affluent family, are defined by their dwelling: "a gloomy stone colossus walled in by an enormous caragana hedge" signifies the family's wealth (175), commanding social capital and "imperial convictions" (176). For Carpenter, as for Major, caragana is an integral element of—indeed, helps to establish and maintain—an unequal social world defined by the imposing "wall" into which the shrub is cultivated. The logic of the fort, it seems, operates across class lines as well as racial and colonial ones, and it manifests in a cultivated landscape that is foundational to, rather than a neutral backdrop for, the uneven spatial and social relations of the city.

Passage

A powerful fiction—another form of make-believe—underpins the colonial order of walls and forts that caragana was introduced to help establish: the "myth" upon which colonialism depends, writes Donald, "teaches us in symbolic syntax that the walls of the fort are impermeable" ("Forts" 100). Those who are engaged in the work of decolonization must "contest the denial of relationality by asserting that perceived civilizational frontiers are actually permeable and that perspectives on history, memory, and experience are connected and interreferential" (102). While caragana has been cultivated in "palisades" and "walls" along lines of colonial occupation, it too is permeable. Unlike a wall, a hedge is a living being whose branches allow some things through that some would prefer to keep out. In *The Words of My Roaring*, Robert Kroetsch draws attention to this feature of all prairie shelterbelts: "there wasn't a windbreak ever planted that could really stop the wind," the narrator recalls. "It got to the house. I always felt it was trying to say something, and I wasn't understanding. Something very sad" (47). To listen to caragana, then, is not only to listen to its (and our) hedging ways, but also to listen for what the

wind carries through the spaces between its branches. Offering only partial protection, caragana tells us something about the tension of being at once nested and exposed, isolated but connected—in ways we cannot always control, no matter how hard we may try—to the world. It teaches us about how we might reconceptualize our interconnected histories and entangled relationships in this shared space.

With caragana as my guide, I wonder, can I learn new ways of understanding home, not as a palisade, but as a penetrable shelter—a passage—more like my own living, breathing, permeable skin? It strikes me that caragana's permeability is one of the things I like about it. When my neighbour walks her dog through the lane past my house, she peers through the tangle of branches, finding narrow windows just below the thickest leaf-growth: "Hellooo!" she cries, interrupting a dig in the garden or a backyard badminton game with my kids. We invite her in, chat about our days and about the joys and challenges of life. Whenever she implores us to replace our patchy hedge with a fence, she asks us to do away with the very thing that lets her in, along with birds and insects and breezes. For these, we are willing to sacrifice more robust protection, even if to do so, as Kroetsch suggests, is to become more exposed, vulnerable to the sadness of raging winds. We are all connected inhabitants of this shared land.

Another colonial myth that caragana dispels is the supposed distinction—equally permeable, it turns out—between wild and domesticated. The plant's spread from the shelterbelts, gardens, and other lines of occupation along which it was originally planted to the unregulated fringes of farmlands and urban neighbourhoods punctures colonial fantasies of containment that have long underpinned my sense of home. "Domestication," writes Tsing,

tends to be imagined as a hard line: You are either in the human fold or you are out in the wild. Because this dichotomisation stems from an ideological commitment to human mastery, it supports the most outrageous fantasies of domestic control, on the one hand, and wild species self-making, on the other. ("Unruly Edges")

Descriptions of caragana as "unkempt and overgrown" (Stewart, "Monstrous" 207), or as having "escaped from cultivation" (Alec

McLay et al., qtd. in Stewart, "Monstrous" 198), figure the plant as an independent agent in breach of accepted rules of domestic conduct. Caragana offends when it behaves like a self-governing "wild" plant (Stewart, "Monstrous" 212), rather than remaining within the bounds of domesticity, as its settler cultivators originally intended. Its unmanageable proliferation has led to a widespread "dislike of caragana by local residents" in Edmonton that "is mirrored by a prairie-wide antipathy to a plant that has been called a 'curse of the prairies'" (197).

Domestic, wild, unkempt, overgrown, escape, curse: these are words that hedge, each one an echo of my husband's yearly attempt to clip the branches into an even shape that conforms to our particular use of the plant. Like *invasive*, such words obscure caragana's entanglement in human culture and history. For Stewart, the word *monster* better captures this messy set of relations:

Behind the thriving of every invasive species, he writes, there is a dense connection of human and more-than-human histories, relations, and bodies. These are the monsters, the symbiotic multispecies entanglements that simultaneously destroy and thrive in anthropogenic landscapes. (199)

"Feral" offers another alternative to the tidy categories that accompanied colonial natures in their migrations to North America. As much as caragana has come to signify the orderly landscapes of colonialism, like many introduced plants and animals, its feral vitality draws attention to the anarchic and unpredictable nature of the life forces and relationships colonialism has introduced, and the insufficiency of binary concepts such as "domestic" and "wild" in defining them.⁵

Is colonialism itself feral too, I wonder, spreading beyond its intended aims and bounds? Should I decolonize my backyard by tearing up these plants and replacing them with saskatoons? My stepdad's family does this work around their cabin on the Precambrian Shield where a long-ago planting of caragana spread through the forest understory. Native species return as the caragana is cut back, but this requires yearly labour. Like us, the caragana does not relinquish

its terrain easily, but it can, it seems, be cultivated into different relation to its fellow plants. Anishinaabe teachings from a little farther east encourage me to think about how this labour might be performed with respect for the plant's own personhood. As Nicholas J. Reo and Laura A. Ogden underscore, "[n]ot only are plants and animals people, but they are kin" (1447). When introduced species take over, moreover, "culpability lies in 'invasive' ideologies rather than the fault of specific animals or plants" (1447): "the imposition of Euro-American property ownership regimes, 'command and control' forms of environmental management, and a worldview predicated on the separation of people from nature" are the problems we need to address (1449). Caragana's prairie literary ecology makes it easier to understand the plant, not as an object to be controlled, but as a subject whose life stories are intimately intertwined with my own.

Kin

In his poem "Wear Your Skin Lightly," Randy Lundy points to an interconnected world of living creatures, including caragana, in which a beginning—albeit sad, hungry, melancholic even—of what might be called restorative kinship is glimpsed in a quiet retreat from words. The poem opens in the darkness of a "Fox den, dug beneath the fieldstone foundation of the ramshackle barn. / Darkness down among the buffaloberry and caragana roots. / Darkness, hunger, and five pairs of golden eyes" (62). The darkness surrounding the foxes' golden but hungry eyes conjures the scarcity and fragility of shelter and food for native animals in a landscape that the caragana, the barn, and "the lawn" all mark as part of a place reshaped by settlers (62). But, like the "ramshackle barn," the caragana recedes amid a throng of non-human beings, both living and dead, including "Mineralized tree stumps" that "glint in sunlight, stone / dinosaur eggs in the crumble of cliffs" (62). The "you" that the poet addresses also recedes into quiet, as if suffering from the "Aphasia" that, along with "shadow . . . and cricket song creep[s] across the lawn": "Your mouth and mind," we read, are "empty of words" (62). Meanwhile, the place itself is "tumbling" and sonorous with more-than-human life: "Meadowlarks in the stubble field, redpolls on bare branches in the bush. / Dulcimer river of air in

the sway of the spruce windbreak. . . . Distant Gregorian / chant of mourning doves before they sleep" (62). The silence of the "you" makes it easier to hear them. In this landscape, caragana intermingles with a healing abundance of life: "At dusk the swallows will return, too," the poet reassures: "Watching flight, / you find the unbearable becomes slightly more slight" (62). What is it, exactly, that cannot be borne, here?

The answer(s) must be imagined, but the stratigraphic landscape of Lundy's poem helps me to see from another angle how the subjugation of caragana has disrupted kinship with the native species that have been displaced. It also suggests a restorative process that, in words that mimic the repetitive rhythm of swallows' flight, makes "the unbearable slightly more slight." Whatever the source of the pain, relief comes with the decentring of the human. Of the caragana too, perhaps. Still present on the land, but no longer dominant. Made—by the words of the poem, at least—to step back, to be a quieter presence.

Artists often invite us to experience a familiar place differently, to imagine the roots of caragana from the golden eyes of a hungry fox, or its branches as the palisades of a colonial fort. I have never visited Lancaster's installation, which is on private property, but I imagine the apertures she has built from caragana's branches prompting many of the questions I have asked here, and more besides. As Lancaster has written, "I foresee my engagement with this project lasting many years" (*Make=Believe*). Similarly, habitat studies have no firm end: they continue to grow, their "conclusions" multiple and changing. Reimagined through caragana and its ecological, literary, and historical entanglements, my sense of home becomes less stable and secure, more provisional and complexly layered, more fraught with contradictions, its fantasies and ambiguities exposed. "This is the contra-diction of the place, the home place, the not-home place," writes Lancaster ("More"). The splitting of "contra-diction" into a compound that reads *against diction* suggests the way in which, ultimately—in a study underpinned by literature and language—the plant survives outside the constraints of our words. I recall how, in *Tree*, Battles imagines that plants might be released from the controlling grasp of language and its pervasive and damaging dichotomies: "[I]t is the trees—uncanny, possessed of depths of mystery, and feral in ways beyond our ken—which take priority over

any terminology,” he writes (6). And, indeed, framing all this thinking, the caragana wordlessly remains, a living, respirating, cohabiting being sharing a space I call my own but that isn’t mine at all.

Notes

1. For a glimpse of *Make=Believe*, visit Lancaster’s website: sydneylancaster.ca/portfolio/make-believe.
2. My use of this term follows Donna Haraway’s theory of companion species as beings who “coconstitute one another in innumerable ways” (qtd. in Calarco 132).
3. See cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-took-down-9-500-homeless-camps-last-year-40-more-than-in-2023-1.7427662.
4. Brought into North America to protect stored grains from mice and rats, cats quickly became adored pets even as they denuded the landscape of its biodiversity, killing not just native rodents but other small creatures, including reptiles, amphibians, and birds by the billions (see Overstreet, “Barn Cat”).
5. For a sustained discussion of feral plants in North America, see Battles 3–32.

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Black Out

the plunder that preceded us,
the eyelets, fishhooks of the dead
try to snag our glances;
so
much
blood swamps here that those
who perceive it drown instantly.
—Tolu Oloruntoba, “When Migrants Gather to Enjoy”

here we are straddling the yet
because
after this
we can’t reclaim innocence
after this
there won’t be comfort in not knowing
—Otoniya J. Okot Bitek, “*pi day 1*”

I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and I am writing this essay in Kingston, Canada. The names of these cities—the vain proclamation of their colonial legacy—sound a resonance, echo a hostile symmetry. The Kingston of my birth was originally inhabited by the Taíno, an Arawak people who once lived on the islands of the Caribbean archipelago. These were the first peoples to be called Indians by Columbus—the people whose gold earrings aroused his greed, sparking the violent conquest for land and resources that continues to shape the Americas today (Zinn 3). Today, I write on Dish with One Spoon territory, the land of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabeg, and Huron-Wendat, once called Ka’torohkwi by the Wendat, meaning “place where the mud is” (Murray).¹ That land was appropriated by the French to facilitate the fur trade in the area. There they built Fort Frontenac, a symbol of French power before the British reappropriated it after the Seven Years’ War, and it became a symbol of British power

for some time afterwards. Even beyond the colonial changing of hands, the lands we settlers now inhabit are layered with histories and stories, each sheet underneath colouring those above. The textures speak of contradictions in the flesh. If we are taught only to graze the contrived patriotism of the surface, how can we learn to articulate deeper contradictions of citizen, nation, and belonging?

In her poem “Lake Ontario Park,” the poet laureate of Kingston, Sadiqa de Meijer, quotes General Jeffery Amherst—another beneficiary of the colonial naming practice. From one of the General’s letters, de Meijer’s epigraph reads: “*You will Do well to try to Inoculate the Indians by means of Blanketts, as well as to try Every other method that can serve to Extirpate this Execrable Race*” (66). Immediately, de Meijer exposes the subcutaneous racism of Canada, bringing into view its historical interest in the extermination of Indigenous peoples and cultures. The horror of this ad hoc extermination plan is juxtaposed against a beautiful day. As de Meijer spends the day with her mother and daughter in the serenity of a playground, a funerary air pervades: “swings toll like clock tower bells” (1). Aware of the day’s fragility, the violences that prefigure it, the possibilities that threaten it still, she calls it “robin’s eggshell fine” (4). In a spirit of historical contemplation, frictive against the present, de Meijer considers the “Shining archipelago” of her mother’s immunizations, the “three shallow scars” (5–6). She is struck by the privilege of “the quiet theatre of our lives,” where “Immune is a sung word” (7–8). This privilege, this possibility that allows health and longevity, is always “skirting sorrow” (8). And for the sake of those denied that privilege, for the sake of those deliberately killed by poxes to which we are now impervious, this moment with her daughter becomes suffused with sorrow. “Kneeling at no registry of toddlers with amorphous voices,” play becomes entangled with mourning over the unacknowledged dead (9). De Meijer memorializes and marks the absences of the deceased children: “Night sweats without monument” (10). She levies a final ironic critique of General Amherst: “The lake has the sea on its breath. / One man has an island” (11–12). Travelling to Ka’tohrokwi to consolidate empire during the Seven Years’ War, General Amherst carried the history of Britain’s naval conquests to rest here: the sea haunts Lake Ontario Park. Between Canada and the United States, there are at least nine communities that immortalize him, honouring his conquest of

New France. Ten kilometres from the lake edge, Amherst Island stands as a monument to him, memorializing a man who, to polish his vision of this land, called for extermination.

In “63 Kingstons,” Britta Badour recreates the city’s atmosphere of anti-Black racism by crafting formative experiences into enjambed layers. She plays with the ambiguity of the name by tying it to “*Kingston Penitentiary*”; suddenly, alliterations gallop the line as we witness a “*Kingston Police Officer*” while he “calmly cards / [her] crew” and “casually calls for backup” (Badour ll. 1–3). The indignity of police intrusion cannot be distanced from race as the officer reports what he calls “a group of non-white males” to his colleagues, and “he spits / Copenhagen blood” (ll. 4–5), evoking both the racialization that pits the survival of Europeanness against Black and Brown lives, as well as the persisting history of racism and slavery that financed the development of cities like Copenhagen. In the face of the intruding violence of this history, we can’t expect Badour to whisper. Rather, she assonates, coming “apart harping on the tar that proves my dad / ’s a factory worker with *NIGGER* kicked into the office door” (6–7). She *harps* on the *tar*, musically expressing a grievance with her hometown. The N-word, etched by rubber soles into the door of her father’s office, reflect the potentially violent exclusion that lies on the surface of the accessways in this country. Badour frames the cop as he explains away his intrusion: “Relax ‘Jamaica was not my first guess’” (ll. 8). She states the unsaid: a placating quip to starve accusations of racism—to ensure the act of carding is viewed as an innocuous, routine procedure. Her memory of this procedure follows her back to school. Noticing her classmate “googling the # of cities called Kingston,” she localizes, territorializes the experience. By titling this poem “63 Kingstons,” she evokes the colonial naming practice that honours British royalty by ascribing their names to lands across the (former) British colonies. The shadow of police brutality becomes tied to the name of the city, drawing a relationship between the institution of policing and the colonial project of renaming that resonates across these distant Kingstons. The poem demands that we consider the combative interactions between police and racialized peoples that must recur globally in these Kingly locales: in New Zealand, in Jamaica, in Australia, and elsewhere.

In Armand Garnet Ruffo's "Lake Cousin," the city cannot be disentangled from its reputation as a prison town. Kingston's penitentiaries loom, impose as the speaker reflects on the distance cut between himself and his cousin: "When my cousin died a few years after being released from prison / I lived with it for years, what I hadn't done, what I might have done" (ll. 1–2). Eventually, he "moved unexpectedly to Kingston and lived in the shadow / of the very walls that held him" (3–4). The distance is closed too late. With reunion no longer possible, he must instead inhabit the lonely shadow, watch vicariously the cold, alloyed holding that prisons provide their inmates. He inscribes a dream wherein his cousin can "stand in one spot and soak up the thinnest heat of memory of a family in a village / beside a lake" (ll. 5–7). This slant light of nostalgia fades "the way of a bruise, sorrow bleeding into anger" (l. 7). The speaker and his cousin share this ache of remembrance. The cousin "learned to read with a passion and found the old stories the best / and though he hated the whiteness he believed had taken everything / he loved, he thought Shakespeare had the right idea" (ll. 8–10). The momentary solace he finds in story cannot be confused with escape. The whiteness of his literary sanctuary compromises his pleasure, reminding him of all he has lost, though he concedes to the logic of Shakespearean prophecy: "the future foretold / by a witch" (ll. 10–11). As do the witches in *Macbeth*, the witch of "Lake Cousin" represents the intractability of tragic circumstances. By turns malicious manipulator of fate's strings and ironic observer, chronicling in prophetic bursts the fraying and snapping—the witch plays with extant possibilities, but did not spin the colonial conditions of the status quo. The cousin yields to fate: "he knew he would never get out" (l. 11). The dream inscription ends, with the speaker concluding, "even when he / did get out, the prediction came true. He died in unseasonable weather, / an unseasonable death, that even his new wife could not have foretold" (ll. 11–13). The prophecy that he cannot escape is, at first, betrayed by his release—but ultimately confirmed by his death. The repeated "unseasonable" not only portrays the unfortunate nature of the cousin's death, but the negation of the word *season* disqualifies the beauty of being freed into an open environment: his end preceded the freedom that his release was meant to promise.

In Ruffo's "On the Day the World Begins Again," the freedom of prisoners is seen as part of the possibility of renewal. While imagining "rebirth in a roar / in a squeak or maybe silence" (ll. 6–7), the speaker wonders if, on that day,

those suspended behind bars
in and between grey ugliness
in their deadened shouts of protest
[will] float beyond their sharp cries of where
they are and wish they were? (ll. 15–22)

Dwelling on prisoners as integral to the vision of a renewed world is the turn of the poem. This turn shifts the eyes of the reader to those who are made to be deliberately forgotten through the workings of criminal punishment. In a space of confined possibilities, prisoners' "shouts of protest" are "deadened," but their cries of "where / they are and wish they were," are "sharp" (ll. 18, 21–22). They have surrendered their struggle, but not their wish for freedom. On that day of renewal, the speaker wonders:

will their re/imagined selves
the shape of thought
the shape of prayer
bend like molten steel
in the fire of the human heart (ll. 23–27)

The speaker understands that freedom is not solely a matter of release, but requires the changeability of the human spirit. Otherwise, a prisoner might acquiesce, calcify a self-identity rabid and docile. They might feel worthy of endless punishment, rather than freedom. Freedom requires robust imagining. Released from physical confinement, a prisoner must free themselves—as much as they can—from the conditions that ultimately determined their path to imprisonment. It demands that they "rise beyond themselves / and find their way home" (28). Still, the voice trepidates at the threshold, asking if the "cages will open for them" (32). Will we cleave to vindictiveness in this changed world? Will we have prepared a better path?

Cops and robbers; cowboys and Indians. Wasn't it always too simple? A slicked history scaffolding a bare imagination? Good guys; bad guys. Of course they *had* to be good, how else to justify the hunting, the chasing, the riding down? During the blackout of August 2003, I was twelve, living in Oshawa with my parents and my sister. Among the most memorable experiences of those two or three days was the utter darkness. The blackout meant the stars were the brightest I'd ever seen in Oshawa. Yet on the ground, in the backyard, or on the street, I'd never seen a blacker night. I took pleasure in waving my hand, unseen, in front of my eyes. With electricity, even with the doors shut and the blinds pulled, a faint ambient streetlight glow would permeate. Only in such idyllic, suburban circumstances could such complete darkness be an innocent novelty. With my friends I would play manhunt, a game where a group of hunters would seek out a single, hiding prey. Once found, they would give chase, running through the playground, the streets, behind the trees, under the coppices. It was thrilling, especially as the prey, when, assessing the terrain—the wetness of the grass, the dryness of the dirt—you had to run, dodge, weave, escape. During the blackout, when the streetlights were off and the darkness reached completion, the chase would have added risk. We might run into each other, collide into trees, into the green power-boxes that dotted the outward strips of lawn. I remember moments where I would stand still, quiet in the darkness, become invisible. It was an incredible feeling. To be stared at but unseen. In such moments, I became free of race. I could forget the predominating whiteness of my neighbourhood, my friends, my country, at the precarious juncture when questions of race were emerging in my young consciousness. It was respite, then, to have that awareness shrouded by a force as primordial and familiar as the absence of light.

On occasion, my sister and I would watch *Mantracker* on the Outdoor Life Network. It was a Canadian reality TV show in which the hunter—a mounted outdoorsman with a cowboy hat and a mustache—would hunt contestants through the Canadian wilderness. These eager survivalists (named “prey”) would, within a time limit of thirty-six hours, make for a predetermined destination. The hunter would track the prey as they sought escape through the rugged landscape. The suspense of the program completely enthralled my

sister and me. To us, the audience, this was a *game*. Yet we were unaware of the very real history it replicated for our enjoyment.

Our ancestors
: enslaved and indentured, hunted
by our ancestors,
slavers and militiamen. On horseback,
on foot
we chased ourselves through the forests,
and into the mountains
captured ourselves, returned ourselves,
to ourselves
for a bounty.

Oh, irony
irony—like stone
can lie
wait for years
strike at speed
viper leaves
hide feverish lessons.

In June 2020, a vigil for the murder of George Floyd was held in Skeleton Park. I was there, distant, absent-minded, hovering slightly, precariously over a truth some part of me had kept from my waking thoughts, compartmentalized. I was present at the vigil, but when the call pealed out, “Black Lives Matter,” I could not respond. Ever the postcolonial in my academic work, I flirted with the radical, cited Fanon, cursed the Queen. I denounced the violent histories of enslavement, land grabs, expropriation without thinking about Black death. About what made it plausible, likely, inevitable. *No, not just over there. Here. Here, too.* When the ceremony was finished, I went home dazed and ashamed. A fever of disillusionment followed me for years afterward. Even now that the pains have mostly cleared, I continue to shed an understanding of citizen, country, and belonging. This is a sloughing off. *I am late.* I am a latecomer to awareness. But now that I

am here, newly inhabiting this place, I am no longer satisfied by a skimming, epidermal awareness. Wherever I go, now, I find myself peeling back pages, searching for the true skin of this place.

No doctoral student wants to celebrate their tenth year at an institution. Watch their peers withdraw or graduate, while they haunt the campus in the deserted summers as university services contract, waiting for the beloved throngs of undergraduates to return. In a fit of self-pity, I once called this the undignified stage of a graduate student's career. My partner rightly chastised me. It's unbecoming for someone of this privilege to indulge in that way, even when the flint fails to spark. Among PhD students, it is said: *life happens*. Deaths, breakups, divorce, suicide attempts, psychotic breaks, global pandemics, racism, genocide. Still, it is impossible in the latter years of a dissertation not to feel it. At first, the institution seemed to want you, crave your presence and participation. Then, you begin to feel the indifference. You fall behind the cutting edge. Imagine also the constrictions of the job market, the dissolving of permanent positions, the spread of short-term contract positions. A corporate university model that institutionalizes internal competition, privileging more lucrative faculties with more obvious ties to industry, while faculties with more nebulous, philosophical goals are whittled down by austerity measures. Pick your poison; the reason your keyboard, your pen, your fingertips are being gummed up, turned to sludge.

There are ways to clear up that block, that slowing process. For me it meant taking the craft of poetry I had been nursing more seriously. For its size, Kingston has a growing poetry community that nourishes an aspect of literary life that cannot always find nourishment in an academic setting. It has its literary stewards who return to it a placeness that it threatens to lose every summer as it becomes more and more dependent on its identity as a university town, where the inflow and outflow of thousands of young undergraduates shape the face of the city. Local poet Bruce Kauffman has run poetry events in Kingston for years. He runs the radio program *Finding a Voice*, a poetry night at the Elm for over a decade, as well as *Poetry World* at *Kingston ArtsFest*. Novel Idea, a local independent bookstore, welcomes many poets for book launches and readings. Among the cohort with ties to the university, there are the poet and retired creative writing professor Carolyn Smart, Ojibwe poet and professor

Armand Garnet Ruffo, francophone poet and professor Chloé Savoie-Bernard, and director of the creative writing program, poet-novelist Helen Humphreys. There's the marvelous Otoniya J. Okot Bitek, without whose advice and guidance I might not have completed these *dignified* years of my program. There's the poet laureate of the city, Sadiqa de Meijer, and the former poet laureates, Jason Heroux and Eric Folsom. Not to forget the late Bob Mackenzie, the late Steven Heighon, and the honoured memory of Bronwen Wallace, who roams this city, still. Poetry has a home in this city, so if you seek yourself in language, you can expect to find kindred spirits.

Kingston has other faces, too. I remember this on the walk through my neighbourhood. There, I see it. In red overalls and a red hat, it sits in the garden, comically holding out a fishing rod. It smiles at me with red lips, white teeth, taunting me with its carefree face. A ceramic pickaninny. I dream of taking a hammer to it. Smashing it to pieces.

In "Event Score for Guest Listening I," Dylan Robinson, xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) artist, curator, and writer, invites us into his dwelling where, among Kingston's famous limestone structures, he calls us to the task of listening. An event score is not poem, but a proposal for a performance contingent on the decision-making process of the artist or performer.² In this way, the act of listening is here construed as an active performance, rather than a passive act of receiving sound. The score begins with the performer "sitting in a room / Limestone walls surround / Limestone lines" (ll. 1–3). The city interjects, interrupting the process of listening with the trivia of municipal tourism: "often called the Limestone City" —says the City / of Kingston" (ll. 7–8). The cloying voice of the City invokes the "charming limestone buildings," "many of which help tell the story of Canada" (ll. 10, 12). Rather than acquiesce to a touristic charm that obscures the history of Kingston, our performer rehistoricizes the limestone and reterritorializes the Indigenous peoples who frequented Ka'torohkwi: "Quarried from the lands of Haudenosaunee and Anishinabek" (15). Aware of the "colonial design" of Kingston architecture, made "to allay anxieties of impermanence" (ll. 17–18), Robinson feels in his "xwélmexw body" the "subfrequency of colonial quarry" in "these buildings, that resonate the story of Canada" (ll. 23, 25). Since every act of listening is also an act of excluding sounds not listened to, the performer is engaged in the act of "trying not to feel the story of Canada / resonate through

[his] body” (ll. 27–28), “trying not to hear these walls declare their immovability, / declare their charming structure, their necessary structure” (ll. 34–35). Instead, he is “trying to hear these walls as still the land” (l. 33), he is “trying to hear their structure burn down / while dwelling and shelter remain” (ll. 36–37). Robinson calls us to mute colonial cadences that have come to structure everyday life, asking instead that we attune ourselves to their contingent existence, and in so doing collapse their pantomime of immutability.

What to do with these subcutaneous histories that—underneath us—prefigure the lives of Black people, Indigenous people, people of colour? How to endure the wild fluctuations between invisibility and hypervisibility that characterize our living here? What to make of a country’s face-saving measures? The reactionary ideologies that explain away the violences that mark this place, make this place—the denials, equivocations, calculations, exculpations? I don’t have a solution for these. Many wiser than I have no solution. Yet, in writing this, I think I’ve already begun a practice. I’ve lost my grip on the status quo. The chitinous nationalisms, the propagandas have been exposed. I am dislodging them, peeling them away. I am doing this not because I expect to find hallowed ground, or even solid ground—but because an unimagined future must be waiting beneath.

Notes

1. In the blog post “Ka’tarohkwi: The Original Swamp Ward?” on *The Swamp Wards and Inner Harbour History Project* website, Laura Murray traces a provisional etymology of the name of Ka’tarohkwi. *The Swamp Wards and Inner Harbour History Project* documents the history of two of the oldest areas in Kingston/Ka’tarohkwi through archival research and oral histories. Initiated in 2015, the project includes blog posts, recordings of stories and oral histories, podcasts, and new cartographies.
2. Event scores originated in the Fluxus group, a community of avant-garde artists that included John Cage and George Brecht. Brecht developed the event score as a performance grounded in the multidimensionality of personal experience (Robinson 113). Rather than preparing for a musical moment as one might at a concert, the audience of an event score prepares for the moment itself (113). The centre of the event score is the “enactment of the artist’s decision-making processes” (113). For more on the Fluxus event score, see Julia E. Robinson’s “The Brechtian Event Score: A Structure in Fluxus.” Dylan Robinson’s “Event Score” prepares the listener for the moment of colonial collapse as an experience of embodied listening and selective muting.

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*“The Sea Is History”: Anticolonial
Place-Making in the Water Spaces of Eden
Robinson’s Monkey Beach and Dionne
Brand’s A Map to the Door of No Return*

What does it mean to find belonging in the water? In Trinidadian and Canadian writer Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return* and Haisla author Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, this means accepting that water is necessarily difficult to capture and has sovereignty over itself (Brand 7). Water contains origins, memories, and histories, as well as dispossession, erasure, and colonial fictions. I look to *A Map* and *Monkey Beach* together because of the similar practice they employ of considering how water’s histories, secrets, and agency are what contribute to its capacity for creating space and belonging outside the colonial imagination. In this paper, I do not wish to conflate Indigenous and diasporic belongings or Haisla and Black water spaces, as I respect the importance of place-specificity.¹ I do, however, argue that considering the ways that water fosters place-making in *Monkey Beach* and *A Map to the Door of No Return* can generate thinking that surpasses the colonial creations and capturings of space that limit belonging to a settler-colonial claim to national identity and ignore a sense of belonging that has long existed outside of these restrictions. Further, in noticing the growing body of work applying water as method (see, for example, Brathwaite; Glissant; Walcott; Sharpe; Steinberg and Peters; and Simpson), this paper views this prevalence as a recognition among scholars of the need for a system of recovering, encountering, and understanding that accounts for a non-linear, non-stagnant, and relational “assemblage” of this planet’s many submerged histories, politics, ontologies, and ideas

(Steinberg and Peters 255; see also Hardy): a system that does not simply measure and note that which has landed, been un-earthed, or can be seen from a bird's eye perspective.² Rather than offering a singular, "watery" method, however, this paper highlights and recentres Haisla and Black diasporan conceptions of belonging that equally engage with various methods and practices of water thinking and water relations to demonstrate how water methodologies, or the process of applying the teachings from water scholarship towards an understanding of the possibilities of space, can be shared instruments of collective, anticolonial possibility.

Mobilizing these water methodologies allows me a moment to pause reflect upon my own positionality, as my personal and family histories of migration are shaped by water. I am a Latina settler scholar, and I was born and raised on the unceded traditional Coast Salish Lands of the Tsleil-Waututh, Kwikwetlem, Squamish, and Musqueam Nations. I am connected to the ancestral lands of the Incan and Pre-Incan peoples, including the Quechua, Aymara, Ichma, as well as the Lima people, after which the city where my parents were born is named. When they no longer felt safe staying in Peru, my family chose Coast Salish lands for the peace my grandmother experienced here and the comfort they all felt in sharing the same ocean as the family they left behind. My presence on Coast Salish lands plays a part in a larger history of colonization and displacement that I am committed to reflecting upon and challenging. Further, while I am able to study and discuss the water methodologies in this article because of systems and structures which have afforded me unearned privilege, the motivation for this research stems from a desire to understand and practice the kind of place-making and belonging that my grandmother modelled: place-making approached with consideration and respect for people, place, and history, as well as belonging found in the languages, flavours, traditions, and stories that the water allows us to hold and transport.

Shared Stories of Submerged Belonging and Wayfinding

Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* and Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* connect place-making to the stories and ancestries

that each text locates in the water and demonstrate how belonging functions through relationship. While Robinson draws on Haisla water stories to relate the histories that connect people to place, Brand uses stories about water in order to illuminate a powerful relationality among Black peoples of the diaspora in spite of settler-colonial dispossession and violence. Together, these texts exemplify long-lasting forms of place-making and belonging that emerge from the resistance, stories, and knowledge of their ancestors through the water.

Weegit, the Spring, and the Spirit World

In Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, water is a place of communication: a place that fosters a connection to Haisla knowledge and surpasses settler-colonial memory and understanding. Place-making in *Monkey Beach* then challenges the idea of belonging as claiming or being claimed. Instead, belonging in this text is based on a relationship with and knowledge of the land: knowledge frequently learned in and through the water.

Water is the place through which Lisa has a direct connection to history, as it is the location where she encounters the spirits of her ancestors. After Lisa spins her dad's speedboat and is knocked underwater (E. Robinson 370), her grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, "grabs [her] wrists and hauls [her] up" (371). After allowing Lisa to catch her breath, Ma-ma-oo urges her to return after having gone too far into the spirit world (372). When "the water pulls [her] back down" (372), Lisa's brother, Jimmy, then pushes her to the surface, before she is once again "sucked back in the surf" (373). Within the chaos of the surf, Lisa is able to see her uncle Mick, Ma-ma-oo, and Jimmy singing "a farewell song" in Haisla about "leaving and meeting again" (374). In this turbulent passage, readers are left unsure as to whether Lisa lives or dies as she experiences a space between the Spirit and the Natural worlds that leaves readers questioning the limits and interrelation of both. Water is a vehicle for this liminality as it fosters a connection between different times and spaces. In a previous and calmer instance, Lisa is in Ma-ma-oo's living room, "drifting off" in thought when she thinks she hears Ma-ma-oo call her name, only to find that the voice is the "soft, sibilant whisper of the waves rolling against the shore" (187). The drifting that Lisa experiences, both in the ocean and while deep in thought, signals that water is not only an in-between space, but also

that it challenges the limits of known physical spaces. Steinberg and Peters note that drifting is an aspect of water that informs what they call “a wet ontology,” as, through drifting, “vertical forces are translated into horizontal motions that often supersede both legal logics and human intentions” (259). In this passage, Lisa is thus only able to receive knowledge about her family, their histories, and her culture by giving in to the resistant and defiant space of the water that creates this illogical and superimposed state of access. Lisa is drawn to the water by the call, “La-es” (E. Robinson 1), a Haisla term spoken by the crows around her that repeatedly asks her to dwell at the bottom of the ocean. By heeding to this call, Lisa engages in a relational place-making by surrendering to a place of more-than-landed possibility.

Haisla stories highlight water’s role in the formation of landmarks, significant historical events, and in explaining important details of Haisla territory, animals, plants, and people. Lisa’s mother tells her about the Haisla origin story, which relates the fear their ancestors had upon approaching the Douglas Channel (114). She explains that a “great big monster guarded the entrance” of the channel, “open[ing] its huge mouth” and “making a roaring cry” (114). She tells Lisa that learning that the monster was actually “a huge flock of sea gulls feeding on herring” taught the Haisla to look for the gulls when trying to find oolichans in the water (114). Through this story, Lisa, and perhaps some readers, learn that the connection that Haisla people have with water and the other creatures above the water allows them to understand what happens and who lives in the unseen depths of the oceans and rivers around them.

This knowledge and history also connect the Haisla to a complex and undocumented topographical history. One example is the way that Lisa is able to depict Weegit the raven’s connection to Haisla geography with great familiarity. While on the water, she describes how places like the “Gee Quans,” or “pushed out point” channel, were formed after Weegit pushed the mountain on his way to Kitamaat to create a shortcut (276). Moreover, she learns these legends from her Ma-ma-oo and, through them, understands how to navigate the waters that hold so much wisdom for Haisla people. In the book *Haisla Legends*, Haisla historian and Eden Robinson’s uncle Gordon Robinson translates these same Haisla legends from oral tradition. Among these stories, “Weegit’s Spring” tells of a hot day when Weegit

came to realize that there was no good drinking water in Kitamaat, and so he picked up a “little spring which he had seen in the Skeena Valley” and “flew with it back to Kitamaat . . . to quench people’s thirst at all times” (G. Robinson, “Weegit’s Spring”). The legend states that “to this day Weegit’s Spring may still be found at the north end of Kitamaat Village” (“Weegit’s Spring”), flowing when all other springs have frozen and remaining cold when all others are warm. I connect Gordon Robinson’s story with Eden Robinson’s not only because of their familial relation, but also because these are likely some of the stories that Lisa would be learning from her Ma-ma-oo. As Haisla legends predate colonial attempts at mapping Haisla lands, they demonstrate a knowledge of place and belonging that is directly connected to traditional water stories and interactions. This is significant because it reveals that Haisla waters are not merely a resource but a *source* of life-sustaining and culturally significant qualities and relations that inform Haisla landscapes. It is, therefore, important to recognize that the waters on Haisla land can be understood as sacred, having long histories and secrets and, at times, having even been put in place by powerful figures.

As Lisa becomes an adult, she begins to navigate Haisla water spaces alone and learns about the water’s power and the spirits that dwell within the water. Through this process, she works to overcome the loss of Haisla language, culture, and knowledge. On one particular trip, Lisa and her mother take Uncle Mick to Kitlope River. Upon reaching the mouth of the river, Lisa’s mom “lean[s] over and dip[s] her hand in the water, then washe[s] her face” (112); Mick follows in the same manner. Watching her mother and uncle, Lisa learns that “[w]hen you go up the Kitlope” you must wash your face to “be polite and introduce yourself to the water,” thus enabling you to “see it with fresh eyes” (112). In this passage, Robinson describes water as holding perspective-shifting qualities that Haisla people have long understood and continue to teach. While the power of water could be read as metaphorical, Robinson does not use metaphor here. The Kitlope opens Lisa’s skeptical eyes to all that the water holds for her as she originally does not “see the point” (112) of engaging in the practices that her mother and uncle teach her. Lisa, at this point, has not yet seen the “porpoises [that] loo[k] like people” (123) and has not yet encountered the Spirit world that she will come to encounter in the

sea that feeds this river. The perspective-shifting qualities that the Kitlope grants are also practical, as they allow Lisa, her mother, and her uncle to navigate the Kitlope with better clarity—an essential skill considering the shallow and yet “furiously foaming and surging” nature of the river (113). As Gordon Robinson’s legends demonstrate, these powers are real, have a history of changing the landscape, and signify a legacy of place-making through relations with water.

Resistance and Belonging Within African Water Stories

In Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*, belonging is complicated by the violent uprooting of Black Africans across the Atlantic. While Brand is critical of the ideas of belonging and origins, she suggests that when Black Africans are captured and Black places become spaces of colonial ownership, water has the potential to become a place where resistance can still be found. A significant part of acknowledging this resistance lies in understanding the tensions of the metaphysical and historical point of rupture known as “the Door” that marks the Middle Passage and its lasting impact, as well as the way the enslaved Africans’ spiritual beliefs and ontologies guided them through that rupture.

Brand’s *A Map* begins with the challenge of the titular Door of No Return which exists as a simultaneously mappable and unmapped place. The “Door” is a physical location as well as a time and space that is “illuminated in the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora” (Brand 2). The challenge that *A Map* explores is the tension of wayfinding for those in the diaspora when, as a result of the Door, there is no concrete origin or destination for belonging. It is because of this tension that, although she does not deny either the desire to return or to find one’s origins, Brand complicates belonging by suggesting that it is, especially for those in the diaspora, not something that can be understood as a single location on a map, but perhaps something that can exist within water relation.³ When Brand discusses wayfinding, she describes the ability to navigate beyond the limits of colonial claims to property and among the connections of the various places in the diaspora. In the subchapter entitled “Forgetting,” Brand quotes David Turnbull’s *Maps Are Territories*, where Turnbull explains that, “[i]n order to find our way successfully, it is not enough just to have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as practical mastery of way-finding” (qtd. 16).

In a separate but connected passage, Brand returns to this “mastery” as she describes a relative of hers who also has a “mastery of way-finding” (44). She illustrates how he “walk[s] out into the water at Guaya” (44), throwing back his ring to shore and instructing it to tell them, who readers can assume to be the enslavers, that he is drowning. Brand explains that while her ancestor’s methods of escaping the body through the water are radical, they demonstrate a wayfinding in which “no known map is necessary” (44), implying that the navigational practice of wayfinding does not require cartography.

Brand further develops this alternative wayfinding method by connecting this story to one in Julie Dash’s 1991 film, *Daughters of the Dust*. She describes a moment in the film when “upon reaching the shores of the Americas the captured turn and walk back into the water . . . their faith of return unflagging” (44). Brand’s description suggests that a return to the water is an escape from not just slavery, but also the colonial commodification of Black bodies. The “unflagging” faith is seemingly both a persistent wayfinding technique and a supranational belonging within the water. To clarify, I do not read Brand as romanticizing the trauma of water suicides or the transatlantic slave trade, nor do I wish to ignore that by far, the more common cause of death among enslaved Africans was murder, illness, violence, and abuse. Instead, I argue that Brand emphasizes this form of wayfinding, the escape into water, to demonstrate belonging that exists beyond cartography and within the unknown possibilities of water relation. Also, I contend that *A Map* demonstrates that an escape by water, whether by walking into the sea or jumping off a slave ship in the Atlantic, is indeed resistance, and not simply a forced act in a circumstance in which enslaved Africans had no agency—even amid the horrifying violence perpetrated against enslaved Africans in the Middle Passage.

In his article on Middle Passage suicide, Robert Stevenson writes that while captains kept logs on the suicides of enslaved Africans, they mostly wrote them to collect insurance and, as a result, ignored the circumstances that may have motivated the suicides of the people aboard slave ships (51). Consequently, the water relations and agency that enslaved Africans practised on these ships went unacknowledged. Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijoke Njoku write that “[t]o explain their propensity for suicide as groups and individuals, one has also to

understand the cosmology of the Igbo and their attachment to the land of their birth" (178). They explain that, upon being uprooted from traditional practices connecting the "living and the land and . . . the land and the ancestors," the Igbo "responded emphatically by committing what may be described as 'acceptable abomination'" (Falola and Njoku 178–79). Therefore, while the justification of suicide was "lost to New World scholars . . . [who] failed to link" these deaths along the Middle Passage "to Igbo cosmology," suicide by water was a choice that "the ancestors would be willing to accommodate" (180).⁴ Considering the African cosmologies and religions of the Igbo and the Yoruba, as well as the several other African nations not discussed in this article, is crucial to understanding suicide by water as a chosen death that resists the alternative abuse and forced death that occurred on the ships and once they landed on the shores of the Americas. For this reason, while I discuss water suicides in the context of Brand's work, I certainly cannot claim to hold or offer a complete understanding of these deaths. Instead, I offer that a recognition of the role that these cosmologies and religions played in the decisions made on the Middle Passage can support a better understanding of how these waters hold possibilities that demand further attention. Christina Sharpe writes that, "[i]n the wake, the river, the weather, and the drowning are death, disaster, and possibility. They are some of the impossible possibilities" (105). The water on the shores at the Door and the waters in Guaya provided, and continue to provide, this impossible possibility: a powerful and impossible space where colonial models of place-making were evaded, and that thus can offer new possibilities of escape. In *A Map*, this history of agency renders water a place to which Brand returns in order to examine the significance of belonging and origins found outside of nation and the possibility afforded by these relations.

In *A Map*, Brand reflects upon the continuation of the water's resistant qualities through the oral traditions and religions that Black Africans transported to the Caribbean and the Americas. Throughout the text, Brand's connection to the Caribbean water goddess, Yemayá, creates belonging beyond nation and across various times and places in the diaspora. In the chapter "Soufrière, St. Lucia," Brand goes to the jetty "to reason with Yemaya, the goddess of the ocean" and asks for help "to make [her] life better, to send some worry away" (172). She

then “makes [her] ablutions,” places her hand in the water, wets her forehead and sings to the goddess as she explains she does whenever she is near the ocean (172). Brand’s connection to the water is informed by a history of interactions across the Atlantic with Yemayá. This relationship involves an intimate exchange of respect for guidance and clarity. Elizabeth Perez, an ethnographer and historian of Afro-diasporic and Latin American religion, describes Yemayá as “rul[ing] travel over salt water” and as being credited by the Lucumí for “delivering Yorùbá captives safely across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage, protecting them from fatal illnesses” (207). Perez also states that, historically, Yemayá has been known as “a maternal figure” who “gave birth not only to the world’s marine life, but also to the rest of the major orichas” (208).⁵ Yemayá, or the water, is, then, not only a holder of history, but a place that protects and connects diasporans. Yemayá’s fluidity de-emphasizes the importance of national origins or destinations, creating spaces for anticolonial forms of belonging that are found in the kind of relational and fluid connections, or “errantry” (Glissant 11), that Édouard Glissant notes as the experience of “the abyss” that made diasporans “an exception” as well as “one people among others” (8). According to Glissant, the experience of the abyss includes “those who never escaped it... the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land,” as well as “the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed” (7). Thus, the abyss is the shared element that created the “knowledge of Relation within the Whole” as it connected its descendants with “shared knowledge” (8). *A Map to the Door of No Return* also suggests that place and belonging are found both in relation and in journeying. Brand highlights the importance of this quality when she writes that, for those in the diaspora, “[t]he journey is the destination” (203).

Hands Dipped in Water

The parallels between Brand’s interaction with Yemayá and the respect that Lisa is taught to pay the Kitlope river are but two ways that both texts demonstrate place-making through the spirituality within water spaces (Brand 172; E. Robinson 112). As they both dip their hands to commune with their ancestors and water spirits, they acknowledge that their connection to place is through relation (Brand 172; E. Robinson 112). Brand and Eden Robinson are, then, asking readers

to consider belonging as requiring what Christina Sharpe has identified as the shared “wake work” of diasporans (19), and what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains as a “world-making [that] is deeply connected” (00:33:21–23).⁶ The work, methods, relations, and understanding that the water spaces in these texts provide demonstrate that, whether it is “wake work,” relation, or wet ontologies, scholars are already searching for what Brand and Robinson illustrate as the value and possibility in water relations, particularly for finding belonging through scattered connections.

Water Re-Mapping and Journeying

In both Robinson’s and Brand’s texts, water is a place that addresses the trouble of inaccurate and limiting cartographies, static spaces, belongings, and national origins. I see both *Monkey Beach* and *A Map to the Door of No Return* as creating place and possibility within all that cannot be understood or captured on a map. Specifically, both texts do this through a consideration of the submerged secrets of the water and the constant journeying that water seems to require.

On the Kitlope River

In *Monkey Beach*, Lisa learns to locate the Haisla people and territory through legends, histories, and traditional knowledge, despite her initial difficulties with the Haisla language. Engaging with a map of what is now called British Columbia, Lisa instructs readers as follows:

Find a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast. Beneath Alaska, find the Queen Charlotte Islands. Drag your finger across the map, across the Hecate Strait to the coast and you should be able to see a large island hugging the coast. This is Princess Royal Island . . . the western edge of traditional Haisla territory. *Ka-tee-doux Gitka’áata*, the Tsimshians of Hartley Bay, live at the mouth of the Douglas Channel and surrounding areas just north of the island . . . once you pass the head of the Douglas Channel, you are firmly in Haisla territory. (E. Robinson 4)

Lisa engages with the map by having readers guide our fingers across a map as it highlights the colonial place names of Princess Royal Island, Prince Rupert, the Douglas Channel, and British Columbia, but fails to clearly label the edges of Haisla territory or where the Tsimshians of Hartley Bay reside. Lisa then guides us to the location where “seven hundred Haisla people tucked in between mountains and the ocean” live, emphasizing the inability for colonial cartographies to properly locate the Haisla nation (5). *Monkey Beach* thus demonstrates that the places, people, and stories within Haisla territory require more fluid notions of place that acknowledge place as “not stable but in process” (Sarkowsky 324). Additionally, instead of relying on static cartography or coordinates, Lisa guides readers from the coast, “across the Hecate Strait,” through to “the head of the Douglas Channel,” and finally to the mouth of the “140-kilometre-long deep sea channel” leading to Kitamaat Village (5), where readers then look out Lisa’s kitchen window to the water where Jimmy is lost. I read Lisa as guiding readers through the methods of wet ontology that help us recognize that “mapping at sea brings a cartographic logic of stasis and control, points and lines, to an ocean whose biogeophysical properties . . . are resistant to a terrestrial ontology of bounded zones and emplaced points of power and knowledge” (Steinberg and Peters 253). By taking readers off land and into the water, Lisa better situates readers to understand not just where she lives or where Jimmy is located, but to experience the fluidity she applies to her understanding of Haisla territory through a Haisla cultural lens.

As a child, Lisa frequently learns the secrets and knowledge of place on the water with her family. Navigating the Kitlope River, she describes “[o]ld logs stick[ing] out of the water like great, bleached finger bones” and learns that “[t]he ones you can see aren’t as dangerous as the ones submerged just below the surface” (E. Robinson 112). On this particular trip, Uncle Mick, an experienced navigator, takes over the steering, while Lisa’s mother goes to the bow to spot the deadheads (112). Together, these passages highlight how Lisa learns that understanding the water will allow her to navigate the dangers that lurk below the surface. Therefore, in the water, Lisa not only learns how to traverse the river, but also, as the text implies, that the water holds stories, secrets, and truths that are manageable with experience. This lesson echoes throughout the text. Further,

throughout *Monkey Beach*, a grown-up Lisa guides readers along the coast of Haisla territory on her journey to find her brother. It is from the water that she can now best locate Haisla lands, legends, and history. She explains that “*Na-ka-too*,” the area “on the opposite of the channel” (276), is named after “two Haisla families who . . . used to play a game . . . in which they would challenge each other to see who could bend a sapling the farthest” (276). Lisa also sees the way figures like Weegit have formed and altered the land and water she navigates (276). These scenes depicting Lisa’s time on the channel reveal the way that the water has shaped Lisa’s knowledge of Haisla territory, and these moments implicate her in a belonging found within an understanding of Haisla navigation, or wet ontology, and the interconnection of space through water that surpasses settler-colonial cartographies or histories. In depicting Lisa engaging in this learning process, *Monkey Beach* complicates water as more than just the in-between of colonial landmarks.

Failed Cartographies and Origins at Sea

Brand writes, “To travel without a map, to travel without a way. They did, long ago. That misdirection became the way. After the Door of No Return, a map was only a set of impossibilities, a set of changing locations” (224). For Brand, maps after the Door signify an inability to travel with “misdirection” and a focus on a series of locations and “irretrievable selves” (224). These post-Door maps forget that fluidity rather than static “impossibilities” is essential for travel (224). As a result, the maps described in *A Map* frequently depict movement rather than static locations, as Brand challenges roots and belongings found within settler-colonial claims of national identity. She does this through the chapter entitled “Maps,” in which she describes Ibn Jubayr’s “*rihla* . . . [or] a traveller’s account of a pilgrimage” (86), Roman maps “based solely on itineraries” (142), as well as the “oral ruttier,” a poem that sailors could memorize and recite as a navigation aide (212), among others. The movement on which Brand focuses suggests that anticolonial belonging means accepting that place-making is made through connection and/or motion and by confronting how space is captured, bordered, and then used to include or exclude.

In the closing chapter of *A Map*, Brand explains that “A map . . . is only a life of conversations about a forgotten list of irretrievable selves”

(224), proposing that maps erase the places and people that they are incapable of depicting. Her critique of maps, then, also suggests that capturing, both through cartography and the creation of nation-states, is incompatible with belonging. In an earlier chapter, Brand explains that “at home, in Canada,” origins are used as “exclusionary power structures” (64). While recognizing that Canada is indeed “home,” Brand emphasizes that, even as a nation with many immigrants, Canada “is always redefining origins, jockeying and smarming for degrees of belonging” (64). Further, according to Brand, nations “[e]ras[e] aspects of complicated origins” that do not fit neatly into a colonial understanding of nationhood (64). I read Brand as suggesting that what prevents belonging in settler-colonial nations like Canada, particularly for diasporians, but also for Indigenous peoples, is the idea that diasporic and Indigenous peoples must uncomplicate their origins in order to achieve a “legitimacy based solely on conquest and acquisition” (64). Further, what Brand might mean by “aspects of complicated origins” (64) are the accents, dress, tastes, and the tyrannies, which she describes, but also the indications of diasporic and Indigenous peoples’ relationships to place that surpass the rigidity of national borders (64). Thus, I understand Brand as suggesting that what impedes belonging within nation is not actually diaspora, immigration, or Indigeneity, but settler-colonial nationhood. *A Map*, then, emphasizes that the claiming and consequent mapping of land requires strict and static borders that both “contain their constituencies as well as, in the case of the powerful . . . aggressively exclude the other” as a means of maintaining land as a resource and, notably, commodifying belonging (69). Nevertheless, while Brand is clearly critical of the origins and the kind of belonging required by settler-colonial nationhood, she does not leave the diasporan without possibility.

Brand finds possibility in the water and highlights the water’s fluidity and mysterious depths as opposing the idea that belonging is only created in static and known spaces. In her critique of cartography, Brand discusses Charles Bricker’s “book of maps,” in which “[e]xplorers, sailing along the coast, called what they did not or could not see deep and dark” (17). She comments here on poor cartographical practices, as well as hinting at the possibility that still lies within water’s depths. Brand quotes Bricker, who notes that “Ludolf, the seventeenth century German founder of Ethiopian

studies, never visited Abyssinia—but relying on the reports of Portuguese missionaries . . . he constructed a new map of the region in 1683” (18). Learning this fact inspires in Brand the idea that “in order to draw a map only the skill of listening may be necessary. And the mystery of interpretation” (18). While this reflection is foremost a critique of ignorant and harmful colonial cartographic practices, it also expands the idea of relating to space and place-making beyond what is known, mapped, or charted. In these passages, I read Brand as offering the “deep and dark” spaces of the water (17), as well as the “mystery of interpretation” (18), as spaces for forms of belonging that are external to the rigid and static limitations of nations and colonial place names. Within this conceptualization of maps, origins are all fictional, and can therefore all be reimagined to incorporate the unmapped, non-static, and anticolonial possibility that both the “mystery of interpretation” and water relations offer; she suggests this by claiming that diasporic “origins see[m] to be in the sea” (12). Moreover, in Christina Sharpe’s reading of Brand’s “Ruttier for the Marooned in the Diaspora” (Brand 213)—the title of Brand’s oral ruttier in *A Map*—Sharpe writes that the ruttier

does not contain conventional navigational instructions to country and safe landing (could it? those of us in the wake cannot use such conventional means); it does contain what present/future migrants might meet, refuse, and remake on and in their journeys. The “Ruttier” takes as ground that first plunge into unbelonging, reframes as gift that absence of country. (107)

Through this analysis, Sharpe emphasizes the “absence of country” as the gift that Brand’s “Ruttier” grants navigators and diasporans. While I agree with this reading, I would add that what contributes to the impact of this gift is the ruttier’s form of wayfinding and its reliance on relation with water through interactions with tides, temperature, taste, texture, and reflection of the water from sea bed to surface (Brand 212). These qualities introduce not simply the gift of absence, but also the gift of presence. As colonial sailors and then diasporans abandon the strict linearity of land, they lean into the water’s inconsistencies and fluctuations and learn water as practice.

Brand states, “The Door of No Return is no place at all but a . . . collection of places” (18), and thus implies a relational connectedness of origins in and with the water. This connectedness, as she demonstrates throughout *A Map*, is frequently mysterious, overlooked, and forgotten. The importance of this understanding of origins as both connected and mysterious is that it proposes that belonging can, and perhaps must, be found through the possibility within the “inexplicable space[s]” that cartography has failed to account for, but which water methods allow (20).

Fluid Origins

With *Monkey Beach* and *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Eden Robinson and Dionne Brand provide a methodology with which to reimagine practices of place-making and belonging that resist the rigidity of the settler-colonial nation. One of the ways their texts do this is through the juxtaposition of static cartographies with fluid ones. These texts critique nation-states as disrupting belonging and suggest that incomplete cartographies are, in fact, replete with possibility. Brand and Robinson show this potential with un-mappings and re-mappings informed by the relationships that Haisla and diasporans sustain and develop with water. These texts, therefore, not only depict water as forming place and giving place meaning, but also as teaching a practice of anticolonial belonging and wayfinding through connection and care.

Respect and Reverence for the Sea

Monkey Beach and *A Map to the Door of No Return* consider not only what it means to commune with water as a place-making practice but also ask what it means to respect water. In both texts, water demands relationship as a simultaneously comforting and frightening being. This section reads *A Map* and *Monkey Beach* as expanding upon Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle’s statement “We do not own the water, the water owns itself” (37), as well as Rinaldo Walcott’s description of the “reverence and fear” that he contends “characteriz[es] our relationship to bodies of water, especially the sea” (65). Robinson’s and Brand’s complicated depictions of the water suggest that the water offers place-

making in exchange for relationship. This agreement between their texts reflects the way that both Haisla and diasporan belonging are written in both and these belongings are an essential element in water's ability to provide alternatives to the harmful relationships that settler-colonial nations have with land.

Exitio est avidum mare nautis

In *Monkey Beach*, Lisa describes the irony of the Greeks calling "the Black Sea *Euxinos*: friendly to strangers" (E. Robinson 46), as, according to her, "[t]hose who know the ocean know it doesn't make friends" (46). Lisa thus suggests that the sea is a place both with which she becomes familiar and that she recognizes as a temperamental being. Further, explaining what this term means, Lisa translates: "*Exitio est avidum mare nautis*—the greedy sea is there to be a doom for sailors" (46). Artist and scholar Anne Hardy's work on Horace's *Odes* 1.28, from which the line "*Exitio est avidum mare nautis*" originates, reveals how this line engages with the sea's juxtapositions. According to Hardy, in the *Odes*, Archytas drowns in a shipwreck with his soul "detained; owing to lack of burial" and relies on the "*nautae* [sailors] on those rare ships which sail nearby" to restore his soul's peace. As intertext, the ode not only suggests that the sea holds spirits with which travellers should interact, as Lisa does, but also functions "to rehearse the *topos* that even great men are overtaken by death," and particularly death by, as Hardy translates Horace's words, the "insatiable swell [that] swallows up sea-farers" (Hardy).

Understanding that the water is both a source of much of Lisa's relation to Haisla culture and a dangerous and consuming force highlights the importance of a relationship with water based on respect. Lee Maracle writes in "Water": "I understand the ocean. She is our mother, our food source; she is both loving and dangerous. We depend on her, we cherish her, and we respect her" (34). This is a perspective that Lisa exemplifies throughout *Monkey Beach* and from which she criticizes settler-colonial treatment of water.

Monkey Beach depicts the consequences of neglecting relationships with water by including images of polluted water spaces caused by settler-colonial industry. Lisa describes "a scattering of beer and pop cans" carried by the tide and explains that "[t]he Kitimat River used to be the best one, but it has been polluted by all the industry in town"

(41, 92). While water is a site of so much relational potential within *Monkey Beach*, it is not devoid of colonial resonance created by “Alcan Aluminum” (5), the forestry camps “near Wee-wah” (95), or the “clear cutting” in “Kildala” (192). Water simultaneously holds the history and secrets of Lisa’s ancestors, reveals the aftermath of Haisla people’s constant battle with settler colonialism, and exposes all that Canada will not confront. As *Monkey Beach* suggests, it is impossible to discuss the potential of belonging within water without addressing the disastrous effects that climate change has had and will continue to have on water relations. Jacquie Kundoque, from the Killer Whale clan of the Haisla people, writes that pollution, draggers, and drought alter not only the way the Haisla fish and hunt oolichan, but also the time allotted to storytelling (20). This also affects the presence of younger generations at the hunt and has the potential to stifle Haisla language acquisition, land recognition, and cultural knowledge among future generations (20). As Robinson writes in *The Sasquatch at Home*: “If the oolichans don’t return to our rivers, we lose more than a species. We lose a connection with our history, a thread of tradition that ties us to this particular piece of the Earth, that ties our ancestors to our children” (22). These are the unseen effects of colonial land and water use that threaten the water relations described thus far.

While *Monkey Beach* briefly addresses the effects of climate change, the text does not dwell on them. Instead, Robinson makes it clear that it is also vital to recognize how, in spite of colonial activity, Lisa is not frightened out of the water. She still achieves a relationship with and respect for the water that allows her access to the histories and knowledge of her ancestors. Readers understand this in several passages when Lisa is out on the land with her family. For example, when Lisa goes crabbing with Uncle Mick, their pot becomes so heavy with crab that the boat almost tips, at which point, “[a]s the pot [comes] over the rim of the boat, a halibut inside [begins] to flap” (E. Robinson 98). Wanting to keep the halibut, Lisa then watches “Mick ope[n] the pot and dum[p] the halibut back in the water” and asks why he let the halibut go (99). Mick replies, “It’s a magical thing . . . You aren’t supposed to touch them if you don’t know how to handle them” (99). This passage, among several with Uncle Mick, demonstrates to Lisa that engaging with the water and its creatures requires showing respect through care and knowledge. Without this

care and knowledge, the magic of the water may become volatile or incapable of positive relation. Further, the relationship that Mick is keen on establishing between Lisa and the water is complicated, especially when considering how, in the end, Mick and Jimmy die in the water. Water spaces in *Monkey Beach* are not romanticized as a magical space that can be accessed at any time or by any person. *Monkey Beach* makes it clear that water is dangerous and powerful because of the fear that it instills. Further, while the water in *Monkey Beach* takes Mick and Jimmy from Lisa, it also returns them to her when she needs them most.

Lisa's engagement with water spaces and creatures emphasizes water's sovereignty in *Monkey Beach*, as well as the gift that comes with the responsibility of respectful water relations. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson elaborates on this notion in her Hopper Lecture for her upcoming book, *Theory of Water*, in which she describes Rebecca Belmore's sculpture *Wave Sound*, stating that the sound of water "works in concert with [her] great-great-grandparents praying and carrying water, and with those yet to be born, to become a practice" (00:53:24–41). In this lecture, Simpson also states that water is a part of a cycle in which its work is unseen and unacknowledged, which teaches her about caretaking for the planet (01:21:07–55). I connect Simpson's work to *Monkey Beach*'s because I see her description of the work that water does to create spaces of generational and spiritual connection as useful for understanding how the exchange of relationship and care for place-making functions in the water. Robinson is careful not to depict water spaces as uncomplicated or constant, and instead makes it clear that receiving the magic and care that water spaces offer requires the simultaneous reverence, fear, and care that water spaces demand.

The Humbling Yemayá

In *A Map*, interactions with Yemayá conjure the comparable notion that "[the sea] reduce[s] all life to its unimportant random meaning" and thus demands that one learn respectful ways of interacting with it (Brand 11). After watching as a woman dumps her waste into the ocean, Brand returns once again to visit Yemayá and asks, "[W]hat is it that we must live like that?" (174). To this, the goddess answers, "[L]ike a man hanging onto a pole in a bus on Colombo: 'So what'" (174). This

passage echoes a story told by Brand's friend about his experience on a bus in Colombo, suggesting that, like any person one may encounter on a bus, Yemayá is an individual with a mind of her own. Thus, while Yemayá has a history of caring for and saving diasporans along the Middle Passage, she does not cater to the demands of all people. Brand writes that the sea "overwhelms . . . It owns . . . [and] uses everything. Small things like bits of black bottles and rusty bottle tops, smoothed transparent fish, fish bones, cockles against small rocks" (9–10). Brand also describes the "hillside cliff leading down to the ocean [that is] covered in feces" (173), where the woman discussed above discarded her waste (174). Brand's descriptions of water pollution serve as proof of a forgotten relationship with water after the Door. Much like *Monkey Beach*, *A Map* also does not solely focus on pollution but instead emphasizes Yemayá's power and Brand's connection to the water. Aside from the pollution, Brand describes the sea as "us[ing] everything" that enters its grasp (9). The effects of human waste do not restrict Yemayá; she recycles whatever enters her realm and can establish new borders with her erosion, wear down trees, and transform buttons into shells (10). The pollution also does not prevent Brand from meeting with Yemayá. Brand's writing does more to prove the sea's sovereignty than to establish the effects of human contamination. In doing so, she proves the way that the sea holds the power to negotiate within its relationships with humans.

Moreover, Brand conveys her awe of the sea when she writes that "[i]t is impossible for [her] not to be overwhelmed by [the ocean], not to pay respect" and that she "never turn[s] [her] back on it" (172). The acknowledgement of feeling simultaneously overwhelmed and respectful echoes Rinaldo Walcott's statement that, "as far as the sea and ocean were concerned, reverence and fear, and sometimes both simultaneously, characterized [Black people's] relationship to bodies of water" (65). Walcott and Brand thus both maintain that the relationship that diasporic peoples have with water is "ambiguous and ambivalent" (65), as the water holds elements of Black belonging. As Sharpe points out, the "first plunge into unbelonging" has the ability to "heal wounds" and consume people, stories, and truths (107, 9).

Moody Waters

The notion that the deep sea is powerful and has yet to be glimpsed or captured provides a space where belonging is based on relationship, rather than origin, destination, or claim (E. Robinson 125). In addition to the humbling depictions of water in these texts, it is important to note that both Brand and Lisa also find truth, identity, and comfort in the water. They both describe losing hours, feeling incapable of leaving, and “being floated” (Brand 73), rocked, and pulled in by the surf (E. Robinson 372). Brand and Lisa even feel as though they can “breath[e] water instead of air” or “inhale the salty taste” of water (Brand 73; E. Robinson 372). Brand and Lisa enjoy their time in the water, as it solidifies their relationship with the water spirits and the ancestors with whom they become connected. The water’s contradictory nature, both frightening and comforting, is, therefore, not necessarily inconsistent as much as an ambivalent mood that proves the need for relationship. When the water is appreciated as a living being and implicated in the creation of the land, of history, and of belonging, place-making becomes connection.

Beneath the Surface

Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return* and Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* engage with water spaces in ways that create possibilities that are otherwise overlooked. Brand and Robinson describe water as defying the flawed cartographies and histories they criticize and as challenging settler-colonial nation-states’ creation and negation of belonging. *Monkey Beach* and *A Map* utilize water as a method and a space for liberating sunken stories, spirits, and ancestors, and for practising anticolonial belonging.

Finally, while this paper exclusively considers water spaces, it does not do so in opposition to or exclusion of land, but as an investigation of the particular emphasis that *Monkey Beach* and *A Map* place on water. While diasporic belonging and Indigenous claims to place may seem incompatible, I argue that the shared goal of anticolonial belonging makes Haisla and diasporan place-making more similar than different.⁷ Sharing experiences of being rooted and uprooted, although at different points in history and in differing ways, these texts

reflect and contest harmful forms of un-belonging with anticolonial water methodology. Therefore, in discussing these texts together, I hope for more discussion on potential forms of belonging that may exist just beneath the surface and through learning water as practice.

Notes

1. I see Brand's belonging as requiring connection to the beings and spaces that are more-than-place. Contrastingly, I read Robinson's sense of belonging as a reconnection with specific spaces that foster unmappable relations. In spite of their differences, both authors suggest that belonging depends upon a conceptualization of space that simultaneously includes the past within the present, as well as the possibility for anticolonial futures.
2. See: Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, Steinberg and Peters' "Wet Ontologies, fluid spaces: giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking," Rinaldo Walcott's *The Black Aquatic*, and Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.
3. My use of the word "relation" here echoes Glissant's understanding that "[r]elation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange" (8). With this, I see a water relation as a place of shared knowledge and belonging.
4. I first came across Falola and Njoku's work via Robert Stevenson's *Jumping Overboard: Examining Suicide, Resistance, and West African Cosmologies During the Middle Passage* (52).
5. Orishas are spirits in the Yoruba religion that were brought to the Caribbean with the African slave trade.
6. Sharpe discusses her struggle in identifying the proper language for Glissant's reference "knowing ourselves as part and as crowd" and finds the best terminology for elucidating this to be "wake work" (19). Sharpe defines "wake work" as "an unscientific method, that comes from observing that where one stands is relative to the door of no return and that moment of historical and ongoing rupture" as well as "a method of encountering a past that is not past" and "tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially" (13). I see this work as the relational after-work of diasporan descendants of the Middle Passage.
7. Scholar Tiffany Lethabo King, in "The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies," theorizes this encounter between Black and Indigenous studies as well as the potential for new ways of thinking about Black and Indigenous peoples, spaces, literary traditions, and politics.

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Where Is Home? Storied Places and Belonging in Indigenous and Immigrant Fantasy Novels for Children

Morgan and Lan have a lot in common: they both live in major Canadian cities, they both love to read fantasy literature, and they both accidentally stumble across a portal that takes them to another world. Morgan, the protagonist of Cree author David A. Robertson's *The Barren Grounds* (2020), is a thirteen-year-old Cree teenager who has grown up in foster families, separated from her relations and culture. Lan, the protagonist of Vietnamese Canadian author Linh S. Nguyễn's novel *No Place Like Home* (2023), is an eleven-year-old child immigrant who comes to Canada with her father while the rest of their family is still in Vietnam. Despite the two characters' different positionalities in relation to the place currently called Canada, they both struggle with the concept of home, and each novel reflects on very specific forms of belonging emerging from its protagonist's positionality as Indigenous or immigrant. I argue that the two novels under discussion imagine home as dynamic, emerging through the interplay of place, story, and body, as well as relationships and responsibilities—outside the realm of the settler-colonial nation-state of Canada. I furthermore argue that the novels teach children about respectful relationships between Indigenous people and immigrants as well as about the responsibilities those entail for the latter. As Malissa Phung points out, there is a literary tradition of “acknowledging and restoring Asian-Indigenous relations” (61). The decision to bring these two novels together is in part inspired by this literary tradition. Reading the two novels comparatively, highlighting both protagonists' struggles, can help in “setting the affective tone” for “coalition-building” in Indigenous and immigrant relations (Diabo 259). At the

same time, it is important to highlight the differences between these stories in order to see how Indigenous and immigrant stories become entangled in complicated ways in a place impacted by the systems of settler colonialism. I am engaging with these texts from the position of a settler scholar from Germany who recently participated in one of Canada's immigration processes. As a settler scholar of Indigenous literatures who has become implicated in the settler-colonial system of the Canadian nation-state, I am grappling with my own positionality. The article's questions about the relationships between Indigenous people and immigrants also reflect themes that have become central to my personal story.¹

The texts discussed in this article are works of children's literature, primarily written for middle-grade readers.² Deirdre Baker points out that Canadian children's literature "comprises most elements relevant for adults, but generally does so in works of shorter span [and] greater transparency" (827). I consider it important to add that works of children's literature can be very complex in their layering of themes, as the two novels under discussion demonstrate. Furthermore, children's literature is, as Peter Hollindale observes, overtly and covertly ideological (11). Especially in early examples of Canadian children's literature written by white authors, these ideologies are overtly entangled with European settler colonialism. The two novels discussed in this article engage with settler-colonial ideologies in distinct ways. Robertson's work contributes to Indigenous cultural reclamation, while Nguyễn's narrative offers representation for immigrants of colour, concurrently engaging with settler colonialism in a critical manner. To demonstrate how these novels counter the themes present in early Canadian texts for young readers, I will initially position them within the historical context of Canadian children's literature.³

It is important to emphasize that Indigenous communities on Turtle Island have always told stories for children. As storyteller Louis Bird points out, in his Omushkego Cree oral tradition, there are four different ways of telling a story: for children, for teenagers, for adults, and for the Elders (Bird, "Louis Bird Cree Stories" 00:28:30–00:29:20). Because of settler-colonial oppression and forced residential schooling, however, texts for children written by Indigenous people were not published on the Canadian literary market until the second half of the twentieth century.⁴ The two earliest examples of Canadian children's

literature in English and fantasy literature for children in Canada, respectively, were penned by white authors. These works incorporate representations of Indigenous people, whom the authors call “Indians,” that reveal their profound entanglement with settler colonialism. Catharine Parr Traill’s novel *Canadian Crusoes* (1852) is widely recognized as one of the first Canadian books written for children in English. The novel tells the story of three early Canadian settler children who get lost in Ontario’s backwoods, and, as the title’s intertextual reference suggests, the book is steeped in settler-colonial ideologies of place and home.⁵ Like Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist of the novel’s British precursor, the titular Canadian Crusoes set out to make a home in a place coded as wilderness. The text is part of the Robinsonade, a (still) highly popular subgenre of children’s adventure literature, which in turn has historically emerged from settler-colonial and imperial ideologies (cf. O’Malley). *Canadian Crusoes* further plays into white saviour myths when the protagonists rescue an Indigenous girl who was left behind by her community. Catherine Anthony Clark’s *The Golden Pine Cone* (1950) is the first novel that brought “fine fantasy” to Canadian children’s literature (Egoff and Saltman 232). Published in the same year as C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Clark’s novel shares several elements with this classic of British children’s literature: a fantasy world populated by talking animals, an ice witch, and a protagonist named Lucy. Clark’s novel is, however, distinctly Canadian for its setting in the landscape of British Columbia (Egoff and Saltman 232). At first glance, the novel is somewhat benevolent in its depiction of Indigenous characters. For example, Tekontha, a female character who is represented as stereotypically Indigenous, with black braids and a buckskin dress, is the most powerful figure in Clark’s fantasy world as she embodies the spirit of the land. Even the antagonist of the novel, the evil figure Nasookin, is depicted as a well-rounded character who is driven to murderous deeds after suffering a terrible loss, and who eventually befriends the protagonists. However, Clark’s novel reduces these characters to stereotypes and relegates them to the fantasy world the protagonists enter; no Indigenous characters appear in the protagonists’ home, the real world. The fact that, at the time of the novel’s publication, white children got to *read about* “Indian” characters created by white authors, while Indigenous children were forced into residential schools and forbidden to *be* Indigenous, further

shows the racist oppression of Canadian settler colonialism at work. *The Golden Pine Cone* and *Canadian Crusoes* are merely two examples of a large body of settler Canadian children's literature that has misrepresented Indigeneity and, thereby, supported and naturalized the settler-colonial endeavor of claiming physical and ideological space.

Indigenous children's book authors started to gain access to the Canadian literary market in the second half of the twentieth century and employed the form of the picture book in particular to write for cultural resurgence and against settler-colonial stereotyping and dehumanization. For Doris Wolf and Paul DePasquale, in their study of Indigenous-authored picture books for young readers published between 1967 and the early 2000s, their most immediate surprise was the sheer number of these books. Their list includes three hundred books by 125 Indigenous authors (87). There are visibly fewer novels for middle-grade readers published in the same time span, one of the earliest and most well known arguably being Anishinaabe author Ruby Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun* (1987).⁶ Over the past decade, in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its resulting ninety-four calls to action, the body of Indigenous texts for young people has grown rapidly in all genres, from history to mystery novels. In 2022, Cree author David A. Robertson, whose *Misewa* saga I discuss below, was named editorial director of a new imprint at Tundra Books, the oldest publisher of children's books in Canada. The new imprint focuses on publishing texts for young people by Indigenous authors. Despite this growing body of texts, Indigenous children's literature in Canada is not yet receiving the scholarly attention it deserves.

Access to the market of Canadian children's literature has historically also been difficult for writers of colour. In a study of children's literature depicting the immigrant experience in Canada from the 1950s to the 1990s, Miriam Verena Richter observes that, until the late 1980s, "groups represented in the earlier works of fiction for Canadian children [were] mainly of European origin" (160). Richter furthermore observes that "early multicultural publications for children in the 1970s and 1980s were mainly written by White authors" (94), which underscores Himani Bannerji's criticism that multicultural policies "involved the translation of issues of social and economic injustice into issues of culture," resulting in gestures that were "more

directed at the discontented Canadians than the discriminated others” (44). As Janet Lunn writes in the preface to Japanese Canadian Hiromi Goto’s children’s fantasy novel *The Water of Possibility* (2001), apart from picture books by Canadian authors of colour, “there have been almost no children’s novels, no up-to-date stories with which these children might identify” (i). Goto’s novel is part of Coteau Books’ “In the Same Boat” series, which was designed to “celebrate the diverse cultures of our country,” as the publisher indicates on the back cover. Five books were published in the series before it was terminated. When reviewing Raymond E. Jones and Jon C. Stott’s *Canadian Children’s Books: A Critical Guide to Authors and Illustrators* (2003), James Gellert notices that the book includes several minority emerging writers (263). Richter pointed out in 2011 that “a steadily growing number of writers of colour have authored multicultural novels for the young and have also gained access to mainstream publishing” (94). While Canada’s multicultural policies supported the creation of stories about protagonists of colour, scholars also criticize the underlying ideologies of multiculturalism, its othering effects, and its representation in children’s literature (cf. Saldanha). It is noteworthy that several authors of colour have recently published children’s novels about immigration with mainstream publishers; see, for example, Nguyễn (HarperCollins) and Salma Hussain (Penguin Random House).

When I first encountered Nguyễn’s *No Place Like Home*, I was struck by the way in which other-world fantasy, or works where characters cross from “our world” into a “fantasy world,” seems to be a perfect genre for grappling with issues of (im)migration, place, and home. Pat Pinsent argues that “the total fictionality of the [other] worlds . . . enables them to examine issues . . . without the need to provide a setting in a place and time which could distract readers from such issues” (67). While I agree with Pinsent’s general observation, I argue that, in the novels discussed in this article, the other world is designed to heighten the reader’s awareness of specific places and times. In fact, Cree author David A. Robertson’s novel challenges the status of the other world and the concept of “fantasy” when his character Ocheq, a talking fisher, says: “The stories we tell here aren’t fantasies. They’re real, all of them” (*The Great Bear* 88).⁷ It is also important to note that the process of leaving home and going to new places is not unique to other-world fantasies. In fact, Perry Nodelman

and Mavis Reimer argue that “the home/away/home pattern is the common story line in children’s literature” (197–98). According to this pattern, a child protagonist leaves home, spends some time away, and returns in the end. Of course, there are numerous possible variations of this plotline. When focusing on Canadian children’s literature in the late twentieth century, Reimer observes that the most valued story in Anglophone Canadian children’s literature “is a narrative in which the central child character, pushed out of an originary home . . . journeys to an alien place and . . . chooses to claim the unfamiliar space as a new home” (Reimer, “Homing and Unhoming” 1). Here, Reimer refines the pattern to home/away/new home. As I will demonstrate below, the two novels under discussion offer yet another reimagination of this pattern, one which might be best described as “home away from home.”

David A. Robertson’s *Misewa* saga has been described as a “Cree-centric retelling” of C. S. Lewis’ *Narnia* series (Fachinger 49), and the series’ intertextual connections to the British children’s classic have been emphasized in the publisher’s marketing for the novels. *The Barren Grounds*, the first book in the series, tells the story of Morgan and Eli, two Cree children who have been taken away from their respective families and communities in northern Manitoba by the province’s child welfare system and placed with Katie and James, a white couple living in Winnipeg.⁸ The novel blends contemporary Indigenous literature with traditional oral storytelling when Eli and Morgan accidentally create a portal to the world of Askí, whose inhabitants are animals who talk and wear clothes. The novel addresses colonialism and draws on traditional Cree wītko stories when Morgan and Eli learn that Askí is trapped in an eternal winter because the only other human being in this world, a white man, has stolen the summer birds for himself.⁹ As Morgan and Eli become friends with the fisher Ochek, the children insist on helping him and the squirrel Arik to go on a quest to bring back the summer birds.

The interplay of home, place, and identity is central to Robertson’s novel and most visible in the character of Morgan. While her foster brother Eli has been taken from his home community recently, Morgan has been in the foster system since the age of three, never feeling like she belongs. As she says to her current foster parents: “[T]his isn’t my home . . . The last seven places weren’t my home

either” (6). While Eli remembers his community and life on the land as home, Morgan does not have such memories of belonging (70). Her situation resonates with Cree scholar Neal McLeod’s theory of how colonialism creates exile. In his definition, spatial exile is “the removal of an Indigenous group from their land” and spiritual exile is “the alienation of a group from its stories” (55). Morgan’s disconnect from Cree culture represents such a form of spiritual exile, and it is responsible for several conflicts between Morgan and her well-meaning yet naive foster parents. For example, at one point, Katie and James gift Morgan a pair of moccasins in an attempt to acknowledge and celebrate her Cree identity. The gift, however, triggers Morgan’s feeling of not-belonging, and she angrily points out: “Being a kid with no real home? With no real parents? . . . *That’s my culture*” (52). For Morgan, home and identity are closely connected to place because no one “can . . . remember who they are when they’re never in the same place for more than a couple of years” (93). Morgan believes that home is created when one stays, not when one goes away—a notion that starts to change when she and Eli visit the other world of Askí (the Cree word for *earth* or *the land*). Settler colonialism and its institutions complicate “home” for both Morgan and Eli, who, at the beginning of the novel, are away from home in a place they are supposed to accept as home.

While the plot of Nguyễn’s *No Place Like Home* displays parallels to Robertson’s novel, with intertextual references to fantasy stories such as Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story* and L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, it is situated in a very different context. The protagonist of Nguyễn’s novel is Lan, an eleven-year-old girl who has recently immigrated to Canada from Vietnam with her father. While they live in Toronto, Lan’s mother and brother are still in Vietnam, as Lan’s mother is finishing up a work project. Feeling lonely and longing for her family to be reunited, Lan is literally swept away through a portal opened by a mysterious fantasy book. A storm transports her to the world of Silva, where she encounters Annabelle and Marlow, the novel’s protagonists. They are on their way to see the king of Silva, hoping to persuade him to reverse a spell that has turned Annabelle’s homeland into a desert. When Lan realizes she has magical powers in this world, she joins the two characters on what “seem[s] like a classic fantasy quest” (11).

The novel complicates the idea of home from the outset just as Robertson's novel does—yet for different reasons. At the opening of the novel, Lan is depicted as a child immigrant hovering between disappointment in her new home in Canada and nostalgia for her old home in Vietnam. Lan's initial view of Canada as a place "full of opportunity" is fading, as symbolized by her T-shirt from Chinatown (20), on which a "touristy maple leaf print was starting to peel" (2). Rather than feeling excited about being in a new place, she thinks about how "an ocean expand[s] between the rest of her family" and herself (3), and her "heart ache[s] for the bustling streets of her own familiar town" (16). Lan conveys her nostalgia for her old home in the comparisons she draws between Canada and Vietnam. In Toronto, the "blue of the sky was so unlike the pale grey of Hà Nội" (4). In North American culture, the connotations of a blue sky are usually positive, while those of a pale grey sky are usually negative. Lan's view that "there was something lovely about that grey" shows how her longing for home is fuelled by nostalgia (4). The other focus of Lan's comparisons is food. The food in Toronto "hardly compare[s] to their meals in Việt Nam" (19), and throughout the book, Lan longs for "mouth-watering dishes" such as "smoked bún chả doused with fish sauce on the streets of her hometown" and "sweet-and-sour bún riêu with deep-fried tofu at the corner of her aunt's house on Lạc Trung" (47). The dishes are described in close relation to place and family, demonstrating how Lan's longing for certain dishes is a longing for the places and people that make her feel at home. The dishes are neither translated nor described for readers unfamiliar with Vietnamese cuisine. According to Louise Saldanha, this representational strategy can create a naturalizing effect that is "validating and affirming for children of colour" as readers (135).

Settler colonialism complicates "home" for Morgan and Lan, yet for different reasons. Morgan struggles with the harmful effects of settler-colonial institutions, experiencing removal from her own home. Lan's family participates in the settler-colonial immigration system of the Canadian nation-state, which is built on past and present colonial violence directed at Indigenous communities. Lan herself, however, did not have a choice in this matter. At the outset of the novel, she struggles to adapt to a new home that has been chosen for her.

The Barren Grounds is highly aware of the colonial aspect that is potentially inherent to all stories in which protagonists travel to new worlds, and the novel evokes questions about ethically navigating new places even before the children cross the boundary between the two worlds. When Morgan and her foster brother Eli first look through the portal that has opened in their attic, they catch a glimpse of the world of Askí, its snowy landscape instantly reminding Eli of his home community. Morgan, more cautious, insists that Ochek, the fisher whom they see walking through the snow, seems angry: “I mean, we were, like, humans trying to come onto his land” (70). On Askí, Eli and Morgan get to stay with Ochek in the community of Misewa because he trusts Eli, for two reasons: Eli speaks Cree, and he “respects this place and the beings within it. He is living here in a good way” (101). Like all inhabitants of Misewa, Morgan and Eli depend on Ochek, who is the only hunter in a starving community trapped in the eternal winter. Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that when “someone moves away from the centre of their territory . . . their knowledge and relationship to the land weakens”; therefore, the new territory “is a place where one needs to practise good relations” (*Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* 89). By portraying how Morgan and Eli leave their own world and depend on good relations with the beings for whom Misewa is home, the novel models an Indigenous way of navigating new places. The novel then contrasts the children’s respectful way of living in Misewa with the story of Mason, the white man who stole the summer birds, thereby juxtaposing Indigenous ways of navigating new places with settler-colonial resource extraction (99–100). Ochek’s story about the summer birds offers the children teachings that help them (and the reader) navigate a new place. Traditional stories for children similarly teach them about the world around them (Archibald 75, 112). While these teachings about respectfully navigating new places speak to Indigenous-newcomer relations, Robertson’s novel is first and foremost directed at young Indigenous readers, teaching them about the importance and joy of (re)connecting with their culture. That it is possible for white settlers to come to Misewa and participate in respectful relationships is not demonstrated until *The Stone Child*, the third book in the series, when Morgan’s friend Emily comes to Misewa.

While both novels address settler colonialism and think about the ethics of navigating new places, Nguyễn's *No Place Like Home* additionally gestures towards the responsibilities that immigrants have towards Indigenous communities. Nguyễn addresses colonialism and the complicity of settler education systems when Lan thinks about her school's history lessons, which "[leave] a strange taste in her mouth" (16). Lan decides that "all these 'explorers' [are] overrated . . . or straight-up villainous. Taking over people's homes [is] far from heroic" (16). Here, the novel not only comments on Canada's history of colonialism, but also on Vietnam's history of being colonized by France in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Similar to Robertson's novel, Nguyễn's novel reflects on how to practise good relationships in new places. For example, when Lan and her friends are invited to stay with centaurs in their forest community, she comments on all the different forest beings and their rules. To Lan, "it all sounds so complicated," and she wonders how she is "supposed to know what's okay if every place is different" (138). The answer she receives is simple: "You take the time to learn" (138). As a scholar who has a background in Indigenous literatures, I read this conversation as a comment on the diversity of Indigenous nations on Turtle Island and their different, culturally specific protocols. The novel highlights the importance of listening and investing time in practising good relationships. It here gestures towards what Larissa Lai, in her reflections on the relationships between Indigenous people on Turtle Island and Asian Canadians, calls "an epistemology of respect," a "deep responsibility to find the new balance of the world and move toward it" (126). The way in which the novel gestures towards the possibility of anticolonial alliances between Indigenous people and Vietnamese Canadian immigrants is reminiscent of Rita Wong's reading of SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*, in which she says the fact that "some of these alliances may not be directly achieved" puts the onus on the reader (337). Similarly, in Nguyễn's novel, it is on the reader to read these plot elements in relation to Canadian settler colonialism.

Stories are central to the protagonist's search for home in each text. A closer look at the novels' relationships with their respective intertexts, however, reveals that each novel engages with storied belonging in a different manner. As discussed by Petra Fachinger, *The Barren Grounds* can be read as a retelling of C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* novel

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. At the same time, it is also a retelling of a much older, traditional Cree oral story: the star story of how the fisher brought back the summer birds. Star stories contain sacred teachings, offering guidance to Cree people, as Cree astronomer Wilfred Buck points out (5). In addition to the guidance offered by the star stories, the stars themselves provide guidance for people physically navigating the land and water—the Cree GPS, as Cree storyteller William Dumas calls it (39). In Robertson’s novel, many of the beings on Askí are protagonists of Cree star stories—and therefore they are also constellations in the Cree night sky. Robertson’s world of Askí can be seen as a storied home of Cree oral storytelling itself, and when entering Askí, Morgan and Eli enter the star story of the fisher and the summer birds. With the world of Askí, Robertson’s novel braids place and story in a way that is reminiscent of what Métis scholar Warren Cariou calls “territory,” a unity of land and story that provides “the ground of culture; the living, nurturing, relational medium in which Indigenous communities flourish” (4). While on Askí, Morgan and Eli get to experience this unity of land and story, the ground of culture. It is this experience that allows Morgan to reconnect with Cree culture and her own history. The more time Morgan spends on the land, the more she remembers about her early childhood. She starts having dreams of her mother, who tells her “kiskisitotaso”: “*Don’t forget about who you are*” (154). Morgan’s experience of the land on Askí and its stories creates in her the understanding that “[s]he belonged on the land. She’d never felt more at home than during the days she’d spent on Askí” (191). It is worth noting that Morgan feels at home after several *days*, whereas, earlier in the novel, her expectation of home is a place where one stays for a longer time. Morgan and Eli participate in a traditional Cree star story, resulting in reconnection with their Cree culture. Their story is a retelling in which the central plot of the star story is not altered significantly. Adapting oral stories to new contexts has a long tradition in Indigenous communities. As Cree author Tomson Highway puts it, at times traditional stories have to be “re-worked somewhat . . . to be relevant to us Indians living in today’s world” (22).

The relationship between *No Place Like Home* and its intertext *The Wizard of Oz* is noteworthy not only because of the parallels between the two texts, but also, and I argue more importantly, because of the

differences between them.¹⁰ *No Place Like Home* emphasizes the relationship between story, place, and home, as illustrated in the title of the first chapter, “A Story Out of Place” (1). This title refers to the mysterious—and, it turns out, magical—fantasy book Lan finds at her school’s book fair, which is stacked on the wrong shelf and does not have any price tag. It also refers to Lan, her life story, and the fact that she feels out of place as an immigrant in Toronto. Finally, the title can also be read as referring to the fact that the story of Annabelle and Marlow, which Lan enters, emerges *out of* a specific place. Like Eli and Morgan, Lan enters a story and a storied place where she learns about home. There is, however, an ontological difference between the world of Silva, which is a storied place in a fantasy novel, and the world of Askí, which is a storied place of traditional Cree storytelling. In the first half of the novel, Lan is desperate to find out why she was brought to the world of Silva. When she has the chance to pose a question to the Cognitor, an all-knowing being, she asks if there is a “*bigger reason*” for her presence in Silva (98). The Cognitor’s answer, however, surprises her: “You are here. What you do now is up to you and that can be as big as you choose” (98). Here, the novel teaches its readers about agency. Lan, who feels like waiting is all she has done “since we came to Canada” (43), learns that it is up to her to make an impact. Rather than perceiving herself as a subject with no agency whose mobility is determined by her parents, Lan learns in Silva that action changes circumstances and that it is up to her to claim agency and to effect change. The novel illustrates Lan’s potential to effect change quite vividly when Lan’s tears create a field of poppies (75). The field of poppies is an intertextual reference to the 1939 movie adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In the movie, the Wicked Witch of the West creates a field of poppies to hinder Dorothy and her companions from reaching the wizard in the Emerald City. The scent of the poppies causes Dorothy and her friends to fall asleep, and they are only rescued because Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, sends a snowstorm that covers the poppies (Fleming 00:54:55–00:57:44). Interestingly, in *No Place Like Home*, Lan conjures a snowstorm later on in the novel to save her friends from forest monsters. The fact that Lan conjures both the poppies and the snowstorm, and that she does the saving rather than being saved, emphasizes her agency as one of the central concerns of the book. Thereby, the character of Lan is one

of many child migrants in children's literature who "contradict[] preconceived, adult-dominated notions of the subservient and dependent child protagonist" (Savsar 396).

Towards the end of both novels analyzed in this article, the child protagonists realize that "home" is not only a place of comfort, but also a place of responsibilities. Both Morgan and Lan take on these responsibilities, and the way in which these responsibilities differ once again speaks to the unique position of each protagonist. In *The Barren Grounds*, Ochek gives the children a chance to go back to Winnipeg before they attempt to rescue the summer birds from Mason. However, Morgan and Eli decide to stay. Eli points out that Misewa "isn't like Hawaii, some place you go just because the weather's bad in Winnipeg" (192). For him and Morgan, "Misewa feels more like home than either of those places" (192). Eli makes it clear that he and Morgan are not tourists who visit a place and leave again without entering any long-lasting relationships or adopting responsibilities. Askí has become home to them, which is why Morgan and Eli choose to take on the responsibility of helping Ochek and Arik to bring back the summer birds. The novel generally prompts the reader to think about the tension between flight and responsibility. Eli's thoughts about Hawaii as a place where Winnipeegers flee from harsh winters mirrors Morgan's bookshelf of fantasy novels that help her escape reality. Askí, however, is neither Hawaii nor a fantasy world. By adopting responsibilities and moving further into this world, rather than fleeing back to their own, Morgan and Eli enact what Simpson theorizes as an Indigenous flight, not from colonialism, but towards resurgence: "a flight path to an amplified and grounded normativity" (*As We Have Always Done* 213). Simpson's use of the concept of grounded normativity draws on Dene scholar Glen Coulthard's idea of Indigenous anticolonial practices informed by "what the land as system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to another and the natural world" (13). Morgan and Eli's participation in these reciprocal relations and obligations not only leads to their reconnection with Cree culture, but it also leads to renewal for all Askí when they eventually succeed in bringing back the summer birds.

I suggest that having asserted grounded normativity on Askí allows the children to also conceptualize Winnipeg as home. At the end of

the novel, the children decide to “go home” (223), notably referring to Winnipeg as their home. Their decision to go back is influenced by Morgan’s initial promise to Katie that she would not run away—a promise which constitutes another example of Morgan entering the reciprocal relations and obligations of a home. Most importantly, the novel does not posit an either/or situation when it comes to the children’s two homes—they know “they [will] go back” to Misewa as soon as possible (238). I therefore propose that, at the end of the novel, Morgan and Eli live at home away from home, no matter in which world they are. The reason that Morgan and Eli were able to open a portal is explained in the second novel in the series, *The Great Bear*. Ochek’s father Mihko explains to the children that Askí “is woven into the fabric of your beings. It’s a part of you, and it always has been” (103). Mihko refers to the children’s connection to Askí as “blood memory” (103). This demonstrates that, in Robertson’s Misewa series, home emerges from embodied relationships to place, stories, language, and traditions, but also from responsibilities for place and for those beings who are part of your home.

Over the course of Lan’s journey in *No Place Like Home*, she realizes her feelings about “home” have become even more complicated, and she wonders “what *home* means” when all she has are “little pieces” scattered across different places and worlds (144). Similar to Morgan in Robertson’s novel, Lan has an idea of what home should *not* be like: “Home shouldn’t be pieces. It should be a big solid thing! For me, it’s all scattered” (144). Here, Lan is essentially describing the experience of diaspora because, as Philip Nel points out, “*diaspora* derives from the Greek prefix *dia* (‘through’) and the verb *sperein* (‘to sow’ or ‘to scatter’)” (358). It is fitting that it is a centaur who gives Lan the advice that “even scattered pieces can make a whole” (144). The centaur reminds Lan that “it isn’t easy, but those without the luxury of one place to call home must make do” (144). With this advice, the novel resonates with Saldanha’s argument that “for people of colour in Canada, truly belonging requires the roominess of more porous spaces and a way of living where ‘home’ and ‘away’ are not stabilized within national or cultural borders and categories” (135). In fact, at certain times in the novel, home is conceived not as a place, but a feeling in the body. When Lan feels at home with the centaurs, she notices she finally feels calm and she

“can’t remember the last time [she] felt that way. Definitely not in Toronto” (153). The embodiment of home is even more pronounced in a conversation with Annabelle, when Lan explains that her body is not built for the cold winters in Toronto (203). Annabelle responds that “maybe our bodies know home” (203). Lan’s question of what happens to the body when home changes, however, remains for the reader to think about (203). The focus on the connection between home and body can be read as a parallel between Nguyễn’s novel and Robertson’s novel, with the latter’s focus on blood memory.

When Lan finally returns to Toronto, she learns that home “can be many places at once” (230). The ending of Nguyễn’s novel is much more open than Robertson’s. While it is clear that Morgan and Eli will return to Misewa as soon as possible, Lan gives up her magic powers to save Annabelle’s homeland. Whether she will be able to create another portal to Silva remains unclear—yet her friend Marlow assures her that “Silva is as much your home as it is mine” (230). When conceptualizing Lan as a newcomer to the world of Silva, making a sacrifice to help restore the land of its inhabitants, Lan’s sacrifice can also be read through Phung’s concept of indebtedness, which involves “claiming settlerhood and the responsibilities of a settler ally” (60). Such a reading implies that Lan giving her magic to save Annabelle’s homeland supports a “process of relation building [that] inaugurates an ongoing, future-oriented relation of social return” (Phung 65). The ending of Nguyễn’s novel puts a strong focus on Lan building “a new home” in Toronto after she and her father receive news that her mother and Lan’s brother will finally join them (243). The novel leaves open whether the new home that Lan is building is the “one big solid thing” she has been hoping for or whether it will still be constructed out of the relationships to all the little pieces scattered across nation-states and worlds.

When characters in works of other-world fantasy cross thresholds into foreign worlds, the first question they usually ask is, “Where am I?” This question echoes Northrop Frye’s often-quoted cultural-nationalist argument that Canadian literature is preoccupied with the question, “[W]here is here?” (338). In the two children’s novels discussed in this article, however, this initial question quickly morphs into the more urgent question, “Where is home?” Other-world fantasies and wonderworks are ideally situated to reflect on questions

of belonging. In both novels discussed in this article, the protagonists travel to storied places, and it is in those places outside the Canadian nation-state where they learn what belonging means to them and where home is for them. Therefore, the novels suggest that it is not the nation-state where belonging is created. In a way, the novels thereby gesture towards the constructed nature of borders and (colonial) nation-states, similar to the way in which migrants as border-crossers “remind us of how arbitrary those boundaries are” (Nel 358). The novels not only suggest that we story belonging, but they also suggest that literature and stories have an active role to play in helping child readers learn about belonging and home.

In both novels, home is complicated from the outset because of the systems of settler colonialism. Reading the novels comparatively allows readers to see the complicated, entangled nature of the relationship between Indigenous people and immigrants. It is settler-colonial institutions which have removed Morgan from her home community. Yet it is also settler-colonial institutions which allow for Lan’s family to immigrate to Canada. While both novels reflect on what it means to come to a new place and engage with the beings in that new place in a respectful way—be they human or more-than-human—they do so in different ways, resulting from the very different positionalities of the protagonists. While Robertson’s novel is first directed at an Indigenous audience, teaching Indigenous readers about respectful relationships, Nguyễn’s novel gestures towards the responsibilities that immigrants have towards Indigenous communities, including themes such as learning and listening. Considering the novels’ relationships to their intertexts reveals how they constitute different instances of retelling. The prefix *re-* can mean either “again” or “anew” (Merriam-Webster). Robertson’s novel is a retelling of a traditional Cree oral story in the sense that this story is told again, adapted for the contemporary context, which speaks to Morgan’s reconnection with Cree culture. Nguyễn’s novel is telling the story of *The Wizard of Oz* in new ways, introducing significant differences which speak to Lan’s process of trusting in her individual agency.

The protagonists in these novels learn eventually that home is not necessarily what they expected it to be. Morgan thinks home is a place where one stays for a long time, yet she feels at home in the world of Askí several days after her arrival. Lan thinks that home needs to be

“one big solid thing,” but she learns that home can be many different pieces, scattered in different places. As I hope to have shown, home is conceptualized as “home away from home” in that there are potentially multiple homes for Indigenous and immigrant children. In this way, the novels create variations of the plot pattern of home/away/home that Nodelman and Reimer identify for children’s literature. The novels, furthermore, teach readers that home can be conceptualized as the dynamic interplay of place, story, and body, as well as relationships and responsibilities.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful, thoughtful, and constructive feedback.
2. Publishers generally define middle-grade novels as works written for children between eight and twelve.
3. While this article focuses on Canadian children’s literature in English, there is also a rich body of Canadian children’s literature and corresponding scholarly work written in French.
4. While not specifically written for children, the works of Tekahionwake (E. Pauline Johnson) “endured as a unique gateway for the young into unfamiliar cultural terrain in Canada,” as pointed out by Diana Chlebek (386).
5. Parr Traill, herself an emigrant to Canada, also published *The Canadian Settler’s Guide* for an adult audience (first published in 1854 under the title *The Female Emigrant’s Guide and Hints on Canadian Housekeeping*).
6. Métis author Beatrice Mosionier’s *Spirit of the White Bison* (1983) and Syilx (Okanagan) author Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* (1985) were published earlier but are considered to be young adult literature.
7. Western definitions of fantasy have emphasized the genre’s inherent opposition to what is “real and normal” (Hume qtd. in Pinsent 63), defining it as “fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects” (Manlove qtd. in Pinsent 63; emphasis mine). As Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice points out, the concept of fantasy is “burdened by dualistic presumptions of real and unreal that don’t take seriously or leave legitimate space for other meaningful ways of experiencing this and other worlds” (152). Justice proposes to use the term “wonderworks,” which “gestures, imperfectly, toward other ways of being in the world” (152). While marketed as fantasy, Robertson’s wonderwork *The Barren Grounds* challenges the dualistic presumptions of real and unreal that Justice criticizes.
8. In Manitoba, there were more than ten thousand children in the foster system in 2022, and about ninety per cent of them were Indigenous (Hobson 2022). The

- foster system has been described as a continuation of the Canadian residential school system.
9. The witiko is a cannibalistic figure in the Cree and Anishinaabe oral storytelling traditions and those of other Indigenous peoples. Cree storyteller Louis Bird provides an overview of different kinds of witiko (112). The figure is characterized by an insatiable hunger, prompting some Indigenous writers and storytellers to employ it as a metaphor for settler colonialism and its insatiable hunger for land and resources.
 10. For my analysis, I work with the 1939 movie adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* rather than the original novel by L. Frank Baum because I argue that *No Place Like Home*'s intertextual references gesture towards elements in the movie more than towards elements in the novel. For example, the phrase "there is no place like home," from which Nguyễn's novel takes its title, is central to the movie but not to the original novel.

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“Work Hard” to Find “Home”: Loneliness in Refugee Consciousness in Souvankham Thammavongsa’s How to Pronounce Knife

Souvankham Thammavongsa’s short story collection, *How to Pronounce Knife*, offers a poignant glimpse into the multifaceted dynamics of refugee and migrant students within and outside Canadian classrooms. Thammavongsa’s stories portray how the interplay between public and private spheres shapes refugee and migrant experiences, specifically their familial and educational experiences, and impacts their socio-economic success. As the children in these stories witness their refugee parents being ensnared into racialized abjection by exploitative labour practices, the children are left to navigate Canadian educational systems based on individualistic models of success. This emphasis on individual success often requires them to leave their families and communities behind. These generations then step into what scholar Vinh Nguyen calls *refugeetude*, a term he uses to describe a “continued state of being and mode of relationality” that can incorporate a myriad of feelings that enables refugees to break down and work against politically imposed refugee subjecthood (“Refugeetude” 110). By bringing into conversation three short stories in the collection, “A Far Distant Thing,” “Edge of the World,” and “How to Pronounce Knife,” I emphasize the generational inheritance of *refugeetude*. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the protagonists’ relationships with their families and their public spheres, such as Canadian schools, demonstrates *refugeetude* in the “sensing, feeling, thinking, knowing, and doing” that each character experiences in the everyday as they seek refuge from feelings of unbelonging (Nguyen, “Refugeetude” 127). Building upon Lily Cho’s seminal article “Turn to Diaspora,” where she suggests

that to be a part of a diasporic community is to be haunted by loss (17), I argue that while refugee consciousness can be a site of agency and recognition, it also leads to perpetual states of loneliness as it reinforces an emotional distance between community members and families and projects loss into the future.

Although some refugees can achieve socio-economic success in host countries, these success stories often represent exceptions, typically involving individuals who fit the stereotype of a “good” refugee. “Good” refugee subjects attain upward socio-economic mobility and therefore achieve “success” as defined by the capitalistic models in their host countries (Nguyen, “Refugeetude” 127). Their success benefits the host countries, thereby maintaining hierarchical structures (see, e.g., 127). For recognition, “refugees need to fulfill the expectation of gratitude, one that prescribes and produces a certain kind of good subjects—those who are successful and devoted to the nation-state” (Nguyen, *Lived Refuge* 30). It is important to understand that the few refugees who achieve this success are indeed exceptions, and many of these successes are marked by loss, whether the subject is aware of them or not. Cho signals this loss in her discussion of diasporic subjectivity, where she argues that diasporas “emerge through losses which have already happened, but which also define the future” (17). Similarly, refugeetude is a constant state that incorporates the recognition of these hierarchal dynamics. The term evokes “past projects of political recuperation—namely negritude, coolitude, and migritude—that take social experiences of marginalization and oppression and recast them as states of being or agency” (Nguyen, “Refugeetude” 110). Thus, understanding refugee subjecthood and diasporic loss informs refugeetude—what Nguyen cites as a “critical reorientation” for discussing the category of refugee. In spite of the potential for agency, living in a state of refugeetude also creates a state of loneliness that haunts the migrant.

As an Ontario educator working with refugee families, I taught refugee students, aged fourteen to twenty, who were struggling with feelings of “home” and “belonging.” Although the students formed friendships and joined clubs, the school struggled to provide adequate individual support for refugee students to help them to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency,¹ a process that takes about seven years and is an essential skill for success in postsecondary

education (Balash). Refugee parents shared dreams of economic stability for their children and expressed gratitude for the time I spent with them, whether it was in the classroom or during mealtimes. However, without long-term access to necessary learning resources, the likelihood of success for these students seemed uncertain. Perhaps because of my brown skin or my familiar name, the students and their families felt a sense of kinship with me. Yet I was just a temporary presence in their lives. I moved to another job and pursued graduate school, leaving the students with another teacher—one who did not look or feel like them. Himani Bannerji critiques the Canadian national identity as “ideologically homogenous” and exclusive, where a cohesive “national we” dictates the limits of multiculturalism (42). Whiteness, particularly in anglophone and francophone cultures, marks belonging, rendering those outside it “others” (Thobani 145; Boire 232). Navigating the education system as a racialized child of working-class immigrants, I’ve experienced Canada’s hierarchal “othering,” as well as a profound sense of loneliness that resulted from it. While diasporic and refugee consciousness fosters agency within the nation-state, it can also provoke feelings of intense loneliness within diasporic communities. This loneliness deeply affects refugee subjects, their families, and their communities. As educators, identifying this loneliness to increase empathy in our everyday encounters is essential to fostering empowered communities that value generational ties.

Nguyen emphasizes that refugee positionality is uniquely intertwined with gratitude narratives, as refugee subjects are expected to mitigate negative emotions with gratitude (*Lived Refuge* 24) since they have been “saved” from violence. This is reflected in the parents’ interactions with gratitude narratives in Thammavongsa’s stories. Indeed, the expectation of gratitude represents a form of ideological oppression as it acts as “a way for ‘rescuers’ and ‘benefactors’ to discipline refugee subjects into national devotion” without allowing space for feelings of “anger, frustration, and disappointment” (24). Therefore, to “be worthy of refuge, refugees must express gratitude to the state and its citizens” (29). In “A Far Distant Thing,” a young narrator recalls her family’s past, when they lived in a run-down apartment while her parents worked at a nail polish factory. She explains how her father’s non-Laotian coworkers, annoyed by his

efficiency, mimic “his speed, scooping up everything around him” (Thammavongsa 154). Her father, rather than taking offense, is just happy that his coworkers are “talking to him instead of pulling at the skin on the side of their eyes and laughing” (Thammavongsa 154). The father’s happiness is significant, as it is a manifestation of recognition. For the father, this mockery is a skewed acknowledgement from his coworkers that shows that he is a tangible being. He is alive and he can feel. Even in this complicated happiness, the child understands the fraught relationship between her father and his coworkers. By ridiculing the narrator’s father and asserting a labour hierarchy, the coworkers create a caricature of the father. Using irony, Thammavongsa illustrates how refugee and migrant workers are expected, by the nation-state and their employers, to work towards becoming model citizens, yet when the white majority in similar socio-economic brackets witnesses these efforts, they feel a sense of threat and fear.² The child narrates, “Dad thought it was a compliment, so he pretended to pick things up too, agreeing that was the best way to work” (154). By joining his coworkers in their mocking gesture, the father subtly asserts his agency, attempting to regain control of the situation.

His actions reflect a desire for peace. His pretense of agreement and participation can be interpreted as an extension of his understanding of refugee subjecthood that is tied to narratives of gratitude in showing he is grateful for and enthusiastic about the job. Nguyen explains how gratitude acts as a “facilitating bond between the state and refugees,” as refuge is “understood precisely as a benefit and not as a natural right” (*Lived Refuge* 32). Thus, by “pretend[ing]” and “agreeing” that speeding through tasks is ideal, the father demonstrates an awareness of his refugee subjecthood and leans into a performance of that subjecthood as a strategy for self-preservation. Both father and daughter recognize mockery and the work ethic. The father is aware of discrimination and seeks to maintain peace, which demonstrates his level of refugeetude; meanwhile, the child internalizes and complicates this refugeetude. She demonstrates refugeetude as a “mode of relationality” that seeks to comprehend the refugee “not as an irregularity or disruption of a political subjecthood—but as an experiential resource for developing significant and durable ways of being and moving through the world” (Nguyen, “Refugeetude” 111). The child is aware of how the settler

workers seek to impose feelings of unrootedness and discrimination onto her father and seeks to protect him, thus indicating her first steps into a more resistant enactment of refugeetude.

Threatened by his work ethic, the white coworkers isolate her father through mockery and relegate him further into the margins. Later, the narrator confirms that the father's efficiency results in the layoffs of some of his coworkers, whose colleagues approach him to "say a word that sounded like spitting . . . [a word that] took so much air to make . . . *thief*" (Thammavongsa 154). Anita Lahey describes Thammavongsa as someone who uses her anger persuasively by being "restrained enough to be tremendously moving" (Lahey). By quietly and subtly mobilizing anger, Thammavongsa resists hegemonic, trauma-based refugee narratives. Thammavongsa's exclusion of slurs illustrates how discrimination is not always overt, but exists within the everyday lives of racialized migrants. In the father's questions to his daughter on the meaning of the word "thief," Thammavongsa demonstrates how migrants and refugees can sense discrimination, even if they do not understand the perpetrators' words. The father's limited English communication prevents him from articulating his feelings of unease and thus he positions himself with a strategic unawareness that is essential for survival. This strategic positioning is further evident in "Edge of the World," where the father engages in his own mockery of his English-speaking coworkers to claim agency in a less-than-ideal workplace. The father's mockery of his Canadian coworkers and their emphasis on politeness accentuates a façade of acceptance. Whenever at work, the father would act like a soldier and say "Yes, Sir" to all their requests (Thammavongsa 97). However, he would say it with as much emphasis as a "Fuck you" (97), thus demonstrating his resistance to the compulsory expectation of gratitude. Regardless of his work, his coworkers do not see him as an equal; he is "like a dutiful soldier" (97) expected to follow rules. He recognizes this and mocks their assumption that he will remain perpetually indebted to their generosity. Thus, his subversion of expectations is his refugeetude.

The child's narration in "A Far Distant Thing" centres her desire to protect her father and his sense of fulfillment at work; she states, "I didn't want to tell him. *I wanted him to go on liking his job*" (Thammavongsa 154; emphasis added). In prioritizing her father's

happiness, the child does not act selfishly; instead, she realizes there is little room for alternative forms of meaningful work, as her father's livelihood and sense of self depend on his ability to provide for his family. Diasporic and refugee subjecthood is intimately connected to longings and "grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated" (Cho 15). Because of the nature of capitalist work structures, the father's only source of fulfillment outside of home comes from his work. He does not have the privilege of seeking out alternative avenues of satisfaction, such as recreational or community activities. For this reason, the father asserts to his daughter that, for fulfillment, "all you have to do is work hard. That's all it is, hard work" (154). In listening to her father's words, the child makes room for both of their desires: her desire to protect him from the realities of heightened scrutiny because of his refugee subjecthood by feigning ignorance of the word "thief," and his desire to present his daughter with a sense of optimism about the future. Yet, within this dynamic, the child faces a unique sense of loneliness. She carries within her a consciousness that combines both her understanding of subjecthood and her father's; while her actions are agential and a gesture of gratitude towards her father, they create a sense of loneliness. She "turns away" from her father so she does not give away her hurt (154).

These complex emotions of loneliness are further typified for Thammavongsa's refugee protagonists within their school settings, where teachers and non-refugee peers act as markers of "normalcy." School acts as a liminal space for refugee children, where expectations of the state and their own cultures create friction. In Thammavongsa's stories, school is a place for acquiring skills for a prosperous future in Canada, but also a place of contention that induces feelings of loneliness for the refugee protagonists and, at times, their families. Just as they work long and odd hours hoping for a sense of security, the parents motivate their children to "work hard" to ensure survival within the nation-state. In both "How to Pronounce Knife" and "Edge of the World," children contend with assimilative discourses in domestic and public spheres to varying levels. In places away from the general Canadian public, such as Laotian homes or community potlucks, cultural traditions help the parents maintain a sense of community; yet the parents emphasize the importance of adjusting to Canadian customs to integrate effectively into public spheres, such as

school. This balance of upholding cultural tradition and assimilating for socio-economic security exerts a pressure, whether overt or covert, on the children to *be* Canadian.

In “Edge of the World,” this tension between settings is evident through the complicated feelings of loss experienced by the child-narrator’s parent. The narrator recalls how her parents went to “get-togethers at the homes of other Lao refugees” to “hear news from back home or to ask what had happened to those left behind,” because when they “read newspapers or watch[ed] the evening news, they never heard anything about what was happening in their country. It was almost as if it didn’t exist” (96). The absence of geographical breadth in Canadian media evokes assimilative narratives, whereby refugees are expected to adjust to their new homes without thinking of their pasts. Yet the narrator’s emphasis on her parents’ desire to “hear news from back home” indicates her refugee parents’ struggle to recognize Canada as “home.”³ In *Race, Space, and the Law*, feminist critical race scholar Sherene Razack elaborates on the isolation of BIPOC communities in Canada and their erasure from Canada’s national fabric. Razack explores how “place becomes race through law” (1). Public spaces, such as schools, workplaces, and media, are organized to sustain and reproduce racial and unequal hierarchies “[that] maintain white settler society” (1). A lack of news regarding Laotian refugees amplifies the narrator’s parents’ feelings of displacement. The use of the deictic pronoun “it” within “It was almost as if it didn’t exist,” where the second “it” refers to the sentence’s main subject and cannot be recognized without the context of the previous sentence, symbolizes the long-term impacts of erasure.⁴

Memories of historical events, and fractures of those memories, heavily impact one’s sense of belonging and potential for finding “home” (Cho 16). After observing her parents’ feelings of displacement, the child inherits a sense of dislocation that influences future perceptions of “home” and “belonging” in Canada. Directly experiencing the fracture of collective Laotian memory because of media erasure, the child experiences a disruption in her Laotian identity formation. In her observations, the child begins to embody refugeehood as she comes “into consciousness of the social, political, and historical forces that situate refugee subjects” and “attempt[s] to know, impact, and transcend [the] situation” (Nguyen, “Refugeetude”

119). She begins to “produce refugee-tude (from inside to outside) . . . through contacts, attachments, and investments within everyday social and political interactions” (118). Indeed, Thammavongsa’s emphasis on the erasure of Laotian refugees from Western media highlights the irony of Canada’s humanitarian interests. The child’s observations demonstrate her ability to pick up on how these news-sharing gatherings act as an anchor for her community, representing a consciousness that unsettles expectations of refugee indebtedness towards the nation-state.

Building upon this observation of Laotian erasure, the tensions between maintaining cultural identity and prioritizing the English language highlight how assimilative discourses contribute to fragmented cultural learning and feelings of unbelonging in both the nation-state and specific diasporic communities. Despite the mother’s pride in her daughter’s ability to speak Lao, glad that she possesses “something from the old country,” another woman is surprised that the child speaks the language (97). She immediately says, “Oh no, no! Oy! You better start speaking English with her. How’s she going to fit in once she gets to school?!” (98). The connection between English and school reflects the expectation of assimilation and how it is connected to notions of success. Based on the woman’s logic, if the child continues to speak Lao, she will not be able to adapt to the expectations of the nation-state properly and will, therefore, be unsuccessful. This belief that speaking Lao is a risk to assimilation and educational success creates fear within the woman, evident in Thammavongsa’s use of successive exclamation marks and the rhetorical question. However, the child and mother ridicule these expectations. As soon as the woman leaves the kitchen, the narrator recalls: “[W]e laughed at her, how worried sick she seemed about not fitting in with everybody, as if that was a thing to want” (98). In including this exchange, Thammavongsa demonstrates more nuanced layers of refugee identity and refugee consciousness. For the woman in the kitchen, speaking English at home is essential for assimilation, but Thammavongsa shows how conforming to these expectations comes at the cost of one’s own identity. Through their joke, the mother and daughter share a level of intimacy in their recognition of assimilation as reductive. In this moment, their refugee-tude brings them together.

As the child progresses through school, her access to knowledge and reflexive observations of her mother demonstrate another characteristic of refugeetude: one which creates distance from her mother. Initially, the mother plays the role of a teacher in the child's life, but eventually, the child's growing academic knowledge reveals the mother's gaps in certain forms of knowledge, thus destabilizing the roles in their relationship. As the protagonist attends school, "[her] mother watches soaps alone" and has the child read books to her (99). Though it is not specified, the child's school attendance implicitly now monopolizes her time. When the child builds a world map puzzle her mother buys for her from Goodwill, a second-hand store, their differing states of refugee consciousness become increasingly apparent. Initially, the child independently builds the puzzle while her mother watches. Only when the child is unable to place a piece in the right spot does the mother assert her teacher position. She states, "That one doesn't go there. Try another one," and, when a piece finally fits, she says, "Every piece belongs somewhere, doesn't it?" (100–01). Focused on creating a teachable moment, she states an obvious fact to regain authority and a sense of confidence, perhaps at the expense of the child's. This questioning mirrors the behaviour of the woman at the potluck, whose insecurities are projected onto the child and her mother. Through this rhetorical questioning, Thammavongsa gestures towards how narrative of displacement can create distance within communities, as individual survival is prioritized over non-hierarchical community praxis. The mother's fixation on the map pieces only reinforces her feelings of the loss of connection with her daughter, reflecting the effort it takes to find a place of belonging for diasporic subjects. To reiterate Cho, the mother's losses impact her perceptions of future potential for belonging. The mother seems hopeful yet uncertain in her use of "doesn't it," as if trying to reassure herself that she, too, belongs somewhere.

However, the mother's assertion of authority is short-lived: "implying that the world is flat," the mother points to the edge of the map and tells her daughter, "It's dangerous . . . You fall off" (101). The child explains that her teacher, Miss Soo, says the world is round; that she "didn't know if what Miss Soo was telling [her] . . . was true. [She] hadn't thought to ask" (101). That the child does not think to ask if Miss Soo is telling the truth indicates the child views the teacher as an

absolute authority figure, superseding the authority of the parent. In correcting her mother, the daughter unintentionally asserts the authority of knowledge from school over her parent, highlighting the acculturation gap between them. Immediately, the mother is threatened by her child's new knowledge, and she sweeps "the puzzle to the floor with her palm. All the connected pieces [break] off from each other, the hours lost in a single gesture" (102). Miss Soo and the mother now compete for the role of teacher in the child's life. The mother's frustration comes across as almost childlike, as she abruptly ruins the child's long efforts at the puzzle without considering her feelings. The "connected pieces [breaking] off from each other" mark another layer of the child's refugee consciousness, one where she realizes that she and her mother are growing distant. The fraught interaction between them reiterates that, despite the child's refugeehood, her realization leads to a sustained loneliness for them both.

Through the mother's anxious body language, Thammavongsa suggests feelings of displacement and loneliness. After the puzzle incident, the narrator observes her mother's restlessness: while watching TV, her mother "ke[eps] pressing the button on the remote control, flipping to the next channel, and then next, until she start[s] all over again" (102). Activities that once comforted her now falter, reflecting her growing agitation and sense of loss—perhaps the loss of connection with her daughter. At the park, the mother's isolation becomes apparent to the daughter: "My mother sat on a park bench alone . . . facing me. She was not far. I called her to pay attention to me . . . but her head was turned away, her eyes focused on something else" (102–03). The narrator cannot reach her, and the conjunction "but" underscores the mother's physical and emotional distance; she is physically turned away. Overcome by loss and displacement, the mother ultimately leaves the family, prompting the grown protagonist to reflect on her mother's refugee consciousness.

Thammavongsa maintains a distance from the reader, focusing on a physical description of the protagonist mimicking her mother's laughter: "[I] went to the bathroom mirror and stared at the back of my mouth. I opened my mouth wide, saw the hot, wet, pink flesh, and the dark centre where my voice came out of and I laughed, loud and wild" (103). The sensory details "hot, wet, pink" create a vivid image, and her feelings are palpable, but they remain unarticulated. Through

narrative distance, Thammavongsa respects the autonomy of the narrator and her mother, leaving the reader to grapple with the uncertainty surrounding the daughter's emotions. Laughing like her mother, the narrator inherits her refugeetude, experiencing a moment of self-awareness marked by "loud and wild" laughter—a cathartic release that accentuates her loneliness in contending with the loss of her mother in the present and the future.

Educational expectations and experiences further demonstrate loneliness as a result of refugeetude in "How to Pronounce Knife." Like the woman in "Edge of the World" who emphasizes the importance of speaking English, the father in "How to Pronounce Knife" tells his daughter, in Lao, "Don't speak Lao and don't tell anyone you are Lao. It's no good to tell people where you're from" (4). He says this while wearing a "[T]-shirt, [where] four letters [stand] side by side: LAOS" (5). Thammavongsa emphasizes the irony of the parent's words but also portrays them empathetically. The father speaks in Lao and wears a loud t-shirt that asserts his cultural identity, yet, when teaching his daughter, he emphasizes the importance of "fitting in." In "How to Pronounce Laos," Guy Beauregard explains how the father's warning "sets in motion a powerful rhetorical device through which such warnings paradoxically keep attempts to speak and tell alive." Indeed, the child inherits knowledge about what can be said in public about her identity, and this suppression of identity feeds into her own cultural consciousness. Beauregard continues, "The irony made visible through the daughter's line of vision likewise keeps LAOS in sight, even as—and perhaps especially when—the protagonist struggles in and moves through the Canadian public school system and the specific forms of knowledge it assesses and rewards."

At the same time, with this irony, Thammavongsa brings humour and laughter as resistant refugeetude. In an interview with Cornelia Channing, Thammavongsa characterizes the presence of laughter as "a way of surviving" that helps to "take back power." Laughter exists in moments of joy, but also when things are unbearable or uncomfortable; it even exists "when there is nothing else to feel" (Channing). Through this humorous scene with her father, the child must contend with what Narissa S. Balce calls the "multicultural present" while grappling with the erasure and displacement of her Laotian identity and colonial histories amplified by her father's

emphasis on assimilation (54).⁵ As Cho argues, diasporic subjectivity emerges from relations of power that are “both external to the diasporic subject and internally formative” (15). Diasporas are consistently “turning in relation to the power of subjection” (15). This turning results in the emergence of diasporic subjects as they turn upon “markers of the self—homeland, memory, loss—even as they turn on or away from them” (15). While the parents believe that economic success will increase their child’s likelihood of finding belonging in Canada, the irony of the above scene and the child’s observations of her father reveal the real condition of subjectivity: one where generations of diasporans contend with controlled infrastructures in the forms of work and school that uphold Canada’s racial hierarchies, hindering their senses of “home” and belonging.

These racial hierarchies affect Joy, the child protagonist of “How to Pronounce Knife,” as she struggles to find academic and social belonging at school. As Laotian refugees, of whom only Joy’s father reads English, Joy’s family disregards school notes from her teacher, Miss Choi. As a result, she arrives on picture day in informal clothes: “The note had been typed out, folded over two times, and pinned to the child’s chest. It could not be missed. As she did with all the other notes . . . her mother removed the pin and threw it away. If the contents were important, a phone call would be made to the home. And there had been no such call” (Thammavongsa 3). By attaching the note to Joy, Miss Choi reduces her to an object and marks her as “other.” The act of pinning reflects the teacher’s authority, extending not only over Joy but also, implicitly, over her family. The note’s placement on Joy’s chest highlights her vulnerability, with its closeness to her heart representing the school’s invasion of personal space. Joy is limited to being a messenger who cannot have an active role in communication.

Unfortunately, when she singles out Joy from the rest of the class, Miss Choi overlooks her duty to serve Joy as an educator; instead, she prioritizes educational expectations. Scholar and educator bell hooks asserts the importance of centring service to students to empower them and enhance their learning. She explains that teachers must ask students, “What do you need in order to learn?” or “How can I serve?” to foster environments that “[honour] the students’ will to learn” (92). Because student learning is multidimensional, teachers must account for individual experiences that may hinder or strengthen student

learning in the classroom. Here, Miss Choi may think she is meeting her obligations as a teacher by sending home a note, but she does not account for the English language levels of Joy's parents or the role Joy can have in communication. She imposes a state of loneliness upon Joy, while Joy's role as a messenger heightens the tensions between the public and private spheres of her life. Additionally, Miss Choi does not account for the emotional impact that the parents may experience when seeing a message pinned to their child. As Nguyen asserts, "refugeetude . . . marks a critical reorientation, an epistemological shift in how we think about and understand the category of refugee" ("Refugeetude" 110). Through historical consciousness, it takes social experiences of marginalization and oppression and "recast[s] them as states of being or agency" (110). Indeed, Joy's mother throws away the note as an act of resistance and, arguably, as a manifestation of her refugeetude; she rightfully seeks respect through a phone call for direct communication.

Miss Choi's othering of Joy results in Joy feeling a sense of apprehension whenever she is at school. At lunchtime and during collective activities such as reading on the classroom carpet, she is cautious and distant from her peers and teacher. On picture day, she sees "all the girls . . . wearing variations of pink, and the boys [in] dark suits and little knotted ties" (Thammavongsa 5). The students' outfits gesture towards gendered ideals and signify what it means to "fit in." The narrator emphasizes the child's feeling of unbelonging among her peers in her description of the scene:

The child looked down at her green jogging suit. The green was dark, like the green of broccoli, and the fabric at the knees a few shades lighter and kept their shape uneven when she was standing straight up. In this scene of pink and sparkles and matching purses and black bow ties and pressed collars, she saw she was not like the others. (5)

Joy experiences a sense of displacement and unease among her peers, which amplifies her state of refugeetude. Her worn-out jogging suit contrasts starkly with her classmates' "sparkles," "matching purses," and "pressed collars," accentuating her socio-economic differences.

Thammavongsa's consecutive use of *and* highlights Joy's perception that these differences are endless: "she [is] not like the others" (5). Joy attempts to mask her unease, but Miss Choi spots her with "eyes widened" and questions whether her parents read the note; Joy responds, "No," as she "[doesn't] want to lie, but there [is] no point in embarrassing her parents" (5).

Adrienne Chan emphasizes that teachers often lack an understanding of the history of Canada's institutional racism and advance postracial narratives while glossing over racism's impact on classroom dynamics (140). Although Miss Choi may not have intentionally isolated Joy, her actions contribute to Joy's marginalization, implicitly normalizing such othering among students. Internalizing this displacement, Joy consciously seeks to minimize scrutiny of her parents. This withholding of information reflects Joy's diasporic subjectivity and refugee-tude, as she carries a consciousness of loss that shapes her desires in both the present and the future. The conflicting desires that Joy experiences—her desire to be truthful with her teacher while also desiring to shield her parents—accentuate the heightened tension she faces when considering her public and private spheres, which in turn increases her feelings of loneliness. Joy attempts to mould herself to fit the teacher's and her parents' expectations, but she is left all alone. Yet, perhaps unbeknownst to Joy, her withholding of the truth resists hegemonic structures and creates a sense of unease for Miss Choi, whose own Asian name, rhyming with Joy's, positions her as an example of normative models of being and assimilation.

Joy further demonstrates her commitment to honouring her parents' intelligence by asking her father for help with her English homework (7). She sits with him and listens intently as he helps her read the word *knife*: "She brought the book to him . . . [and] he leaned over it and said, 'Kah-nnn-eye—ff. It's kahneyff.' That's what it was, what it sounded like to him" (7). This exchange conveys their closeness: the daughter feels confident in her father and feels no shame in asking him for help, and the father reciprocates her trust. He does not hesitate, and confidently helps her with the pronunciation to the best of his ability. Thammavongsa's use of hyphens shows how the father phonetically models how to break down words. Despite using proper techniques, he still struggles to understand English's orthographic

rules, which is symbolic of the unspoken rules governing Canadian education systems and their assimilative expectations.⁶ Cultural nuances such as maintaining eye contact, proper methods of questioning, and appropriate clothing are some of the unspoken rules upheld in schools that often signify appropriate academic and social progression. White settler students of higher socio-economic brackets tend to maintain this cultural advantage over those from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds, much like Joy, as they are socialized into these “norms” from a young age. Indeed, Joy’s observations and omissions of certain truths from her father and school demonstrate her refugeetude. She is aware of her disadvantages due to her father’s lack of social capital, but Miss Choi appears to overlook this, contributing to Joy’s loneliness and perpetuating the school setting as one of inequity rather than opportunity.

Although her father takes time to help her with reading, Joy lacks the necessary language skills to recognize his mistake. However, his confidence and use of a simple, direct instruction for pronunciation deepens her respect for him. Timothy August attends to Thammavongsa’s use of “bare language,” explaining that her “direct and literal” language mimics Lao, which creates a distance “between the narrator and the reader, while producing a sense of detachment from the characters as well” on the part of the reader (5). This distance, then, acts in a twofold way: while it allows readers an insight into refugee lives, it also maintains refugee agency by withholding knowledge. Joy respects this agency and upholds her father’s position in the family. The narrator underlines their physical similarities: “From behind, the child knew she looked like her father. Her hair had been cut short in the shape of a bowl. The child’s shoulders drooped, and her spine bent like there was some weight she was carrying there, like she knew what a day of hard work was all about” (6). Joy recognizes that she resembles her father, especially with her hair cut short. Although the father’s body language is not described directly, it can be inferred that he shares his posture with his daughter. She inherits a burden of resilience⁷ from her parents, her spine bending under its weight, and learns how to survive in a space that marks them all as outsiders. Thammavongsa’s juxtaposition of father and child demonstrates the “porous temporality” (Nguyen, “Refugeetude” 115) of refugeetude and how one does not stop being a refugee even after

being granted citizenship, as “traces of consciousness, knowledge and feeling[s] of refugeeness” act as “foundational to a present and future conception of self” (117). Indeed, the protagonists of “How to Pronounce Knife,” “Edge of the World,” and “A Far Distant Thing” inherit refugee consciousness through generations. It is “a politics” that emerges in relation to inequities of power within the nation-state, whether it be capitalist structures or school environments (“Refugeetude” 118).⁸ The protagonists experience moments of “clarity and communion” (118) that broaden their understandings of hierarchical structures alongside moments of delimitation, but it also sustains a sense of loneliness. Their consciousness provides knowledge, yet they hesitate to share the truths of this knowledge, fearing they may dishearten their families and communities.

During the next day’s reading activity, Miss Choi notices that Joy has not read aloud and asks her to get her book and read for the class. As Joy reads, everything goes smoothly until the word *knife*: “It was only five letters, but there might as well have been twenty there. She said it the way her father had told her, but she knew it was wrong because Miss Choi would not turn the page. . . . But the child didn’t know how to pronounce it” (Thammavongsa 7). Joy’s sense of pressure to perform increases because she cannot pronounce the word. Acutely aware of her teacher’s gaze, she continues pronouncing the word “the way her father had told her” (7). Despite knowing her pronunciation is wrong, her continued efforts demonstrate her desire to protect herself and her father. However, her teacher’s unwillingness to correct her, waiting instead for self-correction or a peer interjection, disregards Joy’s emotional state and right to learn. The teacher’s lack of intervention magnifies Joy’s alienation in school, reinforcing a binary of right and wrong and excluding her from the learning process. This systemic othering then contributes to Joy’s loneliness within the school environment. Reiterating Cho’s emphasis on turning to and from power as a means of externally and internally impacting diasporic subjectivity, Joy consistently turns to and from power depending on her surroundings to protect herself and her family. Her refugeetude enables her to make conscious decisions about the information she shares, but it also leaves her all alone.

When an annoyed white classmate with “yellow hair” eventually corrects her, Joy’s frustration overwhelms her: “This girl had blue eyes

and freckles dotted around her nose. This girl's mother was always seen in the parking lot after school honking in a big, shiny black car with a V and W, holding each other inside a circle. Her mother owned a black fur coat and walked in heels" (8). Fixating on their racial and socio-economic differences, Joy identifies barriers between herself and her peers. She emphasizes her classmate's whiteness in terms of Western standards of beauty: the "yellow hair," "blue eyes," and "freckles" implicitly contrast with the description of Joy that captures Joy's own self-consciousness about her bowl cut and drooping shoulders. While Joy's parents work long hours and their labour manifests in their physical appearance, her classmate's mother picks her daughter up in a large luxury car while dressed in expensive clothing and footwear unsuitable for labour. In this way, Joy highlights the "consciousness of the material life that the refugee is delivered into, and how capitalist refuge has structured [her family's] ability to live" and thrive (Nguyen, "Refugeetude" 119). The narrator continues: "This girl was like everyone else in the class, reading loud and clear, winning prizes. The child was the only one not to have won one yet" (Thammavongsa 8). Her peers are praised for their clear reading, but Joy is overlooked despite her efforts, resulting in her exclusion.

Despite her age, Joy deeply understands her father's struggles and seeks to protect him from her struggles at school, recognizing the efforts he makes to provide for her family's survival. Even after becoming angry when a peer corrects her pronunciation of *knife*, Joy conceals her emotions to protect her father's dignity. The narrator explains:

The child does not tell him the *K* in *knife* is silent. She doesn't tell him about being in the principal's office, about being told of rules and how things are the way they are. It was just a letter, she was told, but that single letter, out there alone, and in the front, was why she was in the office in the first place. She doesn't tell how she had insisted the letter *k* was not silent . . . [or how] she had argued and argued . . . she never gave up on what her father said, on the first sound there. And none of them, with all their lifetimes of reading and good education, could explain it. (9)

Linda M. Morra and Gregory Betts argue that Joy's outrage has an "affective and precarious value" (126); it is about asserting that even the silenced letters must be recognized and "not pushed to the margins" (126). Joy displays resistant refugee-tude as she is conscious of how the education system erases the agency of those who cannot assimilate. Her thoughts, like a mantra, accentuate her desire to honour her family's knowledge and their efforts to survive. Prioritizing her father's dignity, Joy resists sharing anything that may impact his sense of self. Her anger is resistance, and Joy tells her father "[o]nly that she had won something" (Thammavongsa 9). She displays her consciousness of how social structures, such as education systems, create distance between one's family, culture, and sense of self. However, this knowledge still contributes to feelings of loneliness. Even at such a young age, Joy navigates which knowledge she can share in public and private spheres. Her refugee-tude is her ethos, and she is purposeful in prioritizing her family in her decisions.

Perhaps too late, Miss Choi realizes the weight of singling out Joy in class and attempts to reconcile with her by offering her a prize from her desk. The narrative relates, "The child reach[es] inside and grab[s] at the first thing her fingers touch[.]. It [is] a puzzle with an airplane in the sky" (Thammavongsa 9). Here, the narrative re-establishes Joy as "the child," recognizing her age and the importance of joy within learning processes. There is a sense of wonder as the narrator offers a tactile image of Joy's fingers reaching into a "red velvet sack" and touching the puzzle (9). The puzzle symbolizes Joy's development and even her potential in education when intergenerational bonds and alternative knowledge systems are acknowledged. Joy arrives home and shares her prize with her father, who "is delighted because, in some way, he has won it too" (9). Together, "they take the prize, all the little pieces of it, and start forming the edge, the blue sky, the other pieces, the middle. The whole picture, they fill those in later" (9). Thammavongsa's tender portrayal of familial bonds demonstrates their importance in nurturing an environment of care and holistic education. As the narrator explains, Joy and her father collaborate to survive and share moments of joy. The puzzle is a "vessel for intergenerational bonds" (Raheja 51), demonstrating survival in Canada amid normative expectations that often dictate success.

Indeed, nurturing these bonds can lessen feelings of loneliness while still having refugeetude.

“Edge of the World,” “How to Pronounce Knife,” and “A Far Distant Thing” illuminate the inheritance and layers of refugeetude between generations and how consciousness of refugee subjecthood leads to loneliness. Unlike isolation and alienation, which are often linked to systemic barriers, loneliness is an emotional state that distances individuals from their communities and families. In Thammavongsa’s stories, although the characters experience refugeetude in various forms, such as agency, resistance, and moments of clarity, their knowledge contributes to their loneliness. This loneliness is amplified in nation-states, such as Canada, that promote gratitude narratives without prioritizing long-term generational support for refugee families. While knowledge and consciousness bring forth endless possibilities for the future, they also demonstrate how the process of developing refugee consciousness is emotionally taxing, especially for first- and second-generation refugee children who are left to navigate various layers of consciousness while often rejecting imposed notions of refugee-subjecthood. Thammavongsa’s *How to Pronounce Knife* refuses to allow refugee narratives to be subsumed into a national fabric and foregrounds their rights to anger, joy, silence, and living beyond survival.

Notes

1. CALP is the use of language in a decontextualized academic setting, which includes proficiency without non-verbal cues, accessible language, and minimal cultural cues embedded into texts. On average, it takes five to seven years for students to become proficient in the language of instruction; however, because five to seven years is an average, some students take less time and some must take more. Factors such as a lack of formal education prior to entering the Canadian school system, intense feelings of unbelonging, that can manifest in a multitude of forms such as refugeetude, contribute to longer language acquisitions in refugees and low socioeconomic migrants (Balash).
2. Canada’s history of xenophobia towards East Asian and Southeast Asian migrants exemplifies the “Yellow Peril” that began with Chinese immigrants’ arrival in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Described as threats to Western civilization, yet essential in infrastructure development such as the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), Asian immigrants were seen as “job stealers” who were “immoral and filthy threats to Canadian society” (Yu, 00:01:14–00:02:00). See Iko Day’s *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*.

3. In Guy Beauregard's "How to Pronounce Laos" forum, he highlights that this mentioning of Laos by Thammavongsa illustrates various "method[s] of knowing and affecting the world" (Nguyen qtd. in Beauregard 136). He contends that Thammavongsa's stories teach readers "how to acknowledge . . . the many things we do not, and perhaps cannot, know" (Beauregard 136).
4. In the 1970s and 80s, Canada accepted fifty thousand refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (Atkey xi). These refugees are commonly referred to as "boat people," as they travelled to neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong by boat, and then to Canada through public and private sponsorship programs that sought to help resettle them within the country (Lambert).
5. Balce, a scholar of Asian American Studies, extends understanding of humour to postcolonial subjects through the term *postcolonial satire*, where humour "engages with and alludes to the past or imperial historians" to manage the "stresses and anxieties of the imperial past and problems of the multicultural present" (54).
6. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, wherein children benefit from three primary forms of capital inherited from their parents—economic, social, and cultural—is directly reflected in Joy's disadvantages at school (Bourdieu 243, 249).
7. Jonathan Joseph's understanding of resilience as a neoliberal tool for assimilation informs my reading of resilience in Thammavongsa's stories and how it is promoted by governments to "conceal the continuing reproduction of hierarchal power relations" (41). The children's resilience, therefore, mimics the resilience that refugee and migrant parents must exercise in Canada's multicultural discourse through their work ethic.
8. For insight into the inheritance of refugee consciousness, see Thammavongsa, "There Are No Prizes."

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Positionality is Not (Only) a Metaphor: Distance-Focused Reading in Indigenous Comics

This paper suggests that self-location plays a major role in the way we read. It develops the ideas of *distance* and *reader positionality* beyond their usual abstractness into the basis for an ethical reading approach for Indigenous comics. What I put forward is a challenge to the literary practice of close reading, specifically in relation to its usual objectives of collapsing the spaces between reader, text, and author or creator; “digging deeper”; “getting to the heart of the text”; “putting yourself in the author (or character’s) shoes”; and other common maxims used to teach engagement to beginner literary critics. I seek not to disregard detailed analyses or deep critical engagement, but rather to attend carefully to issues of positionality and presumed unlimited access inherent in the practice of engaging with literatures across creator/reader difference. And while this proposed approach is not something specific to Indigenous comics, compared to typical reading and viewing methods it can promote a deeper, more meaningful, relational settler engagement with Indigenous comics that tangibly attends to issues of positionality, location, and limits.

In this paper, I theorize what it might mean to critically engage with a work *from a distance*. In order to do so, I begin first with a brief overview of the concepts of positionality and self-location, specifically in the field of Indigenous literatures; then, I review the way location has been dealt with in the creation of and criticism of comics, especially as it relates to ethics of positionality; lastly, I use “Tilted Ground,” a comic by Ligwílda’xw of the Kwakwaka’wakw Nations writer Sonny Assu, Off.459 illustrator Kyle Charles, and settler artist Scott A. Ford to demonstrate and explain a reading approach that

promotes a positive and productive acknowledgement of, reflection on, and maintenance of distance and separation.

On Positionality and the Metaphor of Positionality

Positionality has become something of a buzzword in the field of Indigenous literary studies. Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder insists an attention to positionality is a necessity in Indigenous Studies, “a corrective for the fixation on Aboriginal identity that is already examined keenly, regularly discussed, legislated, regulated, questioned, dismissed, debated, and defended” (8). Perhaps the reason positionality is so “rarely identified and discussed” in typical literary analysis, Reder suggests, is the theoretical draw of the “so called ‘unbiased’ pose” (8). But because of the growing acceptance that “all knowledge is positioned” (7), the declaration of one’s positionality—an act that can “make visible the lines of relationship that affect one’s perspective”—has become crucial to thoughtful criticism in general.

For Indigenous literary studies in what is colonially referred to as Canada, the need for an attention to positionality is amplified by problematic politics and rhetorics of multiculturalism, reconciliation, and the “particular, historically-grounded insistence by descendants of European settlers on obliterating difference [from] and claiming connection” to Indigenous people and peoples (Hoy 9). In *How Should I Read These?*, settler thinker and artist Helen Hoy points to the tension between equally problematic approaches that either erase difference and profess closeness or emphasize otherness. She highlights the nature of identity as “multiply, fluidly, and relationally defined” (17), putting forward Susan Stanford Friedman’s (Euro-American)¹ approach of relational positionality as a response to the “shifting positions of privilege and exclusion” (Friedman qtd. in Hoy 18). The growing focus on positionality in the field, reflected in the now-common practice of introductory positionality statements, seeks not only to resist simple cultural identification or acknowledgements of difference, but also to emphasize the importance of relationality and self-reflection necessary in this field.

Some scholars have suggested that positionality statements, despite good intentions, have become increasingly performative. Allison

Hargreaves, a white settler scholar, points to growing expectations that critics “understand ‘location’ not only as a gesture . . . but, rather, as a relational process grounded in Indigenous ontologies” (110); in “‘The Lake Is the People and the Life that Come to It’: Location as Critical Practice,” she goes on to explain the damage that can come from disengagement, rooted in “the fantasy of irreducible distance” as well as “confidence in one’s rightful adoption of these protocols” (110). The risk in calling for more attention to positionality, as Hargreaves confirms, is that “[t]oo often, appropriative rehearsals take the place of more genuine engagements involved in working for social transformation from where one stands” (110).

In their foundational essay “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” Eve Tuck (Unanga̋, Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, Alaska) and K. Wayne Yang (Asian American)² characterize the kinds of acts of performative relationality that Hargreaves points to as “settler moves to innocence”: strategic “attempt[s] to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege” (10). Tuck and Yang draw attention to these moves to innocence to highlight the problematic rhetoric of decolonization pervasive in North America that conflates metaphorical decolonization with material decolonization; that is, with treating “decolonizing the mind” not as the first step, but as the only one (19). As Hargreaves suggests, settler positionality statements have become, in many cases, similarly problematic, conflating generic, abstract self-location (e.g., a rehearsed land acknowledgement) with deep, relational, individualized, material positionality (e.g., “working toward social transformation from where one stands” [Hargreaves 110]). In the same way that decolonization as metaphor “turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation” (7), positionality as exclusively metaphorical reduces our complex, shifting relational identities and perspectives to an oversimplified statement of introduction.³ In this paper, I put forward an approach to reading and viewing comics inspired by Tuck and Yang’s calls for less abstraction in relation to decolonization, and by calls like those from Hargreaves and Hoy, who have so aptly identified the complexity of settler location in the field of Indigenous literary studies. Calls from these scholars ask us to consider: How can we extend beyond merely acknowledging our position to consider positionality as method?

And so, it is my hope that this essay both communicates and begins to enact my commitment to relational, socially transformative academic work on location and positionality. Part of this adoption of positionality as method is reflected in the citational practices of this essay. Given the complex, shifting nature of positionality and self-location terminology and specificity—which arise for a variety of reasons, including the development of a new theory or concept in the field, recovery of personal familial details, or even a particular audience’s knowledge—I have contacted each thinker and creator I cite in this essay via email and used their desired phrasing to identify them in this essay, both to ensure accuracy and to emphasize their agency in the way they are identified on the page, as well as to highlight the fraught nature of our current practice, which relies on unverifiable, potentially out-of-date information regarding something so personal and ever-changing. I’ve done this in every case possible; in the cases where this was impossible (for example, for those I cite who have since passed or whenever I received no response), I have included available positionality-related information from other sources, written by them whenever possible, as well as a footnote citing the source from which I pulled the information in the first instance their name appears in this article. Including such detail may read as stylistically clunky or inelegant, and you’ll notice variations among the ways people identify throughout this piece. In including such detail, I seek to draw attention to the increasing invisibility and neglect of positionality statements’ original objectives: relationality, reflexivity, and social transformation.

Such a method raises the question of my own position. I am a white settler scholar, raised in Amiskwaciy Waskahikan (Edmonton) by two Polish political refugees who immigrated to Canada in the late 1970s. I work out of the University of Saskatchewan, whose main campus is located on Treaty 6 territory, in what is now referred to as Saskatoon, kisiskâciwan (Saskatchewan), upon lands that have been cared for, traversed by, and home to diverse Indigenous peoples for millennia, including the Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Lakota, Nakota, Dakota, and Métis. Moreover, this essay is a product of the perspective I gained during a year I spent away from Canada, in a small town in northern Germany. Living thousands of kilometres away from the Indigenous lands and people(s) whose literature I study has had a profound effect on my thinking about position and place. Most notably, and as a

starting point for this paper, it has inspired a reflection on the importance and ethics of distance. This essay reflects on and theorizes the significance of distance and what it means to acknowledge our ever-shifting positions as they relate to the books we read.

The distance- and positionality-focused reading and viewing method I put forward in this essay is guided by the late writer and activist Lee Maracle (Stó:lō, Tsleil-Waututh, and Métis),⁴ whose methodology of *see* promotes a transformation of its practitioner via an uncovering of relationship between themselves and the object of study (“Oratory on Oratory”). *See* calls viewers to attend to the “direction from which looking occurs,” warning that without such an attention to location or position, “study becomes reactive, reproductive, and colonial” (145). Perhaps most relevant to the development of this essay, Maracle maintains that the objective of study and *see* is to “encourage us to look again, to peel back each layer and gain deeper understanding” of our relationship to what we look at (146). The present essay is one of a two-part project, the second of which explores practices of intersubjective looking and provides a more comprehensive explanation of the theory behind the project in its entirety (see Abram, “Learning from Looking”). I take seriously Anishinaabe activist and writer Kimberly M. Blaeser’s⁵ warning against literary criticism that centres non-Indigenous theory, and the risk for even the convergence of mediated Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices to “carr[y] with it the possibility for a new form of dominance,” that “Native stories may again be changed or taken out of context” (59). By looking to Maracle, a Coast Salish theorist, and the story being read for guidance on its own analysis, I seek to respond to Blaeser’s call for criticism that acknowledges and utilizes the inter- and intratextuality, relationality, and critical contexts contained in stories and that are needed for their interpretation.

Based on recent scholarship on positionality and self-location, a distance-focused reading approach involves the initial theoretical acknowledgements that: (1) a specific, shifting, individual location, or perspective, exists for each of us; this means that none of us can “see” a story’s whole (i.e., understand it completely), and neither can we guarantee that even the theoretical summation of our individual perspectives would reveal everything about a story; and, (2), because

no two readers or creators share a physical or metaphorical location, there must, by necessity, exist a distance between them.

Locating the Comics Reader and the “Living World” of the Comic

The ways in which early comics studies scholars have dealt with the ideas of location, position, and world-building raise questions about access and ethical engagement regarding Indigenous comics. A recent development in the field of comics studies is a growing challenge to settler cartoonist and author Scott McCloud’s oft-cited statement that the main purpose of comics is to tell a story. One noteworthy alternative put forward by settler cartoonist and thinker James Kochalka is that comics’ main purpose is, instead, to “create and activate a world inside us” (16). If this is so, how do we co-create, recreate, or even imagine worlds not meant for us? Should we? To whom do these worlds belong and how can—or should—we limit access to them?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, comics theorists debated the extent to which comics are a spatial, temporal, or narrative medium. New Zealand artist Dylan Horrocks⁶ built on Kochalka’s argument to propose a new way of understanding comics, a focus on the construction of a place rather than a series of events. He asks, “What happens when . . . we replace *plot* with *landscape* as the central organizing element? And when, instead of going on a journey through *time*, we set out to create and explore a *space*?” Certainly, Horrocks’ perspective is a compelling alternative to what he calls the “linear path between artist and audience” that McCloud initially envisions in his work, wherein the artist’s role is to maintain control of the sequence (and thus reception) of the story.⁷ Horrocks frees readers in a Barthesian way, insisting the world of each comic is “a kind of playground” in which, to borrow James Kochalka’s words, “the physical world fades away as we step into this new reality . . . a living world” (131). Central to Horrocks’ thinking is the possibility that “[o]nce the playground is built, others can come and try it out—hopefully gaining their own insights and understandings along the way.” However idyllic, this idea that the world created by the artist is one that the reader, should they decide to open the text, always necessarily enters its “living world” poses ethical conundrums for comics set in worlds only meant

for some readers. Kochalka and Horrocks voice issues with McCloud's narrowing of the role of the reader, but their swing to the other end of the spectrum of reader access and freedom neglects to acknowledge intended and secondary audiences, especially regarding works written by and for racialized people.

Horrocks maintains that it is an "inescapable fact" that "imaginary worlds" are also created in nonfictional or biographical comics, which similarly take place in worlds with "their own history, atmosphere, and sense of time" separate from the reality on which they are based. He insists, "No matter how much [the world of the comic] may resemble the 'real world,' it is actually something else." While I agree with this argument and its foundation in an acknowledgement of the separation of place and land and its textual and illustrated representation, the problem with advocating for an unlimited exploration of even representations of real place and land is that it promotes a philosophy of unchecked access to Indigenous space and place. For example, in *Making Comics*, Scott McCloud's most recent book, he also comments on worldbuilding. He encourages creators to take their time with establishing shots "because readers *want* and *expect* that sense of place" (23), and that place-based details "can make the difference between *knowing* where your story takes place—and *being there*" (159). He also explains how illustrations of place without other human subjects create meaningful opportunities for the reader to "form a personal *relationship* with your world" (167), referring multiple times to the setting of a creator's comic as *theirs*. Moreover, McCloud advises creators to actually visit the places they draw—"anything within driving distance"—and "lose [themselves] in the environments [they] draw" (177). In the context of encouraging new illustrators to draw realistic backgrounds, these pieces of advice seem supportive, but suggesting to beginner creators that "[t]here are no limits to what you can fill that blank page with . . . [that] there are no rules" neglects the deep long-standing relationships between Indigenous people(s) and their lands (5).

Horrocks also troubles McCloud's insistence upon artistic control over the narrative and narrative space. He acknowledges that the artist can *influence* how their work will be experienced, but leaves space for readers to forge their own paths within the world created, a perspective supported by trailblazing cartoonist and comics theorist

Will Eisner. Eisner, whom McCloud cites in his search for a definition of comics, asserts a need to “dictate the sequence in which the reader will follow the narrative” (15); however, he also points to the impossibility of fully doing so: “The most important obstacle to surmount is the tendency of the reader’s eye to wander . . . there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first” (15). Again, I agree with Horrocks’ philosophical argument for ceding control to the reader, which allows for multiple readings of works, but it must be accompanied by a caveat. While the reader can (and should!) be a collaborator in the meaning-making process in storytelling, there should also be limits to this influence, specifically in regard to maintaining and upholding traditional Indigenous storytelling protocols. I believe literature—perhaps in comics more so than in other mediums—encourages understanding and self-reflection. Horrocks argues that “the more we explore the worlds that we and our children build, the better we will understand ourselves.” I agree wholeheartedly with this statement, which ends his article on worldbuilding. One question I pose in response is: Who is “we”?

While this essay addresses most directly the work of early comics studies thinkers, there is a deep and valuable body of Indigenous comics scholarship and creative output upon which I build.⁸ Because, as settler scholar Sarah Henzi maintains, there exists a “continued predominance of racist stereotypes . . . [especially in] popular culture and mainstream mass media” (23), a great deal of Indigenous comics criticism has worked to challenge, counter, and correct misrepresentations, colonial narratives, and the iconography that reproduces them.⁹ This branch of criticism resists what Tuck calls “damage-centred research” and its long-term repercussions beyond misrepresentation of Indigenous subjects (409), including the dangerous and imperious settler surveillance and exploitation of Indigenous communities. I build on this foundational body of work that attends to the way we view Indigenous subjects to bring further attention to the way we look at representations and recreations of Indigenous land and space in comics. Moreover, comics theory often highlights the interdependence of image and text in comics¹⁰—and, therefore, the need for a unique approach to reading that looks at both aspects together. This paper also challenges the pervasive conventional

prioritization of text over image and illustrations of subjects over the settings or spaces in which they are illustrated.¹¹

Modes of Viewing: Seeing, Looking, and Accommodation

In comics scholarship, the notion of vision is often simplified, assuming “the viewer is able to see the comic . . . as a clean, flat manifestation of images that are consistent from one copy to the next, and can discuss it as such” (Hague 34), and that “each instance of a particular comic is the same, and also that each reader sees that comic in the same way” (35). Ian Hague calls this simplification the “ideal perspective” (34). Literary scholars depend on the reproducibility of reading and viewing to share interpretations and instruct students, but in some cases, “close reading” approaches risk neglecting both the way the reader’s environment affects how the work is viewed and thus interpreted, as well as how the reader’s positionality comes into play in their engagement with the work. Outlining a way to respond meaningfully and ethically to concepts like *position* and *distance* in comics requires a close attention to—and perhaps modification of—typical processes of visual intake. Comics analysis, and, more generally, graphic analysis, also demands a clearer set of terms regarding visual intake. Here, I use “viewing” as a general umbrella term denoting any visual stimulus. Viewing can typically be broken down into isolated and progressive viewing acts, each particular to the viewer and the moment in which it occurs:

- (1) *Glance*: instantaneous and cursory; a general absorption of the whole of the work.
- (2) *Scan*: ocular movement across a page, often utilizing back-and-forth motions; longer in duration, with a focus on sequence, interactions between multiple images and/or text, and meaning-making.

In simple terms, a glance gives us context via the bigger picture, while scanning helps us understand time and the sequence of events through ocular movement and shifts in our focus.

Modes of viewing have only recently been analyzed in comics studies, mostly in relation to page composition studies. According to Eisner and McCloud, one of the comic artist's central responsibilities is guiding the reader's eye. However, unlike in conventional Western text-only forms, where the outset of the reader's interaction with the page begins at the left- and top-most sentence and proceeds in a left-to-right reading sequence, the comic's writer and/or illustrator decide where the narrative sequence begins. This variability multiplies when the reader interacts with the text, sometimes beginning at a different point on the page than the writer or illustrator intend. A reader's outset, the subconscious focal point when seeing a page, is instantaneous and often difficult to identify. But reflecting on one's *seeing*—that is, where one's initial attention is drawn—can bring attention to ingrained viewing practices and potential biases or inclinations. Neil Cohn is a leader in page composition studies, utilizing quantitative data analysis to study reader progression through varying spatial arrangements in comics. He identifies ocular movement patterns and compositional arrangements that cause deviation from the typical ocular paths.

In addition to attending to particular and diverse ways of looking and seeing, we must also acknowledge the unique locations from which different readers view comics. And so, I encourage readers to practise an additional mode of viewing:

(3) *Accommodation*: an application of the eye's ability to perceive depth and distance; an act that is relational, individualized, and always shifting; a reflection on and of one's temporal and spatial location, relative to apparent material and intertextual layers that make up a visual stimulus.

Physiologically, ocular accommodation indicates a changing of the shape of the ocular lens based on an object's distance from the eye; accommodation is used to shift one's focus in a single plane of vision between something closer and another object further in the same plane of vision. In literary criticism, we often seek to be *close to* the text—to make meaning of techniques used in texts by looking *more closely*. However, this tendency to equate *closeness* with *familiarity with*

and/or analysis of details in the text has issues when we apply it to comics studies. This is because in comics, unlike in text-only forms, there is another apparent variable of distance: foreground, background, and everything in between. Applying accommodation as critical literary methodology requires interpreting the existence and construction of these layers within a text.¹²

“Tilted Ground”: A Demonstrative Case Study for Accommodation

“Tilted Ground” is the second story in *This Place*, a ten-story comics chronology that retells Indigenous-settler history in the lands colonially known as Canada, beginning with the 1867 Confederation. Like all stories in *This Place*, “Tilted Ground” is a collaborative project. Assu, Charles, and Ford tell the story of Assu’s great-great-grandfather, Chief Billy Assu, a famous leader of the Wiwēqayī, a Ligwilda’xw community centred at T’sakwa’lutan (Cape Mudge) on Quadra Island and Quinsam on Vancouver Island.¹³ Through their story, they illustrate the resilience and communal safeguarding of Indigenous practices despite assimilative colonial practices and policies, specifically the 1876 Indian Act and its 1885 Potlatch ban amendment. “Tilted Ground” shows the central role of Wiwēqayī leaders like Chief Billy Assu and Chief Wamish in the survivance of Ligwilda’xw practices in the face of abuse, persecution, and attempted genocide. Below, using a particularly demonstrative spread from “Tilted Ground” (32–33), I model a progressive analysis, moving from more typical seeing and looking to an application of accommodative analysis.

The opening pages of “Tilted Ground” demonstrate the power of illustration and composition to create opportunities for diverse viewing experiences, which can in turn promote a great variety of reader interpretations. In preliminary stages of this research, I undertook a small-scale outset and ocular motion analysis (i.e., analysis of glancing and scanning) for the opening pages of “Tilted Ground” by interviewing a small number of readers with varying levels of experience with scholarly reading, literary criticism, comics, and Indigenous literatures.¹⁴ In this opening spread, there is a splash panel across both pages, depicting a young man walking along a body of water, unbuttoning his shirt, and looking out into the water. Across

both pages, there are two discrete series of panels arranged in rows, depicting, first, the young man wading, then diving into the water, and second, him exiting the water and walking towards an older man, who hands him a towel and advises him on an upcoming meeting with their community Elders. On the left page, larger images—one, a canted image of the same young man breaching the surface of the water and another of the older man looking over his shoulder—are layered atop the splash panel and over parts of the series of panels.

This spread in “Tilted Ground” encourages not only variance in outset, but also in ocular motion and sequencing (i.e., scanning and meaning-making). For example, in a series of interviews,¹⁵ some reader-viewers said they understood the sets of panels as occurring simultaneously; others recognized a chronology in the spread; and one thoughtfully described everything as “both separate, but equal”—a kind of collection of expository information for the reader to take in. There was often a cyclical movement described by these interviewees, either returning to images or text after attempting to grasp the meaning of the whole spread, or scanning “around,” then returning to read in a more linear way. Cohn explains that *blockage*, or panels stacked vertically next to a panel that runs the length of the vertical panels, and *overlap* are the two most likely compositional arrangements to create this kind of diversion from the typical “Z-path,” which often guides readers linearly, from chronological beginning to end. Notably, “Tilted Ground” uses both techniques. From its first page, “Tilted Ground” encourages readers to glance and scan in new ways—to imagine other ways of understanding time, sequence, surface, and narrative.

The “Tilted Ground” opening spread acts as both an introduction to the story’s form and as a potential positioning device for the reader. This spread’s illustration and composition spotlights layering and sequence via its methodical arrangement and overlapping of various comics elements, including text boxes, speech bubbles, panel sequences, detailed panel frames, and larger layered illustrations of Billy and Chief Wamish. An accommodative analysis would incorporate identifying and reflecting on illustrated layers from closest to the reader (the text boxes) to furthest away (the off-white plain background).

My accommodative analysis of “Tilted Ground” is guided by the idea of maintaining various kinds of distance:

- I. Spatial Distance
- II. Temporal Distance
- III. Relational Distance
- IV. Constitutional Distance

I. Spatial Distance

Accommodative analysis encourages the reader-viewer to reflect on space and distance, that is, on the creator's intended distance between various elements, including the reader, narrative subject(s), events, and the world(s) hosting them. On the above-mentioned "Tilted Ground" spread, for example, there are two worlds reflected in the separation between setting and background layers: (1), the world of the physical book (and thus, of the reader-viewer) represented by the extended off-white background, and (2), the setting of the story, a waterside, purply-pink world atop (or in front of) the page. The prominence of the extended white background emphasizes the existence of the page and book itself. While "bleeding," or printing images to the edges of the page, serves to "reduce the distinction between the diegetic environment and the reader's environment by removing the empty border between them" (Hague 52), this spread achieves the opposite effect by foregoing bleed and maintaining a safety margin. The discernibility of the comic as object reminds the reader of the un-reality of the recreated world on the page. This separation and implied distance between layers highlights that the world the reader holds in their hands, or might attempt to enter, is not T'sąkwą'lutąn, but rather a re-creation, protecting it from potential access and commodification.

II. Temporal Distance

In 1993, Scott McCloud identified the positive correlation between space and time. Despite having since been troubled by various comics theorists, the idea that "*time and space are one and the same*" continues to underlie analyses in critical comics studies (100). For McCloud, the passage of time is demonstrable through the gutters between panels, as well as within one panel. In the expository spread of "Tilted Ground," the distance between layers becomes akin to the gutters in McCloud's argument, showing the forward passage of time,

from background to foreground. Each moment in this spread is illustrated in front of, or atop, its preceding moment: from Billy walking along the water to a sequence of panels showing him diving into the water, to his breaching the water on the left page, to a sequence of panels on the bottom left showing him wet-faced and looking towards Chief Wamish, then to Wamish looking back at him, and, finally, a two-panel sequence shows Chief Wamish passing him a towel and stating, “TODAY, WE ARE GOING TO MEET WITH THE ELDERS. THEY WOULD LIKE TO HEAR YOU SPEAK OF THE ORIGINS OF OUR PEOPLE” (33). Though the varying temporal distances between layers cannot be specified, their separation implies gaps in, or distances across, time.

McCloud extends his space-as-time maxim further by correlating the passage of time in the reader-viewer’s world—i.e., the time required to, in my terms, *look*—with narrative plot progression within a panel. He posits that the reader experiences a correlational progression of time as they read left-to-right. However, I argue that the depiction of the passage of time is more complicated than McCloud claims; time *can* progress correlationally and directionally with the reader’s looking, but, in more complex arrangements where sequence is not overt, or where sounds, narrative, and actions may not relate as closely, time can move, and be presented, in non-linear ways. For example, like the background-to-foreground passage of time explored above, the passage of time within a panel can be represented through what is called a deep panel focus, wherein elements of the storyworld are drawn at varying distances that can be seen by the reader-viewer. In the upper left of the expository spread discussed above, Billy Assu walks forward, *towards* the foreground or reader, along the water. Certainly, if he continues to walk, he will progress forward in the setting and come closer to the reader. And time will pass as he does so. While Billy’s implied forward movement could help us discern time, Billy’s distance from the reader, that is, his in-setting existence, remains relatively far from the reader. We don’t actually see Billy come closer. Even as Billy’s action sequence progresses and time moves forward in the set of panels below his walking along the water, he is shown diving away from the reader within the rightmost panel of the first set of panels, then walking away from the reader towards Chief Wamish in the rightmost panel of the second set of panels. Even

as central, interlayer illustrations, such as Billy breaching or Chief Wamish looking over his shoulder, they remain behind multiple layers. Both Billy and Chief Wamish remain distant from the readers within their respective panels, despite the panels' temporal movement towards the reader. Likewise, close-ups, such as those in the leftmost panels in the series, may not necessarily connote closeness, but may exist exclusively for characterization purposes. In the first panels in each series, Billy looks away from the reader, and, despite a close-up shot, there is no interaction with the reader, which might be represented typically via eye contact or speech. Then, in the last panel of each series, Billy is moving away from the reader. This spread shows how distance can be maintained between reader, subjects, and place or setting while illustrating the forward passage of time. This kind of maintenance of distance might be read as an expression of autonomy—that is, an emphasis that closeness or access should be the choice of the creator, subject, or place—or, alternatively, as a potential need for privacy for real people and places, as evidence of the story's roots in real events.

The separation of layers and depth-based representation of time continues through the remainder of "Tilted Ground." And, in addition to using layering as commentary on place(s), time, and the distance between them, "Tilted Ground" demonstrates a similarly complex layering of voice and story via the positioning of text boxes and speech bubbles. The textual elements of "Tilted Ground" can be interpreted according to the same background-to-foreground progression of time.

The narrative layer farthest from the reader in "Tilted Ground" can be summarized thus: Chief Wamish tells Billy Assu that the Elders want to hear him speak of their people's origins (32–35). In 1891, Chief Wamish dies and Billy becomes Chief. He encourages the community to balance adopting settler practices while promoting the covert continuance of Ligwílda'xw practices (46–50). In the end, Billy looks out upon the same water in front of which he first met with Chief Wamish, dives in, and, instead of walking to Wamish as he did in the first scene, he walks towards a woman holding a baby, presumably the future leader of the Wiwēqayí (51–52). This layer, which, for ease of discussion, I'll call layer 1,¹⁶ is an exclusively image-based recreation of the actual events of Billy Assu's life from adolescence to adulthood. This layer implies the existence of, first, a non-fictional Ligwílda'xw world in

which Billy Assu existed (layer 0), and, second, a world, time, and teller and/or illustrator associated with its recreation (layer 2). Another layer atop, or in front of, the original story is that which conveys the story using text. This layer is illustrated using cream-coloured text boxes with apparently ripped edges, a purple shadow, and, notably, an italicized Comic Sans majuscule typeface (layer 3, as seen on page 35's topmost panel). Given the apparent yellowing and worn edges of these text boxes, I would read this layer as older and more distant in time than other text boxes and speech bubbles. However, in the original moments from which this recreation takes its inspiration, interactions would have been in Kwak'wala. Therefore, the existence—perhaps more meaningfully interpreted as an addition—of these narrative captions implies the world and time of another teller: a translator.

The characters' speech bubbles in English use a similar Comics Sans majuscule typeface, but unitalicized, perhaps implying a separation between even these teller-translators and the above-mentioned translator—and, thus, between their worlds—as seen on page 37's second and third horizontal panels. In these speech bubbles, some words remain in Kwak'wala, presumably untranslatable, or left untranslated in this layer for reasons unknown to the reader. Instead of removing these untranslated words and phrases, Assu and Charles add yet another layer, of clean-edged, cream-coloured text boxes (layer 4; 37). Not only do these boxes provide clarification for the reader about how to read the preceding narrative layers, thus implying their later occurrence; their illustration without a shadow also implies their closeness to the reader, and their clean edges might be read as showing comparatively less temporal wear than their purple-backed counterparts. In addition to implying the existence of another narrative layer, they prioritize Kwak'wala resurgence over anglophone convenience. These choices of (non)translation maintain distance between implied audiences. For example, by identifying the white man pictured, and by association, potential white readers, as *mama'a*, the text denotes a separation of peoples, and thus an exclusion of *mama'a* from the text's many references to “us” and “our people.”

III. Relational Distance

Illustrated narrative layers can also demonstrate intertextuality, or interactions between discrete stories, as demonstrated in “Tilted

Ground” by a letter from Dr. Israel Wood Powell. Powell’s narration is represented in a miniscule typeface in text boxes similar to the main story’s text boxes, but with less apparent wear, suggesting the story’s relative position as occurring after the main story but before the added translations (I will call this layer 3.5), as shown in the text box beginning with “A few days ago . . .” (36).

Unlike in text-only works, intertextual interactions are demonstrated visually by the inclusion of different illustrated layers. Powell’s story describes a troubling scene: from his perspective, an inexplicable shift from an “impress[ive] general appearance of poverty” to “the great display of wealth which met the eye on all sides,” Chiefs “allow[ing their] family to suffer from want, practicing meantime the most rigid and miserly economy,” and wanton destruction of property. This telling concludes: “Potlatches, no doubt, not only retard civilizing influences, but encourage idleness among the less worthy members of a tribe . . . and will, I trust, by wise administration become obsolete in time” (39). However, because of the multimodal layering, the reader-viewer can see beyond this layer to layers 1–3, in which Chief Wamish explains (via translation): “< . . . FOR US, IT’S NOT LIKE THAT. MATERIAL WEALTH IS SOMETHING THAT BELONGS TO THE GREATER COMMUNITY. IT SHOULD NOT BE HELD BY ONE MAN IN PERPETUITY.>” (37). “Tilted Ground” shows the interactions of these narrative layers, each contributing to the telling of the innermost story with various levels of veracity.

The deepest story, that of Billy Assu, also interacts with one intertext associated with the 1884 amendment to the Indian Act, represented by a miniscule serif typeface on a scroll-style text box (40–41), and another based on Franz Boas’ fieldwork writing, including Boas’ account of witnessing a famous speech by Chief Wamish before his death. These layers exist between the layers explored above. The illustration of distance and separation between these narrative layers—that is, the implication that there exists an *unclear* connection between Boas’ writing and Assu’s life—highlights the multiplicity and relationality of story. In addition to highlighting the layered distance between the innermost story and the places and subjects it depicts, accommodative analysis calls the reader to attempt to discern the distance between layers where possible.

Accommodative analysis encourages readers to ask: How close are these stories? How do they relate? Multiple stories, worlds, times, and

storytellers are recreated and interact in “Tilted Ground,” conveying the highly dynamic and relational nature of stories, even those based on true events and real people. An attention to the number of interrelated and interactive narrative layers that contribute to a story is a way to acknowledge its strength; these layers are evidence of re-telling, which Warren Cariou (Métis and European) describes as “a way of reclaiming and recontextualizing the story, making it live again, and connecting it to [one’s] own specific experiences on particular land” (6).

“Tilted Ground” demonstrates how accommodation can deal with polyphony in multimodal works. Because of the strategic illustration and organization of its layers, “Tilted Ground” challenges readers to attend to layers, implying that space, time, and sequence exist not exclusively on the surface of the page, but in the varying distances between the reader, illustrative and textual narrative layers, and the page upon which the comic is printed.

iv. Constitutional Distance

Lou Cornum (member of Navajo Nation) maintains that Indigenous storytelling creates “better worlds,” an idea that connects multiplicity to world creation. A similar multiplicity underlies the colouring of “Tilted Ground.” The story hosts two recreated worlds, the Ligwílda’xw world and the settler-colonial world, separated by distinct colour palettes. Both worlds are, importantly, coloured expressionistically, employing whimsical, bright colours and hues to depict otherwise realistic objects and settings. Ford’s use of colour reflects the separation between the real (past, present, and future) worlds and people and the worlds and people recreated on the page. Ford draws attention to his own act of world-creation on the introductory spread on pages 32–33, discussed above, where the safety margin at the outer edge of his colouring reveals the existence of the page underneath it. The white of the page extends throughout the story as its back-most layer, a persistent reminder of the reader-viewer’s own existence, external to the story. This separation encourages a distancing not necessarily between text and reader, but between imagined setting and reader. It creates a boundary for the reader-viewer or, perhaps more accurately, reminds the reader-viewer of their limited access to the actual world depicted in the story.

This separation functions differently for the two recreated worlds in “Tilted Ground.” In the purpley-pink recreated Ligwílda’xw world, the unreal depiction of T’sakwá’lutaṇ might create protective distance between readers and the Kwakwaka’wakw worlds and their stories and people. Ford’s use of colour protects and works against the problematic practice of indiscriminately entering the world of the comic, emphasizing that the world on the page is a *recreation* of a place, and therefore not the place at all. Not only can this colouring protect against non-Kwakwaka’wakw access, but it also punctuates the importance of specific place to the story. This is demonstrated through colour in combination with the identified setting. The first purpley-pink-hued scene is an expository extreme long shot in a page-wide panel (34). Without Ford’s colour work, and paired with the translation text boxes, this panel would have implied a broader Kwakwaka’wakw setting. However, because of the identified village in the expository spread on the previous pages, these hues become specific to this recreation of the village of T’sakwá’lutaṇ, emphasizing the particular place-based nature of the story and its subjects.

In many ways, the settler-colonial world is represented as both distant from and antithetical to the Ligwílda’xw world. On the colour wheel, green, yellow, and turquoise are directly opposite, and thus farthest from, purple, pink, and coral, the colours used in the Ligwílda’xw world panels. Physical distance is also implied in the introduction of this world. Like the first purpley-pink wide panel, the first recreation of a settler world, which follows Billy’s first meeting with the Elders, is expository: an extreme long shot of a parliament building. As with the purple world created one page earlier, a setting is identified, but it is much less specific: “A COUNTRY AWAY . . .” (36). Ford implies here that, unlike in the recreated Ligwílda’xw world, specific place holds less importance in the settler world. This contrast suggests the dangerous placelessness of settler colonialism: the colonial world’s borders are not clearly demarcated and can change. This is supported by the multiplicity associated with setting in the settler-colonial world. In the world’s introduction, one panel shows the parliament building “A WORLD AWAY” (36). Below it, Dr. Israel Wood Powell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, British Columbia, writes a letter from a green-toned office. A panel outlined with an antique-looking frame sits atop both wide panels, revealing the letter’s

recipient, a clean-shaven man with short hair, later revealed to be Sir John A. MacDonald. This layering of similarly-toned green panels demonstrates placelessness, conveying this recreated world's existence as both "A COUNTRY AWAY," in the country's parliament building, as well as in British Columbia, where Powell writes his letter. It is both distant from and drawing close to the Ligwílda'xw world.

In another green-toned panel, anthropologist Franz Boas is shown responding to the 1884 Indian Act amendments (41). Boas is depicted in the story as being at least well-intentioned, brought to a Potlatch with the hopes that he will "< . . . SHOW THE AGENTS THE VALUE OF OUR LAWS. [That] MAYBE THEY [the laws] WILL [make them] LEAVE US ALONE>" (43). Though Boas states that he seeks not to interfere, Ford's use of colour complicates this. First, Boas is pictured in the green settler world, writing a letter troubling the Potlatch ban, which might imply his simply existing *within* that world, rather than championing its values (41). But in the Potlatch he attends, Chief Wamish ends his speech by stating: "<IF YOU HAVE COME TO FORBID US TO DANCE, **BEGONE.** . . . >" (45). And, notably, Boas does not appear again in the story, though George Hunt, the man who brings him to the island, does. While the reasons for Boas' absence are vague, it certainly casts doubt on his intentions. Perhaps his initial location within the green settler world reflects his deep-seated colonial foundation or background, as indicated by the background colour panels before. Perhaps Boas' initial depiction in the settler world does not represent his opinions, intentions, or behaviours, but rather identifies his *belonging* to the world, and thus to his foundational, unchangeable beneficiary status, regardless of physical movement between worlds. Despite most of the green-world panels showing the federal parliament building, the settler world is placeless, shapeless; distant, but looming.

Conclusion: Extending Accommodation

Despite my focus on the visual aspects of "Tilted Ground" and its expository spread (32–33), the story begins on page 28 of *This Place*. Like the other pieces included in the chronology, there appears a brief textual introduction to the piece, paired with a timeline to situate the

forthcoming story.¹⁷ On this page, before the story of “Tilted Ground” begins, there are layered timelines, settings, and stories:

- (1) Sonny Assu, from an unknown time and place, tells of his time in Ottawa visiting with his grandmother and trying on his great-great-grandfather’s regalia; this scene occurs in the past for both teller and reader, but the reader experiences it in their own present.
- (2) Mitzi, Assu’s grandmother from what is colonially referred to as Ottawa, sometime before the writing of this piece, tells the story of Chief Billy Assu passing down his regalia on his deathbed; this scene occurs in the past to teller (Mitzi), re-teller (Sonny), and reader—then is told and retold in the teller and re-teller’s pasts— but the reader experiences it in their own present via its retelling.

These stories exist in relation to tellers and readers in various times and worlds. These two stories are the outermost, or least distant, layers of “Tilted Ground.” Relative time and narrative tense become complicated when reading accommodatively. The narrative layers in Assu’s written introduction are identifiable only via phrases like “[s]he told me the story of,” and the distance between them remains observable only to Assu himself. Like interpretations of graphic interlayer distance, this might be read as an ethical act of separation, a maintenance of distance for citation’s sake, or a demonstration of interpersonal familial story sharing; the important thing here is that as readers, we will never know. Accommodative analysis cues the reader to identify, acknowledge, interpret, and respect distance. Here, the ambiguity maintains separation between the teller and the reader.

The spread that follows appears to be a title page (30–31). However, if we consider it part of the story begun on the pages prior, this panel, which takes up both pages, signals instead an inter-layer move, transporting the reader from Assu’s outermost narrative layer into the world of the internal narrative of “Tilted Ground.” Not only is the reader transported between layers, shifting from the teller’s time and place to the story’s, but the boat racing through water represents a change in place, a transportation to the (recreation of) *place* in which the story will take (or has taken) place. Tangibly, in a spread of the

story on a page held by the reader, the boat's movement, represented by jagged splashes under the boat's bow on the right page of the spread, points the reader in the direction of the story, to the pages behind the spread that progress the story. Without margins, this spread is a single panel that hosts the reader, within the layer of the internal narrative, and the boat's forward motion transports the reader to the story's setting. While changes in time or place in comics typically occur *between* panels or are reflected by a sequence of slowly-changing panels, here, transportation occurs within one panel, challenging McCloud's maxim that "*time and space are one and the same*" (100).

By progressing the story *forward* while moving spatially towards the setting of the story, the panel simultaneously transports the reader forward and backward in time: the story must already be written and published for the reader to read it—it must be past—but Assu's introduction necessarily happens *before* the story. Mainstream interpretive practice in comics would read this panel's right-facing movement as moving *forward* in time, that is, moving forward through the story's timeline. This way, "Tilted Ground" can be read as, simultaneously, a past-tense telling of an extraordinary leader's role in the real, past Ligwílda'xw world, as well as a prediction of strong Ligwílda'xw leaders to come. This kind of multitemporal reading alters the story's purpose from a potentially inspiring historicization to a foretelling, a radical paradigm shift. This shift in reading is also supported in the expository spread (32–33), which challenges the reader to engage with the story according to its layers. Unlike conventional expositions, this spread provides the story's resolution: "HE WILL BECOME ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED AND INFLUENTIAL ÍASA* [Potlatch] CHIEFS IN LIGWÍLDA'XW HISTORY" (33). The disclosure of the story's end implies that what is important to the piece is not narrative plot (i.e., Billy's fate), but the complex interactions of voices, subjects, and stories that contribute to his story. A relational and ethical engagement with "Tilted Ground" thus requires an acknowledgement of the layers that exist between the story's historical subjects, its multiple tellers, and its recreation in *This Place*. The additional variable of the story's visual representations of these layers and movement between them reflected in the story's focalization complicates the way we read time and distance in comics.

Accommodative analysis can be fruitfully applied to other texts, perhaps most fittingly to other comics. Considerations of distance and layering would be especially illuminating in readings of book-length and serialized works that, like “Tilted Ground,” utilize incrustation and a deep panel focus, such as David A. Robertson (Norway House Cree Nation) and Scott B. Henderson’s (white settler) *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story*; katherena vermette (Michif, Red River Métis), Henderson, and Donovan Yaciuk’s (settler) *A Girl Called Echo* series; and Tasha Spillett (Cree/Trinidadian)¹⁸ and Natasha Donovan’s (Métis and white)¹⁹ *Surviving the City*. Accommodative reading can also be applied to other multimodal works beyond comics, such as Jordan Abel’s (Nisga’a) *NISHGA*, which blends, blurs, erases, and layers text and image, and even audiovisual works, such as the music video for “Leaks,” a collaborative project between Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), Tara Williamson (Anishinaabekwe/Nehayowak)²⁰, and Cara Mumford (Métis/Chippewa Cree).²¹

Accommodative reading is a highly individualized, personal, reflective approach to reading and viewing. In respect to engaging with Indigenous literary works, it draws attention to positionality, location, and limits in a tangible way, specifically asking readers to, first, attend to narrative layers of a text, and, second, situate themselves in relation to those layers. In this paper, I’ve suggested that distance can be a good thing—that it shouldn’t always be our goal to get *closer to the text*. Specifically, for settler or outsider readers, maintaining distance can be an ethical, meaningful, and relational alternative to typical close-reading approaches.

Notes

1. The late feminist scholar Susan Stanford Friedman identifies herself as such in her 1995 article “Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse” (4).
2. In an online panel titled “What Does An Abolitionist Asian American Politics Look Like?,” Yang includes himself in his reference to Asian Americans.
3. Despite the dangers of over-metaphorization, others like Black scholar Omise’ëke Natasha Tinsley have also argued for the potential of the metaphor, should it be “materially informed” (203). In a webinar titled “Beyond the Trend of Decolonizing Science” in 2019, Tuck called the title to her and Yang’s essay “catchy [and] sticky,” and admitted that were they to write it again, they might

consider instead, “Decolonization Is Not *Only* a Metaphor,” signalling how “metaphors are actually really important to how we understand and describe colonialism and decolonization” (see Challener [settler, white street race], emphasis added). See also Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino’s response to Tuck and Yang, as well as Curley (Diné), Gupta, Lookabaugh (white, non-Indigenous), Neubert, and Smith’s (white settler) response to Sorentino.

4. Maracle’s positionality is complex. While often identified in secondary sources as only Stó:lō, she describes the community her mother was born in as a “large Métis community” in Lac Labiche, Alberta and her mother as “the child of a Frenchman and an Indian woman” (*Bobbi Lee* 21). Maracle was born in Vancouver and raised on the North Shore mud flats near Second Narrows Bridge, and Maracle’s paternal grandfather, Chief Dan George, was a chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation. For more on her childhood and family history, see her autobiography, *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*.
5. Blaeser’s positionality information comes from her website, where she describes herself as “an Anishinaabe activist and environmentalist . . . enroled member of White Earth Nation and [having grown] up on the reservation”; she explains, too, how she now “splits her time between her home in rural Wisconsin and a water-access cabin adjacent to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota.” For more, see kblaeser.org/about.
6. Information identifying Horrocks is from the biography page of his website, hicksville.co.nz; Dylan Horrocks was born in 1966 in Auckland, New Zealand, and has lived in New Zealand, England, the US, and Bougainville. He currently lives by the sea near Auckland with his wife and two sons.
7. While McCloud acknowledges Horrocks’ “Inventing Comics” as “the most interesting response” to his work (see “An Interview”), in more recent publications, he continues to highlight the need for “clarity and communication” in comics construction, where control of the reader’s eye through a series of events equates to either “clear, convincing storytelling” or “a confusing mess” (*Reinventing Comics* 10).
8. For an example, see Latinx scholar Frederick Luis Aldama’s edited collection, *Graphic Indigeneity*. For an example of the role Indigenous publishers and comics advocacy can play, read Lee Francis IV’s (Pueblo of Laguna) *Cynsations* interview (see Francis). For Canadian examples of field advocacy and expansion, see Daigneault (Métis), Mazowita (settler), Rifkind (settler), and Callison’s (Tsesk iye Clan of the Tahltan Nation) “Indigenous Comics and Graphic Novels: An Annotated Bibliography,” originally published in 2019 and consistently updated via the The Mazinbiige Indigenous Graphic Novel Collection library page at the University of Manitoba (see Callison and Rifkind, “The Mazinbiige”), as well as the University of Winnipeg’s pilot One Book UWinnipeg (1BUW) program, led by Brandon Christopher and Candida Rifkind (“Final Report”). A great number of Indigenous scholars also work across the boundaries of academia and graphic narrative, such as, among many others, Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation), Elizabeth LaPensée (Irish, Anishinaabe, and Métis), Chelsea Vowel (Métis from manitow-sakahikan), and the writer of this essay’s primary text, Sonny Assu (see sonnyassu.com).

9. For example, see Michael Sheyashe (Caddo Nation of Oklahoma).
10. See, for example McCloud, and Jacobs (settler).
11. For more on the study of background in comics, see Abram, "Beyond the Front."
12. Typically, narrative layers might refer to the multiple levels at which we could interpret a text (see, for example, Métis and European thinker Warren Cariou's "Terristory"). In this paper, discussion of narrative layers includes visual incrustation (in comics, the overlapped illustration of panels and subjects), as well as the separate voices and/or stories they each represent, explored further in later sections of this essay.
13. In this essay, I use Assu's Kwakwala spellings.
14. In response to a request by the illustrator, I've removed all recreations of images from "Tilted Ground." However, you can find these pages and the entirety of "Tilted Ground" in the excerpt offered on the Portage & Main web page for *This Place*, here: portageandmainpress.com/Books/T/This-Place.
15. Outsets for reader-viewers who self-identified as experienced text-based readers were located at one of two spots: the top-left-most text box or the subject walking on the beach, most intending to read top-left to bottom-right. Contrastingly, the outsets of self-identified experienced comic-readers were the largest subjects: the figure in the water or the figure wearing a green headband. These generalizations are based on an extremely small data set, but present interesting initial findings.
16. I number these layers for ease, to demonstrate which are relatively closer or further away. However, the numbers are arbitrary. There are, undoubtedly, a great number of other stories and narrative layers—that is, tellers, worlds, and tellings—that exist between and beyond these tellings. For example, the furthestmost layer might be considered the (actual) origin story Billy (re)tells in his meeting with the Elders, and layers closer than this work as it appears in *This Place* might be under construction as a reader reads this layer.
17. These prefatory statements are from each story's writer, without word from the illustrators or colourists. While in some ways relational and personal, the absence of illustrator or colourist statements reflects the prioritization of plot and written aspects of graphic narrative in comics creation.
18. Spillett's positionality information comes from her website, where she explains how she "draws her strength from her Indigenous (Cree) and Trinidadian bloodlines." For more, see tashaspillet.com/about.
19. Donovan describes herself as "a Métis & white illustrator originally from Vancouver, Canada" on her website; she also provides a "note of identity" that reads: "I am Métis, an identity that is often a site of much complexity, so I want to be as specific as possible in describing my connection to it. My Métis family are on my mom's side: the Delarondes and the Morins from Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, and surrounding areas; on this side of the family, we have ancestral ties to the Red River. My dad's family are white settlers primarily from England and Ireland. I spent most of my childhood among the mosses and ferns of Vancouver, Canada." For more, see natashadonovan.com.
20. In the author biography for her poem "My Grandma was a Medicine Woman; A Hundred Roots," Williamson describes herself as "an

- Anishinaabekwe/Nehayowak (Ojibwe/Cree woman). She is a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, was raised in Swan Lake, Manitoba, and currently [then, in 2012] lives in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough, Ontario). For more, see tarawilliamson.net.
21. Mumford's positionality information comes from the biography page on her website, where she opens with: "Cara Mumford (Métis/Chippewa Cree) is a filmmaker, writer and collaborative artist from Alberta, living in Peterborough, Ontario since 2010." For more, see caramumford.com/biography.php.

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Uninvited Guests and Awkward Hospitality: Unsettling Mormon Claims in Dawn Dumont's Nobody Cries at Bingo

Nobody Cries at Bingo, by nêhiyawak/Plains Cree writer Dawn Dumont, was the first novel I ever read by an Indigenous author. The novel is a fictionalized memoir about growing up on a reserve in the early eighties in southern Saskatchewan. Through humorous narration, the book grapples with the complex legacies of colonialism, racism, and attempted assimilation. Its depiction of young Dawn's family life powerfully shaped my understanding of how Canadian and American societies have attempted to separate and divide Indigenous families and communities through residential schools, adoption, foster programs, and other means. This was not something I had learned about growing up in rural southeast Idaho, on the traditional territory of Shoshone and Bannock peoples. Raised in a Mormon settlement founded by my great-great-great-grandfather, I was taught to revere my pioneer ancestors, but not to think about the Indigenous peoples whose lands they had colonized. When I served a two-year Mormon mission in Saskatchewan, including on the File Hills reserves where much of Dumont's book takes place, I did not see my church as an assimilative force that participated in separating Indigenous children from their families. It was not until reading *Nobody Cries at Bingo* that I began to see Mormon encroachment on Indigenous lands as having a colonial history and present. In this essay, I reference that early history, beginning with *The Book of Mormon* and its justifications for colonial land theft. These justifications are brought into relief by *Nobody Cries at Bingo*, which contrasts Mormon presence on Dumont's reserve with her people's longstanding relationships to the territory. Although Mormonism is only of marginal concern in

Dumont's book, I argue that her storytelling helps unsettle the official narrative of Mormon missionary work in Saskatchewan at a time when Mormon attempts to convert and assimilate Indigenous peoples there were at their peak. This narrative unsettling highlights the book's larger critique of colonial family separation and demonstrates Indigenous literature's power to reframe and reimagine contemporary Indigenous-settler relations.

The Book of Mormon: Another Justification for Land Theft

Mormonism's literary land claim¹ has roots in early-nineteenth-century North America, when increasing land greed and religious fervour propelled Christian theories about the origins of Indigenous peoples into the mainstream of public discourse. Two of these theories played a significant role in settler justifications for land theft. The first was the theory of Hebrew descent, which figured Indigenous peoples into the biblical story of the lost tribes of Israel. The second was the white mound-builder theory, which posited that a white race must have built the burial mounds found throughout much of North America before being killed off by the supposedly more savage peoples who remained when white settlers arrived on the continent.

Indigenous writers such as William Apess (Pequot), Peter Jones or Kahkewaquonaby (Ojibwe), George Copway or Kahgegagahbowh (Ojibwe), and William Whipple Warren (Ojibwe-Métis) were quick to take up this "origins" discourse in ways that promoted Indigenous sovereignty. For example, in his 1829 autobiography, *A Son of the Forest*, William Apess seemingly accepts the theory of Hebrew descent but also argues against legislative efforts to claim Indigenous lands.² The next year, another book was published that merged the theory of Hebrew descent and the white mound-builder theory and fleshed them out in narrative detail (Howey 442). Unlike *A Son of the Forest*, this text did not promote Indigenous sovereignty but inscribed the whole continent with a mythology that naturalized settler claims to the land. This text was *The Book of Mormon*, which cast Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island as *Lamanites*, descendants of a people who arrived on the continent around 600 BC.³ Despite *The Book of Mormon*'s controversial status, its amalgamation and expansion of the

Hebrew descent and mound-builder theories “caught hold in public and political circles” enough that Jones, an Ojibwe Methodist minister, addressed it explicitly in his writing (Howey 442).

In his 1861 *History of the Ojebway Indians*, Jones tells a humorous and instructive story called “The Mormon Book and an Indian.” In it, he imagines that the devil, described in accordance with Anishinaabe beliefs as “the evil spirit Muhje-munedoo,” once tried to write a book like *The Bible*, but was so ashamed of his poor work that he buried it in the ground (198–99). In Jones’ story, it is this book that Joseph Smith recovers and presents as *The Book of Mormon*. Writing at the height of Indigenous removal, Jones cleverly reframes *The Book of Mormon*, implicating not only Mormons, but also the non-Mormon settlers who invoked its ideas to justify land theft. In this way, his humorous story is also a sophisticated stand against Indigenous dispossession.

While *The Book of Mormon* naturalized the land claims of even non-Mormon settlers, it gave settler Mormons a grander mission: to “convince the Lamanites of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers” (Alma 26.24), and to work together with them to build an American Zion in preparation for Christ’s second coming. This was the core of *The Book of Mormon*’s literary land claim, giving settler Mormons justification to spread across the continent, replace Indigenous religions with Mormonism, and build a divinely-appointed kingdom. In the decade following the book’s publication, Mormons made converts and enemies, until, expelled from state after state, they moved west to settle around the Rocky Mountains.

Despite their supposed theological importance to Mormonism, the Indigenous peoples living on these lands were seen by Mormons moving west as an obstacle to settlement. For the Indigenous peoples, meanwhile, Mormon colonization resulted in loss of land and resources, starvation, sickness, displacement, war, and massacre.⁴ For nearly two centuries, the continued colonial occupation of these lands has resulted in complex political entanglements over Indigenous education, sovereignty, and land stewardship. Nevertheless, Mormon settlers have continued to see Indigenous peoples mainly as potential converts. While the theory of Hebrew descent has been all but abandoned today in mainstream settler thought, it has remained a permanent and prominent feature of Mormonism, not as an official doctrine of the Church, but as the de facto interpretation of *The Book*

of *Mormon*. Today, Mormon missionaries continue to proselytize Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island and beyond, telling them *The Book of Mormon* is the record of their ancient ancestors.

While Mormons evangelize because of sincere convictions, they are often unaware that Indigenous peoples have their own origin stories—stories that establish their cultural origins on Turtle Island and place them here many thousands of years before the events in *The Book of Mormon*. These stories, writes Taos Pueblo scholar P. Jane Hafen, “establish moral boundaries and address life questions” (Afterword 266). Attempting to replace them with a story of Hebrew origins, Hafen contends, is “a disruptive and colonizing act” (266). Dakota, Assiniboiné, and Sioux scholar Elise Boxer describes Mormon missionary work similarly, as an attempt to erase “diverse creation stories and histories” and replace Indigenous identities “with a limited, racialized identity grounded in Mormon religious discourse” (“The Book of Mormon” 4). What settler Mormons may underestimate is the longevity and continued power of Indigenous storytelling and history-telling. From Peter Jones to Dawn Dumont and beyond, Indigenous writers and storytellers have used literature and other methods to resist *The Book of Mormon*’s literary land claim and the imposition of Lamanite identity, and to otherwise navigate Mormon settlement on Indigenous lands. (Who has done this and how is the subject of my ongoing doctoral research.) Like many of these stories, including Jones’, Dawn Dumont’s *Nobody Cries at Bingo* uses humour to negotiate the serious threats posed by Mormon settler colonialism.

Uninvited Guests and Awkward Hospitality

In the chapter titled “I Slept There,” Dumont shows the Okanese First Nation acting as patient hosts to their uninvited guests, an extended “family of Mormons” living in “three large trailers” near young Dawn’s family “on the edge of the reserve” (36–37). Dumont depicts the Mormon family as having no qualms about being uninvited, reporting that they were “often seen driving from house to house, fighting off rez dogs” to visit the families on the reserve (36). The reason for their being there, Dumont explains in her characteristically humorous way, is that the Mormons “[see] the reserve as an infinite wellspring of

converts" (36). This characterization, though hyperbolized for effect, is consistent with reductive assumptions many settler Mormons have had about Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. Believing that such diverse peoples are actually the spiritually lost descendants of Hebrew people who arrived in America less than three thousand years ago, Mormons intent on making converts are likely to underestimate Indigenous subjectivity. In "I Slept There," Dumont uses story to correct this potential error, rooting her family's position in the distinct identity and territory of nêhiyaw/Nehewin or Cree people. Following the buffalo herds, nêhiyaw travelled across territory stretching "from the centre of Canada up into the early arctic, south into the Dakotas, east to Quebec and west to the mountains of British Columbia" (28). This assertion of territory, more specific and authoritative than *The Book of Mormon's* continental land claim, positions the Okanese community not as mere neighbours to, but as hosts of, the Mormon family. Dumont characterizes the relationship between the Mormons and the Okanese community according to this guest/host dynamic. She recounts that "[t]he Native population tolerated [the Mormons] well," even adding that "[i]t was nice to be visited by a white person who smiled a lot and treated you as their equal" (36). Dumont's language is both incisive and generous: while "tolerated" puts the Mormon family in their place as guests in an Indigenous space, she also gives the Mormons credit for their egalitarianism.

Although the Okanese community hospitably tolerates the Mormon families, their guests are intent on wearing out their welcome by "establish[ing] a permanent church" and "set[ting] down roots and basements" "on the reserve" (37). Despite their lack of success in this project, Dumont's cataloguing of their intentions, and the community's awareness of those intentions, is significant in her depiction of guest/host dynamics. While these Mormons may have been somewhat unique in their decision to move to the edge of a reserve, their intentions are best understood in the context of broader developments within the Church. Mormon enthusiasm for Lamanite conversion was at its zenith during the 1970s and early 1980s, driven largely by the ambitions and programs of Church president Spencer W. Kimball. This enthusiasm played out in a local context in the Church's Canada Winnipeg Mission, which had been established in 1976 and covered all of Saskatchewan, with President Howard Lund's

focus on “forwarding Indian missionary work” (Svenson 108). Between 1978 and 1984, the Church placed portable buildings functioning as temporary meetinghouses on many of the reserves near Regina, including one for the File Hills reserves and the nearby Carry the Kettle Nakoda reserve (Svenson 108–109). While a permanent building would eventually be built on Carry the Kettle, File Hills would never get one.

While the Mormons in *Nobody Cries at Bingo* ignore some basic protocols for guests, they do their best to be good hosts to Dawn’s family. The reversal of guest and host roles occurs one winter night, when Dawn’s family car breaks down near the edge of the reserve and the Mormons appear, offering help. Hesitantly, Dawn’s mother accepts their offer and goes with her children into one of the Mormons’ trailers. Coming in from the cold, Dawn’s family is served cold orange juice—a kind gesture but “an odd choice” to young Dawn, given the “minus twenty-degree weather” they have just stepped out of (38). Dawn momentarily wonders if her mother, who drinks “only coffee from morning until night,” is all right as her mother says, “Orange juice, what a treat. Yum, that hits the spot” (38). Because Mormons don’t drink coffee or tea, though, Dawn concludes her mother is only being “respectful of other people’s beliefs” (38).

Dawn’s family and the Mormon family then stare at each other, apparently “at a loss” for what to say (38). The Mormons demonstrate hospitality and thoughtfulness, bringing out a blanket for Dawn’s younger brother, David, as he falls asleep on the floor. David’s method of getting to sleep is something of a spectacle: he “bounce[s] his head rhythmically for about two minutes before finally dropping off” (38). While Dumont notes the Mormon women’s stares, she writes, “None of us thought they were being rude. It was a strange thing to witness” (38). However, “[a]fter David [falls] asleep,” Dumont recalls, “the silence . . . threaten[s] to crush our skulls” (38). The inability of the odd group to find anything to say makes sense in the context of their differences in class, race, and religion, and in consideration of their mutual unspoken suspicions and curiosities. For instance, young Dawn and her siblings wonder why the Mormons address their mother as “Man,” mistaking the apparently unfamiliar formal salutation “Ma’am” for a familiar one, and why their “pants [are] so neat” (37). Dawn’s mother, “fiercely loyal to the Catholic Church that

her parents had raised her in" (36), harbours her own suspicions about the Mormons' conversion agenda but is reluctantly grateful for their help. For their part, the Mormons, whose children have long been in bed, must wonder why Dawn's mother is driving away from the reserve late at night without her husband. For all the Mormons' desire to meet potential Lamanite converts, they seem to find little to actually talk about. This is not necessarily a criticism of the Mormons; instead, it shows the reality of their interactions to be more ordinary and more awkward than they might have imagined their conversions of Lamanites would be. The humour Dumont finds in this mundane awkwardness is consistent with the Cree storytelling genre of *âcimisowina*, which centres on humorous stories of everyday life. These stories, according to Canadian settler scholar H. C. Wolfart, are often told in a tone of "self-mocking detachment, which lets the audience laugh along with the narrator" (qtd. in Reder 6). This is true of Dumont's storytelling, which encourages readers to laugh along, not only at the Mormons, but also at Dawn herself, her mother, and the oddity of their circumstances.

While the Mormons do their best as hosts, their zeal for conversion gets in the way. Things take a turn when Dawn, an avid reader, breaks the silence by asking if there are any books she can read. In asking this, she knows she is breaking her mother's "standing orders not to make a fuss in someone else's house" (38). However, the Mormons are glad to be asked this particular question, as they have just the book for a young reader. "Smil[ing] broadly," one of the Mormon women brings Dawn—you guessed it—a copy of *The Book of Mormon*, or a "Mormon bible," as Dawn calls it (39). Ignoring a sharp look from her mother, Dawn takes the book and is thrilled by its "heft" and the grounding presence of "words, oh so many words" (39).

Though Dawn's boredom-induced reading mortifies her mother, her hosts are "overjoyed" (39). Unable to interpret her action outside of a missionary/convert framework, they miss the obvious fact her reading is only meant to distract her from boredom. Dawn resists the imposed missionary/convert framework, deciding with characteristic humour that, "if the Mormon Lady had handed me a copy of Satan's Bible . . . [or] pressed a copy of *Mein Kampf* in my hands, I would have given it a go" (40). Although undoubtedly coincidental, it's hard not to hear echoes of Jones' story here, which casts *The Book of Mormon* very

literally as Satan's *Bible*, or, as Jones put it, "the devil's book" (199). For any settler Mormon or other missionary with naive or paternalistic ideas about how eagerly Indigenous peoples will receive *The Book of Mormon*, Dumont's humorous narration provides a much-needed dose of reality.

Despite their kindness and help with the Dumonts' car, the Mormon family's evangelical eagerness makes it harder to bridge the gap between life experiences that separates them from the Okanese community. After the Mormon men finish fixing the car, Dawn's mom drags Dawn "away from [her] bible" and out the door (39). On the way out, one of the Mormon women "presse[s] some pamphlets into [her] hand"⁵ and "joyously" tells the Dumonts to "come back any time" (39). We can interpret this invitation as a gesture of genuine hospitality and friendliness, although that interpretation is somewhat weakened by the painfully awkward time Dawn has just narrated; the only expression of joy prior to this invitation was in conjunction with offering Dawn a copy of *The Book of Mormon*. As they struggle to meaningfully relate to Dawn's family outside of a religious framework, it is unclear how the Mormons in this story see themselves as actually connected to the community they see themselves as helping. For Mormon readers who may be used to less-than-generous depictions of Mormonism, it may be helpful to understand Dumont's humour within the Cree tradition of *âcimisowina*. Describing the *âcimisowina* her own mother would tell, Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder writes that they "sometimes would sound rude if you didn't understand the context" (6). However, Reder clarifies that the tone of *âcimisowina* "might be embarrassing, but . . . never mocking; it might be teasing, but . . . never attacking or mean-spirited" (7). Accordingly, settler Mormons and missionaries should see that implicit in this story of awkward hospitality is an invitation to become better guests and neighbours. As for Dawn, she is unbothered by the Mormons' attempt to bring her into their fold, and probably glad to have more reading material. Shrugging off her mom's question, "What were you thinking?" as they return to their now-working car, Dawn reflects, "[T]hey were truly miraculous, these Mormons" (40).

Unsettling Mormon History in Southern Saskatchewan

My obligatory two-year mission began in 2012, less than a year after *Nobody Cries at Bingo* was published and not long after I graduated high school. I was young, eager, and uneducated about the culture, history, and politics of the place I was going. One of the first things I learned was that missionaries and settler Church members in southern Saskatchewan regarded the local Indigenous population, mostly nêhiyaw (Cree), Nakota (Assiniboine), and Nahkawiniwak (Saulteaux) as Lamanites. My fellow missionaries taught me to interest Indigenous people in conversation by introducing *The Book of Mormon* as a record of their ancestors. Even as I began to grasp that the Indigenous people I met were often dealing with complex problems, I adopted this script. Facing systemic violence, racism, or poverty? Read *The Book of Mormon*. Coping with trauma from something called residential school? Take a free copy. Have a rich cultural heritage and spiritual practices that help you understand the world? Learn about your true identity as a descendant of the Lamanites. While *The Book of Mormon* was all I had to offer, over time, I began to see I didn't have the whole story of the Church's history with Indigenous peoples, either generally or in Saskatchewan specifically.

Five years after returning home and beginning to feel disillusioned, I found Dumont's storytelling helped me think through my resentment at being made an ignorant agent of a colonial agenda. I began to research, piecing together things I had learned on my mission and things I was learning from Indigenous literary studies. As I did, I started to understand that, beneath the humorous veneer of Dumont's writing, there exists a history in which Mormon presence on the File Hills reserves represents a real colonial threat.

In 1970, the Mormon Church's Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP) was instituted in Saskatchewan. It was a Sixties Scoop-era program that had been running elsewhere since at least 1954, designed to give Indigenous children the "benefit" of education in a white, middle-class environment and exposure to what that version of a home and family looked like. While the program offered an alternative, in some cases, to residential school participation, and while some students reported positive experiences, the program is best understood as an unexceptional part "of larger settler colonial efforts

that used boarding schools, fostering, and adoption to remove [Indigenous] children from Indigenous homes and assimilate them into settler society” (Murphy, et al. 97). According to a local history of the Church in Saskatchewan, the local ISPP involved at least two hundred Indigenous children leaving the province to live in Mormon homes each school year, returning home only for the summers. This history, *The Hand of the Lord: A History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Saskatchewan*, edited by Kenneth Svenson and Brook Harker, catalogues Okanese and the adjacent reserves of Peepeekisis, Star Blanket, and Little Black Bear as places from which children went “on placement” (107). Usually, this volume reports, children were sent to live with Mormon families in Alberta or British Columbia, although, as a missionary, I met someone who had stayed with a family in Idaho near my parents’ home. I knew nothing about the program at the time, so I asked how they liked staying there. They answered politely and stated their affection for their host family, but not before I caught a look in their eyes that told me I had no idea what I was asking.

Svenson and Harker’s account of “work among the Lamanites” in Saskatchewan (“Work” 100), particularly their account of the ISPP, constitutes a semi-official Mormon settler account of the same historical moment *Nobody Cries at Bingo* narrates. In *The Hand of the Lord*, the editors report that the ISPP “had a significant impact” on Indigenous participants and their families. This is undoubtedly true; however, the editors frame that impact as an inherent good, writing that because of the program, “some students . . . went on to further education,” and that “most students, when they returned to their homes, became leaders in their communities and many [went on to] hold influential positions in political leadership and administration” (107). One problem with this claim is its limited point of view; what might be legible to the editors as learned leadership qualities or an otherwise “positive impact” might reflect white, middle-class notions of success more than the values of participants’ Indigenous communities (107). Without discounting the accomplishments of ISPP students, it is worth challenging a point of view that only accounts for the kinds of leadership and success legible to a mainstream middle-class settler perspective.

Another problem with the editors' framing is that they give the program credit for any success the participants found after. They write unequivocally that "it is because of the standards [participants] were taught and quality of education received that they hold positions of leadership in the community. In all cases, there was a positive impact on their families" (107). Taking cues from Dumont's generous, good-humoured tone, and the ways her story implicitly invites Mormons to be better guests, I want to problematize this perspective without reducing its complexity. Specifically, I want to hold space for Indigenous Mormons who had good experiences with the placement program and for settler Mormons who might have had or seen good intentions within it. With that in mind, there is still something to be said about the insistent and uncompromising tone of Svenson and Harker's assertion, as well as its uncomfortable implication that without this program, participants would not have had the personal qualities sufficient to become leaders. This implication is simply insupportable: If the ISPP were truly essential for these Indigenous communities to produce leaders, then how could any Indigenous community have produced strong leaders without it?

Equally troubling is Svenson and Harker's assumption that all families participating in the ISPP would have seen themselves as inherently benefiting from their exposure to white, middle-class Mormon life. Young Dawn's narration in "I Slept There" undermines this assumption; when she first sees the "well-off" Mormons outside her family's car, she observes that "standing next to one another . . . they looked like that photo you get with your picture frames before you pull it out and insert the one of your sloppy relatives" (36–37). This comparison casts middle-class life, with its material comforts and apparent carefree ease, as stiff, posed, and artificial. Would Dawn's "sloppy" family have been better off if they looked like that?

If Dumont's story provides a way to challenge the race- and class-driven assumptions of Svenson and Harker's history, it also unsettles how they handle the most obvious cost of the program: family separation. The premise of the program, after all, is not only that exposure to middle-class Mormon homes benefited Indigenous families, but that the benefits outweighed the costs of family separation. The ISPP separated children from their homes and communities for nine months out of the year during some of the most

formative years of their lives. I read Dumont's account of the time spent in the Mormons' trailer as a microcosm of the awkwardness and discomfort children participating in the ISPP or other Sixties Scoop programs might have experienced in the unfamiliar environment of strangers' homes. It is true that not every Mormon home is all neat pants and polite manners, but to Dawn, a child, differences like these left as much of an impression as the Mormons' generosity and good intentions. For many ISPP participants, experiences in Mormon homes went far beyond this awkward discomfort to more extreme experiences of isolation and alienation, ostracization, shame, discipline, and physical or sexual abuse (Boxer, "The Lamanites"). Svenson and Harker's blithe insistence that, "in all cases, there was a positive impact on [the children's] families" erases the basic cost of family separation and seems deliberately obtuse about the program's other harms, such as abuse. To be clear, this blitheness is not Svenson and Harker's alone; ignoring the undeniable harms of family separation is implicit in any sustained defence of the ISPP.

Admittedly, the timing of Svenson and Harker's history may have impacted its seeming obtuseness. *The Hand of the Lord* was finished in 2014, just before the final reports on Canadian residential schools were published by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and a year or two before high-profile lawsuits were levelled against the Church for sexual abuse in the context of the ISPP. Deliberately obtuse or not, the closest Svenson and Harker come to acknowledging those harms is their statement that "placement for some was not a good experience and they returned to become inactive" in their local church communities (107). This limited acknowledgement of "not . . . good" experiences is only noted for the impact it had on participants' church activity. While Dumont's story shows settler Mormons treating their Indigenous neighbours as equals, Svenson and Harker's framing of the ISPP shows settler Mormons discounting the harm done to their Indigenous neighbours to prioritize a narrative of their own rightness.

As an account of intergenerational residential school survival, *Nobody Cries at Bingo* is implicitly and persistently concerned with family separation—especially the separation of children from their siblings and mothers. Both of Dumont's parents, like countless Indigenous people in Canada, were separated from their families to attend residential schools, and, in the story, Dawn's father goes

through bouts of alcoholism and instability due to his experiences there. One of these bouts is the reason Dawn and her siblings are riding away from the reserve with their mom in the middle of a cold winter night in “I Slept There.” Her mother’s protective actions inform young Dawn’s perspective that children should not be separated from their mothers. In another chapter, Dawn is shocked to learn of two boys in foster care and pronounces, “[T]hese boys needed their brothers and sisters and their mom . . . probably not their dad . . . and they needed them now!” (90). Her shock crystallizes into a declaration that “[i]f a child needed something, it was an adult’s responsibility to get it immediately” (90). Although the adults around young Dawn better understand the many complications to this statement, Dumont’s story still powerfully communicates a child’s perspective on family separation. Recalling a period of a few weeks when financial difficulties necessitated that she and her siblings stay with other relatives, she recounts: “It was the worst thing that had ever happened to us” (90). Reading *The Hand of the Lord* in light of how Dumont describes separation from her mother makes clear the indefensibility of the ISPP and other Sixties Scoop programs. Dumont concludes “I Slept There” with the reflection that “it did not matter where you rested your head as long as you woke up with family” (40). I can’t imagine a clearer refutation of the ISPP’s methods, whatever its aims.

Understanding that Mormon presence on Okanese land was part of a deliberate, long-term conversion strategy involving a scheme to take children far from their families heightens the seemingly low stakes of Dumont’s story. It certainly would have added to the suspicions of Dawn’s mother, who, as a staunch Catholic, does not let her children attend the picnics hosted by the Mormon Church, despite the events’ reputation among the children as being “the best” (36). As a residential school survivor, Dawn’s mother has every reason to be suspicious of programs that separate families in the name of education. Dawn’s mother is markedly uncomfortable accepting help from the Mormons, offering to pay them for their trouble (which they refuse), and is horrified when Dawn begins to read *The Book of Mormon*. Dawn recounts feeling her mother’s “glares boring into the back of [her] head” (39), but continues to read, convinced she cannot be in any danger just from reading a book. And while young Dawn does insist that her reading is merely to distract herself from her boredom,

Dumont admits in retrospect that “books inspired me, which was easy since I was impressionable, to an unhealthy degree” (31). As this chapter recounts Dawn mimicking the traits of people and characters around her, such as when her “personality under[goes] a dramatic change” when she reads *Anne of Green Gables* (32), it sets up readers to wonder how she might be influenced by *The Book of Mormon*. One might well ask what it would mean for Dawn to inhabit the imaginative space of *The Book of Mormon*, with its didactic surety, its doomed sensibilities, and its fated account of Indigenous dispossession and resurgence through Mormon Zionism.

Reading “I Slept There” in the context of the ISPP also highlights the chapter’s connections with other stories of Indigenous resistance to family separation and assimilation through education. In particular, Dumont’s chapter is reminiscent of “The Big Red Apples” by Yankton Dakota writer Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša), another Indigenous writer with a relationship to Mormonism (see Hafen, “A Cultural Duet”). Both Bonnin’s and Dumont’s stories are narrated by a child version of the author, and, in both, the narrator’s mother becomes anxious about the influence of missionaries (or other proselytizing Church members) on her fearlessly curious but innocent and impressionable daughter. Just as Dawn resists her mother’s anxiety, Bonnin ignores her mother’s caution not to “believe a word” from the missionaries (41). “Their words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter,” Bonnin’s mother warns her, pleading “stay with me, my little one!” Dumont’s story diverges from Bonnin’s in that Dumont does stay with her mother, while Bonnin goes away with the Quaker missionaries to be schooled.

Although illuminating to read “I Slept There” in the context of the ISPP, it is ultimately difficult to know whether the Mormons in the story specifically hope to interest Dawn in the program. Svenson and Harker report the ISPP only continuing in Saskatchewan until 1985. However, one churchwide history of the program suggests the Church did not begin phasing out placement until 1984 (Garrett 225).⁶ Beginning that year, only students in or above the fifth grade could enrol, then sixth grade the next year, and so on. Dawn’s sister was with her in the Mormons’ home, and would have been old enough to participate in the ISPP. Dawn would have been ten or eleven by 1984—maybe just old enough to make the cut-off.

The late eighties marked the beginning of a change for Lamanite programs and policies in Saskatchewan. After the death of Kimball, the Mormon Church president whose enthusiasm had sustained these programs and policies, they were quickly dismantled. In 2001, Saskatchewan's Lamanite Stake, a large organizational unit made up of individual congregations, was officially dissolved. By the time I arrived in Saskatchewan in 2012, the Church had almost completely pulled out of the reserves, leaving many Indigenous members feeling abandoned and, in some cases, resentful. Perhaps others were relieved to see the Church go. The Church's withdrawal left a climate of confusion for both Indigenous and settler members, but the imposition of Lamanite identity in Saskatchewan has persisted. After much-publicized DNA studies that added scientific weight to long-standing Indigenous refutations of Hebrew descent, the Church was compelled to moderate their position. In 2006, Church leadership edited the claim about Indigenous people in *The Book of Mormon's* introduction, stating that Lamanites were "among the ancestors of the American Indians," rather than "the principal ancestors of American Indians."

This small and unique change in wording was a significant but insufficient step away from the Church's sweeping claims about Indigenous identity; in many ways, it has added to confusion over exactly who supposedly is or is not a Lamanite. By the time the introduction was changed, many Indigenous Church members had adopted the term *Lamanite*, whether they interpreted the label as a literal marker of lineage or as a kind of spiritual heritage. Regardless of shifts in the Church's position or nuanced Indigenous interpretations of the word *Lamanite*, settler Church members in Saskatchewan still use the term broadly, without qualification, and as a marker of literal descent. This is exemplified in Svenson and Harker's explanation of the term:

The descendants of these [Book of Mormon peoples] still live on the American continents and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints often refer to these descendants, commonly called Indians, as Lamanites. In the Saskatchewan context and as used in this book, the term Lamanite applies to all Aboriginal people—First Nation [*sic*] (Indian), Metis, and Inuit. (100)

The continued and unqualified imposition of Lamanite identity by missionaries is upheld by this local tradition and by the refusal of the Church at the highest institutional level to be called to account for its colonial project. Wherever settler members and missionaries continue to impose Lamanite identity, Mormon-Indigenous relations will continue to mirror the social dynamics in “I Slept There.”

If Church members and leaders want to be better guests and neighbours, they can engage with Indigenous perspectives on Mormon settlement, which are crucial to grappling with the Church’s colonial legacies.⁷ Settler Mormons can recognize the diversity of viewpoints Indigenous Mormons may hold about Lamanite identity. For example, while some Indigenous Mormons might adopt the term *Lamanite* without seeing it as a literal marker of descent, others may figure the Lamanites among their ancestors without discounting their primary ancestry or giving up their culture. Others may interpret *The Book of Mormon* allegorically, as a devotional text, or as a series of stories that reflects cultural values but not spiritual or historical truths. Others still might adopt some Mormon beliefs or practices, or participate in local church congregations, without adopting a Lamanite identity. Accordingly, local Mormon leaders can let Indigenous members determine if and how Lamanite terminology is used and advise local missions accordingly. Local settler Mormons and missionaries can also make space for the Indigenous “melding [of] spiritual beliefs” and not pressure Indigenous people to give up cultural beliefs or practices to make them better Mormons (Hafen, Afterword 267). Dumont gestures to this “melding” in describing her mother’s brother, Uncle Larry, who felt none of his sister’s loyalty to the Catholic Church, and in fact “belonged to the Mormon, Catholic, and United Churches” (36). While Indigenous peoples today are adept at navigating the imposition of Lamanite identity and Mormon encroachment, Dumont’s story can be read as a caution for settler Mormons and missionaries against the colonial faux pas of showing up uninvited in Indigenous spaces.

Dumont’s writing after *Nobody Cries at Bingo* continues to expand on the theme of Indigenous family separation and makes occasional references to Mormon attempts at conversion. Her 2017 novel *Glass Beads* exemplifies this—its stories powerfully illustrating Dumont’s conviction that “kids belong with their mother[s]” (178). The book also

alludes to Mormon missionary presence in Saskatchewan when a central character named Nellie warns a new Christian friend, “Just don’t try to convert me. The Mormons have tried, the Catholics, one time a Wiccan girl. I’m not a joiner” (107). As Nellie pre-empts a possible conversion attempt, she avoids the social strain that such interactions would have on her new friendship. Unlike the Mormon family in “I Slept There,” her new friend responds in a way that signals respect for her choice and puts Nellie at ease. “I converted like eighteen people last month,” he begins jokingly, “so don’t worry, we don’t need you” (107). While this interaction contrasts with the visit in “I Slept There,” it has some resemblance to another visit Dumont had with Mormon missionaries—a visit she writes about in her 2017 humour column for the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, titled “Lessons in Procrastination.” This visit took place years after the events of “I Slept There,” when Dumont, like Nellie, was working towards a law degree. In her telling, Dumont comes across as less impressionable than the young Dawn of “I Slept There,” although she is still recognizable as an avid reader with little patience for the mundane. Although Dumont is physically separated from her family for school, any threat this might have posed for her is gone. In fact, when two Mormon missionaries show up at her Saskatoon apartment, she is eager to talk with them, but not for the reasons they hoped. True to form, Dumont reflects on this visit in almost painfully humorous detail. She describes having felt both loneliness and a need to procrastinate on her schoolwork when two exceptionally good-looking missionaries appeared at her door. Seeing the “two Abercrombie and Fitch-looking dudes” hoping to come talk with her, she lets them in “[w]ithout hesitation.” As she relates:

We talked about how studying was good for the soul; then they segued into talking about how it was even better to study scripture! Then I segued into asking them if they wanted to play strip poker. I managed to keep them in the apartment for about half an hour before they escaped . . . er . . . left.

Read in isolation, it’s possible to see this story as a typical portrayal of Mormonism, in which Mormons are the butt of the joke. However, read as an epilogue to “I Slept There,” the humour of this anecdote becomes

more complex. Now with Mormons in her home, Dawn deliberately plays the awkward host, imposing a degree of discomfort that might have been not just amusing but cathartic. Here, Dawn seems completely at ease and in control, framing the missionaries' "segue" as ridiculous and subverting it with her own. After this, she circumvents the serious religious tone of the conversation entirely, as she "manage[s] to keep them" and not the other way around. Read in conversation with "I Slept There," this story's social dynamics take on symbolic significance. Even while Mormon settlers continue to assert themselves in Indigenous spaces, interposing their limited view of Indigenous identity, their threat can be easily handled with an understanding of one's own Indigenous identity and a good sense of humour.

While Mormonism's relationship to Indigenous peoples is particular in many ways, Dumont's literary treatment of Mormonism has broad resonances and implications for contemporary Indigenous-settler relations. This is especially true where reconciliation has become the dominant framework whereby settler society imagines Indigenous grievances to be recognized, regretted, and thus resolved (see Coulthard 105–107; Gaertner 49–56, 106–138). Rather than seeking any kind of formal or institutional reconciliation, Dumont's storytelling takes up the resurgent work of attending to Indigenous-settler relations on a local scale. As she gently shows the well-intentioned work of converting Lamanites (while settling on their land or splitting up their families) to be an unwelcome imposition, Dumont invites settler Mormons to find better ways of relating to the Indigenous peoples around them. This exemplifies the power of Indigenous literature to reframe and reimagine contemporary Indigenous-settler relations—inviting everyone, as Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice puts it, to embrace the sometimes uncomfortable "truths of our shared history" and work together "for better futures" (179).

Notes

1. I borrow the term "literary land claim" from Margery Fee's book *Literary Land Claims: The "Indian Land Question" from Pontiac's War to Attawapiskat*.
2. For more on how Apress used the theory of Hebrew descent to argue for Indigenous sovereignty, see Zuck, especially pp. 2, 9–15.
3. For more on the history and geographical scope of Lamanite identification, see Duffy.

4. Notable massacres include the Fort Utah Massacre (1850) and the Circleville Massacre (1866), carried out by Mormon settlers against the Timpanogos and Paiute peoples, respectively; the Bear River Massacre (1863), carried out against the Northwestern Shoshone by the United States Army on Mormon settlers' behalf; and the Mountain Meadows Massacre (1857), which Mormon settlers carried out on the Baker-Fancher wagon train and blamed on the Southern Paiute people.
5. While the Church was circulating many official pamphlets at this time, any of which could have been given to Dawn, two particular pamphlets are worth mentioning: *Lamanites and The Book of Mormon* (1976) and *Christ in America* (1980). The latter of these opens exuberantly: "The Great White God of ancient America still lives! The diving personage that emerges from the discoveries and writings of archaeologists and historians now stands out as an unassailable reality" (Peterson 1).
6. Elise Boxer's forthcoming book on the ISPP is set to become a definitive monograph on the program; however, Matthew Garrett's book is currently the most widely available. While Garrett's book has been criticized for the pains it takes to rescue the placement program from critique, his primary sources are presumably reliable, including the 1984 *Salt Lake Deseret News* article he draws from here.
7. The collections of essays *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion* (2018) and *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History* (2019) are a great place to start. Settler Mormons can also learn about the history and culture of the specific peoples whose land they live on and about the history of Mormon presence in the area.

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Locating Camelot in Canada: Place, Memory, and John Reade's The Prophecy of Merlin and Other Poems

Modern audiences love stories about Europe's Middle Ages. In TV and movies, we have everything from *Game of Thrones* to the many movie adaptations of *Beowulf*.¹ There are nearly countless variations of Robin Hood. Video games seem particularly drawn to Vikings, with games like Ubisoft Montreal's *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* or the recent instalments of the *God of War* series from Santa Monica Studios. This is not to say that any of these have much to do with history; they are all historical inventions. We love recreating Europe's Middle Ages to suit whatever idea of history we want to give it. These constant reinventions of the medieval past—also known as medievalisms—have existed since the Middle Ages themselves, with subsequent ages reinventing their histories, both near and far. The legends of King Arthur are among those that have been circulated and recreated countless times in various media over the centuries. In North America, some of the more recent popular culture iterations include stage and film versions of the musical *Camelot*, and Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*. Adaptations abound on the other side of the Atlantic: the cult classic *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, an adaptation of the Arthurian legend; *Spamalot*, John Du Prez and Eric Idle's Broadway adaptation of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*; and John Boorman's *Excalibur*, to name only a few. Nor are these adaptations limited to recent decades: in the nineteenth century, Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, published between 1859 and 1885, heralded a fashion for Arthuriana in various forms. In Canada, John Reade was among the first to participate in this trend: his 1870 poetry collection, *The Prophecy of Merlin and Other Poems*, circulated widely

and was at the fore of a trend for literary Arthuriana in Canada that lasted for decades.

But there is something curious about the way that North American culture engages with the legends of Arthur: it is significantly more place-based than any of the other sources of medievalism that I mention above. One does not often see a Heorot Way,² for example, and place-based references to Norse mythology are most common in areas with a history of Scandinavian settlement.³ Yet search for “Camelot” or “Avalon” on Google Maps and they are almost as ubiquitous as Main Street. Every town that I have lived in is marked with references to King Arthur’s court. Ottawa has an Avalon neighbourhood; London, Ontario, has an Avalon Street and a Camelot Crescent. Lafayette, Louisiana—where I live most of the time these days—has an Avalon Street and a seniors’ home named for Camelot. Toronto has a Camelot Court. There is a Camelot Beach near Port Colborne, Ontario. And, of course, there is the Avalon Peninsula (and former Province of Avalon) on the island of Newfoundland. Perhaps because it is all around us, perhaps because I grew up with it inscribed on the landscape around me, I did not question the cartographic imposition of this Arthurian narrative on the land until I encountered literary invocations of Arthur in Canada. I accepted the Arthurian names of these streets and neighbourhoods, just as I accepted that my own childhood road was named after a large family that lived there. Yet reading poetry that called for a new Camelot in Canada immediately registered as dissonant in my mind. In order to understand a contemporary Canadian reader’s experience of Reade’s poetic situation of Arthur in Canada, we need to understand the various ways in which we navigate our landscapes, and the ways we have been primed to accept British medievalism in the spaces around us. Reade’s poetry is distant from me in a way in which my friend’s street never can be; I do not live them the same way. This project is thus a very personal search to understand how the cartographies of my life shape how I read this nineteenth-century poetry, and in turn to understand how this poetry has shaped my—and perhaps our—perceptions of the land.

So why have our urban planners and cartographers been so consistently enamoured with tying places in Canada to Arthur? Why Camelot as opposed to Heorot or Valhalla? A very practically minded

friend proposed that it is because English speakers can easily pronounce “Camelot.” An excellent point, but one that does not account for a key factor: English speakers regularly anglicize words from other languages. We have already done so with Valhalla, pronouncing it “væl’hælə” (Val-hal-uh) instead of “val’hɒl” (Val-hɒtl). Moreover, many of the places associated with Arthur are in Wales, and Welsh is a notoriously difficult language for English speakers. Thus we return to my original question: Why Arthur, and why place names? The answer, in broad strokes, is that for almost nine hundred years, the English have co-opted not just the stories of Arthur, but also the places associated with him, to reinforce English imperial and patriarchal power. In North America, as in Britain, naming places after Arthur is likewise an imposition of masculine imperial power. This is a more subtle type of colonialism than, for example, naming London, Ontario, after London, England, or naming a city the “new” anything. After all, the legendary Arthur was a Celt from Wales who led the military resistance against Saxon invaders. By modern sensibilities, he should be an anti-imperial hero! Instead, even from the earliest stories about him, he has been invoked to support imperial power. His modern resonances are thus bifurcated: while seeming to stand for self-governance, equality, and chivalric love, he is simultaneously an icon for patriarchal English imperialism. This symbolic ambivalence of Arthur and the places associated with him has a long history in Canada, not only in maps and street names, but also in other stories justifying colonial rule through medieval inventions. When things are written on maps, it is easy to believe they have always been that way, but maps and their stories change over time. In story, the insertion of Camelot into the Canadian landscape begins in the mid-nineteenth century and reaches particular popularity in the 1870s. In this paper, I explore the colonial implications of literally mapping Camelot onto the landscape of modern cities, and I trace this practice to the nineteenth-century roots of Canadian Arthuriana, using Reade’s 1870 collection *The Prophecy of Merlin and Other Poems*, as my exemplar.

Mapping Camelots

Although I live in the United States most of the year, I return to Canada regularly to connect with family and to carry out my research. In Canada, the places I most consider “home” are Markham, a large city just north of Toronto, and Pembroke, a very small city in the Upper Ottawa Valley. In Markham, one of the older neighbourhoods gives an example of Canadian urban planners’ fixation on the masculine elements of Arthurian legend. Figure 1 shows a map of Markham Village, with a list of the streets named after Arthur and his knights. This particular neighbourhood is part of the mid-twentieth-century development of the city: not old enough to be included in the pre-1918 heritage conservation district immediately to the west, but established by the time of Markham’s incorporation as a town in 1971 (*1918 York County Map; 1971 Land Use Map*). Here, we get a very masculine picture of Arthur’s court, with fifteen streets named directly for knights, including Sir Lancelot, Sir Bedivere, Sir Gawain, and Sir Tristram; another named for Merlin; and three for medieval places, including Camelot and Knightsbridge. The third place-name street, perplexingly, is Lindisfarne, an island in England’s far northeast famous for the illuminated gospels produced by its monastery in the early eighth century, and for suffering a devastating Viking raid not long thereafter, in 793 C.E. Although it too serves as a nationalistic touchstone of English history, Lindisfarne is far from the places of Arthurian legend, and it is not a site typically associated with him. The reference to yeomen is equally out of place, compressing the times and places of medieval Britain. *Yeoman* begins as a Middle English word, meaning either a freehold farmer or a royal servant. While both were men of middling rank in late-medieval English society, neither serfs nor nobles, otherwise the lives of a freehold farmer and a royal servant would be quite different. The former owned land, was rooted in place, and often had servants; the latter was landless, serving and following a lord. Our earliest written attestations of both meanings come from the fourteenth century, some eight hundred years after Arthur (“Yeoman”). Yet there is an ironic aptness to the inclusion of “Yeoman’s Way” in this Arthurian neighbourhood: “yeoman,” like Arthurian symbolism, has a bifurcated and self-contradictory meaning.

Whereas the streets of Markham Village demonstrate the patriarchal nature of Canadian Camelots, we can find an even clearer symbol of the imperialism of modern understandings of Camelot in my hometown of Pembroke, Ontario, along the Ottawa River. Its namesake is an even smaller town in Wales, made famous by its castle and for being the birthplace of Henry Tudor—later King Henry VII. Like its Welsh counterpart, the Ontario town has a complicated relationship with English imperialism: it is situated in Algonquin territory and is part of the ongoing Algonquin treaty negotiations with the province (“Algonquins of Ontario Land Claim Negotiations”); moreover, the area was colonized by both the French and the English, and maintains a significant francophone population. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Pembroke area of Wales was colonized by the Normans in the eleventh century, and the English colonized the rest of Wales in the thirteenth century.

This first conquest of Wales by the Normans catalyzed one of the earliest attempts to use the legend of Arthur to justify imperial domination: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, commissioned by one of the sons of William the Conqueror. Geoffrey’s so-called history is fanciful to say the least, but one of the things that it does is place William’s Norman dynasty as the successors to Arthur’s legendary reign, thus legitimizing their rule as not a French usurpation of English rule, but rather the restoration of ostensibly true British lineage. With the second conquest of Wales in the thirteenth century by the English, King Edward I also embarked on a variety of projects to legitimize his conquest by claiming connections to Arthur. Key among these projects was his use of the town of Caernarfon. According to some Arthurian legends, Arthur’s grandfather dreamed of finding his future wife at Caernarfon and subsequently established it as the seat of his government. Moreover, Excalibur is supposed to have been found in a lake just outside the town. Like Arthur’s grandfather, Edward made Caernarfon his Welsh administrative centre and built an imposing castle there. He even arranged for his wife, Eleanor, to relocate to Caernarfon long enough to give birth to their first son and heir; hence the tradition of giving the title of Prince of Wales to the male heir to the British throne (Woodbury). Caernarfon was an integral part of Edward’s efforts to justify his imperial conquest through Arthur; tellingly, it is more

secondaire at Jeanne-Lajoie furthers the colonial medievalist imagery: it features an armored knight on horseback, with the motto “*Jusqu’au bout*” [until the end] (*Pavillon*). Inasmuch as it invokes the school’s fight against English linguistic hegemony, it also reinforces French settler colonialism. There is a particular irony, then, in the uneasy placement of Centre scolaire catholique Jeanne-Lajoie and Caernarvon side by side. The Caernarvon complexes stand as monuments to English cultural and political domination, co-opting the myth of Arthur as freedom fighter into the service of the nation he fought against. As a symbol, Jeanne Lajoie likewise occupies an ambivalent place between resistance to and complicity with linguistic colonization.

Writing Camelots into Canada: John Reade’s *The Prophecy of Merlin and Other Poems*

There is a curiously transhistorical element to the history of relationships among cartographic and literary medievalisms in Canada. The cartographic histories of medievalism in Canada go back at least to 1623, with an English royal charter for the establishment of the Province of Avalon in what is now called the Avalon Peninsula on the island of Newfoundland. Canada’s history of literary medievalism reaches back to the first issue of its first literary periodical, *The Nova-Scotia Magazine*, in 1789. Yet these points on a timeline are misleading, for the names and texts both persist, and each shapes our understanding of the other. Just as my friend’s neighbourhood led him to seek out Arthurian stories and imagine a Ramona into them, I imagined a fifteenth-century Jeanne d’Arc blurring into the story of the twentieth-century Jeanne Lajoie. The stories we tell ourselves and the places we live are mutually constitutive. For me, as a reader and scholar, my understandings of text, place, and history are all inherently shaped by my lived experiences, and vice versa. My interest in Canada’s history of medievalisms, of the ways in which artists recreate the past, is thus not even a two-way street, but rather a multipoint intersection. But stories are somewhat more malleable than streets, and the rise and fall in popularity of certain types of stories provides insight into changes in public ethos.

In story, King Arthur first rose to prominence in Canada in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The first appearance of specifically Arthurian medievalism in Canada is a short poem in *The Amaranth* in 1843: “The Misanthrope,” by an “Arthur” who laments that his day of destiny has cut him off from the joys of the world and that he must wait in solitude until the messenger calls him back. Table 1 tracks my findings so far of literary adaptations of and references to Arthurian legend published in early Canada by decade.⁴ Note that there is not much interest in that particular form of medievalism until the 1870s, and that there is another peak in the 1890s. What happened to spur interest in Arthurian legend? The second peak is readily explained: after the publication of Tennyson’s complete *Idylls of the King* in 1885, Arthurian legend features in quite a few reviews and scholarly essays. The initial spike, however, has a slightly more complicated history. The Confederation of four of the provinces of British North America into Canada in 1867 prompted a significant quantity of literary medievalism, as authors looked to historical models of what a new nation-state should or could be—but that alone does not explain the sudden and specific interest in Arthuriana, among the range of possible historical models. The rise in literary Arthuriana also comes too late to be explained solely by the publication of the first version of Tennyson’s *Idylls*, which came out in 1859: if that were the primary precipitating factor, one would expect to see more interest in Arthurian legend in the 1860s. Instead, there is very little in the 1860s: just one book review (that happens to be of Tennyson’s *Idylls*) in 1860. Tennyson’s *The Holy Grail, and Other Poems* was published in 1870, but it generated less press than the complete *Idylls*. However, in the late nineteenth century, as now, North Americans loved their royals, and Queen Victoria’s son Prince Arthur paid a state visit to the newly formed Dominion of Canada from 1869 to 1870. The visit of a royal named Arthur coinciding with the political creation of a new country inspired an outpouring of odes and other praise linking the new Arthur and the new country with the old king and Camelot.

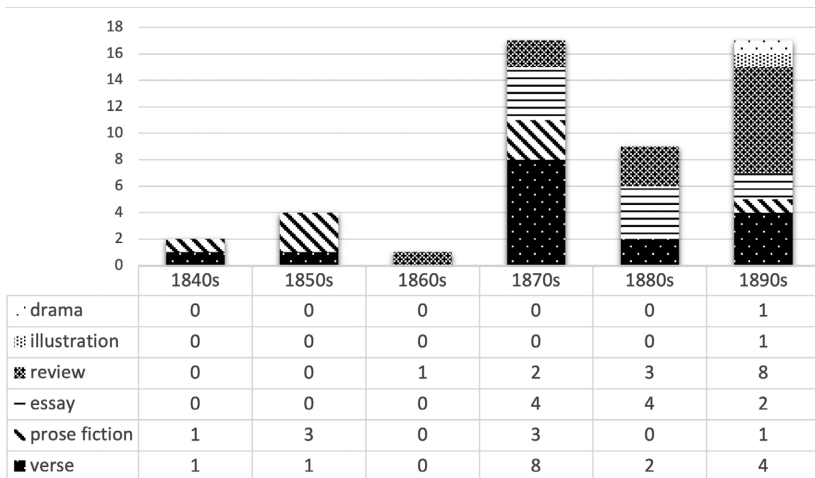


Table 1: Works of Arthurian literature in English published in early Canada, by genre and decade.

John Reade's 1870 collection, *The Prophecy of Merlin and Other Poems*, was one of the most prominent of these literary tributes. The collection begins with Merlin delivering a prophecy to a grieving Sir Bedivere about the reign of Victoria, the rise of the British Empire, and the birth of the Dominion of Canada. The 1869 to 1870 visit of Prince Arthur to Canada directly inspired Reade's poem, in which Merlin foretells that King Arthur's spirit will sleep for centuries until the reign of Victoria; then, the legendary spirit will be reborn in both Prince Arthur and his father, Prince Albert. In essence, Canada becomes the new Camelot, with Prince Arthur at its head. When the poem is taken together with the rest of the collection, however, this vision of Merlin's future and Reade's present is not as straightforward as it initially seems: the poems' topics move not only forward to contemporary Canadian issues, such as Confederation and the Fenian raids, but also backwards to Shakespeare, Mary Queen of Scots, the Battle of Hastings, and the fall of Troy. The collection ends with Reade's translation of a series of French poems from the time of the French Revolution. On this winding path through time and memory, I argue that Reade's *Prophecy* complicates the narrative of early Canada as a re-placement of Camelot. Reade's transhistorical vision suggests

an intertextual approach heavily influenced by his literary predecessors: he draws on Tennyson's *Idylls* for their verse form; and for its mood, on Malory's *Morte*, in which the potential downfall of the empire is ever-present, even when the king is at the peak of his influence. However, Reade's most direct source is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*—the same source used by King Edward I to justify the Anglo-Norman conquest of Wales.

Reade's *Prophecy* is significant for both its artistic and historic merits, though it received mixed reviews at the time. An anonymous reviewer for the *New Dominion Monthly* was unimpressed with the collection, though they did like Reade's praise of Princes Albert and Arthur, as well as, especially, a militaristic section of the poem in which war purifies the world. In the *Canadian Journal of Science, Literature, and History*, a reviewer identified only by the initial "E." notes the heavy influence of Tennyson on Reade, but because they love Tennyson, E. is not at all disappointed by the resemblance. E. does somewhat belittle Reade's work as provincial, claiming, "were the volume issued from the English press, it would present no special claims on the attention of a Canadian literary journal; but as a poet issuing his work from the Canadian press, Mr. Reade may claim some critical notice at our hands" (490). Yet E. also recognizes their own implicit biases, noting, "We are, indeed, perhaps prone to underestimate our native literary productions, as presumably inferior to those begot in the great centres of intellectual vitality" (490). Despite the pompous antinativism of this and other reviews, Reade was quite effective at promoting his work, publishing teaser snippets in prominent journals and sending advance copies to magazine editors. I think Reade's collection played a significant role in inspiring other Canadian authors to take specifically poetic approaches to Arthurian legend and Prince Arthur's visit. There is a relatively high number of creative works on these subjects published nationally in this decade, and, for a brief moment in the 1870s, Reade was discussed in Canadian literary periodicals at least as much as Tennyson.

Yet Reade was indebted not only to Tennyson, but also to other giants of Arthurian legend, such as Thomas Malory and Geoffrey of Monmouth. E. and others are quite right to point out a stylistic similarity to Tennyson's *Idylls*, since both use blank verse with stanzas of variable length. Perhaps if reviewers had noticed Reade's overt

adaptation of the *History of the Kings of Britain*, they would have been kinder about the artistic merits of the work. This oversight seems largely a result of what Canadians were reading and writing about in the nineteenth century. Not many Canadian authors of the time talk directly about Malory's *Morte*: only four articles that I have found explicitly mention Malory. Moreover, Geoffrey is all but forgotten. The only reference that I have found to Geoffrey is from the mid-1890s, well after the publication of Reade's *Prophecy*. So, reviewers likely did not notice the intertextuality of Reade's collection because they were not familiar with the intertexts, which at least temporarily passed out of Canadian popular consciousness. However, there were European editions of the *History* available in multiple languages in the mid-nineteenth century. The most likely sources for Reade are two by English scholar J. A. Giles in the 1840s. Aaron Thompson had translated Geoffrey's *History* from Latin into English in 1718; Giles revised and edited Thompson's translation, publishing the resulting *British History of Geoffrey of Monmouth, in Twelve Books* with James Bohn of London in 1842. The Thompson and Giles edition was the standard English version in the mid-nineteenth century. Reade was also an accomplished translator (Monkman), and he could certainly have worked with the text in Latin; Giles also edited a Latin edition of the text as *Galfredi Monumetensis Historia Britonum*, which he published with David Nutt of London in 1844. For ease of comparison, I use here the Thompson and Giles edition in English.

For Reade's adaptation of the *History of the Kings of Britain*, the most relevant section is, aptly enough, the *Prophetiae Merlini*, or the Prophecies of Merlin. Both sets of prophecy have a lone figure at the end of an era asking Merlin about the future of the nation. For Reade, the questioner is Sir Bedivere, the last remaining knight of the Round Table; for Geoffrey, the questioner is Vortigern, the British king who unintentionally paved the way for the Saxon conquest of Britain by asking Saxons Hengist and Horsa to help defend his kingdom against the northern Picts. The stage for both prophecies is thus similar; moreover, so is the content—at least at first. In Geoffrey's *History*, Vortigern and Merlin witness a battle between a red dragon and a white one, and Merlin cries as he reveals its meaning:

Woe to the red dragon, for his banishment hasteneth on.
His lurking holes shall be seized by the white dragon,
which signifies the Saxons whom you invited over; but the
red denotes the British nation, which shall be oppressed
by the white. Therefore shall its mountains be levelled as
the valleys, and the rivers of the valleys shall run with
blood. The exercise of religion shall be destroyed, and
churches be laid open to ruin. (Giles 133)

We should perhaps count it as one of the miracles that Merlin explains at this point who the dragons are; he does not do this for any of the vast number of animal metaphors that follow. Merlin sees the subjugation—but not the annihilation—of the British race at the hands of the Saxons, the devastation of the land, and the destruction of Christianity in Britain in the process. This is Merlin's core prophecy that he repeats with slight variations for each successive wave of invaders of the British Isles: oppression of its existing inhabitants, destruction of the land, rivers of blood, suppression of Christianity.

Similarly, Reade's Merlin tells Bedivere that a great many things must come to pass before Arthur will rise again:

The great White Dragon of the stormy North,
Rearing his crest above the foaming waves,
Shall shake the ground, and level all the hills,—
And war shall follow war,—and blood shall flow
In every vale,—and smoke of burning towns
Shall reach into the sky,—and men shall cry for aid
Unto the sea, to hide them from the foe—
And still shall Arthur sleep in Avalon. (8)

Reade uses the very images in the same order that Geoffrey does: the Saxons as a White Dragon, the levelling of the hills, the valleys flowing with blood. So far, the texts run parallel—but the last line of this stanza, "And still shall Arthur sleep in Avalon," introduces larger differences between the two texts. Later in his *History*, Geoffrey writes of the possibility of Arthur being cured of his mortal wound in Avalon and returning to Britain (229–30), but this is not a focal point of his version of Merlin's prophecies. Reade, on the other hand, gives

Arthur a constant textual presence even when he is wounded in Avalon. The reference to Arthur merely sleeping in Avalon becomes a refrain; by repeatedly turning away from the devastation of the land, and instead looking to Arthur, Reade's version emphasizes his hope for a new Camelot.

Geoffrey next addresses the just and redemptive rule of Arthur, the "boar of Cornwall," but of course Arthur's rule lasts only so long. Reade, however, skips this portion of the prophecy, as his poem is set after the fall of Camelot. Both versions then pick up with the Viking invasions of Britain. In Geoffrey's version,

Six of his [Arthur's] posterity shall sway the scepter, but
after them shall arise a German worm. He shall be
advanced by a sea-wolf, whom the woods of Africa shall
accompany. Religion shall be again abolished . . . It shall
rain a shower of blood, and a raging famine shall afflict
mankind. When these things happen, the red one shall be
grieved; but when his fatigue is over, shall grow strong.
Then shall misfortunes hasten upon the white one, and
the buildings of his gardens shall be pulled down . . .
There shall be a most grievous punishment of men, that
the natives may be restored. (Giles 133–34)

Again we see the pattern of invasion, natural cataclysms, rivers (or, in this case, showers) of blood, suppression of Christianity, and misfortunes for the settled populace—but, eventually, fortune turns against the invaders, and there is a brief restoration of order.

Reade's prophecy likewise follows this pattern, but with some key differences. Raymond Jess points to the "violent image of national unity" elsewhere in Reade's collection (157), and this is certainly borne out by the large-scale upheaval in the "Prophecy":

And when the Dragon, sated with the blood
Of Christian men and women, yields at length
To a mild victor, Tigers of the Sea
Shall come, from craggy homes, to rend and tear,
And brave men's hearts shall quail before their eyes—
Yet still shall Arthur sleep in Avalon.

The Tiger's wrath appeased, another foe
Shall wave a foreign banner o'er the land,
And trample down beneath his horses' hoofs
Briton, and Dane, and Saxon, till the ground
Is rank with blood. (8–9)

Reade's account, at this point, still largely matches the pattern established by Geoffrey: invasion, destruction of religion, rivers of blood, reversal of fortunes as the invader becomes the invaded. However, Reade begins to incorporate some minor changes—the Vikings here are sea-tigers rather than sea-wolves—as well as some more significant differentiation. Whereas Geoffrey refers repeatedly to the destruction of religion, he never seems to get to its reinstatement. (One might be tempted to ask how something can be destroyed over and over again if it never has a chance to reassert itself.) Reade, on the other hand, makes a brief reference to Christianity as the “mild victor” to which the Saxon Dragon yields. The idea of any victor being mild is foreign to Geoffrey, and this leads to what I argue is the key difference in their prophecies: their approaches to conquest and empire.

For Geoffrey, the realities of imperial conquest were close to home. A Breton born the generation after the Norman Conquest, he prospered under Anglo-Norman patronage. His literary patrons were among the Anglo-Norman elite, and his quick advancement in the Church seems to be a mark of political favour (Faletra 10–12). Although his private views are a matter of debate, publicly and politically he was aligned with the Anglo-Norman ruling class. His work supported the Anglo-Norman ruling class, but it also did not shy away from the brutality of imperial expansion. For Geoffrey, all imperial expansion is conquest, and while the establishment of an empire may be in the interests of some of the people, he does not pretend that it is a universal good. Of the reconquest of Britain by Celtic and British groups, and of their subsequent conquests on the continent, he writes:

Cadwallader shall call upon Conan, and take Albania into
alliance. Then shall there be a slaughter of foreigners; then
shall the rivers run with blood. Then . . . the oaks of

Cornwall shall flourish. The island shall be called by the name of Brutus; and the name given it by foreigners will be abolished. From Conan shall proceed a warlike boar, that shall exercise the sharpness of his tusks within the Gallic woods. For he shall cut down all the larger oaks, and shall be a defense to the smaller. The Arabians and Africans shall dread him; for he shall pursue his furious course to the farther part of Spain. (Giles 136–37)

He associates Conan's scion with Arthur by referring to them both as boars; as Arthur is defender of the British realm, he likewise sees the younger Conan as a defender, though in this case of the weak. Note, however, Geoffrey's stance on foreigners. What leads to the (always temporary) resurrection of Britain's fortunes is the slaughter of foreigners; this time, it is their blood running into rivers. To Geoffrey, the establishment of empire serves a clear purpose: to defend one's homeland against foreigners, and to take what one can from elsewhere. It is only natural to him that those whose lands have been conquered would live in fear. There is none of the nineteenth-century idea of imperialism as a necessary burden to enlighten and civilize the Other.

This is where Reade's attitude towards empire differs from that of his source. Reade replaces Geoffrey's violent xenophobia with an equally problematic vision of the British Empire as a universal good:

But as the ages pass, these foes [Briton, Saxon, and Dane]
shall join
In friendship, and a nation shall arise,
Like a strong oak amid the forest trees,
Which, growing slowly, ceases not to grow,
But fastens firmly, as it aims aloft,
And spreads its branches far on every side,
A shelter to the stranger of all lands—
While Arthur still sleeps on in Avalon. (9)

Unlike Geoffrey, Reade seems to see empire not as a product of conquest, but as a naively beautiful way of joining nations in friendship. Both use the image of the oak tree as a metaphor for the strength of a nation, but whereas Geoffrey's Cornish oak flourishes

when the competition is chopped down, Reade's beautiful oak of empire shelters "the stranger of all lands." Note that Reade's vision presupposes that the stranger must be of a different and lesser kind, not another oak-tree nation, for an oak tree cannot shelter another oak of similar stature. In both visions, there can be only one great oak of the nation. Geoffrey sees equality in violence; Reade sees peace in imperial hierarchy. Jess points to another moment of racial unity in Reade's collection, with Reade using his poem "Hastings" to promote "the idea of a shared Norman culture between British and French-Canadians"; Jess argues that "Reade calls on his fellow Canadians to remember the Battle of Hastings as the moment when distinct peoples were brought together to create a new nation" (158). Yet, as we see with Reade's "Prophecy," this union is one not of equality, but of hierarchy.

For Geoffrey, the pattern of violence and bloodshed continues with no mention of the return of Arthur or of a lasting peace. Arthur does not return in Geoffrey's *History*. Reade, however, sees the British Empire of the late nineteenth century as the fulfillment of Arthur's legacy, and he is particularly proud of Canada's place in the expanding empire. The poem does not suggest a literal return of Arthur, but rather a return of the spirit of Camelot in the current monarchs and in the land of Canada. The refrain of "Arthur still sleeps" disappears, replaced with the arrival of Queen Victoria and her lineage:

And where a Grecian victor never trod
 And where a Roman banner never waved
 East, West, and North, and South, and to those Isles,
 Happy and rich, of which the poets dreamed
 But never saw, set far in the Western seas,
 Beyond the pillars of the heathen god—
 Shall Arthur's realm extend, and dusky Kings
 Shall yield obeisance to his conquering fame.
 And She, the fourth fair tenant of the throne,
 . . .
 Shall be VICTORIA. (14)

The land at first seems uninhabited, since it has been unconquered by the Greeks and Romans. In fact, the only suggestion of human presence on the land is immediately erased. Presumably, Reade does

not see Britain's colonial presence as a conquering one, since, in his mind, the "dusky Kings" of the Americas simply "yield obeisance" to the British once they hear of the glories of British history and legend. Reade's idea of the British Empire is one that multiplies the advantages of King Arthur's world: Canada becomes both Camelot and the Happy Isles in this prophecy, and Arthur lives again in many forms: Queen Victoria, as above, but also Prince Albert, their son Prince Arthur, and their family line. Canada takes on the timelessness of Avalon, with its rulers inheriting the qualities of Camelot:

In a far land beneath the setting sun,
Now and long hence undreamed of (save by me
Who, in my soul's eye, see the great round world
Whirled by the lightning touches of the sun
Through time and space),—a land of stately woods,
Of swift broad rivers, and of ocean lakes,—
The name of Arthur,—him that is to be,—
(Son of the Good Queen and the Blameless Prince),
Shall shed new glories upon him we loved. (27)

The differences between Reade's and Geoffrey's prophecies thus show a fundamental difference in their worldviews. Geoffrey's prophecy extols the virtues of the Anglo-Normans, but only insofar as they are what he sees as the rightful inheritors of the soil. For Reade, as a British settler in North America, any view that privileges the pre-existing inhabitants of a colonized region would threaten not only the legitimacy of his presence, but also the existence of the Dominion of Canada. When we keep the tone and message of Geoffrey's version in mind, Reade's prophecy is not perhaps as naive as it at first appears. Rather, it shows that Reade is aware of the violence of colonialism, but chooses to ignore it. His second Camelot, then, like the first, is flawed from the start.

Reade's main claim is simple: that the visit of Prince Arthur to Canada heralds the rebirth of a new, reinvigorated, but fundamentally British Camelot. Similarly, the Arthurian invasion of Canadian cartography stakes claims to certain types of patriarchal English power. These displaced Camelots hold layers of meaning: they invoke simultaneously the cynicism of almost nine hundred years of imperial

propaganda and the Round Table's eternal promise of egalitarianism and anti-imperialism. But these two interpretations are not necessarily equal: Reade's story ends with futurity, and the land is always changing. Perhaps my friend will write a story of Ramona at the Round Table; for anyone who reads it, she will always be part of Arthur's world. In Pembroke, the situational meaning of the Caernarvon complex is at an inflection point: just downstream from the complex, the Algonquins of Ontario have established a consultation office for a major treaty negotiation with the governments of Ontario and Canada. The settlement area covers much of Eastern Ontario, and the story of the land claim, they emphasize, is one of "renewed hope." The legends of King Arthur have demonstrated remarkable resilience as well as adaptability across centuries; if we continue to tell them, we can tell them in new ways.

Notes

1. For a survey of twentieth- and twenty-first-century adaptations of *Beowulf*, see: Forni, Kathleen. *Beowulf's Popular Afterlife in Literature, Comic Books, and Film*. Routledge, 2018.
2. Heorot, after the hall in *Beowulf*.
3. Jana K. Schulman has explored how Minnesota—a state with a significant history of Scandinavian immigration—has mapped and claimed Scandinavian medievalism. See: Schulman, Jana K. "Minnesota Medieval: Dragons, Knights, and Runestones." *The United States of Medievalism*, edited by Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein, U of Toronto P, 2021, pp. 157–79.
4. I include the full list of these sources in the appendix to this article. I aim for inclusivity in this bibliography: it includes any English-language literary source I found that was published in Canada and either adapted or referred to any aspect of Arthurian legend. It includes sources from monographs, literary periodicals, and periodicals that mixed journalism and literature, but not those that focused exclusively on journalism. Thomas B. Vincent's *Index to Pre 1900 English Language Canadian Cultural and Literary Magazines* (1987, 1993) was enormously helpful for finding many potential sources, which I then verified and expanded upon by reading through related periodicals in the collections of Canadiana.org, the Fisher and Robarts Libraries at the University of Toronto, the Baldwin Room archives of the Toronto Public Library, the Killam Memorial Library at Dalhousie University, the University of King's College Library and Archives, and the Mount Allison University Library Archives.

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Appendix: Chronology of Arthurian Literature in English in Nineteenth-Century Canada

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Métis Futurist Research Creation: Transformation and Peoplehood in Chelsea Vowel's Buffalo is the New Buffalo

The first time I read “Buffalo Bird” in Lac Ste. Anne Métis writer Chelsea Vowel’s story collection, *Buffalo is the New Buffalo*, I was frustrated by the extensive use of footnotes. At times taking up half of the page, these footnotes seemed to disrupt the story of Angelique Loyer, the Two-Spirit¹ Rougarou² of Lac Ste. Anne seeking revenge for her family’s murder. In my initial read-through, I skipped over the footnotes entirely, too wrapped up in getting to the end of the story. In fact, my eyes glanced over most of the footnotes in Vowel’s collection. Only after reading the acknowledgements section—I always read the acknowledgements sections³—did I go back to peruse what I initially saw as interruptions. An avid reader, I was keen to devour the collection and mark the book as “read” on my Goodreads account. As a Métis person, however—some of my family names are Fidler, Lilley, Simpson, Pruden, Welsh/Wells, Vandal, and of course, DesJardins or DesJarlais—I was pleasantly surprised to read about Métis home construction (29n8), Métis adoption of the fire bag (38n21), how “les grises”⁴ had “a specific focus on ending Métis women’s dependence on the hunt” (43n31), and other interesting facts hidden in the footnotes that I hadn’t known about my people’s history. Despite the excitement to share what I had learned with my cousins, I still didn’t understand why Vowel would choose to interrupt her stories, often deflecting readers’ attention to other people’s books. It wasn’t until much later that I came to realize that these disruptions were intentional.

Complementary to Vowel’s innovative use of footnotes, her story collection draws on a variety of conventions associated with science and speculative fiction, or sf.⁵ Her ability to draw on, subvert, or avoid

these conventions lends itself to the expansiveness of Métis futurist work. As a lens through which to write and read Métis literatures, Vowel offers Métis futurisms as a way “to extend Métis existence beyond official narratives, beyond current constraints, and imagine what living in a ‘Métis way’ could look like in spaces and times we haven’t (yet) been” (14). To do this work of imagining futures, Vowel is careful to ground herself and her stories in the community of Lac Ste. Anne. Likewise, she draws on Métis/nêhiyaw literary traditions to present her visions of possible futures or rewritings of the past. Vowel also makes use of academic conventions, engaging with footnoting and metacommentary as ways of practising research creation. In her own words, Vowel writes that “for all the stories, rather than use distracting in-text citations, I am performing hybridity and putting them into these footnotes instead” (27n6). However, Vowel’s footnotes move beyond mere citation into research creation, though many of her footnotes direct readers to sources for more historical or scholarly information, a number of her footnotes point out her interventions in official narratives, explain Cree terms and how she is using them, and clarify misconceptions about Métis culture, history, and identity, especially in “Buffalo Bird.” Many footnotes serve to both acknowledge sources of knowledge and to explain how Vowel innovates or engages with said knowledge. By shifting how footnotes function in her collection, Vowel transforms the academic practice to be part of how she tells her stories. In other words, in Vowel’s conception of Métis futurisms, footnotes can serve as part of the work’s methodology as a form of research creation. In this work, I emulate Vowel’s footnoting to put her methodological innovation into my own practice and to show that Métis futurisms have already begun to create a transformational impact within academia. Focusing on “Buffalo Bird” and “Unsettled,” I argue that Vowel’s story collection positions transformation as a central characteristic of Métis futurisms to ensure Métis values, culture, and stories carry on into the future. Applying a peoplehood approach to Vowel’s culturally-rooted stories makes visible the complexity of Métis identity. Similarly, this paper recognizes Vowel’s footnoting for its transformational potential, reading her collection’s paratextual elements as research creation—as a way of knowing and producing knowledge—which in turn creates space for new research methodologies for Métis scholarship.

My reading of Vowel's representations of Métis identity within her Métis futurist stories relies on the concept of *peoplehood*, as defined by Jennifer Adese and Chris Andersen in their essay anthology, *A People and A Nation: New Directions in Contemporary Métis Studies*. In their introduction, they discuss the dichotomy of approaches taken in Métis identity debates: "peoplehood-based arguments that look to the core of Métis peoplehood (to the collective culture, history, and politics practiced by Métis communities across the Métis Nation's prairie homeland)" and arguments centred on racial mixing (3–4). Adese and Anderson are firmly on the side of the former; they argue that it is the many Métis-specific, historically rooted cultural practices that define the Métis as a distinct people. A racialized understanding of Métis may, by contrast, categorize any mixed Indigenous person as Métis, which ignores the cultural practices that are specific to Métis people.

Vowel's work, read through a peoplehood lens, suggests that, while Métis people as a nation have a shared history and cultural practices, Métis communities can vary greatly. An example of this community specificity can be seen in "Unsettled," when JJ and Liam, both Métis, introduce themselves in different languages. Upon learning that JJ is also Métis, Liam suspiciously asks in Michif, "Taanday ooschchi kiiya?" (288). Annoyed, JJ responds in Cree, "manitow-sâkahikanihk ochi niya. mâka niwâhkômâkanak nêhiyawêwak, namoya nipîkiskwânân Michif" (288). In essence, JJ explains that *wiya*⁶ is from Lac Ste. Anne, where Cree is spoken, rather than the Michif Liam had been expecting, being from St. Albert. Though both characters are from Alberta and are both undoubtedly Métis, due to their connection to different communities, they speak different Indigenous languages. Reading these two characters through a peoplehood lens enables a broader understanding of Métis identity, an identity that can encompass different community-connected languages and stories.

In addition to peoplehood, I am also reading Vowel's stories for their transformative potential, which she identifies as a central tenet of Métis futurisms. Transformation is most easily recognized in the character of Angelique⁷ in "Buffalo Bird." As a non-linear, alternate-historical narrative, "Buffalo Bird" follows Angelique as she explores the facets of her complex identity as a Two-Spirit Rougarou and brings about justice for her family's murder. Additionally, the story features Angelique's work within the *nêhiyaw-pwat* (the Iron Confederacy),⁸

where she provides counsel, gathers information, and acts as translator to stop Canadian expansion westward. Angelique's ability to shape-shift between a human and a large black mare may appear to be the most overt example of transformation in the narrative. Undeniably, Angelique's physical change is one aspect of her character's transformation, but it is not the only aspect. Reading for Angelique's many changes—Rougarou-related and otherwise—reveals the importance of transformation, both in the story and in Vowel's conception of Métis futurisms at large. In the "exploration" section following "Buffalo Bird," Vowel asserts:

Working from Métis otipêyimisow-itâpisiniwin, transformation and shape-shifting are real and a constant potential in everything. I ground this story in the truth of this worldview, but further, I assert that this transformative potential is a characteristic of what I am calling Métis futurisms. Transformation is rendered ordinary, although specific acts of transformation can be extraordinary in terms of their impact. (80)

If the act of transformation is rendered ordinary, then it is not Angelique's ability to shape-shift into a horse that marks her extraordinary transformative potential, but rather how her shape-shifting impacts her community and, in effect, her community's future. Put differently, change in and of itself is not what is out of the ordinary; transformative potential, in Métis futurisms, is concerned with how change creates an impact. This transformative impact is precisely what makes Vowel's work so important. When Vowel's work is read as research creation, the impact of her work alters not just Métis literatures, but also Métis scholarship. In other words, the inherent value of Vowel's research creation work lies in the potential for further literatures, research, and scholarly discussion. By paving the way for future works, Vowel's collection carries extraordinary transformative potential.

In Angelique's case, the effect of her shape-shifting centres on her work within the *nêhiyaw-pwat*. Her knowledge of both English and Cree is valued within the group, leading to her position as translator for Gabriel Dumont, famed Métis strategist best known for his

military leadership during the 1885 North-West Resistance, in discussions with the Canadian government regarding westward expansion.⁹ After three hours of unsuccessful efforts to negotiate building a railroad through the prairies to British Columbia, John A. Macdonald finally asks Gabriel, “Then what, in the name of God, *do* you want?” (65). Gabriel’s response is, as Angelique translates: “We are the People Who Own Themselves. . . . We don’t want or need *anything* from you” (65). This response triggers the end of negotiations; in this alternate history, “Canada had had its chance to crush the Iron Confederacy, and it had failed” (66). In this moment, Angelique’s work with the *nēhiyaw-pwat* transforms the course of history, “successfully stop[ping] Canadian expansion into the West” (21). This act of transformation is not dependent on Angelique’s shape-shifting abilities; instead, it is Angelique’s political actions to protect her Métis and First Nations kin that drives her impact. And when Vowel’s protagonist later turns John A. Macdonald into “a spreading smear of blood and innards” after he attempts to have her killed . . . well, that’s just another example of transformation creating a lasting impact (69).

Another aspect of Angelique’s transformative impact revolves around her Rougarou identity. When Father Bourassa attempts to publicly frame her for the murder of a community member using black horsehair as his evidence, Angelique fights the impulse to shape-shift, knowing that her metamorphosis might be seen as a form of admission. Addressing the crowd, Bourassa accuses her of “driving Father Thibault from [them],” asking who else was “seen as a black mare while her family burned to death,” and “trying to tempt [their] daughters into sin, approaching them as a man does” (73). Here, Bourassa combines Angelique’s non-conforming gender presentation with her Rougarou powers. He suggests that if she is willing to break the heteronormative social rules of Christian society by “tempting [the community’s] daughters into sin,” then she is also capable of committing more deadly sins, such as killing community members—including her own family. His accusations rely on the community’s recognition of her gender, sexuality, and Rougarou abilities as evil, a view held by the church—and one that Bourassa had attempted to cultivate through his time in Lac Ste. Anne. He believes that if the community witnesses her “evil manifest itself” through physical transformation, they will cast her out (71). However, before Bourassa can cast her out of the community,

Angelique's cousin, Cyprien, speaks up in support of Angelique and produces evidence linking Bourassa to the murder scene. In this moment, Angelique describes "a feeling like diving into cold water, and suddenly she no longer [feels] the pressure of impending transformation" (74). Though Bourassa believed that Angelique's transformation into a black mare would result in her rejection from the community, it is actually because of her community's support that she is able to control her shapeshifting. Cyprien's evidence not only shifts the blame onto Bourassa and leads to his removal from the community, it also reminds Angelique that it is the church that views Rougarous as evil, not the Métis peoples. Bourassa's lack of respect for Métis culture thus leads directly to his downfall. It is because of his egotistical belief that he could influence the Métis community to change their perspective on the power of transformation that he is cast out of the community instead of Angelique. Though in this instance the impact of Angelique's change came at the cost of her family's lives, her Rougarou abilities create an even greater and more lasting impact by ultimately driving the church out of her community.

Transformation in "Buffalo Bird" is also present beyond the narrative in Vowel's footnoting strategies, where she practises research creation as methodology. In the short story, footnotes serve many purposes: they evoke oral storytelling practices, correct misinformation, define key people and places, impart insight into Vowel's interventions and motivations, and provide direction for further research. For example, one of the longer footnotes focuses on the figure of the Rougarou.¹⁰ In this footnote, Vowel points readers to articles by Pamela Sing and Warren Cariou for further research, defines Rougarous as they are understood by Métis peoples, and informs readers of her motivations for challenging racist notions of Métis traits:

(Sing 2009, 63–69). This piece compares the Métis stories of the Rougarou to the Francophone loup-garou (Cariou 2010, 157–168). Crucial to this story is the different way that Métis people relate to Rougarou (Roogaroo, Rigareau, Rigoureux) and, indeed, shape-shifting compared to Francophones. Cariou, who insists his own uncle was known to be a Rigoureux, notes that among the Métis and

many First Nations, the power to transform is respected, not feared or treated as evil, the way that the French saw it. In Métis folklore, a Rougarou is not a werewolf, but rather tends to be a black mare or a black dog. Cariou notes that the loup-garou “is also implicitly about race,” reflecting European anxiety of hybridity, which the Métis in particular represent. Cariou links the description of Métis as “the one-and-a-half-men,” half-white, half-Indian [*sic*], and half-devil, with the way Métis were seen as inherently evil, untrustworthy, and potentially capable of transforming into savagery. In this story I want to challenge these notions, maintaining respect toward the power of transformation and troubling the notion of savagery as an inherently Métis trait; in fact, I suggest that the savagery lay within the Europeans who so viciously colonized these lands. (32n11)

In addition to drawing the reader’s attention to other research by Sing and Cariou, this footnote contests the supernatural status of the Rougarou figure, serves the pedagogical purpose of correcting misreadings, and disrupts conventional short-story reading strategies with its mere presence on the page. Moving beyond mere clarification or context, this footnote more closely resembles research creation. In what she describes as a manifesto for research creation, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, Natalie Loveless posits research creation as a set of “multimodal ways of working in and with an arts and humanities attuned to more-than-human social justice, arguing for the importance of focusing on *how we do what we do* within university spaces” (Loveless 100). Research creation, then, is the production of alternate scholarly methodologies that blend forms in the name of changing the way we engage with research. Read as research creation, Vowel’s footnoting practices in her collection invite readers to engage with her work as both scholarly *and* creative, while modelling how Métis scholarship can be carried out within the academy. Her research creation takes up Loveless’ call for “the production of new, unruly, driven stories within the university as not only a bastion of privilege, but as a site of intense *transformative pedagogical power*” (105; italics mine). In essence, Vowel rejigs the scholarly practice of footnoting to serve her Métis futurist

aims. By engaging in research creation, Vowel's "Buffalo Bird" presents a culturally rooted way to write and read Métis literatures within the university and beyond.

Continuing discussions of Métis identity formations, Vowel's final story, "Unsettled," most overtly demonstrates the complexities of Métis identity through a peoplehood approach. A dystopian story, "Unsettled" takes place in a near future where humanity turns to hibernation to solve a global energy crisis. The hibernation stations, or Beehives, require small teams to maintain their operation and, after no initial volunteers come forward, members of Canadian Parliament accept a motion put forward by a Cree Senator: "[L]and [B]ack in exchange for Indigenous trainees" (303). This story follows one subsequent station-maintenance shift, where a team of mostly Métis folks acclimatize to their new positions and "ponder the implications of having the opportunity to rid Turtle Island of settler colonizers" (23). Though the story toys with the idea of large-scale murder, most of the characters' discussions revolve around identity. Brianne, one of the few non-Métis characters, incorrectly introduces herself as Métis, through a "Métis as racially mixed" understanding of identity: "I'm Métis. My dad's Cree and my mom's French Canadian" (292). When JJ asks a follow-up question—"Wouldn't that make you, Cree though?"—Brianne justifies her answer with the explanation that she is "half Indian and half French, so I'm Métis" (292). Though their conversation shifts towards other matters, the discussion picks up again later, and JJ takes the opportunity to correct Brianne's misunderstanding:

Not every mixed person is Métis, Brianne . . . Sure, originally the Métis were the offspring of Indigenous women and white men, but not all of those kids became Métis. A lot of them grew up in their mother's [*sic*] communities. The ones who stayed together eventually developed their own language and culture and shared similar goals. Being mixed today doesn't suddenly imbue someone with all of that, or link them to our shared history. (310)

JJ's explanation follows a peoplehood approach that extends Métis identity beyond simply being mixed. Being Métis, according to JJ,

necessitates a connection—even if that connection has been harmed due to colonial violence—to the language, culture, and goals that grew from within community, not from racial mixing alone. As JJ says, “You wouldn’t tell someone with a German parent and a Japanese parent that they are culturally Nigerian” (311). JJ’s understanding of Métis identity does not suggest that Brianne is not Indigenous, merely that she is not Métis. This distinction is important, as many mixed Indigenous people who “don’t *look* Native” are sometimes understood as somehow less Indigenous (293; emphasis mine). While at times this discrimination can be hidden in subtext, in Vowel’s story, Andrew voices his opinion outright, saying “That’s Métis, though. Mixed. Real Indigenous people aren’t mixed” (312).¹¹ His discrimination is quickly met with correction when JJ responds, “I’m sorry, *real* Indigenous people? . . . You may have noticed that some Métis are plenty brown . . . And even the ones who aren’t . . . are still real Indigenous people” (312). JJ’s response takes a peoplehood approach that validates Métis identities regardless of how mixed their blood is or whether their skin is brown or white. There is no one way to “look Indigenous”; instead, as a peoplehood approach suggests, Indigeneity centres around the shared cultural practices, histories, and kinships of a people. The correction of Brianne’s and Andrew’s misconceptions about Métis identity, from “Métis” encompassing all mixed Indigenous peoples to Métis people being excluded from Turtle Island’s Indigenous peoples entirely, reveals how a peoplehood approach can make visible the complexities of Métis identity.

Similarly, Vowel asserts a peoplehood approach in “Unsettled” through JJ’s “wiya” pronouns, reflecting a Métis/Cree-specific gender identity. JJ’s “wiya” pronouns are neither masculine nor feminine; as Vowel explains in an earlier “exploration” section, “*nêhiyawêwin*, the Cree language, lacks gendered pronouns, and ‘they’ is a more faithful translation of ‘wiya’ than ‘he’ or ‘she’ can be” (127). By choosing not to translate JJ’s pronouns to the closest English pronoun set, *they/them/theirs*, and opting for the Cree term, Vowel signals the interconnection between JJ’s gender and wiya’s Indigeneity. JJ’s gender identity rejects an imposed, colonial binary and is instead culturally rooted within wiya’s Métis worldview. In this way, JJ’s understanding of wiya’s gender mirrors wiya’s understanding of wiya’s Métis identity: neither wiya’s gender nor wiya’s Métis identities are a result of racial or

gender mixing, but rather are defined by wiya's connection to Métis cultural practices.

Through a peoplehood reading, "Unsettled" also debunks racist notions of Métis people as being racially mixed, especially as a mixture of white and Indigenous, which erases Black-Métis identities. To push back against this erasure, Vowel's short story not only features a Black-Métis character, September, but also directly engages with anti-Black racism within Indigenous communities in the form of a discussion between September, JJ, and Liam. In his introduction to September, when she asks if he and JJ "[m]ind if [she] smudge[s]," Liam asks, "But you don't look Native?" (293). September quickly corrects him, saying, "I think you mean I look Black . . . I hear it's possible to be white and Indigenous, and I think I have just established that it's possible to be Black and Indigenous" (293). She sarcastically adds, "My apologies if I don't quite look the part. I'll be sure to put more effort in" (293). Liam's question is ironic, given "his own neon-white skin and red hair" (293); the implication being that he doesn't "look Native," either. However, as September points out, being white and Indigenous is more widely accepted than being Black and Indigenous. Part of the reason for Liam's difficulty recognizing September's identity as Black-Indigenous is due to "fables of perceptual [racial] solidity" (209), to borrow Wayne Compton's language.¹² Put differently, despite September's first words to Liam being about an Indigenous spiritual practice, smudging, Liam is unable to see past her skin colour and casts doubt on her Indigeneity. Through September's rebuttal, Vowel speaks back against Black-Indigenous identity erasure. Through Liam's doubt, she demonstrates that conceptions of Métis identity as "mixed" overshadow the many mixed identities, including Black-Métis identities, that rightfully belong within Métis communities. As September says, "Race is a construct. There is more genetic diversity *within* populations than between them" (309). Looking at the diversity of Métis peoples to see the histories, cultural practices, and kinship lines that serve as points of connection is precisely what Adese and Andersen's peoplehood approach suggests. A peoplehood approach, as seen in Vowel's story, inherently recognizes Black-Métis identities and combats their erasure in all potential futures.

Though Vowel's imaginings often feature positive transformational impacts, she is careful not to forget the implications of past and present forms of oppression. She rightfully credits Afrofuturisms as a

crucial influence on Métis futurisms, writing that the complexities of Indigeneity and Blackness “are foundational aspects of the world building” in *Buffalo is the New Buffalo* (17). In “Unsettled,” Vowel conveys her commitment to recognizing the path-clearing efforts of Black scholars and Afrofuturists through her play on Black scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw created this term to make visible the ways “Black women experience gender and race-based discrimination at the same time” (298). Vowel’s story builds on the idea of overlapping layers of discrimination in the form of actuarial intersectionality, a field that is “based on the *possibility* that people experiencing multiple kinds of discrimination could, hypothetically, be entitled to some form of personal compensation” (298). This fictional field produces intersectional scores for each individual that function “like a reverse credit score; the higher the number, the greater financial risk you were to global stability, were you to be compensated for your suffering” (299). While the intersectional scores reflect a government tradition of refusal “to do something about discrimination and structural oppression” (299), they also function within the story to promote a remembering of those very same systems that cannot simply be imagined away. Put differently, in her commitment to imagining futures that acknowledge the complexities of Blackness and Indigeneity, Vowel recognizes in her Métis imaginings real systems of oppression without accepting their continuation as the only possible future. This refusal to accept any futures rooted in settler colonialism or anti-Blackness is seen in the very title of her collection, where she asks what could happen if, instead of accepting things as they are, we ensure that our ancestral ways continue into the future: What if instead of claiming that education or, creator forbid, “pipelines are the new buffalo” (21),¹³ we work towards making buffalo the new buffalo?

Vowel’s “Unsettled” presents diverging transformative paths to achieving Land Back. The two paths are as follows: first, to “exchange land for service” in the Beehives and gradually achieve Land Back; and second, to “truly unsettle these lands” through sabotaging the hibernation pods with low intersectionality scores to achieve immediate Land Back (322–23). The former path is one most of the crew are working toward. JJ, for example, doesn’t “have much faith that the full agreements would be honoured in 150 years, when humanity

emerged once more from the Beehives, but wiya did believe some of those returned lands would remain in Indigenous hands” (318). On this transformative path, Land Back is understood as a gradual process, one part of a larger historical global protest movement including the likes of “Mica Bay in the 1850s,” “Standing Rock,” “the Riel Resistance,” “Black Lives Matter, Arab Spring, the Hong Kong protests” (317–18). This “way of seeing history as a palimpsest, where generations overlap generations, and eras wash over eras like a tide on a stretch of beach” recognizes that “there is a change, but the changes arise out of slight misduplications of the pattern rather than from essential antagonisms” (Compton, qtd. in Smyth 393).¹⁴ Put differently, on the gradual path towards Land Back, there is recognition that the current push for Land Back is not due to a radical new method, but rather repeats past efforts for Land Back. The misduplications (i.e., differences from previous efforts) within Vowel’s narrative might be due in part to the opportunities created out of the global energy crisis. Vowel’s emphasis on globality is central to this transformative path, as it places the crew’s Land Back efforts in a global context. I read this transformative path as one rooted in humility. Here, I lean on Warren Cariou’s definition of humility “as a way of strength, a mode of engaging with the world and with other people without ego getting in the way” (6). Therefore, following the transformative path towards gradual Land Back requires the humility of recognizing the current Land Back efforts as a continuation of previous and concurrent efforts, rather than believing oneself a hero who will bring about Land Back single-handedly. To engage in a Land Back practice rooted in humility, to take the gradual path towards Land Back, is to understand transformation as a process, not a product. Just as Angelique’s work within the *nêhiyaw-pwat* produces a larger impact on the future than her Rougarou transformations, embracing Land Back as a process means recognizing the value of seemingly smaller acts of transformation, which over time enables a larger, more meaningful impact.

The second path towards transformational impact in the form of Land Back explores a more abrupt approach, demonstrating the dangers of transformative potential. Though the crew discusses this plan as “just a thought experiment” (315), the unnamed narrator inwardly reveals their intention to follow through with a “genocide of

‘white people’ in the name of decolonization” (325). They describe the details of the plot as follows:

All I had to do was set the threshold for failures over a certain [intersectional] score. There would be some losses anyway, and some white people would be spared due to disability or whatever circumstances had caused them to have a higher score than their peers. Neither of these outcomes was ideal, but thinning out the population of colonizers was the main goal. (322)

Read as an immediate method of achieving Land Back, the unnamed narrator’s plot demonstrates the broad scope of Métis futurisms. In other words, Vowel’s future imaginings are not always utopian; Métis futurisms also have the capacity to think through possibilities that perpetuate violence by locating evil in identities (“white people”) that cannot be changed versus focusing on the structures and systems that can be changed. As Vowel posits in her “exploration” section following the narrative, “sometimes what we are imagining isn’t pretty, or even something we’d ever want to see happen in real life” (325). Aside from assuaging settler-colonial fears, Vowel’s explanation for why she includes an Indigenous revenge story creates space for a discussion of the dangers of transformative potential. Though Land Back is a vehicle for this discussion, Vowel’s metacommentary unveils the broad contours of her conception of Métis futurisms. Much like her refusal to erase Black-Métis identities and the “intergenerational impacts of settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade” in her work, Vowel argues that Métis futurisms must have the capacity to contain all kinds of imaginings, whether they are hopeful, dangerous, or both (18).

In addition to her literary Land Back imaginings, Vowel speaks about her non-literary Land Back efforts in her role as a host of the podcast *Métis in Space*.¹⁵ In an article by Vowel and her co-host, Molly Swain,¹⁶ “Back 2 the Land: 2Land 2Furious,” they share how their sf podcast has evolved to now include a Land Back project and how the two seemingly disconnected subjects—Indigenous media representation and Land Back—are intertwined. Vowel and Swain conceptualize Land Back as “Métis futurism in a very material sense”:

it's how we build, remember, and reclaim our relationships with one another and the land, how we enact fundamental principles of Métis governance. When we take the land back we also take the future back from the colonizer. So Land Back means space for us to do the work of bringing those futures into being.

In taking the land and the future back, Vowel and Swain have demonstrated one of the ways Métis futurisms can act as a vehicle for transformative impact within and beyond the realm of literatures. Vowel's *Buffalo is the New Buffalo*, I would argue, is likewise intertwined with Land Back. By modelling Métis futurisms in both material and literary ways, Vowel's work creates a transformative impact that will, no doubt, change our future.

Vowel's insistence on her work being read first and foremost as Métis futurism allows her to play with the boundaries of creative and scholarly works, place and space, and pasts and futures "to get us to where no Michif has been before" (20). Through the stories in *Buffalo is the New Buffalo*, she seeks "to extend Métis existence beyond official narratives, beyond current constraints, and imagine what living in a 'Métis way' could look like in spaces and times we haven't (yet) been" (14).¹⁷ As a lens through which to envision and interpret Métis literatures, Métis futurisms "challenge[] the divide between fact and fiction, as Métis people assert a reality that is perceived as impossible in mainstream thinking. If Métis people say a thing is possible, who gets to determine that that thing is fictional?" (14). One manifestation of Métis reality that defies mainstream thinking is Vowel's research creation work, seen in her collection through the application of scholarly citational practices that move beyond the acknowledgement of sources. Through her methodological footnoting practices, Vowel's stories "resist categorizations and highlight other ways of knowing" (McCall et al. 2).¹⁸ Similarly, Vowel's Land Back efforts, both literary and otherwise, demonstrate tangible transformative impacts; as Vowel says, "though all these stories imagine otherwise, they are also an invitation to act otherwise, to build a present and a future based on where our most fantastic decolonial dreams could possibly take us" (327). As a Métis futurist work, *Buffalo is the New Buffalo* utilizes a peoplehood approach to affirm the complexity of Métis identity,

renders transformation ordinary to highlight transformational impact as extraordinary, and creates space for Métis research methodologies grounded in Métis worldviews through her footnoting practices. As research creation, Vowel's collection transforms Métis literatures and presents a possibility of what Métis scholarship can become.

Acknowledgements

Inspired by Warren Cariou's call for humility within scholarly practice, I offer this acknowledgement section as "a way of showing respect, to the world, to the people speaking, and to the gift of the universe itself" (6). I want to begin by thanking the handful of scholars who have supported me in this project: Sophie McCall, for inviting me to submit my earliest draft of this paper and for all our conversations since; Deanna Reder, for encouraging me to read widely; Cornel Bogle, for introducing me to the flexibility of research creation in the form of a thoughtful (and lengthy) email and for pointing me in the direction of Natalie Loveless' research creation manifesto; June Scudeler, for reframing footnoting as a form of kinship by leading the reader by the hand, in her role as second reader for an earlier version of this paper that would become my MA project. I want to also thank the two peer reviewers whose comments encouraged me to develop transformation as a major thread of this work. I am grateful for the support from my MA writing group, Rebekah Stuiwe, Julianna Wagar, Zandria Sarrazin, and Maya Schwartz, both in the form of rounds of feedback but also in the reminder that scholarly work does not have to be performed alone. Finally, I want to thank my family—mum, dad, Lea, and Lexi—and my partner, Nate, for their endless support as I worked on this project. All I do, I do for you.

Marsii.

Notes

1. My understanding of "Two-Spirit" is informed by my own experiences as a Two-Spirit person, and by the works of Indigiqueer writers like Joshua Whitehead, who describes himself in culturally-rooted terms. In his introduction of *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*, Whitehead "craft[s] a theory of Indigiqueerness by rejecting queer and LGBTQ as signposts of [his] identity, instead relying on the sovereignty of traditional

language, such as Two-Spirit, and terminology we craft for ourselves, Indigiqueer” (7). Vowel’s use of Two-Spirit respects the “fluid sexual orientations and gender identities that existed pre-Contact” (45n32). For further research on Two-Spirit literatures, in addition to Whitehead’s anthology, see Kai Pyle’s “Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles: A Two-Spirit Critique.” For further reading on 2SLGBTQIA+ Métis experiences, see Toorenburgh and Reid’s “Queering Collective Dreaming: Weaving Métis Futures of Belonging.”

2. There are many definitions of Rougarous (including a few definitions throughout this paper), but generally, most definitions connect the figure of the Rougarou with the theme of transformation. Unlike the French werewolf, the Métis Rougarou (there are various spellings of the figure) is “often a heroic figure, or, if it is a villain, this villainy is positioned in such a way that it might still be seen as heroic” (Cariou, “Dances” 161). In Warren Cariou’s “Dances with Rigoureux,” he shares how he came to know that his uncle was a Rigoureux after “perhaps another of his wins at cards, or a bingo bonanza—or maybe another debt cleverly evaded, or possibly more of his legendary shenanigans with women” (157). Though physical shapeshifting is hinted at in Cariou’s narrative, his uncle’s “luck and his shiftlessness” are the main attributes that suggest his connection with the transformative figure, which differs from Angelique in Vowel’s narrative, whose Rougarou identity is not closely connected with luck (157).
3. My practice of reading acknowledgement sections has more to do with Indigenous ways of knowing and sharing knowledge than it does with the paratextual aspect of the sections. That being said, my initial skimming of Vowel’s footnotes has more to do with how absorbed I was within each story and less to do with any intentional skipping of additional materials.
4. In the 1986 issue of *Manitoba History*, Sister Marie Bonin explains where the nickname “les grises” came from; it is a shortened form of “les soeurs grises,” a pun on the word ‘gris’ which can mean either gray or drunk. The sisters eventually dignified this once-unfortunate title by adopting grey habits and so became known as The Grey Nuns.” Vowel’s footnote provides more specific historical context for the Lac Ste. Anne Métis community, stating that “The Grey Nuns actually came to Lac Ste. Anne in the 1850s, once Father Lacombe took over the mission and invited the Oblates to run it with him” (42n31).
5. I opt for “sf” over *science fiction* or *speculative fiction* to respect the important contributions of Indigenous sciences and spiritualities to Indigenous sf texts. Dillon states: “Indigenous Futurisms typically return to an appreciation of Indigenous cosmologies that collapse time, space, and other elements that are distinguishable parts of ‘reality’ in Euro-western Enlightenment thinking. Fundamentally, this is why Indigenous Futurisms look like science fiction, especially to those who equate ‘fiction’ with ‘false’ or ‘incredulous’ or ‘unimaginable’” (3).
6. JJ uses the pronoun “wiya. It’s Cree. We don’t have gendered pronouns like she or he. I use wiya” (Vowel 285).
7. Angelique’s last name, Loyer, is notably also one of Vowel’s Métis family names, further linking her futurist storywork with her own Métis identity.

8. In Vowel's introduction, she defines the "nêhiyaw-pwat, also known as the Iron Confederacy, or Iron Alliance," as "a political and military alliance among Cree, Saulteaux, Nakoda, Métis, and Iroquois (who had moved into the [W]est) during the height of the fur trade. The nêhiyaw-pwat acted as a barrier to US and Canadian expansion until the genocide of the buffalo and decline of the fur trade" (21n5).
9. For more information on Gabriel Dumont, see Darren R. Préfontaine's biographical article for the Gabriel Dumont Institute's *Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture*.
10. Vowel's definition of Rougarous as being able to transform into "a black mare or a black dog" (32) differs slightly from Cherie Dimaline's definition: "The Rougarou is a creature who lives in Métis communities and also in some Cajun settlements . . . He is a wolf- or dog-like entity that usually walks and talks like a man . . . In some stories he wears a suit and moccasins, in others he has only his fur and is more animal than human" (22). Vowel's and Dimaline's definitions demonstrate how "every community, every storyteller has a different way of interpreting him and the specifics about him—sometimes he is charming and charismatic, sometimes he is terrifying and vicious" (Dimaline 22)—and in Vowel's case, sometimes "he" is not a "he" at all.
11. Interestingly, it is this line of dialogue that suggests Andrew is the unnamed narrator of the story who plans to rid Turtle Island of white people. In the final moments of the story, the unnamed narrator echoes Andrew's dislike of mixed Indigenous people, stating how much they "detest all of them, these mixed-blood mutts and the white frauds who hide among them" (323).
12. Though Wayde Compton's work in *After Canaan* doesn't engage directly with Black-Indigenous identities, his work on Black mixed identities is nonetheless useful when thinking through the complexities of Black-Métis identities. To see his thinking on Black and Indigenous solidarities, see his short story "The Lost Island," in *The Outer Harbour*.
13. In her introduction, Vowel discusses her distaste for the metaphor, saying she finds it "particularly vomitous" because it suggests "that many of our pre-Contact ways of living are forever gone, and we must accept this and adapt" (21). Instead of basing our survival and continuance on resource extraction, Vowel puts forth the saying "buffalo is the new buffalo," meaning that to move forward, "we can and must do the work to repair our kinscapes, basing our work in wâhkôhtowin (expanded kinship) to restore our reciprocal obligations to our human and nonhuman kin. Instead of accepting that the buffalo and our ancestral ways will never come back, what if we simply ensure that they do?" (21).
14. Compton's engagement with Brathwaite's tidalectics is in relation to his work on Black diasporic culture, specifically Black Canadian diasporic poetics and performance. Smyth's interest in tidalectics serves her discussion of Brathwaite and Compton's multimodality. For more information, see Smyth's article.
15. In "Land Back Means Protecting Black and Indigenous Trans Women," jaye simpson argues that "Land Back is about so much more than its origins as a meme and more than just returning the land [to Indigenous peoples]. It's about restoring the cultural importance of non-colonial gender identities and

- responsibilities and shedding the colonial grasp that suffocates us all (though some more than others). For Black and Indigenous trans women, Land Back is the promise of safety, of being able to self-actualize, and to not just survive, but thrive" (46).
16. In *Métis in Space*, Vowel and Swain watch sci-fi movies and TV shows featuring representations of Indigenous people and, over a glass of wine, discuss how Indigenous cultures have been portrayed in the media. The podcast is endlessly enjoyable; I highly recommend giving it a listen.
 17. In addition to physical spaces, Vowel's collection explores digital spaces where Métis consciousnesses are uploaded nonconsensually ("I, Bison"), which engages with Métis spiritual practices as well as anxieties regarding who can access and use Indigenous knowledges shared online. For further research on Métis spirituality, see Chantal Fiola's *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis*. For a more in-depth discussion of Indigenous presence online, see David Gaertner's article, "'What's a Story Like You Doing in a Place Like This?': Cyberspace, New Media, and Indigenous Speculative Fiction."
 18. In their introduction to *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island*, the editors underscore the complexities of Indigenous writers working within the academy, stating that the goal of the anthology is "to make visible that colonial frame as a first step in moving to a decolonial understanding of Indigenous narrative forms" (2). Vowel's stories therefore serve as examples of Indigenous narratives that resist conventional colonial categorizations, both critical and creative.

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Suha Kudsieh

Clash of Empires

My father spoke English, mother French.
 He admired Churchill, she Napoléon.
 When they quarreled, she accused
 him of admiring *le souïlard*, the boozier,
 and he chided her for liking *the shorty*.
 When the living room teamed up
 with Balzac, Voltaire, and Flaubert,
 my father withdrew to his den
 office, where he kept the company
 of Shakespeare, Maugham, and Burke.

When they discussed which school we kids should attend,
 my father practised British diplomacy;
 my mother, French *indifférence*.
 When his targeted barbes hit the mark,
 she went to the kitchen to sabotage *le dîner*.
 Whenever they disagreed, we scurried like little mice
 between their feet and hid in the bedroom.
 As a compromise, they decided we should learn Arabic.

My mother's family praised us only when we spoke like her;
 my father's family spurned or welcomed us
 depending on the language we used,
 so we developed a list of mixed *vocabulaire*
 of Napoleonic heights and Churchillian widths
 to confuse them.

When both branches of the family met together,
 the Anglophiles drank until they slurred,

and the Francophiles developed a thick accent.
In those *bizarres* hours, they patted us on the cheek
while singing *Oui, we, en accord*.
Then, as their mother tongue loosened,
they prattled in Arabic like little children
until the wee hours of the morning.

| *Suha Kudsieh is a Canadian poet and writer of Middle Eastern background. Her poems have appeared in Postcolonial Text, Harana Poetry, and Euolitkrant.*

For women. For life. For freedom.

Hearing this, pains my heart
It used to pump new blood in my veins
What happened to my hope?

I guess they killed it
When they put an ugly grey scarf on my head on the 1st day of school
I guess they killed it
When they took my pink backpack because it was pink
I guess they killed it
When they took me out of the singing group in school
Because of my dad who was a modern leftist
I guess they killed it
When I was sixteen
and they took us to jail for being in a house party
I guess they killed it
When they said in court
“You girls can dance naked in front of your future husbands
based on the damn “The Satanic Verses”¹ but can’t party with your
male friends”
I guess they killed it
When Khatami² was about to get elected
And I cried 8 hours to get my hopeless parents to vote
And everything got even worse when he got power
I guess they killed it
When my dad had to revise words like “Wine” or “Hair” in his
translations to be published
I guess they killed it
When they started killing the writers again
I guess they killed it
When literary magazines got closed one after the other
I guess they killed it
When my mom said with a painful smile on her hopeful face

“They say the scarf is not our issue, we have bigger issues, ok”
 I guess they killed it
 When I got fed up and decided to leave
 I guess they killed it
 When I heard comments like
 “Didn’t we tell you nothing will change when you were 18 and
 you wanted to fight, now 9 years later, you left?”
 I guess they killed it
 When the poets only wrote of blood and tears
 I guess they killed it
 When on route to Ottawa they announced the new president before
 we even voted
 I guess they killed it
 When CNN, BBC and all the others stopped broadcasting the Green
 Movement of 88³ and
 only showed MJ’s death
 I guess they killed it
 When I read more history books
 I guess they killed it
 When I realized nothing will change unless the fucking 1% decides it
 needs a change
 I guess they killed it
 When the middle class in Iran got vanished
 I guess they killed it
 When even in my 40s I can’t go watch a football match in Iran
 I guess they killed it
 When the disgusting government people came to Canada with money
 And are walking freely
 I guess they killed it
 When people still judge their friends for their way of protesting
 I guess they killed it
 When even in the USA women’s rights keep going backwards
 I guess they killed it
 When I saw my fellow Iranians support Trump in hopes of change for
 Iran
 I guess they killed it
 When flight #752⁴ happened
 And we could’ve been in it if last minute hadn’t changed our flight

from the 8th to the 6th of January
 I guess they killed it
 When Trudeau couldn't do anything for those Iranian Canadians who
 got murdered mid-air
 I guess they killed it
 When my favourite Iranian sports TV show got cancelled and they
 made Ferdowsipoor⁵ disappear
 I guess they killed it
 When my dad spoke less and less
 I guess they killed it
 When I felt fear walking the streets of Tehran
 I guess they killed it
 When not only religion is not dead but has expanded to the Yonge
 Street
 I guess they killed it
 When they beat Mahsa⁶ to death
 I guess they killed it
 When the human race showed brutality is the new humanity
 I guess they killed it
 When they don't care about us
 Not just them but "they" in the world
 I guess they killed it
 When they keep murdering my sisters
 Maybe my younger sisters can bring my hope back
 Keep fighting.

Notes

1. "The Satanic Verses": What Salman Rushdie calls the *Quran*.
2. Khatami: Iranian politician who served as the fifth president of Iran from 3 August 1997 to 3 August 2005.
3. Green Movement of 88: A major event in Iran's modern political history, and observers claimed that these protests were the largest since the Iranian Revolution of 1978 to 1979. While the protests started out as a peaceful, non-violent movement, people were arrested and killed as protests turned more violent in the following months. The movement eventually had trouble retaining its momentum.
4. #752: A scheduled international civilian passenger flight from Tehran to Kyiv, operated by Ukraine International Airlines. On 8 January 2020, the

Boeing 737-800 was shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shortly after takeoff, killing all 176 passengers and crew aboard.

5. Ferdowsipoor: An Iranian journalist, football commentator, translator, university professor, and television show host and producer. He was the host and producer of the popular TV show *Navad*.
6. Mahsa: Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman beaten to death by Tehran Authorities named “morality police.”

| *Tannaz Taghizadeh, born in Tehran, Iran, comes from a literary family. Her poems appear in LRC, Grain Magazine, EVENT Magazine, and Plenitude Magazine.*

Susan McCaslin

What Would Thales Say?

Water in so many forms

rivers, brooks, creeks, chutes
runnels, rivulets, lakes
sources for ablutions
healings, baptisms, births

where mother waters break
from underworld's wells
and originating oceans
cover two thirds of Gaia's body

Ancient Tao-yielding flow
makes us whole
reflecting aqua skies
and darkening clouds as one

Homeric wine-dark seas
once home to sea nymphs
Nereids, Oceanids—
Poseidon's daughters

Elemental Thales
pre-Socratic dreamer of primordial streams
taught how water licks rocks
cleanses sores, cools eyes and skin

how mineral springs warm pores
cycling wonder through our cells
how Muses' fountains
spring and sing praise

Cumulous clouds drop balms
on arid heads and tongues
Water in deserts, desired
consumed by thirsting athletes

Now, fierce new atmospheric rivers
deluge-dragons, fever-floods
fling mud slides, while avalanches
crest and crash our ego shells

We are overwhelmed, afraid
of an apocalypse not caused by a god
gods, or any transcendent power
but by us—broken off remnants

of our all-consuming
unconsummated selves
which call on Thales to hasten
our long-retarded homecoming

to the place where air, earth, fire, and water embrace

| *Susan McCaslin's Demeter Goes Skydiving was first-place winner of the Alberta Book Publishing Award and was shortlisted for the BC Book Prize for Poetry.*

Padmaja Battani

What Oceans Remember

*Children and women among 64 dead as migrant boat hits rocks near
Italy*

—CNN

Oceans remember ancient journeys
The journeys that sacrificed dreams

The journeys that buried truths
Underneath sighs and songs

Oceans remember injured wings
The wings that flew miles

The wings that sheltered
Broken hopes and burnt desires

Oceans remember unshed tears
The tears that engulfed bruises

The tears that sculpted
Shrines of silence and solitude

Oceans remember surrendered souls
The souls that consumed sorrows

The souls that hauled
Loads of ignominy and insult

| *Padmaja Battani writes poems, book reviews, and fiction. She lives in Connecticut
and is currently working on a poetry collection.*

Anna Veprinska

Witnessing Names

For Mama

Aren't some names heavier than others, leashed to histories
slit with anguish? Auschwitz. Hiroshima. Chernobyl.
Katrina—trauma-soaked syllables. Names anchored
in trespass or shadow. Hefts
one drags from the delivery room

to the hearse. In Ukrainian, the word for name—*ім'я* ('eemya')—
phonetically nudges the Hebrew for mother—*אִמָּה* ('eemuh')—
which means, name and mother come tangled
in my cultures' languages: monikers trail bodies
like second umbilical cords. Voiced by mothers,

teachers, friends, lovers, names arrive as devotions,
distortions, reprimands, murmurs—linguistic homes
to title and trap. Each ribboned and wrapped
with meaning: grace, island, lioness. When I learn
his name means *to carry*, I wonder with what little weights

he has filled his life. "What's in a name?" Shakespeare insists
in a play that unyokes lovers because the name of each
is distasteful to the family of the other. And what of names
that are omitted, written out of stories, unmouthed? Silence
for the testimonyless, the fleshly ghosts. Ungraved energies

deferred until another world. Named after my grandmother,
whom I never met, I carry my name like a secret heirloom,
an ancestral scar. Names press first scars upon our too small
skin.

On my right ankle, a birthmark shaped like a pink blurry I—
a self marked atop self. I, our other name. Aye, a howled
affirmation.

Eye, an iris and pupil: witnessing, ~~witnessing~~.

| Anna Veprinska's second poetry collection, *Bonememory*, was published with U of
| Calgary P in April 2025. She has published two books of poems, a monograph, and
| two chapbooks.

Joanne Epp

Pieces of Story

The card may have been in the china cupboard,
tucked in behind a teacup. *Do you like it?*
Grandma asked. *You can have it.*

We didn't have really too much peace there at
all in the village . . . the revolution had broken
out . . .¹

Or possibly, she brought it out one day
and said, *I found this among some letters.*
I thought you might like it—

In 1921 we had a year of famine . . . the
harvest failed completely. Besides this, a
typhoid fever epidemic broke out.

the blue postcard, gilt-edged, with strange
gold print, and on the back, handwriting
I couldn't read.

. . . and we didn't have bedding to lie the
people on, really, the sick ones . . . There were
doctors; there was no medicine available.

The handwriting, I now know, is German Gothic.
An afternoon's work deciphers the message,
addressed to a friend: *I am*
nice and healthy, and I sincerely
wish the same for you.

I was the first one to take sick, and I was unconscious, I've been told, for three days and three nights . . . and then I was sleeping for about the same time, and then I woke up. And my first impression was a funeral procession going past my window, that hit me, and it was my teacher . . . and one of my school friends . . .

The gold print, I now know, is Russian:
Christ is Risen.

After that, when I got well I nursed the whole family.

Note

1. Text in the right-hand column is found material from the reminiscences of my grandmother, Elisabeth (Pauls) Klaassen.

| *Joanne Epp is the author of Eigenheim (2015) and Cattail Skyline (2021). She lives in Winnipeg.*

Jen Colclough

Halfway to Morning

Look—
a gate

pretending to be a door.

between two trees,

Snowflakes fall sideways,
knocking.

I used to think of home
as the sound of my name being called from the next room,
forever.

Or a mistranslation of her name

called again,
and again,
and again.

I watch as you take another step

and so does the door.

Everything on earth was made to be crossed over

then out.

There is no manual for memory

—no place to put
your hands.

Snowflakes freeze into hail to assault you properly
as the greying twilight slices through the earth,
bisecting you.

Do you feel that?

In another time someone is holding
your hand.

Time was invented to give the mind something to hold.
(Dreams are the mind's way of
communicating hunger.)

In Korea,
old men are dying,
and children are learning
how to speak.

The days die first for others.

Tell me,
is it morning, where you are?
No. The night is eating its own tail.

Do you know where you are?
Yes. I am in the dark.
Light refuses to touch me, still.

Still?
Still.

You used to be still, before I met you.
That sounds true.

Up ahead,
smoke rises from the snow-blank
page.

In winter, fire comes as a relief,
not a warning.
Smoke means someone lives here.
Follow the trail of singed air.

Look now,
your body is carving a snow trench,
hot breaths floating skyward,

where morning is in the fetal position,
waiting.

50 paces ahead—a door.

Also, forward.

| *Jen Colclough's debut poetry collection, Our Little Agonies, is slated for publication
in May 2025 by Montreal Publishing Co. More at jencolclough.com.*

Derek Webster

Night Thought

for Steven Heighton

There's no plan for growing into a body.
A fire burns its path across your field
and when it's done, you return to swirling winds
and a still thing, hairless in wet grass and earth,
gasping at the wrap of bare arms.

Nor is there any plan for growing into a country.

Lying here, next to snoring Miss Canada
I no longer hear blood's machine gun
propagate in my ears. Into blue evening I follow
a mirrored concept that barely exists,
murky line of light alive in the saying.

| Derek Webster's second collection of poetry, *National Animal*, recently won the
| A. M. Klein Prize for Poetry. More at derekwebsterwriter.com.

Shyanne MacDonald

Resilient Grandmother

Children enclosed in rows,
divided from familiarity.
Frozen stuck in photographs, or engraved in memory than stone.
Only moving through quiet conversation.

The roots were dug up,
scorched, burnt, washed out and forgotten.
Scorched hills and frozen fires.
Once our very own, now a forgotten home.

Long black braids cut
Sick, cut-covered, skin flesh to the bone
Stripped and bleached
Poisoned and silent.
No home-stitched skirts of radiant colour.
No sound, no song, no dance beat or hum.

Nineteen ninety-six
was when we were finally freed.
I'm considered lucky,
because it wasn't me.

Your braids grew back,
and you speak to me in our language and our lost sound.
You adventure our hills and make skirts.
We hum, because you are resilient,

Grandmother.

Ling Ge

Snowflowers!

yells a line of daycare kids,
pointing to snowflakes in the air.
Perfect symmetry. Unique pattern.
Soon, snow lands on their yellow hats.
Hurry up. The teacher in her white jacket
scurries to the front like a gust of wind.
As the snow melts into water,
they walk past Yaya in her red parka.

Yaya in her red parka
organizes her canvas bag.
Old election flyers. New books.
Instantly, they get soaked and swell.
Never mind. The reason
she came here is untellable.
Her dreams are as unattainable
as snowflakes.
In snow, she runs
towards her next class,
towards an unknown future,
past Lanjun in her brown coat.

Lanjun in her brown coat
pushes her small produce stall.
Bitter melon. Sweet potato.
Slowly, they freeze and wither.
Just one dollar. Her family's
needs in China are unforgettable.
Her gains are as transient
as snowflakes.
In snow, she looks
for the next customer,

for the place meant for her,
past Bo in his blue sweater.

Bo in his blue sweater
changes his Tai-chi stance.
Yin, descending. Yang, rising.
Gradually, he finds inner peace.
Let it be. His failures
to help others are unthinkable.
His intentions are as pure
as snowflakes.
In snow, he lets go
of his body's illnesses,
of struggles and sorrows,
past the bronze Sun Yat-sen statue.

The bronze Sun Yat-sen statue
holds a book, *The Three Principles of the People*.
Democracy. Welfare. Nationalism.
Silently, snow lands on the statue's eyes,
past everyone wandering
between their ideals and reality
in Toronto East Chinatown.
Before melting into tears,
snow flowers.

Note

1. In Chinese, the literal meaning of “snowflake” is “snow flower.”

| *Ling Ge is an author based in Toronto. Her chapbook Snow Flowers will be released in Spring 2025.*

Chutney Tongue

My father was born with a chutney tongue,
flavoured with the spices
of foregone generations
from an Indo-Caribbean kin.
His voice calls out to me
in island twang,
thick as callaloo inside a pot
and hot like mango achar.

*Ay boy, how yuh doing?
When yuh go come see meh?*

Across an ocean that divides
continents and cultures,
his words ring out like
the sizzle of a saucepan
with curry chicken,
taking me back
to a tropical land
and a past resurrected from sand.

I answer in earnest
but he doesn't understand me,
when my own tongue is slathered
with cool mayonnaise
and Anglo in speech and sound.

*Come nah, and I'll cook for yuh,
dhalpuri with chana and aloo,
baigan choka and bitter kuchela
just de way yuh like it.*

My father speaks to me in broken English,
peppered with the rhythms
of culture and creed,
and I grieve with guilt
for betraying that language,
long buried
beneath the whitening snow.

| Jeevan Bhagwat lives in Scarborough, Ontario. His poetry books include *The Weight of Dreams* and *Luminescence* (IN Publications, 2012; 2020).

J. Iribarne

Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi

Sometimes etymology is beautiful
algorithms for instance
nothing to do with rhythm

but with you, Muhammad ibn Musa
and your magical surname
al-Khwarizmi. So I conjure you

grandfather algebra, you wild and
tiny courtier, in miniature.
Your ninth-century eyes

regard me without astonishment.
We are here to help with passport forms,
I say, *and pull-down menu choices.*

This man's. Together we watch
the hospital's Iranian caretaker
carefully collect visitors' crumbs

his family barred from travel now
by presidential fiat. It's a punch line
of history, the algorithm, like a

cosmic socket wrench. *Lift me up*
you say, tiny scholar dressed in robes.
Lift me up. I want to see.

All these trained machines and one
trapped caretaker. *What should he*
choose for this question of origin?

I ask you, learned friend—the flow chart
clogs here, and you opine, *Yet what are oracles
anyway but stumbling into binary?*

It may be simpler just to acknowledge
the bland and bright certainties that
slide under our menu'd thumbs . . . hmmm . . . huh . . .

Not from here, Canada. Not from there,
Persia. Not quite Iran, nor Baghdad. In between.
Like you. Even your famous name rolls in

from the shrinking and salty Aral Sea.
Other. There is no option for other.
Inbetwother. *It wasn't my idea*

this algebra for belonging, you say.
Your turban askew, you climb on my hand
and the caretaker moves on to the chapel

where cobalt blue cushions collect dust
devotional and familiar. Here families seek
space and stillness. *These are the same*

you pipe in, *space and stillness*.
*For what is sweeping after all
but a gentle prodding of sands.*

Through the yellow glass, light catches
our beards, each one a different shade:
mine, yours, the caretaker's.

One black, one brown, one blond.
Hello o future, you whisper
while the broom swishes over silence.

We visit the passport office next, set you
on the limestone counter, its trilobites
the size of your palm, and the caretaker

grips the printed forms . . . explains . . . retreats.
I weep. My tears dribble down to the officer's
keyboard where they explode in symbols

collected by you, Muhammad ibn Musa
al-Khwarizmi, who pile them up, grey,
green and golden in the folds of your ancient robes.

| *J. Iribarne lives on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, where she
teaches at Camosun College.*

Welcome Refreshment

Rebecca Salazar

sulphurtongue. McClelland & Stewart \$19.95

Aaron Tucker

Catalogue d'oiseaux. Book*hug Press \$20.00

Hoa Nguyen

A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure. Wave Books \$18.00

Reviewed by Neil Surkan (University of Calgary)

Given the pandemic's attack on our attention spans, new poetry collections from Rebecca Salazar, Aaron Tucker, and Hoa Nguyen remind us of the bewilderment, renewal, and delight that poetic language—language at its limits—can provide. We need these books not just to be inspired by what's possible in contemporary poetry, but also to be reminded of how to live together after isolation and disruption (and in the face of ongoing, tremendous loss).

Vivid and visceral, Rebecca Salazar's debut collection, *sulphurtongue*, features four impressive suites that contrast, echo, and scorch. These poems counterpoint desire with terror, and regeneration with violence, in high-stakes lyrics that refuse to merely survive: the body's "cup of flesh" becomes, instead, a singing bowl (24). This is a melodic and generous collection, one that repeatedly astonishes because of the way Salazar creates unique and oft-disruptive connections between words and across languages. Beginning with a poem titled "Synaesthesia," in which a pinch "on the neck or the wrist / tastes like landing on your tailbone" (11), Salazar signals an evocative, associative approach to imagery in the lyrics to come. What's especially exciting, however, is how, as the book progresses, these synesthetics are mobilized to turn the pleasure of poetic thinking into protest, critique, and retort. Part 3, "dopplebanger," is a standout, each poem comprising flexing, rhythmic couplets. Here is "Underbelly" in its entirety:

When blood is cut with acid rain,
all touch pollutes. Lips to brow.

Oversaturated silt will oxidize its waters
and leave ore deposits blinking up, glaucomatous.

Pour my molten afterbirth down the black hills.
Watch the drip trails reach out: burning, liquefied limbs.

I am mourning my pubescent faith
that all things come to flower.

Months ago, I shed my ilia on your front porch.

Return my bones before raccoons scavenge my sex. (65)

There are sorrows, here, but also demands: Salazar's poems implicate the reader, pull us into complex, panging meshworks of complicity. When the collection arrives at its final part, "sulphur bonds," those complicities become more explicitly focused on deteriorating environments and the perpetual colonial violence of "the land's (white) history" (95). Whorled in a cycle of resource extraction as sustenance, the speaker calls us to prayer at book's end while, simultaneously, unsettling the way we take refreshment: "Pray with me: recite the names of lakes / from which our tap water is drawn" (111).

Aaron Tucker's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* is a palimpsest of love and longing. Across this book-length poem that comprises vignettes of time spent either with his partner or yearning for their reconnection, Tucker's speaker navigates gallery exhibits, bustling cityscapes, and domestic spaces with dream-like pleasure and desire. Via propulsive, compound words that "strangeify"—to borrow Matthew Zapruder's word—a world of delights and fascinations (take, for instance, the words "neondraped," "windcurrents," and "nesthome"), the partnership portrayed is predicated on unwavering belief in the existential value of art, the transformative potential of earnest conversation, and the life-enriching practice of writing and reading literature. The beloved sought has been found, and the relationship that she and the speaker choose to cultivate—across oceans, time zones, continents—is cerebral but also ardently aesthetic. The resulting poem is saturated with unabashed, idealistic adoration, which, at first, feels a little overwhelming: it wasn't until about halfway through my initial reading that it dawned on me that the way Tucker savours—in the face of unrelenting disparity, doom, and evil—his amazement at having found his ideal partner is radical and inspiring. This is a poem about a great love, and the stylized memories that Tucker catalogues expand what's possible when it comes to describing romance in the Anthropocene. "Braided together" (20), the lovers' commitment takes precedence regardless of whether they're traversing cityscapes together:

we, a city's occupants
are messy strata, Toronto, Porto, Frankfurt, Vancouver
& so on up Yonge Street as shreds of pigment
as ink & frail gestures, we move without immediate destination
hand-in-hand mid-afternoon light
on your dark hair, in your astral eyes. (23)

Or whether they're apart, synchronizing their lives via text:

you, novae, lodestar, despite the absence
an acute ubiquitous missing of our other half, lunula
we will fill with WhatsApp messages, phone calls
watching Netflix across a six-hour time difference
commenting on the other's social media
our digital bodies substituting for the corporeal,
bearing voice & tones
the shimmering vision of meeting again
.....

we live inside memories that form around us. (24–25)

Throughout, the curated scenes are—to use the beloved’s characterization of the artist Jeff Wall’s works—“both staged event & impossible recreation” (38). But I suspect this is the book that many would write were they fortunate enough to feel such certainty in love. *Theatre d’Oiseaux* rejects cynicism and sarcasm, and Tucker’s optimism is the first contagion I’ve considered welcoming in years.

In *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*, Hoa Nguyen’s definition of the word “precipitation, n.” aptly describes the experience of reading the book: “act or fact of falling headlong” (51). These poems travel like raindrops descending glass: Nguyen’s deft, marvellous lines slip down and coalesce on the page, through fragments from her mother’s life (which includes a stint as a member of an all-women stunt motorcycle troupe), incisive descriptions of the American weapons that devastated the Vietnamese jungle and countryside during the Vietnam War, and scenes (and scenarios) that highlight the challenges of communication across languages. Even though, as one speaker reminds us, “the past tense of sing is not singed” (20), these poems do sing as they sing, since the inheritance that they reckon with—one of resilience, courage, stubbornness—takes the form of melodic, lithe snippets that thrill and disturb. The poems evade even as they intimate, travelling between history and the present, memories and figments, competing narratives and entangled voices. In line with how Nguyen’s mother “held hands on the Wall of Death” (51)—photographs in the back of the book present a circular wooden bowl of sorts, in which she would ride a motorcycle so high up the sides that her body would swoop parallel to the ground—these poems depend on inertia, too, as they suck language in close. Take, for instance, the whirling sensation created by “Failed Tower Ca Dao”:

sonnet tied to the sky
struck by lightning
in that one film version
of Frankenstein who
was it that feared
the storm and lightning

myth and history twist
exile into a tower structure
also called “mouth”
that feeling of headlong
the site of mother
my longing in language

see my eyes rubies red I feed
on toxic flowers kiss one
or any flower rise clean from
mud water row a petal boat
absurd longing to sing the sun
to exist and live an island of (83)

There is coherence, here, but not linearity. Phrases coexist and resonate together—mid-line, between stanzas, and inside other poems pages apart. The resulting collection interplays, not unlike motorcycle stunting, moments of precarity, danger, exhilaration, and freedom. Those hungering for that delightful admixture of perplexity and excitement that a truly singular poetic voice can provide will welcome Hoa Nguyen's latest work.

Unfettered Language: Poetries Old and New

Milton Acorn and bill bissett (Eric Schmaltz and Christopher Doody, eds.)

I Want to Tell You Love: A Critical Edition. U of Calgary P \$29.99

Lisa Robertson

Boat. Coach House Books \$21.95

Nicole Markotić

After Beowulf. Coach House Books \$21.95

Reviewed by Alessandra Capperdoni (Simon Fraser University)

The years 2021 and 2022—right on the heels of a most trying time traversed by a pandemic, Trumpism, and ongoing wars—brought much light to the shores of writing with the appearance of three exciting publications which, despite their differences, all respond with renewed urgency to the call to rethink the political work of language. They are three distinct works, coming from different poetic generations, but also sharing a relationship to the language-based concerns and politics of language that have characterized Canada's writing scene since the late 1960s.

Eric Schmaltz and Christopher Doody have carefully curated the release of a collaborative book from the mid-1960s by poets Milton Acorn and bill bissett, *I Want to Tell You Love*. Acorn and bissett are literary icons of the counterculture literary scene, but they could hardly be more different. As the editors point out, the avant-garde aesthetic of bissett, poet and painter, shares little with the working-class ethos of poet and playwright Acorn, and this dissonance may have been the reason for publishers' rejection of the manuscript at the time. Yet it is in this dissonant incongruence that the value of the work lies. Its release as a book brings to the fore the differences rather than the commonalities—as it was intended to do from the very beginning, according to the editors—producing a coarse texture in the friction between the two textualities. But friction is also productive, and the editors are correct in pointing out the dialogic nature of this work. In moving through the book, poem by poem, the reader will experience not déjà vu, but a refreshing awareness of the interconnection between the social concerns of an age so distant in time and those we face now—for the social and political issues that bissett and Acorn address in this book in two voices have not changed in substance. The lines that perhaps best summarize this relationship come from "Elaboration on a Text," by Milton Acorn:

and I had to write poems
as you do . . . desperate signals
of my existence. (177)

The book opens with a critical introduction by Eric Schmaltz, which provides a useful entry into the work, despite the expected and unavoidable limitations. Schmaltz situates Acorn and bissett's collaboration in the literary, cultural, and socio-political landscape of 1960s Canada, and, in particular, in the burgeoning counterculture scene that had its centre in Vancouver and in the West Coast Renaissance. Much is missing from the account of those complex years, but Schmaltz does a good job at keeping his introduction grounded in the positionality of the two authors and their shifting relationships to different poetic groups at a time when Vancouver was setting itself up in opposition to the institutionalization of CanLit. The introduction also includes a useful textual history and a discussion of the two poets' collaboration in relation to their distinctive aesthetics and political ideologies, while the afterword, as well as the interview with bill bissett (191–99), further enrich the poetic concerns emerging from the book.

Lisa Robertson's *Boat* extends the previously published *Rousseau's Boat* (2010), which in turn included the earlier chapbook *Rs Boat* (2004), adding to the series of long poems-become-sections two new long poems at the beginning and the end of the book: respectively, "The Hut" and "The Tiny Notebooks of Night." In her final section, Notes, Robertson describes *Boat* as "the accumulated record of a series of indexical readings of the sum of my quotidian notebooks" (173). The process of including earlier material, itself the product of reading her own notebooks at different stages in life, speaks to the ongoing, processual form of her writing and the poet's sharp attention to procedures of reading and writing. Language is sedimented material that is uncovered and reassembled not archeologically but poetically. Each reading produces a resignification that becomes writing. Such temporality of the reading act functions as a hidden device in the examination of language, which at every turn takes on a different dimension. In "The Hut," the central justification of the poem—which appears as a caesura or a gap that cuts through words and phrases—visualizes a temporal "cut" that unfetters possibilities of signification. Where the cut hits, a word is often disassembled grammatically and phonetically, producing unexpected perceptual and cognitive resonances. Time is introduced as a condition of meaning as well as a problem:

What I want to address here is inertia, sloth, and drag.
 What can a sentence do beside es give more time to ideas?
 the words become th e room of experience
 as I w rite. (34)

For the reader interested in psychoanalysis, this is also a creative reminder of the way in which language functions both retroactively and through associations and displacements: like the cut of the analyst's intervention, the gap unleashes rich horizontal movements. The problem of time—embedded in the form and raised at several moments as a question—also points to the philosophical texture of poetic work: poetry as philosophical method.

Robertson's procedure also articulates a sense of the processual nature of language, which, per one of the epigraphs of the book from Émile Benveniste, one of Robertson's most-cited theorists, forms the deep matrix of the living itself: "Far before it communicates, language is for living." This is no autobiography but, like most of Robertson's work, it bears the traces of the singularity of experience and of the unique

situational formation of subjectivity: a subject can only and always be a subject-in-process, a questioning subject, and a subject in question.

Nicole Markotić's *After Beowulf* tackles with humour and playfulness one of the foundational epics of English literature, which has been studied by generations of students mainly in modern English translations, rather than in its original Old English. Markotić probes less the archaeology of the medieval poem than the discourse that it has generated through its translations and adaptations. She proceeds parodically and subversively, poking fun but not dismissing. She disentangles and reassembles, thwarting fixed images and expectations about story and discourse, all the time amusing the reader by colliding the epic world, or the modern English tradition's reconstruction thereof, with the world of pop culture. In this carnivalesque tornado, who is Beowulf if not a guy obsessed with celebrity status and suffering from andropause (90)? But amusement is not an end in itself, here. It is the (O)ther stories of the legitimized story that emerge in this process. Not surprisingly, Markotić's sharp feminist tongue unleashes language to resurface the figure of Grendel's unnamed mother—Ur-monster and Ur-m(O)ther—from the gendered constraints of canon and myth, where monstrosity can only be epitomized by motherhood. And, in following the heart-wrenching aching of a being deprived of her child, we cannot not think of the biases of storytelling and of the many other Others elided between its lines—be they under the guise of the abused S—, the boy-servant kidnapped from the Slavic regions (91), or the more monumental Dragon, the legendary, mammoth reptile. Markotić's book-length poem is one of the most intriguing examples of poetics of re-assemblage I have encountered in these last years and a welcome intervention in the heroics-obsessed culture of our age.

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