

# Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

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Editor: Christine Kim

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Christine Kim

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## *From Then to Now*

When I first took up the role of editor-in-chief at *Canadian Literature* in July 2020, we were in the midst of a global pandemic. As I prepare to wrap up my term as editor and reflect on the past five years, I'm conscious that the turbulence unleashed by the pandemic never disappeared. Instead, grief, fear, anxiety, and anger continued with global conflicts that include, but are not limited to, the devastation being inflicted on the Gaza Strip, the invasion of Ukraine, and the terrors being experienced within the US in a myriad of ways, including deportations without just cause. Within this new epoch of history, what has Canadian literature come to mean and what, moreover, does it do? How have the field and the journal been transformed over the years? These questions of framing and context are ones that I've thought deeply about in order to figure out who the reader of *Canadian Literature* is or isn't, or could perhaps be, as well as what my own relationship to the field is these days.

Around the time that I joined the journal, the field of Canadian literature was undergoing a period of deep self-scrutiny and controversy. In what have come to be known as the CanLit dumpster fires, writers, critics, and academics weighed in on the state of the field, with many expressing their profound disappointment and anger about how Canadian literature, as a scholarly, literary, and media formation, continued to exclude minoritized voices. *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*, for example, an edited collection by Hannah McGregor, Julie Rak, and Erin Wunker, takes the field of Canadian literature to task for its persistent inequalities. Citing controversies that have taken place over the last decade, including sexual harassment revelations at Concordia University, the Appropriation Prize, debates about Joseph

Boyden, and UBC Accountable, *Refuse* examines Canadian literature as an institution and in relation to the publishing industry to propose that, “[l]ike the country its writing is supposed to reflect, CanLit is supposed to be tolerant, liberal, a place where we can imagine our future together” (12–13). The “supposed to” is the obvious problem here, and the editors express their collective feelings of rage, dismay, and frustration at the fact that the field has never met these expectations. From their perspective, the field is in ruins, and if it is one we are to “live within, we have to mourn the ideal of CanLit” (12). This work of mourning is necessary, they suggest, “if we hope to move through it to something better than this” (12).

While I sympathized with these feelings and appreciated that the authors and editors were taking seriously these deep problems endemic to the field, I also found myself questioning the assumptions that underpinned this cycle of never-ending melancholia. I am wary of this sharp emotional response to the state of Canadian literature because anger eventually dissipates, is forgotten, and is often folded into catharsis. Reading through a literary lens, we might also say that *Refuse* follows the conventions of an elegy, moving from mourning to reconciliation. Indeed, this arc is implied by the editors of *Refuse*, who imagine that mourning the disarray and inequities within Canadian literature will lead us “to something better” (12). I want to interrupt this emotional arc because I don’t think that what the field of Canadian literature needs is to move towards an inevitable, if uneasy, sense of resolution. Indeed, Indigenous scholars have taught us to be suspicious of reconciliation, and we would be wise to hold onto this lesson. Rather, I think that what the field needs are different structures of feeling and new forms of critique to name and undo the relations that underpin it. In working towards these new structures and forms, we can reflect upon this moment of recent history and use it to decolonize rather than to reconsolidate the field.

To do so, we need to ask what the field looks like these days, meaning: What is its shape, its purpose? Which voices dominate and which are less easy to hear? And who are its audiences, both intended and unintended? In other words, we should ask what we are reading and writing about, and why. Who do we imagine ourselves as being in dialogue with, and what interventions do we intend to make? While these are the kinds of questions that the humanities have asked

themselves for a long time, they take on a particular valence when posed within the context of a national literature. Without a pretense of being representative or inclusive, it becomes difficult for one to understand their relation to Canadian literature. It's worth noting that, while these recent debates about power, privilege, and representation garnered a lot of attention and provoked much thought, they weren't new conversations for the field. We saw a version of them in the 1990s, as scholars and writers grappled with similar concerns, with those conflicts taking shape around matters of appropriation, feminism, and racialization as they influenced voice and representation. The Writing Thru Race conference is one often-cited example of cultural organizing that created a space for BIPOC writers to gather and discuss the politics of representation and relations of power that influenced the literary terrain. Yet if we compare the debates in the 1990s to those from the past decade or so, it seems important to note that the debates in the 1990s led to the opening up of the field, making space for marginalized writers. But it isn't clear yet what impacts these more recent debates have had or will have, or whether they will yield the kinds of transformations that many hope for.

I want to turn to the old chestnut of multiculturalism in order to sketch out the kind of interrogation and deconstruction that Canadian literary studies requires. As we all know, multiculturalism is typically viewed as part of the dominant Canadian identity and often used within uncritical forms of nationalism to signal a Canadian attitude of tolerance and a liberal identity. And while this is part of a persona that the nation projects to the rest of the world, it is contentious for those who have experienced the failures of multiculturalism. Many have critiqued Canadian multiculturalism for focusing on cultural representation instead of social and economic needs; erasing Indigenous peoples, their specific historical relations to this land, and the structures of settler colonialism that continue to shape this place; an ahistoricism that makes it seem like Canada has always existed within a multicultural logic; and a practice of recognizing forms of cultural difference without attending to how these forms of difference are also intersected by other systems of power such as class, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness. Despite the many criticisms of multiculturalism, it continues to flourish as a familiar and somewhat banal narrative that is used to narrate migration post-1960s.

Multicultural discourse frames Canada's move away from nation-based migration and towards a points-based system in 1967 as welcoming a steady flow of deserving and grateful migrants. While the US also reformed its immigration policy around the same time (in 1965), Canada is different because it has never seen itself as a dominant imperial power. Multiculturalism, in other words, is very much a part of our sense of Canadian exceptionalism and how we define national ideals.

I suggest that we critically reflect upon this understanding of Canada as a peaceful nation that fails to live up to its ideals to ask what work this perception does. In other words, what might it mean to think of this understanding of Canada and Canadian literature as existing by design rather than emerging by accident? Here, we might think of Richard Cavell's declaration that "Canadian literature, for all intents and purposes, is a Cold War literature" (86). In his contribution to *Trans.Can.Lit*, Cavell reminds us that the emergence of Canadian literature, in institutional terms, is tied in large part to the Massey Report (1951) and the Canada Council and was intended to protect Canada from the cultural influence of the US: "The result of these regulatory interventions was a cultural isolationism, and it was achieved paradoxically by representing the cultural milieu as depoliticized" (86). Framing Canadian literature in relation to the Cold War as well as US cultural imperialism underscores the intentions and effects of this narrative of Canadian exceptionalism.

This is an important shift because it prompts us to historicize Canada's global relations and also consider how this framing can help us to understand the changes that have taken place within the field in new ways. Broadly speaking, in the early days of Canadian literature, regionalism, genre, nineteenth-century writing, single-author studies, prize culture, and nationalism were topics that received much scholarly attention. I'm also conscious of the fact that we typically think of this period, the late 1950s and onwards, (when *Canadian Literature* emerged and took shape), as the postwar era, and as marked by conflicts over nationalism, separatism, and multiculturalism; however, these years were also part of the Cold War era, and a key period for the rise of US imperialism, marked by its pretense of being a liberal empire. In other words, this exceptionalism, or what Cavell calls the belief that Canada was a "depoliticized" site (86), has long

shaped the politics of the field of Canadian literature. The more recent shifts in the field can be understood, in part, as a rethinking of these politics or a renegotiation of Canada's position within a global landscape, and, consequently, of the value and purpose of literature.

For example, the transformations that have taken place within the field can be understood via literary prize culture and in terms of the kinds of cultural and material capital it produces. In an early *Canadian Literature* editorial, George Woodcock writes about the importance of awards like the Governor Generals, and how they can create prestige for the field while also giving the writer time to write, free from the duties of teaching or other kinds of labour. But as Gillian Roberts and Jody Mason have demonstrated, literary prize culture has never been a straightforward marker of prestige. In the current moment, this has been underscored by the controversy over the (formerly Scotiabank) Giller Prize, given its relationship to an Israeli arms manufacturer (Canadian Press). Protests by members of the writing community make it clear that the question of where the cash for the prize comes from matters, and that the literary institution cannot ignore the relations between symbolic and economic power or the conditions that produce these forms of power. Similarly, Madeleine Thien's decision to donate the \$25,000 prize from her Writers' Trust Award to the Palestine Children's Relief Fund, the Lebanese Red Cross, and the Woodcock Fund adds another dimension to how we might understand literary prizes and the kind of power they bestow upon a writer. Rather than just legitimizing the importance of a writer and adding to the commercial value of their writing, as Thien notes in her speech, the gift that the prize gave her was "the ability to return the prize money to the world in ways that my own resources would not have allowed" (qtd. in Szklarski). Such a gesture asks us to think about agency and the power of writing in very different ways than we're accustomed to, and I want to underscore the magnitude of this act, given the fact that even brilliant and prolific Canadian authors whose work is feted and sells well tend not to reap huge financial rewards from their writing.

In terms of my own relation to the field, I chart another kind of shift via what Canadian literature means and does for me. I come to the field as someone whose graduate training in Canadian literature taught them to read along the lines of feminist theory, postcolonial

critique, and in relation to American literature, Indigenous literatures, and Black diasporas. This background has informed how I've approached work conventionally understood as Canadian literature or Asian Canadian literature. But just as importantly, *Asian Canadian* has become an analytic that I use to engage with Asian diasporic writing and even inter-Asia cultural studies. By this, I mean that *Asian Canadian* offers a method of thinking in terms of migration, displacement, imperialisms, settler colonialism, and Indigeneity, and is a lens that informs how I conceptualize racialization, class, gender, and sexuality via their relations to place. This is similar to how Vinh Nguyen writes about a situated kind of writing, namely, "[w]riting that does not eschew the embodied self but makes it a guiding compass becomes a critical mode of living and survival" (469). This writing practice is akin in many ways to Glen Coulthard's *grounded normativity*, which he describes as "modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (13). Read in this way, Canadian literature has become less of a field in its conventional sense and more of a critical approach, making projects on topics like diaspora or North Korea Asian Canadian ones for me.

When I reflect upon the submissions that I have seen during my term as editor, many of them take up, implicitly and explicitly, the question of value. How we can assess what is valuable about a literary text? What kinds of conversations do we seek to have about these texts? These questions take different forms, with some authors exploring value in terms of the ethical and political dimensions of Canadian literature: Who and what should we write about? What needs to be represented that isn't? What are the politics of representation? And, as scholars and writers, what is it our responsibility to write about? For others, the concern translates into attention paid to the literary and aesthetic aspects of texts, as they ask questions about the formal innovations that writers are making. Still other scholars ask how texts fit into or disturb literary histories. How do we position ourselves within various genealogies, and not always the same ones? And running throughout these queries, there is a questioning of what *Canadian* means. Is it defined in terms of where one lives? Writes about? Thinks with? What is the relationship

between *Canadian* and settler colonialism? Or the institutions, like granting agencies and literary prizes, that have shaped in symbolic and material ways how we define *Canadian literature* and what version of Canadian literature is esteemed?

These kinds of questions are producing a range of thoughtful essays. Many scholars who work with canonical literatures but also want to take up voices and histories that have tended to be excluded are finding innovative ways of approaching these gaps. For example, Naava Smolash's essay on Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House* reads that text alongside Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* to reflect upon what is missing from the text and, by extension, our relationship to the canon and the relations of power it normalizes. For others working on Indigenous and diasporic literatures, there are crucial questions being asked of national borders and how they attempt to regulate imaginaries. Much of this work on BIPOC writing thinks of Canada as one node of a larger conversation, as it reckons with a kind of Canadian exceptionalism that reads Canada in isolation rather than in dialogue. This issue of *Canadian Literature* contributes to conversations about gender, race, sexuality, genre, Indigeneity, and settler colonialism with essays by Tania Aguila-Way on race and ecology in queer Latinx writing, Sara Minogue on Margaret Atwood's relationship to feminism, Emily Howe on Black Canadian narratives of mobility, Deborah Schamuhn Kirk on critical-creative engagement with ecology, and April McInnes on reading Michelle Good's *Five Little Indians* in terms of temporality and residential school narratives.

I'm very excited for the future of the journal, as we have a number of special issues forthcoming, including Solidarity, Emerging Scholars, and Suburb Nation. There is much valuable work in process that continues to probe questions of value, representation, and power. There is also an upcoming issue that focuses on the creative, critical, and pedagogical legacies of Y-Dang Troueng, and I'm thrilled that we have this opportunity to engage with her brilliant work.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone that I've worked with at the journal from 2020 until now. I'm beyond grateful for having such a spectacular team. It was daunting to take over the journal from Laura Moss, who had done such a stellar job, but I benefited greatly from the guidance of my then managing editor, Donna Chin. I am happy that the incoming editor will have the benefit of working with a top-notch

editorial team—Brianne Colon, amanda wan, Dylan Jackson, and Emma Gilroy—and wonderful associate editors Sophie McCall, Nick Bradley, Glenn Deer, Danielle Wong, and Phinder Dulai.

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Tania Aguila-Way

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*“the uncleanness of my dark skin”:  
Toxic Burdens, Brown Embodiment, and  
Latinx-Indigenous Relationality in  
Rebecca Salazar’s sulphurtongue*

*sulphurtongue*, a 2021 poetry collection by Colombian Canadian poet Rebecca Salazar, is spoken from the point of view of a queer Latinx subject whose parents fled political turmoil in Colombia to seek refuge in Sudbury, Ontario. The opening poem of the collection, “Synaesthesia,” begins with the speaker apprehending the sound of her name as both a taste and a tactile sensation: “Your name, pronounced / feels stark against your teeth / like cold and cloves” (11). As the poem unfolds, it continues to blur the boundaries between seemingly discrete sensory experiences, leading the speaker to recognize that

[t]he body knows  
that being pinched on the neck or the wrist  
tastes like landing on your tailbone . . .  
and knows the colour of the cry  
that surges crackling up your spine (11)

By reproducing the synaesthetic experience of feeling/tasting/seeing multiple sensations at once, this opening poem stands as a synecdoche for a collection that is characterized by its proliferation of entangled sensory perceptions and meanings. Seizing on these entanglements, Trynne Delany notes that *sulphurtongue* explores what happens “when

noticing and knowing and suggesting, guiding, evoking, get their wires crossed,” thus “allowing for more than-double-meanings to bloom and fester.” If saying one’s name can trigger the sensation of cold and cloves against one’s teeth, if a pinch on the neck or the wrist can be felt deep in the tailbone, what other connections lie within our bodies, waiting to resurface unexpectedly? To continue with the extended metaphor that runs through the poem, what *else* does the body “know”?

That the body can act as a material repository for alternative forms of knowledge, including alternative forms of historical memory, has long been a tenet of postcolonial, diaspora, and ecocritical studies.<sup>1</sup> But what strikes me as novel in *sulphurtongue*’s treatment of embodied memory, and what seems to hold the key to the complex entanglements and “more than-double-meanings” at work in the collection, is its treatment of diasporic emplacement within the Canadian landscape and, more specifically, the landscape in and around Sudbury, Ontario, from the distinct positionality of a speaker who describes herself as a brown Latinx “anchor bab[y] implant[ed] . . . in the soft white folds called north america” (9). This sustained engagement with brown Latinx embodiment—the first to be published by a Canadian author, as far as I am aware—produces an unexpected traffic between the speaker’s history of toxic exposure as a Sudbury resident, the modes of racialization she experienced while growing up as a “little immigrant girl[]” in this Northern Ontario town (97), and the modes of racialization she has inherited from her family, which thus inform her emplacement as a second-generation Latinx Canadian subject (37).

On one level, Salazar’s *sulphurtongue* might be taken as a poetic example of what Lawrence Buell has called “toxic discourse,” a mode of environmental writing that is characterized by a preoccupation with the threat of “toxic interpenetration” (649). Surveying the “smoke-stacked” scenes of her childhood, Salazar’s speaker registers the ubiquity of toxified spaces and bodies in and around Sudbury. The “toxic discourse” of *sulphurtongue* is complicated, however, by the speaker’s estrangement from her body, not only as someone who carries the toxic burdens of living in a nickel mining town, but also as a brown diasporic subject who carries the embodied traces of Canadian and Colombian racial formations which figure brown skin

as a visual marker of uncleanness while placing brown bodies in close proximity to environmental harm. By unearthing these connections, *sulphurtongue* offers a timely example of what ecocritic Min Hyong Song calls the “revived lyric” (4–5)—a poetic form that draws on lyrical conventions to induce a sustained, yet uneasy, attention to entanglements between race, colonialism, and ecology. This paper examines the concrete ways in which Salazar’s collection materializes such entanglements. I offer three main arguments: first, that *sulphurtongue* constructs a poetics of synaesthesia that links everyday sensorial experience to connections between race and pollution that traverse temporal and geographic scales; second, that the text situates itself within, but also disidentifies with, the biopolitics of *mestizaje* that shapes dominant constructions of Latinidad; and, third, that the book holds space for rethinking Latinx and Indigenous relationalities in Canada in a mode of what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls “coresistance” that challenges this problematic biopolitics of *mestizaje* (218; see also 228–31). By developing a synaesthetic poetics that grapples with ecology, brown Latinx embodiment, and Latinx-Indigenous relationalities all at once, *sulphurtongue* makes a crucial intervention into ongoing conversations within Canadian literary and ecocritical studies about the need to complicate critical understandings of diasporic emplacement in settler-colonial Canada.

### Diasporic Embodiment and Textual Synaesthesia

Recent ecocritical scholarship has emphasized the role of the sensing body as a site that reveals interconnections between social, ecological, and political systems. Materialist feminist ecocritic Stacy Alaimo has proposed the concept of “transcorporeality” to think about the body’s immersion in networks of environmental harm that are both local and transnational in scope, and through which “social power and material/geographic agencies intra-act” to place certain bodies in closer proximity to harm than others (63; see also 2–4). Crucially, Alaimo notes that race “has been well documented as the single most important factor in the placement of toxic waste sites in the United States,” thus illustrating “how racism can materialize across bodies and places” (28). However, racialized communities often struggle to access

data that “will be accepted as persuasive evidence of systemic harm” (62), in part because community members’ situated embodied knowledge of the risks that affect them may not conform to established forms of biomedical evidence. As Hsuan Hsu notes, one form of embodied ecological knowledge that often gets “marginalized in assessments of environmental risk” is smell, largely because of its “resistance to description, recall, isolation, archiving, and objectivity” (22). Yet despite the difficulties that attend its representation, smell is a fecund site for thinking about the transcorporeal circulation of environmental risks. As Hsu explains, because its “perceptual range is both intimate and extended across space,” smell is “well adapted to the task of sensing how differentiated atmospheres get into bodies and populations” (21). Writing about the role of smell in Warren Cariou’s work on the Alberta tar sands, Stephanie Oliver argues that olfaction functions as “an important literary archive of the tar sands’ seemingly ephemeral byproducts and their significant material impacts” (“Stinking as Thinking”). Elsewhere, Oliver has argued that the diffuse materiality of smell can help us grapple with the “diffuseness” of diasporic subjectivity, as well as the “intermingling of contingent experiences [from] different times and spaces” that often accompanies diasporic embodiment (“Diffuse Connections”). Thus, in addition to carrying crucial knowledge about unseen environmental risks, smell must also be considered as an important site for the transmission of diasporic memory across generations and geographical distances.

In what follows, I adapt and build upon Hsu’s insights regarding the epistemological implications of olfaction, as well as Oliver’s insights regarding smell’s ability to spark “diffuse” environmental and diasporic connections, to think through the textual form of *sulphurtongue*, which, as I’ve noted above, hinges on a sensory modality that is even more diffuse than smell: that of synaesthesia. Broadly defined as a neurological condition in which the stimulation of one sensory pathway produces responses in other sensory pathways, “giv[ing] rise to a type of ‘merging of the senses’” (Simner), synaesthesia is characterized by its material and conceptual diffuseness. This diffuseness arises from the fact that, as Julia Simner notes, synaesthesia involves a broad range of sensory perceptions, including “unusual colours, tastes, smells, shapes, textures . . . not to mention abstract sensations involving emotions and thoughts.” Recent

scholarship on the use of synaesthesia as a poetic resource highlights that, by producing sensory “interchanges” that challenge the “boundaries of empirical knowledge,” synaesthesia can induce “new forms of feminist and ecological attention” (Skoulding 81). Building on this insight, I argue that the synaesthetic “interchanges” at work in *sulphurtongue* spark an intermingling of experiences, memories, and sensations from different times and places. The text thus toggles between the lives of the speaker’s ancestors in Colombia; the events that precipitated her parents’ emigration to Canada; and the speaker’s own childhood experiences in Sudbury. These synaesthetic interchanges also give rise to a merging of multiple forms of embodied unease: from the unease of living amid the toxic byproducts of nickel mining, to the unease of growing up as a brown immigrant child in Sudbury, to the intergenerational memory of a Latin American biopolitics of *mestizaje*, which has historically codified brown skin as an emblem of racial impurity.

Salazar’s interest in the intersection of these multiple forms of embodied unease is foregrounded by the title *sulphurtongue*, which suggests a synaesthetic merging of taste and smell in the sensing of sulphur dioxide, a key environmental pollutant resulting from nickel mining. By invoking the pungency of sulphur (i.e., how it clings to the tongue as it is inhaled), the title emphasizes the speaker’s transcorporeal immersion in a landscape shaped by settler-colonial extractivism and its toxic runoffs. The speaker’s emplacement at this nexus is further complicated by the section titled “Sulphur Bonds,” which chronicles her parents’ migration from Colombia to Sudbury and their subsequent entanglement with a nickel mining industry that has historically relied on immigrant workers as an endlessly renewable source of labour. Playing on the polysemy of the word *bond*, which can designate a relationship or form of filiation, a financial contract, or a chemical reaction, the poems in this section raise unsettling questions about the mining industry’s labour practices, the embodied risks faced by industry workers and their families, and the health risks posed by the chemical reactions that arise during the nickel smelting process. In the poem “child/machine,” the speaker muses that, in mining towns like Sudbury, “pensions are highest since few / live too long and why not bribe the ones who must die, silicosis and cancer the severance” (97). Her invocation of the town’s historical dependency on

immigrant labour disrupts official accounts that characterize Sudbury's relationship with its immigrant communities as one of mutual benefit and happy multicultural integration.

In a 2001 editorial that typifies such accounts, the *Sudbury Star* celebrated a citizenship ceremony that had recently been conducted at Tom Davies Square. The editorial paid homage to the Eastern European immigrants who arrived in the late-nineteenth century to work in Sudbury's nickel mines and played a crucial role in shaping the city's "cultural makeup." It then stressed the contributions of the city's more recent arrivals, concluding that "every time someone swears that oath at Tom Davies Square, Sudbury grows." This narrative of "continued growth" elides the histories of environmental harm and toxic exposure that underlie Sudbury's relationship to the immigrant labourers who have historically constituted the bulk of its workforce.<sup>2</sup> As documented by the "Mining Immigrant Bodies" oral history project, the immigrant workers who began arriving in Sudbury during the postwar period "have not only dealt with multiple occupational hazards, but . . . also continue to struggle with poor air quality and increased levels of toxicity in the region's water, soil, and food chain. Arthritis, respiratory conditions, and lung and colon cancer are more prevalent [in the city] as a result" (Zembrzycki et al.).<sup>3</sup> Salazar's speaker contends with this history of toxic exposure as she considers the "sulphur bonds" that encouraged her parents to risk their future health for the promise of upward mobility and generational wealth.

The speaker's reflections on the racialized environmental harm that the mining industry has historically offloaded onto immigrant families are laced with visceral memories of the more explicit racial othering she experienced while growing up in Sudbury. In the poem "Contact Dermatitis," anti-brown slurs like "darky" and "ugly spic" cling to the speaker's skin, mediating the way she perceives and experiences her own brownness (104). This sense of racial unease becomes more layered and complicated, however, as the speaker powders her face with a mica-laced shimmer and begins to meditate on "what is done" to make brown skin like hers "consumable":

café au lait. light cocoa.  
butterscotch. brown sugar.  
cinnamon. warm toast . . .

shit brown.  
darky.  
ugly spic.

brown is the itch unnameable.  
crass palimpsest of origins  
obscured by migrant love,  
colonial hell, a violent  
complexion freckling my nose. (104)

It is here that Salazar's poetics of synaesthesia becomes a conduit for speaking not only about the merging of multiple sensory experiences, but also about the merging of historical timelines and distinct, if interrelated, experiences of racialization. The synaesthetic associations invoked in the first few stanzas of the poem work to emphasize the speaker's chronic exposure to the heavy metals that are present in her makeup, and to the violent forms of racial abjection that the white gaze visits upon brown skin, tying it to darkness, ugliness, and the unclean smell of bodily waste. However, as the poem unfolds, the localized "itch" that arises from the speaker's apprehension of her brown skin as "abject" triggers a more diffuse unease, one which the speaker cannot directly name, but which she intuitively ties to her genealogy as the daughter of migrants from another colonial context: a Colombian context in which brown skin like hers has historically figured, on one hand, as a synecdoche for an idealized mestizo nation, and, on the other, as a visual index of miscegenation. As studies of racial melancholia teach us, genealogies of race have been so obscured by "colonial relations and imperial practices" that race is often "dissociated from or subsumed by other axes of social difference, such that it can only return as a structure of feeling, as a melancholic trace demanding historical explanation" (Eng 10). This, I argue, is the "itch unnameable" that Salazar's speaker alludes to in "Contact Dermatitis": the melancholic trace of Latin American histories that are lost to her, yet nevertheless mark her brown "complexion" as a site of uncleanness. In the interest of placing this itch in its historical and geographical contexts, and of showing how these contexts materialize—if only fleetingly—in the synaesthetic entanglements at work in *sulphurtongue*, I now turn to the history of *mestizaje* as a

biopolitical project that continues to shape how brown bodies are read in contemporary Colombian and other Latin American contexts.

### **The “Childless Offspring” in the Double Matrix of *Mestizaje* and *Blanqueamiento***

At the most literal level, *mestizaje* can be understood as the material fact of the racial intermixing that occurred across Latin America in the aftermath of first contact between European colonizers and Indigenous peoples in the region. However, as scholarship in the field of critical *mestizaje* studies teaches us, *mestizaje* also refers to a biopolitical project that flourished throughout Latin America in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which sought to “integrate the nonwhite populations of former colonial societies within the territorial borders of recently formed nations” (López 127). Though influenced by late-nineteenth-century scientific racisms, architects of Latin American *mestizaje* modified discourses around European racial purity by making arguments “for some version of *mestizaje*” based on “European mixing with Indigenous and African-descended populations, depending on the local and national context” (127). Focusing on the Colombian national context, Fernando García and colleagues note that, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, articulations of *mestizaje* in Colombia have “fluctuated between a . . . model that conceived of *mestizaje* as the foundation of nationality and an emblem of democracy and . . . [a] model that sought to progressively eliminate . . . Black and Indigenous presence” (124). Colombian *mestizaje* has thus “historically represented a whitening project whose objective has been the elimination of Black and Indigenous minorities through their progressive ‘merging’ into the superior white element” (124). García and colleagues further note that, while this model entails the “assimilation of certain elements of Indigenous and Black” communities, their inclusion is framed as “part of an overarching process of biological and cultural whitening, understood as progress” (124). Central to this future-oriented work of whitening, or *blanqueamiento*, is the heteropatriarchal expectation that Colombians marry “whiter” people in a practice colloquially referred to

throughout Latin America as *mejorar la raza*, or bettering the race (García et al. 123; Wade 33; Buscaglia-Salgado 113). In the final stanzas of “Contact Dermatitis,” the speaker places her anxieties about her complexion firmly within this heteropatriarchal matrix of Colombian *blanqueamiento* by asking: “what’s dirtier: my dna, / a lead-based powder, / or the toxic soil i root in” (105). Thus, what begins as a localized, tactile encounter with the toxic exposure and racial abjection experienced by “little immigrant girls” who grow up in towns like Sudbury becomes an encounter with a larger transhistorical and transnational genealogy: one that raises questions about the speaker’s relationship to the heteropatriarchal expectations that underpin the race-making discourses of *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* and that shape the structures of feeling she inhabits as a daughter of immigrants from Colombia.<sup>4</sup>

These structures of feeling are materialized in the poem “Genealogy,” which dramatizes the speaker’s attempts to reconstruct her family tree from the stories and anecdotes her parents carried from Colombia to Canada. Here, the speaker’s efforts to map her extended family are disrupted by a series of lacunae, including the disappearance of her maternal great-grandmother, who “abandoned [her grandfather] at twelve, leaving no semblance of herself in him” (25). Another key gap the speaker encounters as she works to reconstruct her family tree surrounds her grandmother’s uncle, whose name has been lost to the family archives, but whose memory lives on through the legends the family still tells about his “sun-black skin / and green eyes, still the envy of the few who even now / recall his beauty, but forget his name” (25–26). The speaker’s foregrounding of her uncle’s “sun-black skin . . . green eyes,” which she tells us rendered him beautiful in a way that is admired, but also fetishized, by the rest of the family, invites us to read his placement at the margins of the family tree as at least partly a function of his implied proximity to Blackness and his possession of features which might be read, within the biopolitics of Colombian *mestizaje*, as visual markers of racial admixture. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of the uncle with dark skin and green eyes works to emphasize that, as Peter Wade notes in a discussion of the historical relationship between Blackness and *mestizaje* in Colombia, “those very sites and processes which might seem to annul racial difference and hierarchy—such as

marriage, interracial relationships, mixed race families, and the promulgation of ‘*mestizo*’ as an inclusive category—can become sites where racial hierarchies are reproduced in a visceral manner” (35; my trans.). The forgetting of the uncle’s name, along with every other aspect of his history except for his mythologized physical beauty, becomes even more salient, given how the poem juxtaposes his memory against that of the distant cousins from Aracataca who occupy a prominent place in the family archive primarily because of the stories they used to tell about their neighbour. Though this neighbour remains unnamed, his identity is implied through playful allusions to the discovery of ice and the renaming of Aracataca as Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “in aracataca, shelter for the stories of their neighbour’s / surly, bush-browed son who renamed home, discovered ice,” the speaker notes (Salazar 25). The uncle’s memory has thus been eclipsed by that of the distant cousins’ precarious, and possibly fabricated, connection to Gabriel García Márquez. The speaker redresses this erasure, however, by “drawing an ornate line” to reclaim her uncle as a beloved, if distant and elusive, ancestor. I read this as a reparative gesture that, more than simply highlighting the speaker’s desire to know more about lost branches of her family, also reflects the sense of identification she feels with this long-lost uncle as a fellow dark-skinned subject who harbours misgivings about the histories that underpin her own “violent complexion.”

This doubling between the speaker and her great-great uncle intensifies towards the end of the poem, which frames the speaker as a queer subject who is inherently oriented against the heteropatriarchal expectations that are part and parcel of the biopolitics of *mestizaje*. This orientation becomes evident in the concluding stanzas, where the speaker reminds herself to “add a footnote for the secret queers whose progeny are uncontainable / in lineage, biology, or text” (26). Casting herself as an “ungenerative archivist” who intends to remain “childless,” the speaker imagines herself joining her queer kin to “tend a lurid garden” at the margins of the genealogical tree (26). The speaker thus engages in the queer of colour strategy that José Esteban Muñoz refers to as “disidentification,” in which identity is negotiated from within, rather than against, the site of its emergence. Disidentification thus names a form of “identity formation that locates the enacting of self

precisely at the point where discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit" (6). Thus, the "identities-in-difference" produced through disidentification "emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere" (7). A similar dynamic unfolds in "Genealogy." Instead of denouncing or explicitly positioning herself against the expectation to reproduce the family line, Salazar's speaker situates herself precisely at the juncture where this expectation enters into crisis, tugging at the speaker's desire for affiliation yet failing to interpellate her into the family tree "proper."

However, if, in this poem, to be "ungenerative" is to disidentify with the work of *mestizo* race-making, in other poems in the collection, this word takes on a more ominous register as the speaker considers the reproductive health problems she could develop because of her prolonged exposure to the heavy metals that flow through Sudbury. Describing her own body as a "hyperreactive, / sharp sulphuric medium" that is "hostile to most life forms" (93) in the poem "Acid Rain," the speaker expresses deep misgivings about her reproductive future: "i have curdled every future / every embryo that enters me. / i am a mass of suicidal proteins / in hydrolysis, denaturing, entropic," she laments (93). The speaker's apprehension about her reproductive health is laced not only with a lingering sense of shame and guilt over an implied miscarriage, but also with an anxious awareness of the transcorporeal connections that link her to the toxic runoffs of nickel mining. It is one thing to reject parenthood as an act of queer disidentification with heteropatriarchal expectations, the poem seems to say, but it is another thing entirely to be rendered childless by the "denaturing" effects of toxic exposure.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even as they express an unease about the reproductive health hazards associated with nickel mining, the poems in *sulphur tongue* refuse to engage in what Alexis Shotwell terms "purity politics" as a reaction against reproductive toxicity (6). Indeed, Salazar repeatedly reminds readers that, as Shotwell notes, not only is there "no primordial state" before environmental pollution we "might wish to go back to" (4), but purity is a racialized concept that has "long been entangled and co-constituted with biopolitical practices aiming to reduce or eliminate disability, poverty, and queerness at the population level" (15). Instead of longing for purity, then, the collection dramatizes contemporary anxieties surrounding

reproductive toxicity *precisely* to interrogate the longstanding racial and gendered associations that feed into the biopolitical projects of *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* and which continue to shape the speaker's experience even through her emplacement as a second-generation Latinx Canadian subject.

In dramatizing the speaker's anxieties around her reproductive future, *sulphurtongue* mobilizes the resources of lyric poetry in a way that resonates with Song's conceptualization of the "revived lyric." According to Song, this form is characterized by its "careful building up" of lyric structures in which what "matters is not the isolated events" of environmental exposure or ecological degradation, "but the way they are part of something larger and more systemic" (49; see also 38–64). Thus, to pay attention to such moments, Song argues, is "to impugn [the] whole structure of meaning" that enables the uneven distribution of ecological harm (49). Similarly, in *sulphurtongue*, Salazar stages a careful buildup of encounters with the threat of reproductive toxicity to interrogate the entire system of meaning that makes brown bodies available to settler-colonial extractivism and that also requires the speaker to participate in a biopolitics in which brownness becomes legible only as an intermediate stage in the intergenerational, future-oriented work of *blanqueamiento*. This epistemic break becomes readily visible in the poem "child/machine," which is composed of a series of metonymic chains that synaesthetically link together the diverse associations, sensations, and affects that arise from the speaker's reproductive anxieties. These entangled perceptions, which the poem likens to "accumulated toxins," include an intergenerational shame over the birthing of so-called "anchor babies"; a resentment over the mining industry's historical reliance on "expendable" immigrant labour; and a fear of the future health risks posed by the nickel tailings that circulate endlessly in the bodies, both human and nonhuman, that populate the speaker's hometown. Overwhelmed by this proliferation of associations and affects, the speaker asks: "what nature / what nurture will I replicate if ever I can birth a living child?" (97). Her question highlights the cognitive dissonance she feels as a queer daughter who harbours deep anxieties about the status of her reproductive health *despite* her desire to remain childless. And yet, by dramatizing this cognitive dissonance, *sulphurtongue* implicitly raises another, more hopeful, set of questions:

What if reproduction were understood not in terms of the obligation to perpetuate a prescribed biogenetic legacy, but in terms of the collective work of figuring out what kinds of social and ecological relations diasporic Latinx subjects might want to bring forth into the future? How might such a reframing contribute to the project of imagining alternatives to the settler futurities that underpin neocolonial extractivism in Canada? And how might this exercise enable a reclamation of brown embodiment as a site of decolonial relationality and resistance, rather than racialized ecological violence?

### **Towards an Ethics of Co-Resistance: Latinx and Indigenous Relationalities in *sulphurtongue***

While *sulphurtongue* resists closure for and easy solutions to the racialized ecological harms it identifies, it does invoke an alternative form of futurity in those moments in which the speaker considers how her emplacement as a “brown immigrant child” has contributed to the displacement of the Indigenous peoples whose traditional territories are situated in and around Sudbury. In the poem “Big Nickel Mine Road,” for instance, the speaker recalls learning English at “(white) schools for (white) settler children” that “t[ought] (white) official languages, (and) decr[ied] assimilation / of (white) francophones” while remaining silent about the “other mother tongues excised” in this territory (95). Having been educated within this settler-colonial system, the speaker is unable to name those “other mother tongues” or the nations they belong to (95). And though she can feel that the territory where she lives is marked by “a haunting of other brown faces” (95), she does not seem to recognize Sudbury as the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek Nation. What is more, her casting of Indigenous presence in Sudbury as a “haunting” suggests that she thinks of this presence as something of the past, something that was lost to the violence of residential schools (the poem alludes to the closing of Spanish Indian Residential School in 1965 [95]). Conceiving of Indigenous presence in Sudbury as lost, the speaker is left wondering what “ceremony” she might offer as a brown diasporic subject who wishes to confront her own complicity with settler-colonial violence:

//what words,  
if any, do we brown ghosts share for losses  
we are not allowed to grieve, what ceremony can i offer  
when my spells are just another colonizer's tongue,  
a (foreign) language of forgetting// (96)

The speaker's self-questioning here resonates with ongoing conversations that are happening within Canadian literature and cultural politics, and across Turtle Island more generally, surrounding the possibilities and limits of diasporic and Indigenous relationalities.<sup>6</sup>

Salazar alludes to these conversations by framing "Big Nickel Mine Road" with an epigraph from Vivek Shraya's poem "amiskwacîwâskahikan" (the Cree name for Beaver Hill House), which appears in Shraya's 2016 collection *even this page is white*. In this short lyrical poem, Shraya's speaker confronts the realization that they have been so "preoccupied / with [their] own / displacement" as a brown diasporic subject that they have failed to consider their own complicity in the erasure of Edmonton's Cree name and history. Salazar's epigraph invites us to read "Big Nickel Mine Road"—as well as other poems in *sulphurtongue* that broach the topic of diasporic-Indigenous solidarities—intertextually, alongside those poems from *even this page is white* that also address this question. Especially relevant here is Shraya's poem "indian," in which the speaker meditates on the irony of growing up as an Indian child who repeatedly witnessed their family's bias against "Indians" of a different sort, including the time when their mother "drove near a reserve / the only time i have seen her afraid hit gas pedal." Recalling such moments, the speaker questions whether the mere acknowledgement of Indigenous presence is "enough" to combat the deeply rooted anti-Indigeneity they have witnessed within their own community. The poem ends on an open-ended note, leaving readers to interrogate the work that needs to be done before diasporic subjects can claim to be in solidarity with Indigenous peoples: How can those who come from histories of displacement and loss attend to the distinct losses—particularly the loss of ancestral territories—that Indigenous peoples have suffered? How can diasporic subjects confront anti-Indigeneity within their own communities? And how might such subjects avoid the temptation to prematurely identify with Indigenous peoples on the

basis of a shared sense of harm or racial oppression without first decolonizing their own relationship to Indigeneity?

These are the questions that float in the background as the speaker of *sulphurtongue* confronts her emplacement as a brown Latinx subject who lives in a territory marked by the “haunting of other brown faces” (95). Moved by a premature sense of racial identification, the speaker includes herself in the collective “we” constituted by Sudbury’s “brown ghosts.” However, this sense of identification is punctured as the speaker wonders what ceremonies she might offer as a second-generation Latinx subject whose prayers derive not from English, but another colonially imposed language, Spanish. The speaker’s lament here hearkens back to an earlier poem titled “Elder,” which reflects on the spiritual teachings she inherited from her *abuelo*, a healer who is implied to have spoken a language *other* than Spanish:

what to do abuelo  
healer to restore  
your voice      your power  
in the language  
I have failed      to spell (33)

By emphasizing the speaker’s failure to “spell” her *abuelo*’s language, both in the sense of being unable to write it, and in the sense of being unable to summon its spiritual and ceremonial powers, these lines invoke an ancestral connection to an unspecified Indigenous language from Colombia. Thus, the speaker’s misgivings about her inability to offer ceremony except “in another colonizer’s tongue” can be read as both an expression of diasporic guilt and a lament over the loss of her *own* Indigeneity to the twin processes of *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento*. The inaccessibility of this lost ancestral connection is further accentuated by the caesura that precedes the words “to spell,” which formally enacts the silence the speaker encounters whenever she attempts to channel her grandfather’s “voice” and “power.” However, even as it highlights the pain of this silence, *sulphurtongue* refrains from claiming a presumed proximity to Indigeneity, perhaps because Salazar remains aware that to do so would risk reproducing the same biopolitical logic whereby *mestizaje* claims a genealogical connection to Indigeneity, even as it has worked to erase and displace

Indigenous peoples throughout Latin America.<sup>7</sup> Adapting Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's insights on the "moves to innocence" whereby settlers "problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity," we might say that for the speaker to claim a proximity to Indigeneity against this historical backdrop would be to engage in a diasporic Latinx "move to innocence" that would disavow the complicated contexts of Latinx–Indigenous encounters in settler-colonial Canada and thus foreclose the possibility of "more meaningful potential alliances" (1).

The dangers of claiming a *mestizx* proximity to Indigeneity without sufficiently interrogating these contexts become evident towards the end of *sulphurtongue*, in a poem titled "Skindeep," which once again addresses the relationship between race and toxic exposure. The poem begins with a description of the limestone cliffs of Manitoulin Island, whose cream-coloured surface the speaker likens to white skin:

. . . when I left Sudbury  
the limestone cliffs of Manitoulin  
gleamed cream and unpolluted to the eye  
  
this ugly whitegirl knew more kinship  
from the black rock against her brown skin  
than from you we both were tainted  
our complexions shamebrands of pollution (106)

Casting herself, once again, as a brown-skinned subject who has internalized the construction of brown and Black skin as "shamebrands of pollution," the speaker claims kinship with the black rocks that abound on the island while simultaneously distancing herself from its iconic limestone cliffs, which "glea[m] cream and unpolluted to [her] eye[s]." Her description of the limestone cliffs as "unpolluted" is punctured, however, by the poem's enjambed lines, which materially enact the transcorporeal spread of the environmental pollutants the speaker thought she had left behind when she departed from Sudbury. What is more, the speaker begins to recognize that her internalized construction of whiteness as synonymous with purity belies the openness of white bodies to toxic exposure: "who knew whiteness was no guarantee / of purity . . . as though whiteness reflects deflects / any

incursion of water bacterium rust,” she muses (106). Thus, the poem’s description of the seemingly unpolluted façade of Manitoulin Island ends with an uncomfortable reminder of the environmental pollution that permeates this territory, from the sulphur dioxide that emanates from Sudbury’s famous smokestack to the nickel tailings that contaminate all the surrounding bodies of water: “could we find a stream where water runs / unglittered by a thick mantle of nickel,” the speaker asks in the final line of the poem (107).

Yet despite this realization, the speaker fails to consider *another* key reality she has elided through her reading of Manitoulin’s limestone cliffs as “white”: namely, the Island’s status as an Indigenous place that holds “the spiritual histories of the Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatami peoples, who constitute the Three Fires Confederacy and who regard Manitoulin Island as their ancestral home” (Macklem 3). Also occluded here are the six Indigenous nations whose territories are located on Mnidoo Minising, to use Manitoulin Island’s Anishinabemowin name: M’Chigeeng First Nation, Zhibaaahaasing First Nation, Sheshegwaning First Nation, Sheguiandah First Nation, Aundeck Omni Kaning First Nation, and the Unceded Wiikwemkoong Territory. Thus, the poem remains caught in an impasse between its brown Latinx speaker’s unease with the layers of racialization that mediate her emplacement within the northern Ontario landscape and her own inadvertent deracination of this landscape into a whitewashed space devoid of Indigenous presence. By dramatizing this unwitting erasure on the part of its speaker, the poem highlights the necessity of interrogating the terms of encounter between diasporic Latinx and Indigenous peoples in northern Ontario, and in the territory known as Canada more broadly. What kind of work does this encounter require from diasporic Latinx subjects? Can this work make space for mourning the ancestral connections to Indigeneity that have been lost to the violence of *mestizaje* without erasing local Indigenous histories and ongoing Indigenous presence in the host territory? And, finally, how might diasporic Latinx subjects begin to honour the lands they call home *as* Indigenous lands?

I wish to offer a tentative answer to these questions by putting the speaker’s description of Manitoulin Island in “Skindeep” into a conversation with the reflections on Nishnaabeg intelligence and

cross-cultural coresistance that Simpson offers in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. Writing about her own process of “coming to know” as a Nishnaabeg thinker, Simpson describes the teachings she received from the Elders of Long Lake #58 when she was younger: “I kept asking them about governance, and they would talk about trapping. I would ask them about treaties, and they would take me fishing,” she writes (19). Only much later did Simpson recognize that, by allowing her to witness and participate in these embodied practices, the Elders had gifted her “[her] first glimpse of Nishnaabeg brilliance—theory, methodology, story, ethics, values all enmeshed in Nishnaabeg politics” (16). What is more, by immersing her in these values, the Elders had also introduced her to “the *affirmative* Indigenous worlds that continue to exist alongside the colonial worlds” (17, emphasis mine). For Simpson, these affirmative Indigenous worlds constitute “opaque” celestial constellations that contain “coded mappings for Nishnaabeg [and] for those with star literacy,” yet remain “unreadable . . . to the colonizer [and to] those who aren’t embedded in grounded normativity” (213).

Rereading Salazar’s “Skindeep” with this notion of the “opaque” constellation in mind, the speaker’s whitewashing of Manitoulin Island might be understood as a generative moment of crisis in a process of “coming to know” in which, as Simpson reminds us, “[m]istakes produce knowledge” and “[f]ailure produces knowledge because engagement in the process changes the actors” (20). That Simpson derives this insight from the Seven Fires creation story as told to her by Wiikwemkoong Elder Edna Manitowabi is crucial here, for it suggests the possibility of relating to Manitoulin Island, or Mnidoo Minising, in a different way, through the “grounded normativity,” or the “place-based practices . . . and knowledge” (Coulthard and Simpson 254), that is embedded in Nishnaabeg stories and intelligence. Simpson stresses that Nishnaabeg intelligence is primarily concerned with the continuation of Nishnaabeg lifeways. At the same time, however, she seeks to establish a dialogue between Nishnaabeg intelligence and other knowledge formations that are geared towards liberation from the conjoined forces of white supremacy and settler-colonial extractivism (228). Writing about her own dialogue with the Black Radical and Black Feminist traditions, Simpson asserts: “If Dionne Brand or Fred Moten speaks to my heart

as an Nishnaabekwe, as both do, then Nishnaabeg intelligence compels me to learn, share, and embody everything I can from [them]" (163). For Simpson, then, grounded normativity requires not only the practice of Nishnaabeg intelligence on the land, but also a commitment to figure out "how to act in solidarity" with "Black and brown individuals and communities on Turtle Island and beyond that are struggling in their own localities against these same forces, building movements that contain the alternatives" (229, 228–29).

*sulphurtongue* does not provide clear directions on how diasporic Latinx subjects might enter into such "constellations of coresistance" between Indigenous, Black, and brown communities (228). However, for this brown diasporic Latinx critic, reading Salazar's collection relationally, alongside extant scholarship on the biopolitics of Latin American *mestizaje*, Vivek Shraya's poetry, and Simpson's writing on Nishnaabeg intelligence, suggests some crucial first steps. Entering into such constellations requires, first of all, resisting the impulse to claim an unencumbered proximity to Indigeneity without first interrogating how violent histories of *mestizaje* mediate our encounters with Indigenous peoples both here and in our countries of origin. It requires a willingness to disidentify with discourses of *mestizaje* and *Latinidad* that uphold settler-colonial futurities and centre proximity to whiteness while violently erasing both Indigeneity and Blackness. It requires recognizing, along with Salazar's speaker, and following Simpson's generous teachings, that "affirmative Indigenous worlds" continue to exist alongside daily colonial realities shaped by white supremacy and settler-colonial extractivism (Simpson 16). And, finally, it requires actively seeking out and centring place-based Indigenous knowledges about the territories we've come to call home, in hopes that we might learn, through trial and error, to live on these territories in reciprocity and mutual recognition with Indigenous peoples.

Reflecting on the questions that *sulphurtongue* has generated for me, it seems only fitting that this "coming to know," as Simpson might describe it, has been facilitated through the medium of poetry, which works by association and thus allows for the bringing together of experiences, genealogies, and material realities that are deeply connected, albeit in nonlinear ways that defy realist and narrative modes of representation. Through their synaesthetic merging of

multiple geographies, temporalities, and experiences of embodied unease, Salazar's poems not only disrupt received understandings of Latinx genealogies of arrival and emplacement in settler-colonial Canada, but also highlight the urgent need to rethink the terms of encounter between diasporic Latinx and Indigenous peoples in this territory. In so doing, the poems in *sulphurtongue* demonstrate that, although decolonization is most certainly not a metaphor (to invoke Tuck and Yang's famous assertion), metaphor *can* be a powerful intermediary in the process of decolonizing our relationship to the territories we inhabit in hopes of building infrastructures of coresistance against settler-colonial extractivism.

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## Notes

1. For instance, writing in the context of Asian Canadian literary studies, and drawing on Paul Gilroy's conceptualization of the cultural practices of the Black Atlantic as "living memor[ies]" (qtd in Cho 106) of the trauma induced by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Lily Cho argues that diasporic subjectivities are marked not just by the effects of "geographical displacement," but also by "forgotten or suppressed pasts" that "continue to live on in secret or forgotten gestures, habits, and desires" (106). For ecocritical investigations into the sensing body as an alternative site of memory, see Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* and Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.
2. Although most of the immigrant population in Greater Sudbury comes from European countries, recent decades have seen a marked increase in immigration from the Global South, with large numbers of recent immigrants coming from Africa, South Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America (Nangia 4–6; "Focus").
3. For instance, writing about workers who became ill after being exposed to nickel by-products at the INCO sintering plant in Copper Cliff in the 1960s and 70s, Stacey Zembrzycki notes that "many men who worked in the plant, even those with limited exposure, developed various forms of lung, sinus, and throat cancers that were endemic to the sinter plant environment" (259). Furthermore,

- “[m]edical studies later confirmed that sinter plant employees experienced a significantly higher lung cancer mortality rate than comparable groups in the province and that sinus and nasal cancers were prevalent” (259).
4. Raymond Williams coined the term “structures of feeling” to describe those affective dimensions of lived experience that exceed the “fixed and . . . explicit” realm of recognized “relationships, institutions, formations, [and] positions” (20). Though taken from Williams, my understanding of the concept is also influenced by critical ethnic studies scholarship, which has used it to conceptualize racial melancholia as a “structure of feeling” that bears testimony, if only indirectly, to occluded or poorly documented histories of racial exclusion. In addition to David Eng’s *The Feeling of Kinship*, which I’ve cited earlier, see also Anne Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race*.
  5. As Saima Parveen, Asim Rizvi, and Imrana Naseem note, “nickel causes female reproductive toxicity in more than one way,” with studies showing that “the toxicity of the embryo and foetus may be caused by nickel induced maternal hormonal imbalance, instead of directly affecting fertilization” (66).
  6. For some representative examples of these conversations, see Daniel Coleman’s “Indigenous Place and Diaspora Space: Of Literalism and Abstraction,” Karina Vernon’s “To the End of the Hyphen Nation: Decolonizing Multiculturalism,” Larissa Lai’s “Epistemologies of Respect, or A Politics and Poetics of Asian/Indigenous Relation,” and Rita Wong’s “DecolonizAsian: Reading Asian and First Nations Relations in Literature.”
  7. As Luis Urrieta and Dolores Calderón remind us, although people who identify as Latinx and/or Hispanic have been in relation with Indigenous peoples “for hundreds of years . . . those relations have generally not always been harmonious”; hence, it remains crucial to consider how “Mestizo violence against Indigenous people” has shaped “old and new settler colonial contexts of encounter” (149).

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## *Margaret Atwood, #BelieveWomen, and the Limits of Literary Criticism*

It is unfashionable to talk about Margaret Atwood these days, at least in Canadian academic circles. That's because of her role in a controversy in which she defended the right to due process for Steven Galloway, an author and teacher who faced "serious allegations" at the University of British Columbia in 2015 and was subsequently fired. By signing a letter asking for an investigation into the university's handling of the case, Atwood was seen by many as attempting to silence and intimidate victims of sexual assault. A subsequent *Globe and Mail* essay in which Atwood compared the #MeToo movement to the Salem witch trials—where one was "guilty because accused"—caused further consternation, as did her later comments questioning the #BelieveWomen campaign that emerged in 2018 during the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court (Gillette).

For the most part, public esteem for Atwood remains intact, especially in the us. Her popularity reached new heights with the release of the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* just a few months after she signed the Galloway letter, and peaked again with the release of her sequel to that novel, *The Testaments*, in 2019. Atwood continues to write regularly for the *Atlantic* and, in 2024, celebrated the publication of a collaborative novel about the pandemic, *Fourteen Days*, as well as new stagings of her play, *The Penelopiad*. But her refusal to back down from her controversial positions has caused some people to question her position as a global feminist icon. These concerns reached their apex in the Canadian academy, where Atwood has been reappraised as someone who is at best ambivalent to feminist concerns and at worst, according to Atwood scholar Lorraine York, "failing" in her responsibility as a writer (133).

While others simply questioned Atwood's feminism, one scholar in particular has led a reappraisal of Atwood in the wake of these recent controversies. In a 2022 paper, "Margaret Atwood and Sexual Assault," Julie Rak revisits Atwood's past interviews, articles, essays, and novels and finds that Atwood's idea of feminism is rooted in liberal ideals of freedom that do not take into account the role of the patriarchy in society and that overemphasize the role of individual women in resisting male authority. Rak blames this narrow feminist view for Atwood's reluctance to believe women who report sexual assault and finds this failing central to Atwood's work and legacy. Rak insists she is doing this work in order to puncture the broad perception of Atwood as a feminist icon.

On the surface, it seems odd to question the feminism of the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Since its publication in 1985, the book has become almost a shorthand for feminism. The figure of the handmaid brilliantly dramatizes the coercive control of women's bodies, an issue that stands at the very heart of feminist concern. Furthermore, Atwood's interest in women and sexual politics long predates *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her early work tackled issues like the objectification of women, in *The Edible Woman*; abortion, in *Surfacing*; and breast cancer and bodily autonomy, in *Bodily Harm*. Atwood is a highly topical writer who likes to tackle live issues: women and sexual politics in her early years and, more recently, climate change and other environmental degradations. She is, in short, a writer who has dedicated her life to probing major problems of our times via complex female characters.

This paper will argue that the questions of whether to believe women who say they've been assaulted, or to believe women at all, are central concerns of Atwood's fiction. In fact, this is a subject that Atwood has taken up with great care and attention, especially in her most recent work, *The Testaments*. Rak's reappraisal comes at a time of reappraisal more generally, and so this paper will also enter the contemporary debate over how to approach art produced by people who are deemed to have behaved badly. Lastly, this paper will consider the role of the academy in this conversation and ask whether Rak provides a model one should follow or reject.

## Atwood's Ambivalence

Atwood is so outspoken and so well known that it can be easy to forget that for many years she “famously refused” to be drawn into allegiance with feminists or any other special interest group (Tolan 2). As far back as 1976, Atwood spoke candidly about “the questionable value of writers, male or female, becoming directly involved in political movements of any sort: their involvement may be good for the movement, but it has yet to be demonstrated that it’s good for the writer” (“Woman Writer” 190). In 1982, she described herself as “a profoundly apolitical writer” (*Second Words* 15).

Atwood elaborated on why she feels so strongly about the independence of the author in a 2010 talk for the Index on Censorship and PEN International on the subject of “the writer as political agent.” Here she explained that “to judge novels on the justness of their causes or the ‘rightness’ of their ‘politics’ is to fall into the very same kind of thinking that leads to censorship” (“Political Agent” 135). Atwood maintained that, for a fiction writer, “the writing itself—the craft and the art—is primary, whatever other impulses or influences may be in play” (135). For Atwood, to expect otherwise is to suggest that “the writing itself is a frivolous pursuit, of no value apart from whatever external roles and duties can be cooked up for it” (135). To Atwood, the crucial feature of the writer is that they engage with the truth. She compared writers to the small child who asks why the emperor isn’t wearing any clothes, “not to be bratty and disruptive but because they just can’t see any clothes” (133). To write with any other purpose is to risk “break[ing] the bond” between the writer and the reader (135). It would also, for Atwood, remove the crucial “litmus test” of fiction, which to Atwood is the constant balancing act performed by writers who are, by definition, always testing the limits of what can be said in any given society, at any given time.

Throughout her career, Atwood has been reluctant to align herself with any sort of feminism, even though her own work has frequently been taken up by various feminist movements. In her 2007 book, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*, Fiona Tolan marks this reluctance, while noting that Atwood shares much “common political ground” with feminist theorists (3). Tolan resolves the problem in much the same way Atwood does, by claiming for writers of fiction a

special status. Tolan writes that the novelist “absorbs influences,” which are then processed in a manner that is “unpredictable and generative” before returning to the popular culture (5). In general, Tolan finds that Atwood’s novels often anticipate feminist theory, serving as “instigators of theoretical debate” (3). To Tolan, Atwood has without question “generated a new and original contribution to feminist discourse” (3), despite her refusal to take overtly political positions.

Atwood’s status as a woman further complicates her relationship to feminism, putting her in a threefold defensive stance. First, as an emerging writer in the late 1960s and 1970s, Atwood feared being categorized as a women’s writer, rather than being enfolded into an expanded category of literature (“Reflections” 250). Second, Atwood feared being judged as a woman, particularly after the backlash to her portrayal of the villainous Zenia in *The Robber Bride*. She discussed this in a 1993 lecture on the challenges of writing female villains: “If you are a man, the bad female character in a novel may be—in Jungian terms—your anima; but if you are a woman, the bad female character is your shadow” (“Spotty-Handed” 171). Third, Atwood feared being judged in terms of solidarity with her sex. She wrote in 1976 of her “fear of the development of a one-dimensional Feminist Criticism, a way of approaching literature produced by women that would award points according to conformity or nonconformity to an ideological position” (“On Being” 192). From the very beginning, Atwood sought to be a writer who could tell the truth, unhindered by expectations related to her gender or politics.

### **The Galloway Affair**

Atwood’s steadfast refusal to avow feminist concerns makes her recent forays into the public discussion around sexual assault all the more remarkable. Where many see an antifeminist stance in Atwood’s positions, her concerns are in fact of a piece with her concern for truth generally. Atwood does not engage with the content of various accusations, but with the manner in which accusations are aired, handled, and ultimately judged—in other words, with interference in the search for truth.

When UBC announced it had suspended Galloway, the chair of its Creative Writing program, in November 2015 due to “serious allegations” (qtd. in Kipnis et al.), a broad conversation around sexual assault, justice, and power was already well underway in Canada. Heated public discussion on the issue began around October 2014, when the CBC fired popular broadcaster Jian Ghomeshi, and continued in the weeks that followed as criminal charges of sexual assault were laid against him. Complicating the discussion was the newly ubiquitous presence of Facebook and Twitter. Broad access to social media meant that the public had access to salacious, unfiltered details of the Ghomeshi case, as it soon would in the case of Galloway. Social media also brought serious consequences for both accusers/survivors and the accused.

For some, the accusations of sexual assault against Ghomeshi, and the rush to judgment online, felt at odds with the principle of due process. Others felt that this concern for the accused amounted to little when weighed against the harms of the sexual assaults themselves and the many costs to survivors who attempted to seek justice. Public discussion tipped firmly in favour of the accusers/survivors after 2017, when news broke about Harvey Weinstein’s serial exploitation of female actors and the #MeToo movement began to take off. The novel public opinion that formed out of this moment was expressed most clearly in the fall of 2018, during public hearings into Brett Kavanaugh’s appointment to the US Supreme Court, when the hashtag #BelieveWomen arose as a means of supporting women who had survived sexual assault and had the courage to speak out about it. The intent of this phrase was to recognize the high cost to victims of assault of coming forward and the challenges of being heard in the justice system as a way of mirroring the concern historically shown for the reputation of the accused.

In Canada, the imperative expressed in #BelieveWomen gained momentum in March 2016, when an Ontario court judge acquitted Ghomeshi of all charges, despite remarkable public testimony offered by women who had sacrificed their privacy and dignity in an attempt to bring him to justice. Three months later, UBC announced it had fired Galloway based on the findings of a private investigation that would not be made public. On the surface, it appeared that, in the Galloway case, survivors of sexual assault had obtained a measure of

justice without the routine humiliation of women required by the public criminal justice system. In this case, women had been believed.

Five months later, Atwood and dozens of other authors signed the UBC Accountable letter calling for due process for Galloway, sparking an immediate backlash. In her paper, Rak states that Atwood claimed Galloway “was unfairly accused and should not have lost his job” and that Atwood insisted “that Galloway, not the complainants at UBC, should be believed” (82). Rak further states that Atwood “decided to defend Galloway with no apparent concern for the complainants themselves” (82). This summary is unfair. The UBC Accountable letter that Atwood signed does indeed foreground the treatment of Galloway, but the thrust of the letter is that the university suspended Galloway citing only “serious allegations” (qtd. in Kipnis et al.), without making any details of those allegations public or providing the details of the allegations to Galloway himself. The university then held an independent investigation that, again, was not made public, and subsequently fired Galloway without providing a public explanation and denying him the right to speak publicly on the issue. The letter points out that the university, in this case, “cast a cloud of suspicion” over Galloway that was “amplified in the public sphere” and provided no means for Galloway to defend himself and no clarity to the public, which, one year later, remained left with the impression that Galloway was “in some way a danger to the university community” (Kipnis et al.). The letter does not claim that Galloway was unfairly accused or that he should not have lost his job. In fact, the letter calls for “due process and fair treatment for all” (Kipnis et al.).

Rak is far from alone in her critique of Atwood and the UBC Accountable letter, which caused an outpouring of anger on social media, in journalism, and on blogs. To date, little of this controversy has trickled into the world of academic publishing, with the exception of an anthology, edited by Rak and two others, titled *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*. The book deliberately sets out to capture “significant interventions . . . written in ephemeral online venues” related to a series of controversies (10). In addition to the Galloway affair, these controversies include concerns about sexual harassment in the Creative Writing program at Concordia University, the “appropriation prize” floated by writer Hal Niedviecki in a 2017 editorial for *Write* magazine, and revelations about Joseph Boyden’s spurious Indigenous

identity. In the memorable words of author and contributor Alicia Elliott, the book characterizes CanLit as “a raging dumpster fire” and seeks to imagine a more inclusive kind of Canadian literary establishment (93), one not built on “Indigenous genocide, anti-Blackness, anglophone dominance, racist immigration policies, eugenicist attitudes toward disabled people, and deep-rooted misogyny” (McGregor, Rak, and Wunker 21).

A particularly haunting chapter in the book comes from York, a former Atwood scholar. In an essay called “‘How Do We Get Out of Here?’: An Atwood Scholar Signing Off,” York self-flagellates pitilessly, acknowledging that her academic career has been built on the study of Atwood and announcing her “disaffiliation from Atwood’s actions of recent years” (134). Her reason is that Atwood signed a letter that “all but erased the women complainants” in the “rush to empathize with Steven Galloway” (133). Atwood fails in her responsibility as a writer, York writes, by “taking actions that slam the door on early-career writers” (133), by which York means failing to believe the young women who made the initial accusations about Galloway.

The imperative to choose sides could not be clearer. UBC Creative Writing professor Keith Maillard, in his contribution to the book, sums up the debate as “Old School vs. Everyone Else” (46), or in the words of one of his students to the rest of the class: “Margaret Atwood hates us” (44). Atwood, in this controversy, comes to stand for the elite, privileged gatekeepers against whom everyone else must fight in order to gain access to the cultural capital that’s being hoarded by elderly, straight, white people and their friends. York’s contribution is haunting because of how clearly it casts a white female academic at or near the top of her field yearning to align herself with the young aspiring writers, largely female and many queer or of colour, who also appear in *Refuse*.

To a large extent, York represents the more hopeful note in *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*. She represents the scholar who acknowledges the history of exclusion in Canadian literature and who seeks to make room for a new, more representative cadre of authors and artists. In this sense, York dwells within the same space as leaders in many fields who have only recently begun to acknowledge their own exclusionary roles in history and to consider what kinds of change are needed. To Rak, this is not enough. In “Margaret Atwood and Sexual Assault,” she

turns her academic lens on Atwood's work in order to find evidence that Atwood has never taken sexual assault seriously. Rak also takes issue with several of Atwood's female protagonists, whom she finds repeatedly refuse to acknowledge that they are victims, even when they are victims of rape. Before I enter a discussion on why this position is threatening to fiction as a whole, I will probe Rak's assertions carefully.

### **Feminism in Atwood's Fiction**

The overriding concern expressed in Rak's article is that women who report sexual assault ought to be "believed on the balance of probabilities" (87), and that prominent women—including Canada's most famous female author—ought to express belief in all such testimony as a means to punish and prevent instances of sexual assault. In this, Rak aligns herself with many feminists and feminist allies.

Where Rak differs is in turning to Atwood's creative output. "It is vital to do the work of assessing Atwood's feminism with regards to her stated positions about sexual assault, in order to understand what Atwood's feminist positions actually are," she claims (80). In reading Atwood, Rak concludes that Atwood "doubts the usefulness and veracity of female survivor testimony" (81). Rak further concludes that Atwood's emphasis on equality between the sexes precludes an understanding "of patriarchy or broader social factors that lead to gender discrimination" (89). Rak gives failing grades to Atwood characters who find it too easy to decline sex, and to novels and stories that contain "no analysis of rape culture" (92). "Across her career, Atwood consistently represents women as capable of exercising or withholding consent, exhibits suspicion of survivor testimony, and conflates survivorship with victimhood," Rak writes (92).

To reach these conclusions, Rak repeatedly zooms in on particular instances or discussions of sexual assault, while ignoring the context of the stories overall. For example, Rak reads Atwood's 1975 short story "Rape Fantasies" as expressing the idea that "women can talk men out of assault by reasoning with them, and that women can stop rape from happening merely by asserting their agency" (93). The story centres on a group of women playing bridge while eating lunch in an office

building and sharing stories of rape fantasies, prompted by a magazine piece on the subject. One woman shares her fantasy of a man creeping into her apartment and joining her in the bathtub. The narrator asserts that this is not a *rape* fantasy, “it’s just some guy you haven’t met formally” (96). The narrator, Estelle, then shares her fantasy of squeezing a plastic lemon in a potential assailant’s eye. The story ends with the narrator thinking more deeply about her own sexual fantasies—encounters with male strangers that end not with sex, but with mundane, comical situations, like both the victim and perpetrator having colds or discovering they both have cancer diagnoses. The narrator observes that the fantasies are odd because they always involve someone she doesn’t know, when the statistics say rape is often by someone you do know. The story concludes with the narrator drifting into thought about how, even though one has to live in a world which contains rape, it’s a difficult thing to worry about all the time. The story’s themes of humour and irony have seemed “obvious to most critics,” according to Nancy Workman (133). Workman nonetheless was able to discern a comment on “the serious nature of sexual assault” (132), a comment she says centres on the fact that one of the bridge players may have a story about sexual assault that her fellow bridge players fail to notice.

To Rak, the fact that rape itself remains unimaginable to the narrator proves the rejection of rape as a concept by Atwood. A different interpretation of this story might focus on the magazine article that prompts their discussion, which asserts that “all women have rape fantasies” (93). The story could then be read as a study in young women encountering a public discussion about rape that tells them not only that they are going to be raped, but also that they *want* this to happen. The women in this story are not powerful; they work as receptionists or in the filing department of an office. They are subject to male bosses, like the unattractive assistant manager Derek Cummins, or Estelle’s boss, who is “over sixty and,” in Estelle’s view, “couldn’t rape his way out of a paper bag” (102). “Rape Fantasies” is less a story about female agency as a prophylactic against rape, and more a story about coming of age in a climate of fear.

In *Surfacing*, Rak finds two scenes where the narrator talks her way out of sexual assault, further establishing the pattern by which Atwood’s characters use their personal agency to prevent violence. In

one instance, the narrator tells her aroused partner she may get pregnant if they have sex; he relents. In another, telling a would-be attacker that he doesn't "turn her on" is enough to deter him from pursuing her (152). Rak correctly observes that, near the end of the novel, the narrator explicitly refuses to be a victim, refuses to be "powerless" (191). Yet here, again, Rak ignores the larger context of the story. This narrator has fled to a cabin in the woods after aborting a child conceived with a married man who has refused to leave his wife. The narrator is without question the victim of whatever story this married man has told her. The novel, in conformity with the conventions of novels, focuses on her transformation following this terrible realization. Refusing to be a victim in this context means refusing to be a powerless woman subject to the whims of a powerful man. Early critical reception of the novel typically focused on the protagonist's attempt to integrate this experience into a whole self, with debate breaking around whether or not this is achieved (see Kokotailo 157).

In *Alias Grace*, Rak finds more examples of the uncanny ability of Atwood's protagonists to talk themselves out of being raped. Grace Marks, she notes, is able to physically rebuff a jailer, Dr. Bannerling, two guards who sexually harass her, her first employer, and the murderer James McDermott. Rak again ignores the story as a whole. Marks is an impoverished servant girl. She achieves her remarkable chastity while working for rich men and, later, being imprisoned for a murder she may or may not have committed, where she is confined and silenced by, once again, men. Crucially, *Alias Grace* is not a true account of the life of Marks: it is an entire novel about the difficulty of getting at the truth of the life of such an insignificant and powerless woman. In *Alias Grace*, a doctor begs Marks to tell him whether or not she killed Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. This is testimony Marks has not offered previously, ostensibly due to a case of memory loss, but also because of a patriarchal social apparatus, with which Marks has ample experience: "You won't believe me, Sir, I say. Anyway it's all been decided, the trial is long over and done with and what I say will not change anything" (49).

Strangely, Rak ignores *The Blind Assassin*, a novel that is rife with sexual assault. In a tale-within-a-tale, the titular "blind assassin" is a former slave blinded by the fine work of carpet-weaving in the

mythical city of Sakiel-Norn. He takes part in a revolutionary heist by sneaking into a temple where nine virgin girls are killed each year in a sacrificial ritual. The night before the sacrifice, the girls are raped by courtiers who pay for the privilege. Three months before the sacrifice, the girls' tongues are removed to prevent them from resisting. By the end of the novel, the sacrificial girls are understood to be stand-ins for one or both of the young, orphaned Chase sisters, who are left to the mercy of a wealthy industrialist who rapes both of them repeatedly. In several respects, this novel encapsulates the nature of sexual relations in Atwood's fictional worlds. Sakiel-Norn is a world in which men rule and women are confined, muted, and sexually assaulted at will. Typical of Atwood, the sisters' actual rape scenes largely take place offstage. In the case of the narrator, Iris Chase Griffen, we are told simply that the "distaste, my suffering even," is considered "normal and even desirable" by her husband, Richard Griffen (241).

Rak also ignores *Bodily Harm*, a novel which opens at the scene of a botched home invasion in which a would-be predator leaves a noose on the bed of the young female protagonist. The entirety of this novel, as evinced by its title, concerns the physical risks of simply being female. The story concludes with the protagonist in jail, watching policemen torment male prisoners in the courtyard. The protagonist reaches a straightforward conclusion: "She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening" (290).

Rak situates *The Handmaid's Tale*, from 1985, as a reaction to the end of second-wave feminism and the radically anti-female conservatism on the rise in the 1980s. Yet she chooses again to focus on two faults of Offred, the protagonist. The first is Offred's pre-Gilead ambivalence towards feminism. The second is Offred's belief that she has consented to her ritual rape as a handmaid by choosing this station rather than face certain death cleaning up toxic waste—in other words, her belief that she has agency in Gilead. Rak then zooms in on a ritual execution based on false testimony about rape, which Rak cites as an instance in which readers are encouraged not to believe women.

In fact, this execution is both more and less complex. In the scene, the handmaids have been told by Aunt Lydia that a man is being subject to a "particution," or death by handmaids, because he raped a handmaid, killing her unborn child. They dutifully stone him to death. We later learn the man was in fact "a political" (263). Rak is correct

that this man's execution "is founded on a false accusation of rape" (100). However, the act of deception was driven not by the state's desire to punish this man, but rather to implicate the handmaids in his murder while generating fear of other potential transgressors. The event takes place only a few pages after Offred takes part in the execution of a fellow handmaid, for which Offred has just confessed her "consent" and "complicity" (260). In other words, the purpose of this incident is not to highlight the false testimony offered by a victim of rape, but to expose the ways in which the handmaids' desire to punish an accused rapist and murderer is harnessed nefariously by a totalitarian government.

Rak highlights another execution orchestrated by Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*, Atwood's blockbuster sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. "*The Testaments* seems to suggest that accounts of rape are suspect," Rak reports (102). The false testimony she refers to comes from Aunt Elizabeth, who accuses the dentist, Dr. Grove, of sexually assaulting her, resulting in his death. Though this is indeed false testimony, by the time of the execution, the reader is well aware that Dr. Grove has sexually assaulted at least two young women and that Aunt Lydia knows this and has even gathered photographic evidence in order to put a stop to it. The trouble for Aunt Lydia is that, in Gilead, testimony from girls like those Dr. Grove has victimized "would count for little or nothing" (252): "Even with grown women, four female witnesses are the equivalent of one male, here in Gilead" (252). Aunt Lydia, the real arbiter of power in Gilead, finds her solution by tricking Aunt Elizabeth into falsely accusing Grove of assaulting her. Aunt Lydia does this because she knows that testimony from a respected aunt *will* be believed. She also uses it as a potential means of blackmail: Aunt Elizabeth's false accusation, if known, would endanger her in Gilead, "which takes a stern view of bearing false witness" (255).

Many readings of *The Testaments* have been suggested. Jordyn Weiss reads the novel as an illustration of Judith Butler's performance of gender, "that of the Gileadean Aunt and that of a woman longing for the destruction of the regime" (4). Jia Tolentino and Michaela Keck and Carl von Ossietzky read *The Testaments* as an opportunity for women readers to imagine themselves not merely as handmaid victims, but as perpetrators. The *Atlantic* critic Sophie Gilbert reads *The Testaments* as part of the "literature of witness" for its use of the not-always-reliable

testimony of Aunt Lydia to probe the limits of the genre. Ramona Tausz writes that *The Testaments* absolves Aunt Lydia of the evil she did in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and thus “ruins one of [Atwood’s] most interesting creations.” Peter Sabo and Rhiannon Graybill apply a biblical lens to the novel, suggesting that *The Testaments* offers multiple “testaments,” “each offering a somewhat different articulation of the relationship between body, memory, and truth” (132). Taken together, these readings show that the novel develops a degree of complexity that can’t be reduced to a rejection of sexual assault testimony.

Because of the participation of Dr. Grove, to Rak, *The Testaments* “foregrounds the question of whether testimony about rape should be believed at all” (101). Once again, it is only by ignoring the context in which this testimony is elicited and believed that Rak can plausibly make this claim. When Dr. Groves’ daughter, Becka, first describes her sexual assault to Agnes, she is immediately believed. Becka is also believed by Aunt Lydia, who spies on this conversation. Rak similarly ignores the limitations on female testimony within Gilead, which remains a patriarchy despite the privileged view Atwood gives us of Aunt Lydia and her charges. The Gilead of *The Testaments* posits an entire justice system that does not believe women. Individual characters, meanwhile, are perfectly capable of believing accounts of rape. Rak glosses over the fact that *The Testaments* is quite literally composed of the testimony of three women in Gilead who manage to bring down the oppressive system by reporting its corruption to the outside world. In addition, it turns out that *The Testaments* as a whole is a testament to Becka, the rape victim. In the end, we learn that the two sisters who escaped Gilead carrying their explosive testimony also erected a monument to Becka as someone who sacrificed her life in order to make it possible for testimony about Gilead to reach the outside world. In this sense, and in others, female testimony is at the heart of *The Testaments*, though it must battle complicated forces to be heard.

As we have seen, Rak finds fault with Atwood’s portrayal of individual incidents of sexual assault and finds that Atwood subscribes to a feminism that eschews victimhood and “does not contain an analysis of patriarchy or broader social factors that lead to gender discrimination” (89). Again, this seems like an odd charge against the inventor of Gilead. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we find a world in which

women are functionally enslaved to men. Indeed, dressing as handmaids has become a common means of protesting strict abortion laws and other indignities against women. To *New Yorker* writer Tolentino, the red robes and white bonnets of the handmaids have evolved from “a symbol of advocacy for victims into a way of playacting victimhood” (56).

There is an alternative to reading Atwood’s heroines as either victims or women who refuse to understand that they are victims. That alternative is to focus on a different character in Atwood’s oeuvre. *The Testaments* shifts focus away from the handmaids in Gilead and instead zooms in on the aunts, and one aunt in particular. By telling Aunt Lydia’s story—her slide from normal, workaday lawyer to matriarch to subversive who brings down the entire state—Atwood offers unique insight into an archetype she’s been writing since her very first novel in 1969: the controlling aunt. Rak contends that equality, to Atwood, means that “women are like men as a group” (89). In fact, the existence of the aunts, and the way they reproduce and broker power among their young charges, demonstrates that Atwood has a very clear grip indeed on what patriarchy means and how it is thrust upon her young female protagonists.

## The Aunts of Atwood

Almost all of Atwood’s early novels include an aunt: someone who rules, guides, admonishes, terrifies, or otherwise influences the main character. The most fearsome is Aunt Muriel in *Life before Man*, who actually kidnaps the protagonist; the protagonist must confront the aunt before finding any hope of emancipation. The kindest is Aunt Lou in *Lady Oracle*, whose kindness curdles when she bequeaths the protagonist money on the condition that the latter lose one hundred pounds. In *The Edible Woman*, the role of aunt is filled by a downstairs neighbour who strictly monitors the comings and goings of the protagonist and her roommate; in *Bodily Harm*, it is filled by the entire town of Griswold, whose elderly women monitor everybody. *The Blind Assassin* includes a prospective aunt, the sister of the protagonist’s rich husband, who manages and manipulates the protagonist on his behalf.

All of these aunts are guiding figures who play an outsized, inescapable role in the development and self-understanding of Atwood's protagonists. This is doubly important in the universes of Atwood because her female protagonists are often strikingly passive and still young, coming of age in a world not of their own making. Elizabeth, in *Life before Man*, marvels when her daughters laugh at Aunt Muriel and seem unafraid. Elizabeth herself will never be able to do this. "Because Aunt Muriel once had all power over her, she will always have some," the text states blankly (109). The plot turns on whether Elizabeth will ever be able to reject this power and find her own.

Like all of the aunts, Aunt Muriel herself remains "opaque as a rock" (199). In *The Testaments*, we are at last treated to the inner workings of an aunt. In this novel, Aunt Lydia tells the story of how she manipulates the downfall of Gilead by using the elder child of Offred and her sister, the "stolen" Baby Nicole, as messengers to report the shocking corruption she's learned about to the outside world. It is Agnes, Offred's daughter, who puts the central question of the novel into words: "I had begun to wonder how a woman changed into an Aunt" (156). Agnes has been told they have a calling, but still puzzles over aspects of the transformation:

How had they received their strength? Did they have special brains, neither female nor male? Were they even women at all underneath their uniforms? Could they possibly be men in disguise? Even to suspect such a thing was unthinkable, but what a scandal if so! (156)

Aunt Lydia herself gives us the answers, describing how she was kidnapped, taken to a stadium, and forced to witness executions until she capitulated to the male power brokers who are bringing their dream of Gilead to fruition. From the beginning, Aunt Lydia is determined to survive, and thrive, in this new world: "I needed to work the angles, once I could find out what the angles were. I'd been in tight corners before. I had prevailed" (117). Yet, placed in the role of an Atwood protagonist, even Aunt Lydia suffers from a curious bout of passivity. Thus a scene crucial to her transformation shows her sleeping in a comfortable bed, taking pleasant showers, and eating nice food (150). These small perks are enough to help her decide to

don the brown garment that signals cooperation with the regime, then take part in an execution herself. Through this series of events, she is inducted into a matriarchy that dramatically mirrors the patriarchy that's taken charge of Gilead.

Aunt Lydia gets a seat at the table where Gilead is designed. Told by Commander Judd that “[s]ociety is best served by separate spheres for men and women,” Aunt Lydia proposes that the female realm be a “wholly separate sphere” with no interference from men (174). At the time of her narration, Aunt Lydia goads the reader into believing she did this for benevolent reasons, the whole time plotting Gilead’s downfall. In fact, it’s not at all clear when she turns against the regime or whether she does so out of a sense of justice or merely self-preservation. Aunt Lydia’s rule is both benevolent (she rescues Agnes and Becka) and self-serving (she sacrifices nearly everyone for her own purposes). She is also terrifying, as evinced by Agnes, when she is ushered into Ardua Hall as a prospective aunt and told she’ll be safe: “I might be safe from men, I thought, but what about women?” (239).

Even Atwood feared she’d gone too far with her pitiless portrayal of Aunt Muriel, a sin for which she “was expecting to be denounced by at least a few feminists” (“Male Character” 421). Yet she got away with it and went on to create more aunts, in Gilead and elsewhere. The relationship to these aunts becomes a test through which all of her characters must pass. Despite her aunt’s nearly God-like power, for instance, Elizabeth is ultimately able to banish Aunt Muriel from her life. In the climax of the novel, Elizabeth screams at Aunt Muriel to leave her house and not come back. “You moldy old bitch!” she adds, throwing a porcelain bowl after her, then doing a little dance (200).

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is incomplete in this regard. Offred departs Gilead without battling or breaking free of any aunts. In *The Testaments*, a more intimate reckoning is at hand. Here we see young women—nubile, fertile—becoming aunts themselves, preparing to take on the role of reproducing the ideology of an oppressive regime. This preparation brings revelations, new knowledge about the nature of the regime—and about the nature of the aunts. Forged in a stadium with the stench of death all around, the aunts of Gilead are not behaving *like* men, they are behaving *for* men—at gunpoint. Whereas past aunts in Atwood are pushed aside or simply age and die, leaving the younger women to live more freely, Aunt Lydia is willing to go

much further to see to the welfare of the young women in her care. She has seen the dangers of the patriarchy up close, in the form of the murderous Commander Judd, and she's not going to take it anymore. In *The Testaments*, the young protagonists at last team up with an aunt—indeed, *the* aunt—in order to free not just themselves from tyranny, but their entire society. Seeing the text in this light, it is wholly inaccurate to say that *The Testaments* “foregrounds the question of whether testimony about rape should be believed at all.” Rather, the novel demonstrates how an entire patriarchy is overturned, against considerable odds, by the testimony of women.

### The Role of the Academy

Rak assumes that Atwood has somehow been unclear about her position on sexual assault. She claims that Atwood's refusal to “believe all women” is “puzzling” (81). In fact, Atwood—one of the most articulate and most prolific female authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—has stated very clearly why she will not believe all women who report sexual assault without evidence or some form of due process: “My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system” (“Bad Feminist”). There is an irony in Rak asking us to believe women yet refusing to take one woman at face value: Margaret Atwood.

Rak is not alone in her feeling of betrayal. Many women readers have been deeply moved by Atwood's work. “*Cat's Eye* was the first book I read that looked at female friendships in a sustained and serious way. Women could be villains to each other,” writes Erika Thorkelson in *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*. “We could be tragic, cruel, smart, and resilient. In other words, we were precisely as complex and fully human as men” (185). Thorkelson notes this experience before going on to describe how “sad” she feels about Atwood's inability to hear younger women (188).

To many, Atwood has used her authority and prestige to silence young women who want to see a different kind of justice system and a different kind of world. This is the reason, I suspect, that the little

free libraries in my neighbourhood now contain multiple Atwood novels: women were moved by #MeToo and #BelieveWomen, and many readers were disappointed by Atwood's refusal to amplify these concerns.

In *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma*, the critic Claire Dederer begins a conversation about how to engage with art created by "monsters": people who are revealed to hold qualities their audience finds distasteful or even criminal. Dederer begins her exploration by acknowledging the critic's desire to judge art on its own merits, rather than on the life and character of its author. Although Woody Allen has been accused of sexual assault and seen cavorting with his young stepdaughter, Dederer writes, "We continue watching, separating or trying to separate the artist from the art" (37). Dederer concludes that the project of engaging with art made by difficult people is the job of the audience. It is those consuming the art who must employ emotion and subjectivity; conclusions about how to consume it cannot be prescribed.

Yet Rak wants to prescribe—and proscribe. Furthermore, Rak not only finds Atwood's books distasteful because of the behaviour of Atwood herself; she finds *Atwood* distasteful because of what she has published: namely, stories that include elements of what Rak defines as a refusal to believe women who have survived sexual assault. As shown above, Rak's conclusions on this front rest on shaky ground, ignoring the context both of events within the novels themselves and of Atwood's oeuvre as a whole. Rak seeks to prosecute the author rather than illuminate the text.

In her exploration of how and why artists are so often monsters, Dederer hits on the theme of "selfishness": specifically, "the selfishness of forgetting the real world to create a new one" (276). Artists, Dederer writes, are hoarders: of time, of space, and, crucially, of freedom in order to create. Atwood the novelist is not producing feminist diatribes: she is producing fiction. Atwood insists upon freedom, as noted above, because for a fiction writer, "the writing itself—the craft and the art—is primary" ("Political Agent" 135).

Atwood clearly delights in her evil aunts. In a 1993 lecture, she decried the feminist expectation that bad behaviour in novels be reserved for men: "Were all heroines to be essentially spotless of soul—struggling against, fleeing from, or done in by male oppression?" ("Spotty-Handed" 165). Atwood feared "the development

of a one-dimensional Feminist Criticism, a way of approaching literature produced by women that would award points according to conformity or non-conformity to an ideological position" ("Woman Writer" 192). In her defence of villainesses, Atwood says:

Female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom—because everyone's choices are limited, and women's choices have been more limited than men's, but that doesn't mean women can't make choices. Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power, you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences. (168)

Atwood is arguing here for the preservation of broad terrain for exploring female characters in fiction.

Tolan begins her study of Atwood and feminism by stating her "belief in the importance of fiction writers such as Atwood as instigators of theoretical debate rather than mere passive recorders of its impact" (3). This position rests on the assumption that fiction has something to tell us, that it often "generates entirely new areas of thought" (3). Tolan's book goes on to "highlight moments when Atwood's work demonstrably anticipates future movements within feminism" (4). In the words of Atwood, fiction is not a "frivolous pursuit" ("Political Agent" 135). It is where one looks to understand the present, and sometimes the future.

As with fiction, textual analysis should never be constrained or censored. The close reading of literature must be performed freely if it is to shed light on the mysteries of fiction. It is true that Atwood's novels contain several incidents of false testimony about rape. Rak wants to use this fact to tarnish Atwood's feminist credentials, but this reading is too narrow, and too nakedly ideological, to do justice to Atwood. Nor does it meet the needs of readers, who, as Dederer suggests, will judge for themselves how to approach an author whose values fall short of their expectations. Atwood would be much better engaged, as a weapon might be, for her immense power of observation and creation. Atwood created the handmaids, a powerful image of a

sisterhood pressed into the service of men, a symbol being used today in the fight for women's reproductive rights. The aunts of Atwood, and particularly Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*, also provide a powerful image. In *The Testaments*, Atwood's alpha aunt reaches a vivid conclusion by overturning a villainous regime with the help of her young protégés. In this case, the aunts of Atwood are unified, and worlds change.

Six years after #BelieveWomen began trending, its fever pitch appears to have subsided. Margaret Atwood, meanwhile, is certainly not failing as a writer; she continues to accept awards, appear on podcasts, and publish commentary in *The Atlantic* and elsewhere. In October 2024, Steven Galloway was granted permission by the Supreme Court of Canada to proceed with a defamation lawsuit against several people who made public allegations against him (Greer). In fiction, as in life, truth may be contested, both inside and outside of the academy. Care must be taken that outside interests don't get in the way of that truth.

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## *“That Particularly Canadian Thing”: Remapping Black Canada through Narratives of Mobility*

Canada is a vast nation, with a population that is characterized by cultural, regional, linguistic, and racial differences. With the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1885, Canadians and tourists alike were able to travel across the country with unprecedented ease. This new form of cross-country travel encouraged many to reflect on the nation itself and consider the identity of Canada. Kevin Flynn argues that the narratives produced by early travellers of the CPR “fit into a master narrative of the nation’s progress from infancy to maturity, with the traveller’s arrival at the west coast terminus seeming to be the proper occasion on which to contemplate Canada’s arrival at nationhood” (191). This entanglement of mobility and national identity continues to be a part of Canadian literature. It is difficult, in a nation as large as Canada, to feel connected to national identity, and travelling through and occupying physical and geographical space often fosters that sense of connection. In her book *American Road Narratives*, Ann Bringham poses the question around whether cross-country or continental travellers seek to embrace the vastness of space or attempt to reduce it into something more manageable (5). There is no singular answer to this question, as the motivation for travel can be so varied, but in the context of Canadian narratives of mobility, there is certainly a strong sense that the vastness of the country is something that is at once beautiful and awful. Many early settlers wrote about their efforts to tame the vast *terra nullius* that would become Canada. With the completion of the CPR, the answer to Bringham’s question is simple and yet complex: both. Travellers want to marvel at the vastness of the

country, the juxtaposition of the endlessly flat Prairies with the sheer magnitude of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, but they want to do so in a comfortable and convenient fashion. The railroad connects the coasts, thereby encouraging the seemingly impossible task of traversing the country while also creating a spectacle of the immense landscape. Yet the very structures that enable cross-Canada travel rely on the historical labour of marginalized peoples. Many early depictions of Canadian spatial and cultural magnitude often fail to account for the experiences of people whose relationship to Canada as a nation is complex and fraught with issues of colonization, racism, and violence.

The lack of connection to Canada as a nation for Black Canadians whose social and cultural histories are not often commemorated is something Karina Vernon highlights and works to rectify in her text *The Black Prairie Archives*. She writes about how “the prairies . . . [have] been imagined into being through a particular archive of writing . . . by Frederick Phillip Grove, Sinclair Ross, W. O. Mitchell, Martha Ostenso, and Robert J. Stead, among others” (2). She goes on to point out that “the ‘authentic’ prairie subject that emerges from this archive is rarely gendered, never raced, and definitely not black” (2). In order to remap the social and cultural histories of the Prairies, Vernon’s anthology includes works by Black prairie writers that insist on the “long black presence on the prairies” (3), but also incorporate histories of the transatlantic slave trade and diasporic elements while insisting on the way that race has “shap[ed] the prairies as a region” (3). Vernon’s work in *The Black Prairie Archives* is an exemplar of the kind of remapping of Canadian histories and spaces that needs to be undertaken in order to rectify the fraught relationships between racialized peoples and constructions of Canadian national identity. Here, I am examining two Black Canadian narratives of mobility, specifically George Elliott Clarke’s *The Motorcyclist* (2016) and André Alexis’ *Days by Moonlight* (2019), as exemplary of the kind of remapping that is taking place that works to create new understandings of place and identity in Canadian literature.

Drawing on language from geographer Nicholas Entrikin, Vernon considers the Prairies not as a “natural geographic location, but as an ideological and ‘ideational space’” (3). Entrikin defines this “ideational space” as an area “in which individual and collective identities are

worked out” (qtd. Vernon 3). I see both Entrikin and Vernon’s notions about the way that geographies are produced as reflective of the way that Black Canadian narratives of mobility remap the geographies of Canada through movement. The act of moving through space and insisting on the history and presence of groups who have been rendered ahistorical in the construction of national history and identity is an insistence on creating space for these forgotten and underrepresented histories to be told.

The pairing of Blackness and movement also invites discussion from the field of surveillance studies. Simone Browne’s work is particularly valuable for thinking through the implications of what it means to be Black and mobile. In her book *Dark Matters*, she writes that while Blackness is often absent from intellectual discussions, it is always a presence in the practice of surveillance, particularly in cases of traffic stops and pedestrian stop-and-frisks (13). In her work, she considers the model of the slave ship as a means of transporting slaves, but also of surveilling them. This consideration of the space of the slave ship connects with Katherine McKittrick’s work in *Demonic Grounds*, where, in her discussion of the social space of the slave ship, McKittrick argues that

the relationship between black populations and geography—and here I am referring to geography as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations—allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic. (x)

McKittrick’s work builds on Henri Lefebvre’s argument, in *The Production of Space*, that space is socially produced. She argues that examining Black narratives not only reclaims histories of Blackness, but also produces social space for Blackness by acknowledging the relationship between place and space. Examining the literary social lives of Black Canadians produces social space for narratives that have historically been invisible. The novels discussed in this article work to locate and make visible histories of Black Canada. Both Clarke and

Alexis use the narrative of mobility to overtly remap Black geographies in Canada.

Through a consideration of narratives of mobility written by Black Canadians, I am interested in the way that cross-country travel can also be a tool for interrogating accepted constructions of national identity and character. I use *mobility* here to mean physical movement through geographical space, in particular by vehicle. However, in the context of Black Canadian narratives of mobility, the term takes on other meanings and nuances. In many Black Canadian narratives of mobility, the traveller is not only exploring their connection to Canada, but also their diasporic connections. Movement is, in many of these texts, a part of a shared history that is unique to Black Canadians. Whether it be the history of the Black Loyalists or the writing of a second-generation diasporic subject, these travellers are reckoning with more than just their connection to Canada; they are also reckoning with their connection to their personal histories. Mobility also functions as the driving force of these narratives; however, movement itself is often not the focus of these texts. While the travellers are moving through geographical space on their journeys, many of the noteworthy incidents detailed in the narratives take place during moments of stasis. Stops along the road and trips home figure heavily into *The Motorcyclist* and *Days by Moonlight*, and these moments of immobility or regressive mobility often prove to be fruitful grounds for a traveller to consider themselves in relation to their fellow citizens. Canadian identity is varied, and each area and region have their own unique features and idiosyncrasies. The travellers' encounters with different constructions of national identity allow them to consider their personal identity and how that does or does not relate to nation. Mobility also allows them to occupy geographical space, and their movement in and through these spaces is an act that insists on their belonging. These journeys work to produce social and historical space through the stories they tell about Black histories in Canada and by insisting on the presence of Blackness in the nation. Black Canadian narratives of mobility function as an act of resistance to exclusion from the construction of a national identity and racist beliefs about who has freedom of movement.

Canadian narratives of mobility are texts that grapple with socio-cultural and political issues through travel and mobility. As the

traveller moves through varied landscapes and encounters an array of people and experiences, they begin to disentangle and destabilize prescribed narratives about national history and identity. As Heather Macfarlane writes:

The process of physically covering ground and telling stories about it . . . connects the personal to the collective. The act of writing road trip narratives is therefore also nationalistic, or representative of literary nationalism, since telling stories about real places reflects an exploration and claiming of the land, or conversely, the process of being claimed *by* the land. (5)

Macfarlane's work eloquently delineates the relationship between identity and mobility in Canadian literature, in particular the complexities of the subject's relationship with nation in Indigenous road narratives, a topic that had, until then, been largely ignored in the literature. Often, in Canadian narratives of mobility, people of colour are forced to travel as a means of claiming space. Space, in this context, reaches beyond only the physical and into the social and cultural as well. In the context of my article, *space* refers to the inclusion of social and cultural histories of Blackness in Canada as well as the creation of a Canadian national identity that reflects the diversity of the population. *Place*, on the other hand, refers to the physical areas being traversed in these texts. The connection between space and place is explored extensively in this article, and the interplay of the two works produces cultural geographies that can be examined to better understand how people conceive of themselves in relation to the nation.

Claiming space in literature, in Canadian culture, and in the nation itself is a central aspect of these narratives. An inability to affirm a sense of national identity is at the heart of many narratives of mobility produced in Canada. This article seeks to examine Black Canadian narratives of mobility and focus on the way that these literatures use the narrative of mobility to remap literary histories and geographies of Canada, thus producing a new understanding of Canadian national identity that is fluid and ever-changing to reflect the changing demographics of Canada. Mobility also allows Black travellers to explore

physical geographies and relay unknown histories or flout expectations through the simple fact of their presence in spaces that do not always accept or welcome Blackness. Building on Vernon, I argue that mobility allows travellers of colour a sense of freedom from racist expectations and prescribed subject positions in order to explore their personal sense of connection to or alienation from constructions of national identity and nationhood. Novels such as *The Motorcyclist* and *Days by Moonlight* reveal the structures of exclusion that are woven into Canadian socio-cultural identity. These novels, I argue, are rooted in considerations of place despite being about mobility. Mobility functions as the driving force that stimulates the travellers' reflections on the nation as a whole, their place within it, and how their identity figures in relation to national identity as a construction. Black Canadian narratives of mobility thus have a twofold significance in this discussion: They allow the travellers to shed the constricts of expectations rooted in identity and determine their own personal connection to and with nation. Simultaneously, the traveller also functions as an explorer, detailing their findings and relaying histories while also making a mark on the geographies they explore through their physical presence.

### **Black Canadian Movement and Mobility**

Using his father's diary from 1959 to 1960 as a launching point, George Elliott Clarke adapts and fictionalizes William Lloyd Clarke's experiences into *The Motorcyclist*, a narrative of mobility that follows Carl Black, a young railway worker and aspiring artist, as he details his sexual conquests, his travels, and the experiences that he had as a result of growing up Black in Nova Scotia. In the "proviso" to the novel, Clarke writes that it is "neither biography nor history, but it does sketch the he-said, she-said, *black* comedies of coupling, and their *personal* consequences. All open to *Interpretation*. As usual . . ." (x). Nonetheless, the novel is rooted in real experiences and recollections. The motorcycle is representative of Carl's desire to be untethered, to be afforded his freedom to come and go as he pleases, and to do so in a way that flouts the expectations of the middle-class white people of Halifax. Set in the late 1950s, *The Motorcyclist* exemplifies those narratives of mobility that expose the complex

relationship between Blackness and Canadian identity. Carl's visible mobility is an affront to "whites-only segregationists" in Halifax, who recognize that his possession of the motorcycle signifies a loss of control over Black Canadians (Clarke 11). Carl's mobility allows him to penetrate spaces that were, until recently, barred to Black Canadians.

Alexis' *Days by Moonlight* (2019) follows Alfred "Alfie" Homer, the novel's Black Canadian protagonist, and his travelling companion, Professor Bruno, a white University of Toronto professor, as they leave Toronto on a trip through small-town southern Ontario. Having spent a great deal of time travelling southern Ontario as a child with his preacher father, Alfie is both familiar with the region and nostalgic for the time he spent there with his parents. He expects a pleasant journey through the familiar landscapes of his childhood, but his journey presents him with a very different experience of southern Ontario, one that renders familiar territory strange. Alfie is often reminded on his journey that he is very much unaware of some of the strange customs and histories of southern Ontario. While they are local traditions, they often point to larger narratives of Canadian identity. In each small town, Alfie reflects on the sometimes bizarre customs that are important to the community but make local and national pride an alienating experience for an observer. As Clarke does with Nova Scotia in *The Motorcyclist*, in *Days by Moonlight*, Alexis uses the geography of southern Ontario to dislocate Alfie's sense of familiarity with the people and social norms that he had assumed he understood. Alexis' satirical novel plays on the question Brigham posits in *American Road Narratives*: in seeking to reduce the vastness of nation through a regional journey, Alexis presents southern Ontario as a microcosm of Canadian identity.

### Exploring Historically Black Communities

The novels approach the representation of Black geographies in complementary ways: Clarke's novel is rooted in historical recollections, while Alexis' novel often draws on imagined or alternate histories of Canada. Regardless of the veracity of the histories or practices that are explained in the novels, each author draws on real experiences of alienation and otherness as a Black Canadian. The novels also produce the "surprise" and "wonder" that McKittrick

writes about where the presence of historical Blackness in Canada is concerned (*Demonic Grounds* xxx). While Canada's national identity often insists on common characteristics of politeness and inclusion, these novels peel away narratives about Canadian identity through experiences of Blackness. Histories of Black Canada complicate common narratives of inclusion in Canada, as McKittrick points out in her article "'Their Blood Is There and They Can't Throw It Out': Honouring Black Canadian Geographies." She introduces the erasure of Black geographies in Canada through the attempt to rename a road in Holland Township, Ontario. McKittrick's argument recognizes that existing social spaces have developed around structures and systems of exclusion and inequality. She goes on to point out the way that Black Canadian narratives work to unsettle concepts of nation and require a reconfiguration of "the meaning of unsatisfactory, racial, geographical boundaries" (28). Narratives of mobility provide a clear means of using literature to remap geographies through the narration of a racialized subject, in order to affirm histories that have long been ignored and to allow Black Canadians space to determine their sense of identity in relation to national constructions of Canadianness.

Alfie Homer's travels, for example, quite literally remap geographical boundaries through the imaginary southern Ontario town of Schomberg. Alexis has created a town which, in the nineteenth century, had been home to a number of white abolitionists who had "shepherded into town numerous freed slaves who'd come to Canada by way of the Underground Railroad" (113). The abolitionists, in theory, welcomed and accepted the new members of their community. In practice, however, the freed slaves made the white people of Schomberg uncomfortable because of the diverse languages that they used to communicate with one another. In order to mitigate the discomfort of the white Schombergians, the "lawmakers made it illegal for Black people to speak on the streets of Schomberg during the day" (113). As a result, the Black people of Schomberg adapted and created a method of communicating using "hand signals and movements of the head" that became known as "day speak" (113, 114). Alfie is uneasy upon entering Schomberg, despite his familiarity with it, "having spent summers there as a boy, between the ages of seven and fourteen" (112). "Even so," he reflects, "I find it an unsettling place. My unease has nothing to do with Schomberg's Black population.

Being Black, I'm comforted by the thought of a town of Black people. My problem is more practical: when I'm in Schomberg, I'm often unsure of what's being said to me" (112). Schomberg forces him to grapple with the duality of his identity as both insider and outsider. As a child, Alfie accepted the need to be quiet in public when visiting Schomberg, but was unnerved by the movements made by the residents of the town because, as an outsider to their customs, he was often unable to discern if there was meaning in a movement. When he returns, it is assumed that because he is also Black, he is able to navigate "day speak" with ease, and when he is unable to communicate, he becomes embarrassed and ashamed.

An incident in which Alfie struggles to order a chamomile tea because he is accidentally signing that he is going to vomit leaves him questioning his identity and causes him to wonder if the white people that live in Schomberg are "in some way, more 'Black' than [he is]" simply because they are fluent in "day speak" (118). This small southern Ontario town with a unique language causes Alfie to question whether he is "more Canadian than Black" (118). This thought forces him to consider his own beliefs about Blackness and Canadian identity and his unconscious assumption that the two are in some way mutually exclusive. It is language that briefly renders Alfie uncertain of his own identity. The miscommunication in a language that he considers to be essentially Black unsettles him. "Day speak" was created as a way for freed slaves to circumvent a racist bylaw created by the white people of Schomberg, and therefore is seen as a Black language, but one that is used and understood by the white people of Schomberg. Visiting Schomberg causes Alfie to confront his fraught sense of belonging to Canada as a racialized subject.

This moment is reflective of a sense of alienation felt by Black Canadians when they cannot communicate in languages of the Black diaspora. Writing about some of Alexis' short stories that deal explicitly with "his Afro-Caribbean heritage," David Chariandy writes that Alexis is part of a "recently emerging second generation of writers of Caribbean descent . . . [who] have almost wholly been socialized within 'white' countries and often possess only indirect or second hand connections to the Caribbean" (80). I see this complicated relationship between heritage and nation reflected in *Days by Moonlight*. The novel continuously reinforces Alfie's sense of being simultaneously insider

and outsider. This feeling is a reflection of the way that Blackness has not been reflected in constructions of Canadian history and identity while Canada simultaneously insists that it is a diverse and welcoming nation. Alfie is unable to feel a sense of belonging to Canada because histories such as those of Schomberg are not made part of narrativized histories of Canada. This absence creates a sense of disconnection for Black Canadians, and Alfie is exemplary of this sentiment. He was born and raised in southern Ontario but does not feel a connection to these spaces as he returns to them. While the novel does not ultimately resolve Alfie's feelings of disconnection, it is Alfie's mobility through ideational space that allows for a geographic remapping of space. Alfie's presence not only produces space for Blackness in these largely white and homogenous areas, but also highlights histories of Blackness in Canada that have not been told.

The historically Black communities in both Alexis' and Clarke's novels reveal the complexity of claiming Blackness as a diasporic subject in Canada. While Alexis' Schomberg is imaginary, it is by no means a utopia of Black Canadianness. Instead, it depicts a complex experience of both belonging and feeling alien. Alexis uses Alfie's experience in Schomberg not only to remap the geography of southern Ontario, but to do so in a way that is faithful to Alexis' own experience as a second-generation Canadian whose ties to his heritage are both comforting and difficult for him to navigate, having grown up in the diaspora. While Alexis provides a second-generation perspective and reflects on some of the complexities of the Black Caribbean diaspora, Clarke's *Africadia* (a term he coined that combines African and Acadian to "represent... the distinct, historical experience of African-heritage peoples in the Maritimes") is the result of an influx of Black Loyalists to Atlantic Canada following the American Revolution (Clarke). The British had promised to provide freedom and land to those who enlisted to fight against the Americans. When the Americans won the war and the British retreated into Canada, many Black Loyalists settled in the Maritime provinces to claim their land allotments. These allotments were notably smaller than those awarded to their white compatriots, some of whom brought their slaves with them when they fled to Canada. They still faced discrimination, but they were also "the founders of Canada's first free [B]lack community" (Walker x). These communities were quite small and close-knit, so the history from which

Clarke's novel emerges is very specific. James W. St. G. Walker writes, "In all but economic terms the black Loyalists were isolated from the rest of Nova Scotian society. They were settled, most of them, in segregated communities . . . Under such conditions the [B]lacks began to feel not only different but exclusive" (86–87). Clarke's construction of Africadia is the product of this history of movement from America to Canada that was motivated by the Revolution. It is also reflective of the kind of segregation that Walker points to, as well as a disappointment that Canada was not nearly as progressive and welcoming as the Black Loyalists had been promised. This is reflected in the way that Clarke's protagonist relates to Canada, America, and England.

### **Tackling the Fallacy of Inclusion**

In *Days by Moonlight*, the legacy of Canada's historical racism is highlighted through an attempt to make amends for the past. Alfie and the professor visit the (real) town of Coulson's Hill, Ontario and witness their yearly tradition, the (fictional) Coulson's Hill Indigenous Parade. After hearing about it a few times, Alfie asks a local to explain the parade. The parade, it seems,

[a]s with so many things in our beautiful country . . . was the product of a committee. It was also the product of an era and a longing. Like most Canadians, the people of Coulson's Hill sometimes noticed that the Indigenous populations of Canada had been mistreated in any number of ways and for quite some time. Most felt it was not enough to simply notice this. Justice demanded restitution, even if only a symbolic one. (70)

The plan that the council finalizes is that Indigenous peoples will be invited to throw food at Canada's "founding fathers" (70). The committee does not engage in any thoughtful planning of the parade, and the result is an event where the people of Coulson's Hill dress up as early Canadian politicians to have rotten fruit and vegetables thrown at them by other residents who don Indigenous "headdresses, ceremonial beads, moccasins, etc." (71). The event becomes an

instantly successful tourist attraction, but “[i]n other ways, of course, the parade [is] a disaster” (71). There is, naturally, public discomfort with the use of Indigenous symbols and a desire for more representation for other groups that have been wronged by the Canadian government. The profitability of the parade encourages the town council to make changes, but the changes only result in increasingly bizarre attempts by the townspeople to represent various racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups. When Indigenous peoples elect to represent themselves, however, it causes tension with Coulson’s Hill residents because they do not “dress in any special way” (72).

I view the Indigenous Parade as emblematic of a national desire to present a Canada that is inclusive and committed to the project of reconciliation, but when participation in these efforts does not adhere to prescribed behaviour, there is public outrage and reductive solutions. The residents and councillors of Coulson’s Hill repeatedly reject certain forms of participation that earnestly engage with Canada’s colonial history. The parade was originally imagined as an opportunity to reckon with Canada’s mistreatment of Indigenous peoples, but in practice the town council is far more concerned with amusement and profitability than earnest reflection on that mistreatment. To recognize that the nation has a history of mistreating other racialized peoples, the parade produces a number of unforeseen issues: residents in blackface, anti-Francophone sentiment, the use of bok choy as well as tomatoes to include Asian Canadians, a righteous sense of nationalism in response to criticism, and Indigenous peoples who are insulted by the notion of throwing tomatoes as a form of reconciliation. In spite of the fact that the parade results in an annual backlash, the “Coulson’s Hill’s town council (largely Liberal) . . . [are] persistent. Over the years, they tweak[] or change[] the rules to accommodate the criticism they’d got” (73). Rather than acknowledge criticism and earnestly reflect on the competing motivations for and intentions of the parade, the council continually adds new rules and regulations to justify its insistence on hosting a contentious event. The profitability of the parade is too alluring to the town council, so any misgivings about whether the event is appropriate are ignored.

In my reading, the novel uses this imagined custom to criticize the way that Canada is desperate to appear more inclusive and tolerant than its American neighbours but continually fails in its attempts at

restitution. Rather than engage in honest reconciliation and consult with Indigenous peoples on what would be appropriate, the organizers of the event allow it to become a kind of slapstick pantomime that may provide entertainment but has long since strayed from its intended purpose. In Alexis' novel, there is a sense of well-meaning that drives the misguided attempts to acknowledge histories of oppression and genocide, ultimately underscoring the fact that while Canadians often rely on a narrative of a Canada that is superior to racist America, the problems that arise are still rooted in notions of race and difference.

*The Motorcyclist* likewise presents a criticism of the myth of Canadian diversity and tolerance by insisting on representing Canada's racist past. The novel creates McKittrick's sense of "surprise" and "wonder" through Carl Black's descriptions of a historically Black community and the way that Black Canadians were treated at the time. Carl is often able to reject the racist expectations placed on him because of the mobility afforded to him by his vehicle. The heightened sense of confidence, freedom, and masculinity that Carl acquires from the motorcycle encourages him to plot his invasion of rich, white society. His motorcycle provides him with a sense of bravado that is potent enough to distract him from his fear of the violence that often accompanies interracial relationships. For if Carl is a frontiersman, then his foray into plush bedrooms of the "milk-white" women of Halifax is the next venture that he intends to take on. In Clarke's novel, access to mobility is just as important as the act of movement (63). Carl uses his mobility to remap the social space of a city that insists on his inferiority. His motorcycle, cheekily named Liz II, allows him to reject the narratives of Blackness that he has grown up being forced to believe. Although he is hyper-aware of the threat of violence, he nonetheless enters into a relationship with Avril, a white, American woman from the South. Halifax allows Avril to indulge in her own taboo desires:

As a Mississippian, studying *Nursing* at Dalhousie, Avril enjoys her present liberty to ogle Coloured guys . . .  
Hailing from the magnolia-hypnotic, if homicidal,  
Mississippi, her yen for Coloured gents would be a death wish in the South. She is twenty-one, flashes gold hair, green eyes, scarlet lips, and is plush enough to dispatch a

thousand brothers of Emmett Till . . . to lynching trees,  
just for glancing her way. (98)

In his description of Avril, Carl demonstrates that the two are connected through their taboo desires.

Avril understands Carl's fear of interracial relationships because she grew up in a place where she, too, would have been persecuted for engaging in one. Of course, her move to Halifax allows her the freedom to engage in any relationship she chooses, but Carl must still take great care in his pursuit of Avril. While the two may feel united in their pursuit of a sexual relationship that is taboo, it is only Avril who experiences a feeling of liberation. Carl continues to be reminded of the fact that his desire for her could result in violence. Carl often mentions that Avril accompanies him on rides throughout Halifax, but much of their relationship is confined to the hotel room that Avril occupies during the summer months when student residences are closed. Following a date at the theatre, the two must concoct a reason for Carl to enter the hotel. They cannot be seen entering the hotel together, so they decide Avril will enter alone while Carl "will hang back, then pick up Chinese food to 'deliver' to her room. They both chuckle over this ruse—though they rue its necessity . . . Thirty minutes later, playing the eunuch Uncle Tom, Carl steps into the ritzy hotel . . . and tells the officious clerk (who is so prejudiced that he doesn't even look at Carl) that he has an order of Chinese to deliver to Miss Beauchamps" (120). For him to possess Avril, Carl must shed his masculine bravado and embrace racist stereotypes so that he does not appear to present a threat to white womanhood. Likewise, Carl must use a cover story to avoid his movements and relationships being surveilled. In a rare moment, Carl abandons his pride as a means of securing his dalliance with Avril. His desire for Avril outweighs both his dependence on his hypermasculine façade and his fear of the potential consequences of interracial relationships. The novel reveals that while there is some sense of freedom afforded to his white American lover, Carl must continue to behave as though segregation were being practised. He is not free to engage in an interracial relationship without fearing for his safety and the persecution he may face if his affair with a white woman were to be discovered.

While Canadian narratives of national identity insist on Canada's politeness and its identity as a welcoming and diverse nation that does not have the same racist past as its American neighbour, these novels reveal histories of anti-Black racism and issues that persist despite popular beliefs about Canada's progressive and inclusive socio-cultural landscape. Through the encounters that both travellers have on their journeys, they are able to understand how the nation perceives Blackness and race in Canada, and these experiences impact the ways that they are able to conceive of their connection to or disconnection from national identity.

### **Driving towards the Horizon**

Canada, in both novels, is revealed to be a nation where histories of racial segregation and violence have occurred more recently than mainstream histories would like to admit. Likewise, in contemporary texts, Canada's attempts to reckon with these histories can prove alienating for those it seeks to champion. Through mobility, both novels deconstruct narratives of national identity that rely on tolerance, inclusion, and diversity by representing individual experiences of Blackness in Canada. Through an examination of Black Canadian road narratives, the deconstruction of national myth is inevitable. As Rinaldo Walcott argues, to construct Black Canada within the contexts of white Canada is to reinforce structures that have historically oppressed and marginalized people of colour in Canada. Instead, narratives of mobility offer remappings that insist on the excluded histories of and potential futures for Black Canada. Narratives of mobility are valuable because of their ability to remap social, cultural, and physical geographies through textual explorations of identity, otherness, and nation.

Building on Katherine McKittrick and Karina Vernon, I suggest that the narrative of mobility uses geographic movement to reveal otherwise overlooked social lives. The narrative of mobility is uniquely apt at making visible the processes through which social space is constructed and can therefore be restructured. In McKittrick's discussion of Black Canada, she writes, "It could be argued, for example, that given the white colonial and geographic contexts of

Canada, it is a surprise that black people are geographic at all due to spatial constraints that have an interest in sustaining black subordination and exclusion” (92). While *The Motorcyclist* reveals an overlooked aspect of Canada’s past and creates space for Black Canadian histories, *Days by Moonlight* demonstrates that narratives about Canadian identity are both exaggerated and alienating. Each novel presents Black Canadian geographies—even if imagined, like Alexis’ Schomberg—that McKittrick argues are often erased from national memory. Both Clarke and Alexis use the narrative of mobility to remap Black Canadian geographies from a first-person perspective. Neither author attempts to generalize the Black Canadian experience as something that is unified and singular, or presents one way to experience Blackness in Canada. The road narrative genre is tied to individual experience and is therefore conducive to an exploration of one’s relationship to nation without attempting to totalize the sense of reckoning with narratives of national identity.

Leslie Sanders argues, in relation to the fiction of André Alexis, that the nation is unable to articulate identities that do not fit comfortably into the category of “Canadian.” Many of the issues explored in this article are reflective of that limitation. Each text is revelatory of the structures that shape social and cultural life in Canada and suggests that the current notions of diversity and inclusion are failing. Neither novel suggests a future, but their insistence on representing the Black Canadian experience through a picaresque structure creates space for stories to be told and remaps Black Canadian geographies. Each novel uses mobility as a tool through which to relish in McKittrick’s “surprise” and “wonder” at the histories of Blackness in Canada, to unburden Black travellers from racist expectations so that they may consider how they fit into Canada as a nation, and to remap new geographies of belonging for Black Canadians. Black Canadian narratives of mobility, then, use movement as a means to produce novel social and cultural space for Blackness in Canadian history, Canadian national identity, and Canadian social life. The novels do not seek to generalize an experience of Blackness in Canada, and in some ways they embrace what Clarke calls “the vagueness of black identity in Canada” (“White Like Canada,” 98). A multiplicity of stories provides space for Black Canadians to articulate themselves in relation to nation instead of waiting for the nation to attempt to articulate them.

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Dr. Emily Howe completed a PhD at York University; her dissertation interrogates issues of national identity and myths as explored through narratives of mobility. In particular, she examines the way that Canadian national identity is constructed through movement between the Canada/US border, as well as in relation and opposition to American national identity and culture.

## *From Floods to Encounters: Habitat Studies and Reading This River*

foot is sinking deeper, deeper—Quick! Draw stroke, pull to his side so he can balance! Bare foot recovered but sandal left behind in the mud. The Mazama Ash layer found along Edmonton's river valley records one of the most catastrophic events on Earth since the end of the last Ice Age. I was turning away from the river to head back up to the main path when SLIP! arms jut out, one foot shoots into air, body tilts backwards like a stick figure in one of those warning signs about slippery ground, and laughter brings me back to my body, this place. I aimed to determine the in-stream environmental characteristics most associated with the crayfish's occupancy in the North Saskatchewan River and determined which currently unoccupied tributaries are most prone to future invasion. The only reported death was that of an infant who slipped from the arms of its mother, who was walking precariously along a floating sidewalk and dropped her baby into the rushing water. This study aimed to investigate the microbial response of North Saskatchewan River water to diluted bitumen (DB) and conventional crude (CC) during the freeze-thaw-refreeze cycle. The missionaries met at Buffalo Lake and continued travelling between the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers to

Fig. 1. Learning about the North Saskatchewan River: intertextual minglings, river, and me.<sup>1</sup>

I perch on the green painted stairs, tie up my laces. Crunch along gravel, adjust earbuds' volume. I will head to the river today. Pause for a moment to decide my route.

It occurs to me, although I can plot many routes, there is a line between me and the river. If I start moving along that line, I will come to the river. I cannot begin writing about this river, it is the Columbia Icefield and the Columbia River and the Fraser River and the Athabasca River and the Saskatchewan Glacier and the Saskatchewan River and Hudson Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, it is evaporation and sublimation and transpiration and ablation (Tarbuck and Lutgens 216), it is rain, it is snow, it is tributaries, it is ecosystem (Sandford 25), it is erosion and cliff faces and dinosaur bones and coal and resource extraction and climate change and sediment and feet stuck in mud and feet dangling in cool water over the edge of a canoe and histories of canoes and voyageurs and colonization and stories of Métis and Indigenous peoples and stories by Métis peoples and nêhiyawak and stories of interactions and stories and language and stories and I cannot begin writing about the

river. But if I go for this run, I will arrive at the bank of the river. The river is locatable. I can stand at its bank.

My approach in this piece of writing is guided by “Habitat Studies,” a methodology suggested by Canadian literary scholar Laurie Ricou, and it invites me to ask: What would it mean to accept a more-than-human member of the local ecology in which I live as a guide? To “listen to . . . the world outside of (human) language systems” (Ricou 163)? In a University of Alberta graduate English course with Sarah Krotz, taught primarily outside in the Edmonton River Valley, each student drew a slip of paper from a bag, and each paper named an animal, plant, or other feature of our ecology, including fire, ermine, wild rose, snow, chokecherry, barred owl, birch tree. Our task was to read broadly, exploring websites, photographs, poetry, drama, historical writings, and scientific writings, and to learn everything we could about our guide. I have lived in Edmonton for many years, and I have always lived near the river, and so I was very excited to read “North Saskatchewan River” on my slip of paper. In this article, I work to listen for what the North Saskatchewan River, my habitat guide, might help me understand regarding what is written about it—not only to learn about my river guide, but to learn from and with it.

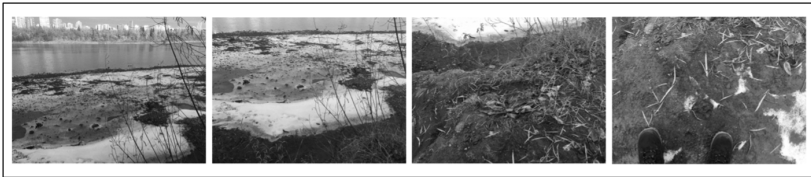


Fig. 2. Shifting viewpoints. Photos by the author.

I see this methodology as an ethico-onto-epistemological approach (see Barad, qtd. in Truman 19) to literary studies that challenges me to become attuned to the particular ecologies I inhabit and to read literature and place through that lens of attunement. I wrote “see,” above, but perhaps “hear” is a better word: when I run alongside the river, if I remove my earbuds, I hear squirrels and magpies but also my own breath, my footsteps, the rustle of my jacket sleeves as my arms move against my body. The sounds that I make are a part of this place.

Habitat studies invites me to remove my earbuds, to broaden my listening practices, to listen for “a system” and my place within it, for relationality (Ricou 161). My “positionality guides the way [I] listen,” writes Dylan Robinson (Stólō/Skwah) in his decolonizing sound studies work *Hungry Listening* (1); habitat studies invites a reading practice that includes my voice and, also, asserts the possibility of opening to the voice of the river. If the river is my guide, I do not plot the points and set the course; rather, I become a visitor to this project of reading and interpretation, and my writing becomes the trace of a growing relationship.

In outlining his methods for “teaching habitat” (161), Ricou explains that the randomization embedded in the process of assigning his students a habitat guide is important because it allows for encounters that do not follow from “whatever preconception” (163)—in other words, it allows for good visiting. The wide-reading practice of habitat studies is another way I can work to set preconceptions aside: moving from text to text to text encourages broad listening, instability, and “receptivity” (Ricou 172). In this essay, I do “not attempt a sustained, singular reading” of each text I encounter (Ricou 164). What I offer is a way to “embrace and participate in being” (Bringhurst, qtd. in Ricou 162), in process, and in (perhaps) the river’s movement. This form of listening, of “wayfaring” (Ingold, *Lines* 77), does not ask me to approach a “list of texts to be . . . interrogated within a set of thematic, generic, historic, etc., frameworks” (Ricou 163), but to attend to a system shaped and gathered by water. My reading is a walking, my understandings “forged in the very course of [my] moving through” a wide range of texts (Ingold, *Lines* 91). In my moving through texts, I may choose to dwell a little longer here, to move more quickly there—my picnicking spots may not be the same as yours—but through this movement I listen for intensities, to “ecologies of texts that coalesce around” the North Saskatchewan River (Krotz 142). About research-creation projects, Sarah Truman writes, “I think about the event . . . through scholarly writing” (Truman xx); similar to a research-creation project, my writing about the event of my literary research is itself a thinking, a walking, and to highlight process, I write about my encounters with the river chronologically, “as a way of highlighting how research unfolds in practice” (Truman 16). Also, I come to this project as a fifth-

generation newcomer, a descendant of Canadian and American white settlers; starting from this positionality, I locate my initial readings of the river within colonial frameworks. But although the origins of my own relationship with the river are entangled with colonialism, the North Saskatchewan River's headwaters are not located at Fort Edmonton, nor did the river begin to flow at the signing of Treaty 6; and with the river as my guide, I read beyond these geographic and temporal locators. I recount an unfinished story—one that will both circle back and extend beyond the close of this paper as I continue to grow in my relationship with the river.

As I followed the approach of habitat studies through the fall and into the winter, the river I walked beside began to slow. Occasional discs of ice, *ice pancakes*, floated through Edmonton, then more, and more, until the slowing water was thick with icy islands bumping against bridge piers, curves in the shore, one another. I thought I should be able to hop from one to another, dance my way upstream in search of the place where the pancakes began.

The river was always alongside me in this study of my habitat, and I alongside it, and in this essay I offer my sense of alongside-ness through the insertion of boxed figures: a formal experimentation with ice pancakes. Tim Ingold explores alongside-thinking, teaching that “[t]he scholar’s verbal impulse to explicate continually threatens to unravel the dense weave of experience” (33); following from this, he articulates that his “purpose is to think *with*” (*Correspondences* 34; emphasis mine). In many of the collected essays in *Correspondences*, for example, Ingold inserts images into his written text but rarely addresses those images directly; images speak alongside worded thoughts. In this essay, there is fluidity in how I communicate “thinking with” throughout the process of my writing, with some content in my boxed figures inviting more direct engagement—explication—and some content wanting to float alongside my writing, bumping against it but not always overtly addressed. As I sought to think with the world, I came to see this experimentation as an important aspect of habitat studies. If “the world outside of (human) language systems” communicates (Ricou 163), how might I offer a response that reciprocates outside of language? How might I work within the confines of a piece of writing to enact “more-than-representational thought” (Truman 25) and insert lines of fracture,

openings unbound by analysis, “disturbance[s]” (Ricou 164)? Textboxes, images, fragments of quotations, of poetic response: ice pancakes, moving through the text.

I begin with feet. Dwayne Donald (amiskwaciwiyniwak) narrates his experience of walking to the Viking Ribstones (55). He observes that the physical and temporal act of walking to this site—passing through fields, crossing roads, travelling by foot—shaped the quality of his experience at the site, where he felt connections to his ancestors and the land. I would like to learn from this way of thinking about walking in a place and about what walking can offer. But as indicated above, my connections to this land and this river are entangled in colonialism and colonialist frameworks of understanding. I can walk along this land, here, in this place I know as Edmonton, along what I know as the North Saskatchewan River, but how do I interact with this place in a way that is ethical? Can I accept Donald’s guidance and take the land as my kin (58)? How do I do this without re-enacting a colonialist taking and claiming?

If I consider the North Saskatchewan River the object of my study—for example, surveying information gleaned from a university database or a Google search—I am often looking down at a map of information from a vantage point in the sky. I can adjust the borders of my map’s frame to widen or sharpen the focus of my study; I can create a legend to help me categorize the information I am collecting; I can slide my frame this way or that across disciplines, location, timelines—but in the middle of a run, standing at the river’s edge, looking downstream, looking upstream, I realize that the information I can collect about the river does not have a discrete starting point or end point. What I see is that the water flows in that direction, and eddies here, and this season’s first ice is growing there, and the bank beneath this tree is going to slide into the river in this amount of time. Attending to these moments requires a process that cannot be about grasping for a comprehensive overview of an endless flow of information. And I notice that the language I am using—“that” and “this” and “here”—points back to me even as I work to listen for the river. I can only ever encounter *this* river from *here*, from my own positionality. I draw preliminary boundaries around my asking: What can I learn about the section of the river that flows through

Edmonton, the city in which I live, and about ways this river is written about by authors who are also located in Edmonton?

I discover a visual art exhibit entitled *FLOW* on display at ten branches of the Edmonton Public Library. This exhibit, as its wall text explains, depicts local artists' interpretations of ways in which the "flow of the North Saskatchewan River has shaped the city that Edmonton has become." Anita Nawrocki's collage, "Are You on the North or Southside," uses City of Edmonton maps to depict a top-down view of a section of the North Saskatchewan River as it flows through Edmonton and includes nineteen 3D-printed labels glued on top of the river to represent its many bridges. In the collage's wall text, Nawrocki emphasizes the river's bridges because, she explains, when people in Edmonton ask someone where they live, they often "orient the answer mentally to the north or south side of the Saskatchewan River."

A number of literature sources reference the North Saskatchewan River in this way—that is, as a locator by which to identify another place as a focal point. I browse through the books on my shelf and find Myrna Kostash's compilation of writings about the North Saskatchewan River, *Reading the River*, in which I find an excerpt from *Contemplatio*, a long poem by Edmonton poet Alice Major, who reflects on what it means to found a place. In the excerpt, entitled "Envision the Outline," Major describes the river as "the city's hinge, its east-west line" (l. 35, qtd. in Kostash 134). This is an orientation to the river similar to Nawrocki's sense of river as dividing line, but Major goes further, adding more-than-human populations to those who orient themselves to the river: "Crossing it from south to north / geese make their high way overhead" (ll. 36–37). In my public library I find *Road Tripping* by Conni Massing, an Edmonton-based playwright, a humorous account of travelling through Alberta with friends in which she refers to the North Saskatchewan River. The river, however, is named only in passing and en route to somewhere else: "Fort Edmonton, nestled on the south bank of the North Saskatchewan River, is a 'living history park' featuring the restored / 1846 Hudson Bay Company Fort, 1885 Street, 1905 Street, and 1920 Street. It's big" (183–84). The river is present, but it is the fort, for Massing, that takes centre stage.



Fig. 3. Ernest Brown, photograph of Fort Edmonton, 1884.  
Photograph in public domain.

Searching through historic photographs of Edmonton, I find an 1884 photograph of Fort Edmonton in its former location on the north bank, not the south, of the North Saskatchewan River (fig. 3), contemporary to the time periods cited by Massing as represented at Fort Edmonton Park. This photograph similarly represents the North Saskatchewan River as locator but not focal point. In this photograph, the river, although positioned in the middle of the frame vertically, functions as backdrop for Fort Edmonton, and even the trees in the foreground function as conceptual backdrop: dotted lines have been drawn overtop of the photograph—judging by the initials E. B., these lines were drawn by the photographer, Ernest Brown—connecting physical aspects of the fort to descriptions written along the white border below the image. The composition of the photograph itself draws the viewer's gaze towards the fort, but these additional hand-drawn lines literally overwrite the river's presence and draw the viewer's gaze away from the river and towards the fort's centre line, gate location, and imperial measurements.

There is a colonial focus on Fort Edmonton that at once accentuates and elides the river's presence in both Massing's play and Brown's photograph. The practice of offering land acknowledgements,

more common since the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, draws my awareness to Treaty 6 and the way it has shaped and continues to shape my colonial inheritance, and I wonder: How does Treaty 6 itself orient itself towards the river? The written Treaty 6 document, which was negotiated in 1876 along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River downstream from Fort Edmonton, near Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt, covers an area whose boundaries are demarcated by rivers, including a section of the Saskatchewan River:

The Plain and Wood Cree Tribes of Indians, and all other the Indians inhabiting the district hereinafter described and defined, do hereby cede, release, surrender and yield up to the Government of the Dominion of Canada, for Her Majesty the Queen and Her successors forever, all their rights, titles and privileges, whatsoever, to the lands included within the following limits, that is to say: Commencing at the mouth of the river emptying into the north-west angle of Cumberland Lake . . . thence on a straight line south-eastwardly to the mouth of the said Red Deer River on the south branch of the Saskatchewan River. (*Copy of Treaty 3-4*)

In this document, rivers are identified as boundaries, as “lines . . . embracing an area of 121,000 square miles, be the same more or less” (qtd. in Weigel 53). In the text of Treaty 6, rivers function as one-dimensional lines fragmenting land into measurable territories, dividing what is possessed from what is not. Rivers are both physical and metaphorical locators, foregrounding invasive colonialist thought and devastating desire.

Although these particular early and more recent texts represent the North Saskatchewan River as boundary line and, at times, as in the text of Treaty 6, of less significance than the places it locates, in many other texts, the North Saskatchewan River seems to assert its presence—for example as an “obstacle” impeding easy access or disrupting presumed boundaries (Kostash 106). An indication of the importance and, indirectly, the challenge of crossing the river, many websites draw attention to Edmonton’s numerous bridges: in Edmonton there are eleven vehicle bridges, seven pedestrian bridges,

two LRT bridges, and, as highlighted by a recent news article, ongoing plans to build more bridges (Lamb and Martin). Historic accounts of the North Saskatchewan River written before these twenty bridges were built often reference challenging river crossings. For example, John McDougall, a settler Methodist missionary who was present at the negotiation of Treaty 6 in Fort Pitt and Treaty 7 in Blackfoot Crossing (Nix), describes crossing the North Saskatchewan River in 1873 to reach Fort Edmonton as an experience marked by “much wading and splashing and shouting, and often many disappointments” (qtd. in Kostash 105). Mary Schäffer Warren, an American-Canadian settler who surveyed Maligne Lake in the early 1900s and promoted tourism to the Rockies through her lantern slide presentations, emphasizes the “large and turbulent” nature of the Saskatchewan River and draws humour from the challenge of “crossing in safety” (qtd. in Lang 143), accompanying the story with a hand-painted slide of her experience overcoming this river obstacle on horseback (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Mary Schäffer Warren, crossing the Saskatchewan River, circa 1915.  
Photograph in public domain.

Many texts narrate this concept of river as obstacle another way; that is, they reveal flooding as an obstacle to living along its edge. In

Edmonton, the North Saskatchewan River has overflowed its boundaries many times. Many sources cite the 1915 flood as “the worst in Edmonton history” (Snowdon), and one photograph taken during this flood, although similar in composition to the 1884 photograph of Fort Edmonton, represents a moment at which the river is in sharp focus and colonialist architecture is blurred and recedes into the background (fig. 5). The continued interest in and availability of this photograph (see, e.g., *Vivid Print*) suggests a fascination with moments of tension between human endeavours and the river. A binary is at war: the river—waves, carrying a log as battering ram, in sharp focus in the bottom left of the photograph and where they splash against the bridge—fight for control of the viewer’s attention against the bold geometric lines of the Low Level Bridge, one of only two bridges spanning the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton at this time, and the ingenuity of those who thought to weigh the bridge down so that the river did not push it away (represented by the steam train sitting on the bridge).

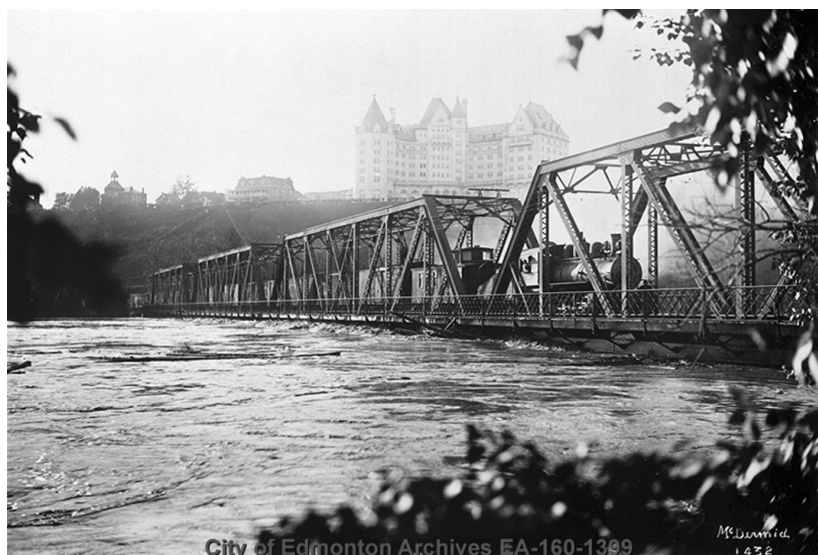


Fig. 5. McDermid, North Saskatchewan River flood in Edmonton, 1915.  
Photograph in public domain.

Representations of the North Saskatchewan River as a line, a boundary, an obstacle to cross or a disruption to contain suggest a fixedness to the river. The river in the representations above provides a stable point of reference—for locations of home, for yearly migratory patterns of geese, for claims of land ownership, for the explorer's adventurous identity, for binary conceptualizations of human and nature. A quick search for "North Saskatchewan River" on Google and the University of Alberta's library database turns up many texts that similarly frame the North Saskatchewan River in terms of human–river interactions reliant upon stable divisions: people want access to the river valley (River Valley Alliance); humans extract resources from the river (Tyrrell); people participate in recreational activities on the river (Rural River Rentals); people manage the river (North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance); people drown in the river (Tran); sturgeon disappear as a result of negative human behaviours (Watkins); aquatic life is harmed as a result of oil spills ("Husky Fined"). Many of these texts, like the image of the North Saskatchewan River overflowing its banks and rising to the level of the Low Level Bridge, suggest that stability comes from consistent boundaries.

I turn to poetry and find that some poets suggest another kind of stability. For example, Kelly Shepherd, whose "poems in *Insomnia Bird: Edmonton Poems* (2018) were constructed from lines and fragments [he] wrote" while moving through the city (Shepherd, "Writing"), maps onto the North Saskatchewan River an emotional stability: "People hold it for balance when they ride buses / and look out windows, forgetting themselves" (*Insomnia* 15). Here, an encounter with the river amid the heavy tedium of a daily commute provides an emotional stability and intimates an experience of the sublime. Alice Major, who, in 2005, became Edmonton's first poet laureate, published in her 2006 collection, *The Occupied World*, poems that "invoke human preoccupations that resonate through landscapes of time and space" ("Occupied World"). Through her description of an inverse moment, that is, a time when the river *cannot* be seen, she similarly suggests the emotionally stabilizing effect of the North Saskatchewan River on those who inhabit its banks: when "fog conceals the river," thoughts are "unconnected to the ground, / unfounded" (Major, "Foundation" ll. 1, 18–19).

As well, many texts that reference the North Saskatchewan River engage with ideas of stability as a kind of balance that is not so much about not tipping as it is about relational balance, balance that arises in a space of “*in-between-ness*” within human-river interactions and in contexts of relationships and gathering, of flow (Ingold 9). In *Correspondences*, Ingold distinguishes being “between” two points, as one is while standing on a bridge above a river (9), or, perhaps, while fording a river on a horse, from “*in-between-ness*” (9), which I observe may be more easily perceived from the vantage point of a canoe, where we can “align our awareness with the waters” (9). A river is “running water” (Tarbuck and Lutgens 217); in a river, things move. And along a river’s edge, moving water is never in a fixed state but is always interacting with the shoreline, which is always interacting with the water. This wave draws that sediment into the river; those rocks create these ripples in the water; that shoreline, this water, these moments are never static. *In-between-ness* foregrounds movement and relationality.

a day   day spent canoeing into   breeze   mosquitoes   lunch raft   eddy turns, holding edge of canoe  
 - careful - try to get out but water pushing, tipping   stepping out and into mud   line of ducks   sandbar  
 in a different place than last year   and through Edmonton after a year of driving across its bridges  
 disorienting   reorienting

Fig. 6. Learning about the North Saskatchewan River: on water.

Zoe Todd (Red River Métis), in “Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in amiskwaciwâskahikan and Treaty Six Territory,” writes of and about kisiskâciwani-sîpiy from a framework of relationality. A University of Alberta library database search using the term “North Saskatchewan River” turns up 1,373 results, with two of the first thirty results about bitumen spills in the river. Searching the same database for “kisiskâciwani-sîpiy” turns up only one result, but my Google search for this word finds 3,550 results, with Zoe Todd’s

“Fish, Kin and Hope” on the first page—these search results already suggesting that this academic article is embedded in a different set of relationships than those which exist within the institutional university setting. In this article, Todd begins by describing a 2016 oil spill into the North Saskatchewan River and proceeds to describe a way of conceptualizing this spill that does not distinguish between human and contaminant, or even wildlife and plants and contaminant. Rather, her work presents a conceptual framework that is fluid and relational, presenting pollution—in this case, fossil fuels and plastics—as kin, animate byproducts of once-living dinosaurs, “progeny of the fossilised carbon beings buried deep within the earth of my home,” but as kin that humans have weaponized (106). Todd asserts that it is not this “progeny” that is inherently “violent”; rather, human actions are misguided, out of balance with the land, and need to be restored to a “reciprocal relationality” (107).

Like Todd, John Zoe (Tłıchq) and Jessica Dunkin, in their essay “Whaèhdoò, Eto, Kè,”<sup>2</sup> and Conor Kerr (Métis and Ukrainian), in his poem “Party on the Prairies, Part II,” refer to rivers from within a framework of reciprocal relationality. Both of these texts describe a contemporary experience of encountering rivers as travel routes. Zoe and Dunkin’s essay is itself situated relationally, published in *The Politics of the Canoe*, a collection of essays and stories that offer “complicated histories and meanings” of the canoe (Erickson and Krotz 6), which remains “fundamental to many communities’ relations” (3). In their essay, Zoe and Duncan describe “the myriad portage trails that criss-cross an area of more than 295,000 square kilometres” and the community of Tłıchq paddlers who travel these routes annually (73), visiting “named places” that hold “stories that bring forward ancestral knowledge . . . best told in the places they belong” (74). Kerr’s poetry collection *An Explosion of Feathers* stories a contemporary experience of “being Métis” (37), and in “Party on the Prairies, Part II,” Kerr invites the reader into the camaraderie of preparing for a canoe trip, and the anticipation of fishing and moments of stillness and beauty. Although this poem’s focus is not so much the river as it is the anticipation of travel along the river, the river is not overwritten the way it is in Ernest Brown’s photograph: here, the river is recognized as a vital, active enabler. In both essay and poem, these writers depict community-building as sustained by river

canoe trips, and they also refer to the importance of maintaining relationships with the land. For example, Kerr recounts his uncle's teachings: "respect relationships with everything. / Bring your sacred offerings. // Tobacco down" (18), and both texts refer to the work of maintaining physical access to portage routes and waterways. Zoe and Duncan write that "some trails are only travelled every four years and the growth of vegetation is such that travellers have to hack their way along portages" (86); Kerr writes of "clearing campsites and trails that haven't been used since the / last time we passed through" (17). There is no expectation that paths to rivers will be exactly as they always have been; rather, rivers, trails to the rivers, and relationships between land and these writers are all in constant flux, and these writings describe a way of relating within this context of movement and change that emphasizes maintenance, not permanence.

The work of maintaining canoe routes to and along riverways also maintains connection to the past, within the context of community. Such connections to history and community are highlighted in "Governor of the Dew," a play by Floyd Favel (Plains Cree) set near and within a river. In-between-ness, in this play, is fully immersive. I read its setting as *kisiskâciwani-sîpiy*, extrapolating from the playwright's identification as "Plains Cree from the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan" (187), which has as its northern border *kisiskâciwani-sîpiy*—but in this play, the river is no mere border, nor is it even named or constrained by language. "Governor of the Dew" tells a story of a beaver and a human woman in a world of fluid boundaries. The beaver and the woman both speak the same language, communicating across human-animal boundaries; the river is not crossed but travelled through by the woman and the beaver, who together emerge at the beaver's home, which is within the river; relationships permeate species boundaries and the woman and Beaver become "husband and wife" amid celebrations of "dancing" and "joy" (200); but sorrow, too, crosses boundaries, and after the woman becomes sick and Beaver returns her to "her people" (201), the sickness spreads to and kills Beaver's community, leaving Beaver to bury "all of [his] tribe" (201). When he is old, Beaver tells his story to the woman Rose Billy, who lays "a pack of tobacco at the old beaver's feet" (199), calling him Teacher. In this play, the river is simply home, not boundary or obstacle or reference point; like river water that interacts with the shoreline, Beaver interacts with, impacts, and is impacted by

human women. The river here is not background for a more prominent story; it is an all-encompassing world, where in-between-ness is not a feature of the landscape but the very conceptualization of relationships and ways of being that give way to story.

It was clearly understood,  
there was no ownership of land,  
so clearly does the land, in fact, own me. (Weigel 46)

Fig. 7. Understanding the North Saskatchewan River.

The subtitle for Favel's play is "A Memorial to Nostalgia and Desire," and, indeed, both of these emotions flow through this story and back to the beginning of time: Rose Billy weeps for her grandchildren (199); Beaver weeps for "all of [his] loved ones, / then, all of [his] tribe" and carries the guilt of having brought sickness to his people through his union with the human woman (201); his "tears seemed to be made up of . . . all the streams of the world" and are "the sound from the beginning of time" (202). Grief occurs within the context of relationship: this story is told by Beaver, who is both an old beaver and a young beaver, to Rose, who is both "old woman" and grandchild, "ahm nosisim" (191, 193); and Rose Billy's story is retold by mother, whose story is retold by her son (191). Like "the hydrologic cycle" of which rivers are a part (Tarbuck and Lutgens 216), this story weaves forward and backward through time and is situated in an ecology of relationships. In this context, tears are a "gift" (199), and speaking grief within this relationship brings "forgiveness" (202). Story is both monumental and ordinary, ceremony and a simple "[s]haring [of] a cup of tea" (203).

I referred, earlier, to lines from "Foundation" in Alice Major's *The Occupied World* that position the river as stabilizer. Moving on from

“Foundation,” the first of a sequence of poems in a section titled “Root Zones,” Major’s preoccupation turns to resonances of grief. In “Mazama Ash,” geology and human mourning layer and blend in “a line of ash” (l. 13): land’s witness to this volcanic eruption of almost eight thousand years ago speaks to the poet’s intimate knowledge of grief’s fracturing and time’s relentless flow, “A time when all / should have stopped. // But carried on” (ll. 19–21). Memories “stack the valley wall” (Major, “Mazama Ash” ll. 3–4), and the river, “our hard-rock miner” (“River our Bedrock” l. 6), is the force by which “clay is cut away” (“Root Zone” l. 1) and stories exposed. As in Favel’s “Governor of the Dew,” the river is a site for grief. But does the North Saskatchewan River itself remember, and grieve?

every story must be a layer in the earth of stories (Weigel 14)

Fig. 8. Listening to the North Saskatchewan River.

Habitat studies is a process of attunement through encounters with gatherings of texts. With the river as my guide, reverberations from one text shaped what I heard as I moved to the next, and the next, and as I moved to Tasha Hubbard’s (Peepeekisis First Nation/Thunderchild First Nation) documentary *nîpawistamâsowin: We Will Stand Up*, I continued to feel the brokenness of grief. Was this grief I was feeling a by-product of colonialism, itself “an extended process of denying relationships” (Donald, qtd. in Martin 220)? Hubbard’s documentary provides background to the signing of Treaty 6: “They came together at Fort Carleton and Fort Pitt in 1876 to meet the Crown’s representatives” (*nîpawistamâsowin*). Later in this film, captioning layers words atop an image of fort and river: the fort is depicted from the outside, in the top right corner of the image; in the foreground, the words “No one knew the government of Canada was preparing the Indian Act at the same time, which said Canada could dictate our lives” overlay land and river. This is *kisiskâiwani-sîpiy*, once a pivotal waterway between these forts. The river was present at the signing of

Treaty 6. Was the river listening? In Ernest Brown's 1884 photograph of Fort Edmonton further upstream, the river is overwritten with lines and numbers, drawing attention to fort measurements and mentality; by contrast, in this film's image of fort fronted by river, the fort functions as a symbol of the actions of the Canadian government, while captions align words with river in knowing, naming, and remembering. In 1885, when children were brought from the residential school in Battleford to watch the hanging of eight Indigenous men at Fort Battleford (*nîpawistamâsowin*), did the river witness? When Métis in 1885 and Papaschase Cree in 1886 "were induced to take scrip" and removed from their traditional territories (Papaschase First Nation), did the river witness? When the river flows through Edmonton's Rosedale cemetery, does it remember?

How to

live by this river How to live on this bend that has been a meeting place since  
 before time was mined by the colonizers Here at the river bend the context  
 persists insistent The river moves east north east south east catches the low  
 spring sun Ice melt early here Brings down birds to rest here Holds this moon  
 opens this throat holds These coyotes howl close singing that owl holds most  
 nights this muskrat wake and mergansers late in fall before the ice sets As long  
 as this water flows this Treaty holds We are all bound here to this water (Stewart 113-114)

Did you know that when you wrote this down the river would  
 remember it (Weigel 48)

Fig. 9. Listening with the North Saskatchewan River, late in fall.

What is the grammar of intimacy?<sup>3</sup> Language is not apart from relationship. Marilyn Dumont's (Cree and Métis) *A Really Good Brown Girl*, which has been reprinted many times since its first publication in 1996, is a collection of poems that story growing up Métis. "Liquid Prairie," a poem from this collection, draws me into a textual eddy. In "Liquid Prairie," Dumont speaks a grammar of intimate relationality:

*I miss the North Saskatchewan that runs through  
those trees that shoot up black and grand  
from its cool hips,*

*I miss those spruce that  
defy the flatness,  
gloat at the pressing palm sky, the  
loaded rifle earth and  
grow anyway.*

*I sit on this thin coast  
But haven't yet been on that belly of water*

*they call the ocean.* (Dumont 83; emphasis mine)

This poem asserts "I." This is a depiction of "the North Saskatchewan" that does not try to disentangle speaker from river; rather, naming of self and river arises out of relationship. But, at first, distance is named. "I" is not in proximal relationship with the river and the land it "runs through," but misses it; the trees in the first two stanzas are "those trees," "those spruce," over there, separate and separated from the speaker by geographical distance. The speaker's "this" is the "thin coast." However, although the speaker sits here, "on this thin coast," her relationship with *here* is defined by emotional distance: she does not name the water here as "this," but as "that"; she has not "yet been on" it; and she asserts a divisiveness, on the basis of naming, between "I" and the "they" who "call [that body of water] the ocean."

The North Saskatchewan River in this poem is defined by the trees it "runs through"; it is the "cool hips" that spruce "shoot up" from, personification underscoring the intimate relationship between one

aspect of the land and another. This is a landscape that gives birth to strength and agency; in this landscape, trees “defy,” “gloat,” and “grow”—their defiant energy in marked contrast to the speaker’s apparent stillness as she sits, removed from her beloved river landscape, on the coastline of another place. And yet, after a moment of stillness, waves lapping against the shoreline, the speaker asserts her own defiance born of a prairie that is not flat: it is “they,” not “I,” who name this water “the ocean.” What is “the ocean” except in relation to people and landscape? And if “ocean” is not woven into your web of relationships, how can this be its name? In this poem, it is the North Saskatchewan that the speaker knows, and it is from a place of relationship with the North Saskatchewan and the landscape it runs through that she names “that belly of water,” the one she does not know, not “yet,” “Liquid Prairie.”

I step back from the river—Hotel MacDonald on that side, a tent at the river’s edge on this side, the Rosedale Burial Site over there, the island where we stopped to explore just down there—and begin to jog along this root-crossed path. Hello, birch tree. Hello, soft soil. Hello, coming snow. Hello, rose hip. The river at my left—I sense you there, keeping pace with me even when I can’t see you. Hello, kisiskâciwani-sîpiy. Nice to meet you. I would like to get to know you better

Fig. 10. Meeting the North Saskatchewan River, late in fall.

Stopping in at my branch of the Edmonton Public Library to warm up on my way home from a visit to the river, I see a board book on display, *Welcome Song for Baby*, by Richard Van Camp (Tłı̨ch̓ Dene), that celebrates sacred beginnings and intimate relationality; and in the chill of *iyikopiwipisim*, Frost Moon, I am drawn by the warmth of the fire on its cover to Van Camp’s most recent book, *Gather*. In this book about community and storytelling, Van Camp only briefly and obliquely references the North Saskatchewan River, despite living in Edmonton and near the river. He writes, “[T]he other day, a couple days ago, we were telling stories down in the river valley in Edmonton

by the fire” (90). At first, I wondered about this apparent omission. But as I continued to think about the river, with the help of my colleagues and sitting near the river in the company of those colleagues, I began to regard the river not only as flowing water, but as enabler. The flat area where we gathered near the river, below the university, was created by the river. The title of Van Camp’s book, *Gather*, resonated. I felt recognition when I learned, again through the community of my colleagues, that the area where we gathered is known by nêhiyawak as a pehonan, a gathering place (ôtênaw). I wonder if this habitat study, this collection of ideas about the river, might also be considered a gathering place. I have been working on this paper bit by bit over months; I return to it today rather affectionately, one more visit to this gathering place. I hold a mental image of the now frozen river in my mind as I drink hot tea, water from kisiskâciwani-sîpiy, a delta flowing through houses, bodies, in Edmonton. The river “stretches backward and forward,” writes Naomi McIlwraith (Métis; l. 6); in this moment of “hovering” (l. 7), of almost-completion, the arbitrariness of a written stopping point seems ludicrous. I have recently learned that in Indigenous knowledge traditions, nîpiy, water, “is known to be alive . . . and to hold memory” (Johnson 00:07:12). I have recently learned that the Magpie River, or Mutehakau Shipu, has been granted legal personhood (Nerberg). I have recently found a film by a favourite author, Robert Macfarlane, called *River*. I have recently listened to *nîpiy*, an album by Edmonton-based music group nêhiyawak. I have not finished amalgamating this knowledge. I cannot finish. But picturing the river, holding in my mind these snow-dusted ice pancakes now wedged against one another, a miniature mountain range of convergent continental plates, I can let go of aspirations of completion. The river stretches backward and forward, and I will visit it again.

*kisiskâciwani-sîpiy (whisperings, listenings):*

I am slowing down now  
over here  
ice now on top but beneath  
I hold you up, your webbed feet still moving in my moving  
my fingers an absentminded caress trailing the sedimented line of your leaving, joining  
my remembering  
your roots an unfurling letting go, no grasp but an opening  
along<sup>4</sup>  
as we  
a longing and you  
here  
and

Fig. 11. *kisiskâciwani-sîpiy*.

#### Notes

1. For citations for Figure 1, see Appendix.
2. Rivers sometimes overflow. And here, my choice of texts begins to overflow the boundaries I initially set for myself. The rivers in Zoe and Duncan's essay "Whaêhdqô Etq Kê" and in Kerr's poem "Party on the Prairies, Part II" are not the North Saskatchewan River. My focus in this habitat study is shifting and becoming more relational, both in terms of my selection criteria—I am choosing texts I enjoy spending time with, the way I enjoy spending time in a canoe on the river—and also in terms of the content of texts I discuss.
3. Deixis, to which Edmonton poet Christine Stewart draws our attention in *Treaty 6 Deixis*, is relational grammar (119). I read Stewart's poetry as animating a settler's response in English to concepts of animacy and reciprocity that are woven into Indigenous languages, as described by Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.
4. "along" (Ingold 9).

## Appendix

### Fig. 1 Content, with MLA Citations

foot is sinking deeper, deeper—Quick! Draw stroke, pull to his side so he can balance! Bare foot recovered but sandal left behind in the mud. “The Mazama Ash layer found along Edmonton’s river valley records one of the most catastrophic events on Earth since the end of the last Ice Age” (Mussieux and Nelson 74). I was turning away from the river to head back up to the main path and continue my jog, when SLIP! arms jut out, one foot shoots into air, body tilts backwards like a stick figure in one of those warning signs about slippery ground, and laughter brings me back to my body, this place. “I aimed to determine the in-stream environmental characteristics most associated with the crayfish’s occupancy in the North Saskatchewan River and determined which currently unoccupied tributaries are most prone to future invasion” (Van Mierlo ii). “The only reported death was that of an infant who slipped from the arms of its mother, who was walking precariously along a floating sidewalk and dropped her baby into the rushing water” (Kostash 113). “This study aimed to investigate the microbial response of North Saskatchewan River water to diluted bitumen (DB) and conventional crude (CC) during the freeze-thaw-refreeze cycle” (Saborimanesh et al. 1). “The missionaries met at Buffalo Lake and continued travelling between the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers to . . .” (Krasowski 178).

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## *Memories, Manifestation, and Finding a Way Forward: Developing Agency through Spiralling Time in Michelle Good's Five Little Indians*

The way I see remembering, just the nature of the word, has to do with going back. But I see it in another way, too. I see it as occurring, not just going back, but occurring right now, and also future occurrence so that you can remember things in a way that makes what occurs now beautiful.

— Joy Harjo, “*The Story of All Our Survival*”

Residential schooling has been a project of genocide intricately linked with chronological notions of time. The frequent linear framing of Indigenous identity in relation to residential schools as one of before, during, and after continues to be reinforced through reconstructions of experiences and literary analyses of residential school narratives. Cree author Michelle Good, however, disrupts this line of thinking from the beginning of her novel *Five Little Indians* by drawing readers into a complicated temporality in which the past, present, and future are evoked simultaneously. In Good's opening paragraph, Clara, a survivor of residential school, “look[s] east and [sees] the beginnings of the many trails she and Mariah had walked so many years ago” (1). The “beginnings” of the trails Clara sees act as routes to a past that has not yet been made clear to the reader, but in looking east—the direction of new beginnings—Clara's past seems to co-exist with the present as she continues developing new experiences. The beginning of Clara's story is actually the culmination of her narrative, but even this supposed end holds new beginnings. Unlike the linear trajectory of chronological narratives, which confines the protagonist to the present, Good's portrayal of the harmonious entwinement of the past, present, and future destabilizes readers' capacity to adopt trauma-centred approaches to the narrative.

Settler scholar Renate Eigenbrod defines residential school literature as texts “that recreate the school experience through the literary imagination and that . . . contribute to upholding the continuance of traditions against the discourses of loss and vanishing” (“For the child” 278). As an example of this subgenre of Indigenous literatures, *Five Little Indians* pushes back against expectations of victimhood while extending beyond Clara’s residential school experience to express her life both before incarceration—from her joyful childhood with her loving mother to her later kidnapping by church and state officials—and after incarceration, including her involvement with the American Indian Movement (AIM) and her healing journey with the help of an old woman named Mariah. Bonnechere Algonquin and French scholar Michelle Coupal posits a critical addition to Eigenbrod’s definition: “[R]esidential school literature often also recreates the experience of life following the schools and includes . . . creative writing that marks yet refuses and exceeds the tethering grip of those experiences” (Coupal and McKegney 31). Good’s creative depiction of what I call “spiralling time” illuminates Clara’s capacity to confront and resist the trauma of her residential school experience beyond the institution. I argue that Good’s *Five Little Indians* rejects chronological temporality and its associated effects by framing Clara’s narration through achronological spiralling time. Good deploys spiralling time to permit an exploration of the past which informs the present and future with greater integrity, acknowledging the fragmentary dimensions of Clara’s residential school experiences while simultaneously refusing the premise that those experiences deny her access to knowledges and ways of being that, in Good’s narration, precede and exceed the coercive interventions of the state. In this way, *Five Little Indians* reorients focus to foreground the agency of survivors like Clara over the social engineering impetus of the genocidal institution.

### Moving beyond Damage

Laguna Pueblo author Paula Gunn Allen argues that “there is some sort of connection between colonization and chronological time” (151). The residential schooling project was designed—and continues to be

depicted through historical representations—to eliminate Indigenous identity across a linear framework. The pre-residential school Indigenous identity is embedded in culture and community relations. However, the coercive strategies of colonialism are designed to radically sever ties to a past life. As settler scholar Sam McKegney argues, “the civilizing mission of white settler heteropatriarchy by politicians and civil servants . . . suggests the primary impetus of colonial policy to be dis-integration and elimination rather than social engineering and assimilative reproduction” (*Carrying the Burden* 30). Instead of seeking to transform Indigenous peoples into the white body politic, the social policies of colonialism, including but not limited to residential schools, “bespeak a campaign of deterritorialization: not to remake but to *unmake*, and ultimately to legitimize that unmaking” (*Carrying the Burden* 30). Such “unmaking” requires a chronological framework of time to isolate Indigenous peoples from a past identity to which they cannot return. This severance isolates the supposed authentic Indigenous identity—which differs from dynamic Indigenous identities established by and within Indigenous communities themselves—in a sequestered past that makes possible a post-residential school identification that renders survivors as quasi-Canadian subjects who can no longer identify as “truly Indigenous.” According to Allen, “Having perceived us [Indigenous peoples] as belonging to history, [colonizers] are free to emote over us, to re-create us in their history-based understanding, and dismiss our present lives as archaic and irrelevant to the times” (151). By manufacturing and perpetuating this history-based representation, colonizers make the authentic Indigenous identity, as defined by colonialism, unattainable. By structuring Indigenous identities through a Western conceptualization of time that fragments Indigenous peoples into categories of non-being, colonial agents attempt to naturalize the erasure of Indigenous identities. Ultimately, the colonial narrative relies on chronological time to isolate, unmake, and erase identity in order to claim elimination.

The irony, then, is that the dominant means of reading and teaching residential school stories in secondary schools continues to follow this chronological sequence through a trauma-informed lens based on a Western psychological model in which damage is the focal point. As a white settler educator in predominantly settler-populated Ontario

secondary schools and current PhD student in Indigenous literary studies, I have witnessed the frequency with which such narratives are discussed in accordance with Western worldviews and settler expectations. In the Ontario grade eleven “English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices” curriculum, one of the first sample exercises for supporting students’ reading comprehension involves “plot[ting] events in a novel on a timeline and add[ing] significant historical events to help [students] understand the context within which a . . . storyline occurs” (*Ontario* 153). While the use of this reading strategy encourages students to consider the context in which a novel’s events unfold, it simultaneously invites students to reconstruct the plot in a linear manner, often forcing a chronological reading that imposes historicization onto an achronological narrative. In the context of residential school narratives, McKegney warns that “historicization (alone) dangerously orients our thinking away from the present and future, binding us in a reactive manner to the power dynamics of the past” (*Magic Weapons* 6). Therefore, the effect of this reading strategy is contradictory: students’ reading comprehension is hindered, since they are considering the narrative through a cause-and-effect ordering that historicizes the narrative and risks exposing the text to a Western psychological reading. Western psychology, according to scholar and NunatuKavut member Kristina Fagan Bidwell, “currently favours theories of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder . . . to describe the effects of sexual abuse” (205). She acknowledges that “these theories posit that events that are too painful to bear become cut off from ordinary consciousness and are expressed only through symbolic symptoms such as dreams, phobias, or violent behaviour” (205). Applying these theories casts the protagonist in a triptych: before the “damage” of trauma, the trauma moment itself, and how such trauma imposes itself upon the present. The protagonist is then at the mercy of their trauma and can only overcome it through fragmentarily encountering such “symbolic symptoms” on their own, restricting their ability to demonstrate *survivance*—a term coined by Anishinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor, who describes it as “a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance. Survivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and [his] sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry” (93). In other words, this linear conceptualization of time

under the Western psychological model actually bolsters a sense of stasis for the protagonist. By continuing to craft a linear trajectory of inescapable brokenness, residential school narrative interpretations risk becoming an extension of the eliminationist objectives of colonialism.

While many Ontario school boards have made the study of Indigenous literatures compulsory via the implementation of the grade eleven course, the deployment of the dominant reading strategy teaches students the Canadian-imposed stereotype of the stasis of Indigenous peoples and roots residential school survivors in the past in ways that serve to erase Indigenous peoples from the present and future. Unanga scholar Eve Tuck acknowledges that “the research on our [Indigenous] communities has historically been damage centred, intent on portraying our neighbourhoods and tribes as defeated and broken” (412). Although Tuck’s call for the suspension of damage-centred approaches to Indigenous communities occurred in 2009, many settler educators in secondary-level classrooms are still analyzing Indigenous literatures from this standpoint. Some elements of the curriculum outline expectations to counter the teaching of such problematic pedagogies. Each curricular stream for the course shares a specific learning expectation that requires students to explain how elements of style “help communicate meaning or reflect a world view and enhance the effectiveness of the text” (*Ontario* 130, 155, 178). While this learning expectation centres Indigenous worldviews within the analysis of Indigenous literatures, there is a misalignment between the *expected* teaching practice and the *actual* knowledge and skills possessed by most settler educators.<sup>1</sup> As Eigenbrod notes, “Due to the colonial legacy of labeling Aboriginal peoples as primitive and childlike, there is still a perception in dominant society that they and their cultural expressions are simple, easy to understand” (“A Necessary Inclusion” 15). To counter this dominant viewpoint and equip students with the knowledge necessary to conduct rigorous analysis, educators must first understand the worldview an author deploys in a text. In 2002, Métis writer Jo-Ann Episkenew acknowledged “that many interpretations of the works of Canadian Aboriginal Literature lack a fundamental understanding of the ideological context in which the works were written” (56); yet, decades later, such interpretations are still being fed to the current generation of students, which “will have an effect not only on the perceptions that

non-Aboriginal people have of Aboriginal society but that Aboriginal people have of themselves” (57). Under the current circumstances, where most educators are not provided the educational tools necessary to address this curricular expectation, settler instructors regularly revert to the dominant, trauma-centred narratives of Indigenous victimization that they have been conditioned to perceive. By analyzing such literatures without considering their context and opting instead to apply Western chronology, settler educators contribute to what Ojibway scholar Kimberley Blaeser describes as “violat[ing] [the literatures’] integrity,” which “performs a new act of colonization and conquest” (55).<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, the onus of implementing such curricula may be placed on the few Indigenous educational leaders in some school boards, ultimately (mis)designating them as the ones responsible for decolonization. Although the curriculum itself outlines a decolonial learning objective, the way the literatures are taught can make the difference between reinforcing colonial attitudes and decolonizing the classroom.

Without proper intervention, the misreading of Indigenous texts in educational contexts will persist. A forced chronological approach to achronological Indigenous-authored narratives, including *Five Little Indians*, merely replicates the colonial narrative of social engineering and inevitable victimry. When forcing this model onto Clara’s experiences, a victimhood mentality becomes the central discussion: Clara’s trauma creates flashbacks that embed her in a past she either hopes to evade, such as residential school experiences, or a deeper past in which she desires to remain, such as childhood experiences with her mother. While this reading of the text positions fragmented narration as evidence of how trauma breaks the natural forward flow of characters’ lives, a reading through spiralling time heeds Tuck’s call for research that “does not fetishize damage, but, rather, celebrates . . . *survivance*” by offering a nuanced perspective that centres agency (422).

## Deploying Spiralling Time

Throughout my educational experience in Indigenous literary studies, many settler educators have discussed Indigenous narrative style

through a cyclic framework. The circle has become a defining feature of Indigenous literatures in classrooms, with many students quickly identifying the “coming full circle” narrative. When viewing the circle as a two-dimensional plot structure, however, the idea of “coming full circle” becomes a cycle that reintroduces a protagonist to their starting position, subsequently relocating them in the past often without acknowledging their development or movement. This interpretation of a cyclic plot structure risks perpetuating stasis, restricting a protagonist to a time loop from which they cannot progress. This is not to say the circle model is flawed; I am arguing, however, that there is more to the circle than initially meets the eye.

While Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte uses the term “spiralling time” to “refer[] to the varied experiences of time that [Indigenous peoples] have as participants within living narratives involving [their] ancestors and descendants” (229), I use the term to reference a narrative plot structure that reaches into the past, present, and future simultaneously. In describing his mother’s stories, Cree author Darrel McLeod explains, “The timelines are never linear. Instead, they are like spirals,” since his mother “starts with one element of a story, moves to another and skips to yet a different part” (5).<sup>3</sup> A spiral can be interpreted as a two-dimensional circle when it is spiralling towards the viewer. This head-on perspective, however, fails to recognize the spiral’s nuance. From a side view, the spiral remains a cyclic temporality, but further encompasses movement—and, ultimately, development—as it flows across time and space. Its trajectory permits a stretch into the past while simultaneously moving towards the future, creating what Laura Coltelli describes in the introduction to Joy Harjo’s *The Spiral of Memory* as “a dynamic process [that] reaffirm[s] ancient heritages and proceed[s] forward on a path of constant renewal” (9). Instead of confining the protagonist to repetitive cycles of trauma, the spiral permits the protagonist to interact with the past in a way that propels them into the future by illustrating how knowledge and ways of being are spirited in the world across bodies and generations. The spiralic theorization of time rejects *both* linear time and its ostensible irreversibility, which restricts access to the past, *and* cyclic time, which has the potential to trap one in a repeated loop of reliving the past. This conceptualization of time becomes a representation of Allen’s achronology, a temporality that “is

not ignorant of the future any more than it is unconscious of the past. It is a sense of time that connects pain and praise through timely movement, knitting person and surroundings into one" (150). Spiralling time, then, exceeds the "traumatizing, disease-causing effects" of chronological time by encompassing one's entire experience, creating a sense of harmony and balance (150). Thus, spiralling time has the potential to encompass the past, present, and future in a fluid, motion-based space, prohibiting stasis and centring wholeness and development. Within a spiralling-time narrative, the protagonist is not solely acted upon but, instead, becomes an active participant in their memory (both individual and collective), their lived experiences, and their futurity.

No longer fixed in a chronological narrative, the protagonist can claim a sense of agency. As Métis scholar Kim Anderson writes, "When we conceptualize our connection to the sacredness of all creation, we can begin to see that, as individuals, each one of us has purpose or a reason for being" (*A Recognition* 178). Since Clara's traumatic residential school experience was designed to unmake her identity, her connection to creation—the land, her culture, her own sacredness, and her kinship relations—has been impaired. Anderson continues by quoting Mohawk healer Diane Hill:

When we were born, we knew the reason for why we came. But, for many of us, remembering is difficult because our true selves are covered over by the memories and feelings associated with the painful experiences in our lives. The spiritual task before us requires us to work our way back through all of those experiences to uncover our true selves by remembering who we are and what our gifts are. (qtd. in *A Recognition* 178–79)

The isolated past does not permit one to work their way through previous experiences, but through spiralling time, the possibility of agency is generated. As Fagan notes, "In a story, aspects of traumatic memory can be reshaped, reordered, and metaphorically or symbolically expressed" (211). Good does so by relocating Clara in a past experience to re-encounter—and thereby redevelop—integrity, which McKegney argues "is cultivated when one's full humanity is

honoured and respected by those around them, enabling meaningful integration into the family, community, and nation; it is affirmed through recognition that one is indeed *integral* to those very systems of relation” (*Carrying the Burden* x). While the limitations of chronological time would force Clara to remain “covered over by the memories and feelings” (Hill qtd. in Anderson, *A Recognition* 178) of her residential school trauma, spiralling time allows her to foster integrity. Clara’s identity, then, is neither static nor solely reliant on Clara as an individual; it relies on her ability to exercise agency within a space of cultural rootedness, which permits her to uncover her reason for being and work through the process of remembering and (re)claiming her integral self.

### **(Re-)Experiencing the Past**

Through Good’s deployment of spiralling time, Clara is able to re-experience a past that precedes her residential school experience, where she is reunited with her culture, family, kinship relations, and teachings that lay the foundation of knowledge and agency. The past is opened to Clara, challenging the notion that her residential school trauma has confined her to a state of permanent brokenness. Although the sweat ceremony in which Clara participates is where she feels she is her integral self again, this moment is the culmination of multiple opportunities to interact with former moments which challenge her residential school shame and thinking, which I will demonstrate below. Her journey, then, is one of finding her way back to the cultural rootedness to which she was denied access in residential school. As Clara accesses an essential moment of love and care from her childhood through spiralling time, she is able to engage with culture and relationships that residential schools were designed to strip from her. Thus, spiralling time offers Clara the opportunity to navigate her fragmented identity and reconnect the pieces.

After Clara is jailed following her racially charged arrest, she re-experiences a moment from the distant past with her mother: “As though no time had passed, Clara found herself back, way back when she was little, walking home from church with her mom” (Good 117). Unlike a flashback, which Allen argues is an element of chronological

narration that does not permit “a reintegration of self within [one’s] surroundings” (152), Good relocates Clara in both a physical and spiritual past, freeing her momentarily from physical jail and the mentally imprisoning memories of residential school. While walking with her mother through the birch grove, Clara hears “a tinkling, like tiny bells sounding in the wind,” and she believes it to be “angels . . . playing in the trees” (118). Although Clara’s mother does not hear the sound, she gently offers Clara a teaching: “Your grandma used to say the little people played in that thicket. Maybe they were making music just for you” (119). Here, Clara is able to re-experience her mother’s modes of guidance that centre agency, as opposed to the controlling discipline of the residential school. Clara’s mother is not rejecting Clara’s interpretation of the noise, nor is she arguing that the noise is not there. Instead, she offers a teaching that expands—rather than limits—Clara’s understanding of the world. Clara’s mother provides an alternative interpretation for the “tinkling” sound that centres a story from her Indigenous culture, yet she does not impose a view, illustrating a supportive relationship that foregrounds individual autonomy through non-interference. In his seminal article “Native Ethics and Rules of Behaviour,” Kanien’kehá:ka psychiatrist Clare Brant argues that the ethic of non-interference “is a behavioural norm of North American Native tribes that promotes positive interpersonal relations by discouraging coercion of any kind” (535). Anderson writes, “The principle of non-interference is, thus, grounded in respect for the path of the individual, no matter how young” (*Life Stages* 68). Although Clara’s mother offers a separate perception of the sound, Clara possesses the agency within this space of non-inference to come to her own conclusion. Spiralling time thus allows Clara to re-experience her mother’s non-coercive means of guidance, permitting Clara to regain agency and reintegrate into community, both of which she can experience in the present.

The moment Clara shares with her mother, which establishes a strong foundation of agency and care, is then threaded through Good’s narration, rejecting the implication of the inaccessible past in chronological time and permitting the past to engage with the present to support the reclamation of Clara’s agency. During his speech at the Friendship Centre, George—an avid supporter of AIM and a later friend of Clara—describes the wind as a vehicle for past knowledge:

“Think of the drum, the heartbeat, the songs, and how all these beautiful sounds roll into an echo carried by that wind from the ancestors through to the lives of our children’s children” (Good 143). His teaching prompts Clara’s memory of her mother, allowing Clara to feel “the same way she had back then, with those lilting songs dancing among the shimmering birch leaves” (143). Without physically re-experiencing the past, Clara is able to encounter the memory which holds the potential for her to recapture and reclaim herself. This moment is framed as one of reinvigoration: “Something that had been gone a long time filled her again, like her heart had suddenly started beating again after a long silence” (143). Although Clara has been separated from the past for a “long” time, as is repeated twice, the past is never too far gone in spiralling time. As Tanana Athabascan theorist Dian Million notes in “Felt Theory,” “we [Indigenous women] *feel* our histories as well as think them” (54). George’s words mobilize Clara’s felt experiences and knowledges, granting her the possibility of re-embodying elements of her past self and experiencing a renewed sense of self in the present. Through this bridging of the past and present, Clara experiences a rebirth, in a sense, as she feels her heart has been given the power to beat again. The auditory phrasing is especially significant; Million argues that silence is “colonialism’s strongest defense” (58–59), and Clara’s heart, like the felt knowledge across time, breaks the silence that has resulted from her traumatic experience at residential school. According to George’s teaching, the heartbeat is a sound that can be carried across time by the wind, and the newly generated sound of Clara’s heartbeat becomes part of the collective sound of the ancestors, the living, and the next generations, connecting Clara to creation. The mobilized past is thus *given* life by *giving* life to the present. Although Clara is still contending with her trauma, her re-experiencing of the past gradually equips her with agency and strength to resist the cycle of suffering.

### Connecting Memory, Land, and Body

While George’s speech has the power to evoke Clara’s felt history, it also plays a critical role in the novel’s spiralling narration. Through George’s evocation of the past, Good illustrates how knowledge is

spirited across the land and bodies. The wind's power permits the intersection of the past, present, and future via its ability to propel past knowledge across time and space to reach present and future generations. Although Good does not reposition Clara in the past beyond her re-encounter with her mother, Good fuses Clara's pivotal memory to the wind in later scenes, making the wind a connective element between an ever-expanding past and the present. Such interplay between the past and present through the wind's mnemonic power offers Clara the ability to co-exist in both temporalities, gaining access to elements of her past that precede her residential school experience and reunite her with her culture. As Cree author Neal McLeod writes, "Narrative memory connects us to the past, but the memory is also embodied in the land and in our bodies" (92). Good's decision to map the past onto the wind, then, allows Clara's past experiences to transcend time, ultimately making spiralling time legible through the landscape's power to evoke memory.

Clara's engagement with the past through the wind's transcendent power is crucial as she navigates her relationship with her culture and with Mariah, who cares for her after her injury helping AIM. Good continues to equip Clara with the strength and agency from her past through the repetition of the "tinkling noise" that Clara hears in her childhood. In the grove behind Mariah's cabin, Clara encounters the "tinkling noise" as a sound generated by "dozens of small and very old coloured glass bottles" that sway in the wind and take Clara "back to those days before Indian School, back to those long walks with her mother though [*sic*] the birch groves" (Good 188). The wind and the associated "tinkling noise" channel the past and bring it to Clara's present, disrupting a chronological sequence of events and granting Clara access to a nourishing moment of cultural connectedness. In evoking Clara's past with her mother at Mariah's lodge, Good reconnects Clara to a moment of childhood love that foreshadows Clara's relationship with Mariah and lays the foundation for Clara to flourish into her integral self.

It is important to note, however, that spiralling time is not a catch-all solution to Clara's trauma. As Clara begins grappling with Mariah's traditional teachings, she is haunted by flashbacks of Sister Mary, a nun from the residential school who violently attacked Clara's body and culture. Good, though, does not isolate Clara within this cycle of

trauma. Whereas chronological time delimits Clara's agency, restricting her to ongoing mental trauma, spiralling time opens Clara's mind to a past in which she was deeply loved and respected. Although the "tinkling noise" of the bottles grants Clara access to the past, she must actively resist the internalized colonization that stems from Sister Mary's abuse. After numerous moments where Mariah invites Clara to engage with traditional teachings, Clara hears the bottles that "her childlike spirit knew to be the angels, the ancestors, shining down on her," and, as Good writes, "[s]he hated them" (197). Here, Good does not distract from the felt consequences of residential school trauma. The memories generate rage and contribute to Clara's self-isolation as she rejects opportunities to share her pain.

However, through spiralling time, the "tinkling noise" also prompts a return to a childlike state for Clara that foregrounds the critical nature of her past experience with her mother and offers it to her again in the present. After expressing her hatred for the ancestors for not protecting her friend Lily from being murdered at residential school, Clara is depicted as a child in her conversation with Mariah:

"There is more to life than surviving, *child*."

"I'm not a *child*."

Clara immediately felt silly about her *childish* reply.

(Good 198; emphasis mine)

Although Clara argues that she can "survive [her] own way" (197), Good's framing of her childlike state suggests otherwise. By repositioning Clara as a child through Mariah's depiction, Good situates Clara in a similar state to her fundamental memory with her mother. Again, within the ethic of non-interference, Clara cannot be forced to rely on the systems of relation of which she is part; she must choose to do so. This moment, which precedes the sweat ceremony whereby Clara reconnects to her ancestors and experiences self-reintegration, re-establishes the importance of building meaningful relationships with others in Clara's life to enable her access to a sense of integrity. Clara cannot survive beyond the present, despite what she asserts, if she cannot first *feel* the past she is trying to escape. As Million notes, "The successful struggle to rearticulate the colonial residential school experience as *abuse* was not a move to articulate

*victimology*, it was a move to ground a present healing in a past properly understood, *felt*, and moved beyond" (73). Clara must *feel* her pain instead of denying it. It is through Mariah's care that Clara can embody a childlike state in which she can come to terms with the distortional understanding of her culture that she experiences due to residential school trauma.

Within this space of nurture made possible by spiralling time, Clara is able to be vulnerable and *feel* her suppressed pain, which she then expresses by verbalizing her trauma:

She told [Mariah] of how the spirits had touched her in those early days of her childhood, and how they abandoned her completely in the barren halls of the Indian School. Clara cried and cried. For Lily. For herself. For her lost angels. It seemed as though hours had passed, and still she cried, Mariah sitting quietly by her side.

"We were children, me and Lily, and neither of us survived, even though I'm still walking." (Good 198)

Clara's assertion that she can survive her own way is replaced with an acknowledgement of her perceived death. Although Good demonstrates that Clara felt "abandoned" through the isolating effects of residential school, spiralling time, as generated by the wind, holds the power to reconnect her to the angels and her associated memories. Mariah, who stays with Clara across an unidentified amount of time, allows Clara to be a child again through her care, freeing her from her childhood death caused by residential schooling. As Mariah feeds Clara "clear soup and put[s] her to bed as though she were a child" (199), Clara's childhood spirals forward in a continuum of non-interference, with Mariah promoting Clara's agency and centring her needs without imposing values onto her. By regaining agency, Clara is able to be vulnerable and develop her relationship with Mariah as she contends with her past, equipping her with the necessary knowledge and care to prepare her to participate in the sweat ceremony.

## Ceremonies to Remember

Clara's journey of developing integrity culminates with the sweat ceremony. After struggling against her trauma and fighting to regain elements of her past, Clara is uniquely positioned to participate in ceremony. Again, Mariah offers Clara agency through the ethic of non-interference that Clara previously experienced with her mother, as she says, "I've prepared the lodge. Will you come with me?" (Good 199). Thus, the decision is entirely at Clara's discretion. As Clara goes to enter the lodge, a mirrored moment from her past occurs, pre-empting the ceremony with her mother's memory. When Clara is re-experiencing her childhood, Good writes a hand-holding scene in which Clara's mother "squeeze[s] Clara's little hand," and later, Clara's fingers are described as "slipping from" her mother's (118). This moment is then repeated with Mariah, as "Clara crouche[s], [takes] her hand and crosse[s] the threshold" (199). Although her relationship with her mother has been severed, the power of her mother's influence is not lost in spiralling time. Clara is able to embrace the spirit of her interaction with her mother and carry it with her as she forms new connections with other supportive, non-coercive guides. Through spiralling time, Clara is equipped with the agency and support necessary to allow her to embrace the ceremony and propel herself beyond the traumatizing effects of residential school.

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg theorist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that the struggle of Indigenous peoples "is a beautiful, righteous struggle that is our collective gift to Indigenous worlds, because this way of living necessarily continually gives birth to ancient *Indigenous* futures in the present" (21). Simpson voices her refusal of linear conceptualizations of time, deploying an apparent oxymoron in "ancient . . . futures." This notion, however, captures Good's use of spiralling time in ceremony, which foregrounds the significance of the past in developing Clara's identity. In Allen's discussion of "ceremonial time," she argues that chronological time "concerns itself with . . . psychic fragmentation," whereas ceremonial time involves "psychic integration" (150). Thus, ceremonial time permits one to enter "into timelessness—that place where one is whole" (150). Here, the spiral of time is condensed, connecting Clara to each element of herself without the fragmentation of trauma. Throughout Clara's journey, she has

embodied the components of the past that allow her to re-engage with her past self, illustrating how her struggle with the past “gives birth” to an “ancient future.” Returning to Hill, “The answers related to who we are, how we are connected to life, and why our spirits have entered this life are already inside us. So we just have to be taught how to open ourselves and to look inside for the purpose of remembering. We just need to remember who we are” (qtd. in Anderson, *A Recognition* 178). Ceremonial time brings all the elements of Clara’s being together in a timeless space of not only remembering, but re-experiencing.

By simultaneously engaging with the past, present, and future within ceremonial time, Good locates Clara in a timescape that allows her to fully embody—and accept—the aspects of her integral self that she can then deploy in the present. Following Clara’s sweat ceremony with Mariah, Good writes,

All Clara knew was that it took her back. Back to the birch grove and the angel songs. Back to who she was before Sister Mary, before the school, before they tried to beat her into a little brown white girl. She felt a certainty, from then on, that all the ones who had come before walked with her. Life was no longer just survival. It was about being someone. An Indian someone, with all the truth that was born into her at the moment she was placed in her mother’s womb. (199)

Importantly, Clara is not simply becoming a past self. While the repetition of “back” and “before” in the quotation above demonstrates the foregrounding of the past in the development of Clara’s identity, this key instance of spiralling time permits access to past experiences to embody them in the present. The past collides with the present to reunite Clara with who she was meant to be before colonial agents “tried to beat her into a little brown white girl”—an impossible contradiction that has fragmented her being. Clara’s agency comes through in her feeling of “certainty” that the ancestors walk with her, and Good’s use of “from then on” does not confine the feeling to a timeframe; instead, the past stretches into the future with no endpoint. Transformed into an alternative version of herself through the embodiment of her past, Clara is able to overcome the fragmentary

nature of her trauma by remembering who she is born to be. No longer trapped in the mindset of social death and mere survival, Clara reclaims her past identity while simultaneously deploying it within the present and future.

The strength and sense of self Clara gains from her ceremony are further illustrated in the prologue, a formal representation of spiralling time for the reader. Despite the reader's lack of access to Clara's life story at this point, the novel becomes an unwinding of spiralling time as the story cascades across the temporal landscape to show how Clara's strength and cultural connection have been spirited across her lifetime. Within the prologue, Clara is no longer positioned as a child, but instead, as a woman offering support to both Kendra—who is “as close as [Clara comes] to having a child” (Good 1)—and Lily. Whereas Clara's residential school experience isolated her from others, her access to the past has empowered her through the embodiment of cultural values that encourage ongoing kinship relations. Clara, equipped with teachings she (re)learned during her spiralic journey, is now in a position to offer support to others. For Lily, Clara's fight allows her to be put to rest in a spiritual home through ceremony that is outside the control of the state: “We found you, Lily. We brought you home . . . I couldn't leave you there after what they did to you. We finally got to go home. You and me both” (3). Although Lily's murder prevents her from having agency over her physical body, Clara's liberation of her remains from the Church's hold is an act of resistance that exceeds the physical self, extending her agency to Lily in spite of Lily's death. Good's use of “[w]e found” and “[w]e brought” emphasizes the collective power in which Clara now participates; her fight for Lily is not an individual undertaking, but she still possesses agency within this communal space, making her *integral* to the community of which she is part. By finally freeing Lily from residential school, Clara protects Lily from being solely defined by her residential school experience. Now at “home” together, both Lily's and Clara's beings survive.

While Clara is offering support to a child of the past, she also offers knowledge to a child of the future. For Kendra, who has been impacted by residential schooling through its intergenerational effects, Clara deploys the ethic of non-inference that she has learned from her mother and Mariah's past teachings. When discussing Kendra being the “[f]irst Indian doctor in Canada,” Clara offers her an alternative

understanding of medicine, claiming Mariah's traditional practices as "a whole different kind of science" (2). Clara does not interfere with Kendra's pathway, but offers her an alternative perspective that, again, expands—rather than limits—Kendra's understanding of the world. Although Kendra shrugs at this knowledge, "her discomfort plain" (2), Clara does not force her to accept this decolonial viewpoint. Instead, as the sweat ceremony is about to begin, "Clara lean[s] over and [takes] Kendra's hand" and says, "Doc . . . Get ready for some doctoring" (3). Just as her mother and Mariah did for her, Clara takes Kendra's hand in a guiding sense. While these teachings have manifested in Clara through her nonlinear journey, they do not stop with her. Thus, her journey not only re-establishes her sense of self and purpose in the world, but also contributes to the wider community through individual members' own deployment of such knowledge and its associated strength.

### **Conclusion: Spiralling Back to Spiral Forward**

Although the implemented colonial policies are meant to unmake Clara's identity and isolate her from her culture, Good's depiction of Clara's journey refuses to bind Clara to a trajectory of life trauma. Whereas the past is rendered inaccessible through a chronological notion of time, Good's deployment of spiralling time permits Clara agentive access to foundational moments in her life that foreground her culture and traditional ways of being. While she is haunted by her traumatic experiences, such engagement with the past permits Clara to redevelop the sense of agency that the social policies of residential schooling were designed to rob from her. Clara's trauma does not cease to exist, nor is spiralling time offered as a passive solution to Clara's distorted view of herself. Instead, Good's narrative allows Clara to transcend time and space to connect segments of her life and integrate them in the service of becoming the self she is born to be, thereby refusing to define Clara by past traumas. Clara is not confined to the past any more than she is secluded in the present, and the melding of these temporalities creates opportunities for Clara to navigate her past, demonstrate vulnerability, feel her lived history, accept herself, and ultimately experience futurity.

As Good demonstrates, residential school legacies, while ever-present, have not signalled the success of the system's genocidal intent. In closing, I wish to turn to Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle on the supposed permanent loss of Indigenous identity through the colonial apparatus; she argues, "We have not 'lost our culture' or had it 'stolen' . . . The essence of Native culture still lives in the hearts, minds and spirits of our folk" (Maracle 92). As Good demonstrates throughout her narration of Clara, knowledge and culture are not isolated to a pre-residential school temporality. They are threaded across space, time, bodies, land, memories, and voices. Like Clara—in spite of her silenced heartbeat and seeming childhood death in residential school—culture lives on. The notion that culture does not persist threatens a decolonial present and future by restricting Indigeneity to history, allowing the colonial agenda to push forward in its attempts at erasure. But residential schooling did not eradicate. It did not win. And even though its legacy and the "traumatizing, disease-causing effects" of chronological time (Allen 150) lurk in the shadows of minds, classrooms, and colonial institutions more broadly, Good illustrates a spiralic story that "gives birth to ancient *Indigenous* futures in the present" (Simpson 21) through her craft and creativity.

#### Notes

1. Educators in Ontario require limited education in Indigenous literatures prior to certification to teach such curricula. At the level of teacher training, the implementation of Indigenous content is primarily at the discretion of the instructors of curriculum courses, who may also have limited education in Indigenous studies. Secondary school educators are then left to their own professional development to acquire adequate knowledge to teach Indigenous-focused curricula, resulting in many educators simply approaching Indigenous literatures via Western knowledge with which they are most comfortable. In order to effectively respond to the curriculum expectations for students, educators need more rigorous and culturally relevant knowledge and teaching strategies.
2. Blaeser also argues that while "the oppositional distinctions may have been necessary early on to underscore the difference, the distinct voice of Indian literature, . . . they actually proceed from and reinforce an understanding of the dominant position of the Euro-American literary aesthetic" (57). Although Blaeser challenges the creation of oppositional relationships within literary criticism, I am presenting linear and cyclic temporalities as a binary because most settler educators are early on in their learning of Indigenous literatures.
3. Although my theorization of spiralling time builds from McLeod's Cree perspective, I draw on multiple non-Cree theorists to support my argument. I

acknowledge that weaving the work of these theorists together risks implying that what I am tracking in Good's novel is applicable to any Indigenous-authored text. I do not intend to make any such pan-Indigenous claims. Rather, I have turned to the Indigenous critics and theorists whose work I feel best illuminates the complex ways temporality functions in *Five Little Indians*. I recognize that a Cree-specific investigation of these matters in the novel, which is beyond my capacity, would undoubtedly yield significant, and potentially alternative, findings. My decision to explore this text through the theories of the thinkers curated here is intended to illuminate the possibilities of exploring Good's narrative style through non-Western conceptualizations of time and to generate alternative methods of reading some residential school texts.

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Jim Johnstone

## *The Next Day*

We need rain, even the idea of rain.  
Bulkheads flex, bear our weight—  
light catches the river north of town.

+

Bearing. What current can't know—  
roosters rusted to weathervanes,  
swallows confined, tattooed to a hand.

+

Are you still here? Come to inspect  
the riverbed, the birds  
singing sleep from the fields?

+

We need rain, even the idea of rain.  
Soon current will flex,  
arrange itself, a lifeline reaching out—

+

*Jim Johnstone is a Toronto-based poet, editor, and critic. His most recent book is Bait & Switch: Essays, Reviews, Conversations, and Views on Canadian Poetry (Porcupine's Quill, 2024).*

**Richard Brait**

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## *The Rats of Aquileia*

( I )

I wake up shouting, striking hard  
at the rat chewing on my big toe.

It takes almost a minute  
to realize I've been dreaming.

Not the first time the fright has been upon me  
and not uncommon either to wear my slippers to bed.

( II )

1915, Aquileia, west from Trieste —  
my great uncle Giuseppe only a baby,

his family in flight from the advancing Austrians.  
And the priest refused admission to the church —

a desecration, he said,  
to have them sheltering in the house of God,

and sent them to the stables.

But this was no nativity scene  
in that humble parish just inland from the sea.

The straw was fetid and damp,  
with a sweet smell that was anything but.

You could hear the squeaking, hissing, chattering  
of the rats in the building's darkened margins.

But it was other noises they woke to in the night —

chomping and grinding. Shooing the creatures away  
from the crying baby

they gazed in horror on the scene —  
his big toe bitten right off.

( III )

In the sand at Wasaga Beach, we marvel  
at Uncle Joe with his four toes —

ask him over and over

to tell the story about the stable  
and the rats, and how it felt,

the crunching on bone  
as they made their meal.

And we all fall quiet when he comes to the part  
about that rough wooden cross in the churchyard,

the family showing those Austrian soldiers the baby's wounds,  
telling them about the priest.

How the soldiers dragged him roughly from his church  
and how his blood made blackened pools in the dirt —

one right under his feet,  
the other two under his outstretched arms.

And them just leaving him hanging there,  
screaming for the mercy of Christ.

*Richard Brait is a corporate lawyer living in Toronto. He has degrees in engineering physics, and law, and (forty-one years later) his MFA in poetry from Bennington College.*

**Beverly Harris**

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## *On Hornby Island*

I am standing by a steep moss slope  
where water flows down in streams  
from the lips of ancient stones,  
so clear it appears as if the very rock spills.  
There is no word in my language to tell  
the sound of water falling like this.

It is a perpetual sparkle-splashing,  
a bright variable-pitch water music  
I wish you could hear  
I wish you could understand  
by it how much I am silenced,  
by it how much I am changed.

By a high mossy slope  
where water music spills from lips of stone,  
I stand silent and transfigured.

| *Beverly Harris is the author of short stories collected in Three Times Five (NeWest Press). A former editor of Dandelion Magazine, she now lives in Victoria, BC.*

**Robin Durnford**

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## *by the fire*

we tried everything, even sat by the fire  
contemplating the landscape

outside the picture window some professors put in  
books lining the walls like graves

as I hear you chopping  
every branch and tree from the great birch forests

great beyond grey as the mountain I refuse  
to look at because it reminds me

of all I can't become,  
the world has gone hard.

this landscape a bratty truth somebody drew  
to remind me I don't belong.

I never belonged to granite, wild roses, flaming  
beads of dogberry that line the memory certain  
times of year.

now I ignore it like I do some paintings at the grand museums  
where I mostly look instead

at the walls, or the faces of the people lining the paintings, or  
the guards looking on, bored, checking the watch

for when art ends—  
I want art to end.

I want to not contemplate the world  
as representation instead put my hand on  
the axe like you do

and cut into it with my own vituperous blade.

I want to taste that breath of wind

and stop angels with my thumb.

I hear you chopping, and I know you  
have to stop. I know

we have to leave well enough  
alone.

*Robin Durnford is the author of four books of poetry. Her new collection, At Beckett's Grave, is slated for publication with McGill-Queen's UP in Fall 2025. She lives in Montréal.*

**donalee Moulton**

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## *Price of Admission*

I forgot fear

everything else was on the list

pajamas ✓

mouthwash ✓

iPad ✓

health card ✓

disposable underwear (in case) ✓

today, across this expanse of formica

and fresca and fries (with gravy)

I learn not to underestimate fear

not to put it in the optional column

understand its essential-ness

like salt, water, ketchup

you taught me this today my friend

dread rolling across the table

grains of salt in the breeze

that is our conversation

in the wrinkles that are now your eyes

that were once laugh lines

fear pushes mustard and relish aside

consumes the tabletop

sits dead centre

somewhere there is an elephant in the shadows  
not here  
where fear trumpets its presence  
challenges us to another course  
weaves its way around the cutlery,  
the paper napkins, the smudged water glasses  
breathes into the vinyl that eats at the edges of our backs  
daring us to bridge the gap  
between your hand  
and mine

| *donalee Moulton's poems have appeared in Arc, Prairie Fire, The Dalhousie Review, and Carousel, among others. She was editor of The Pottersfield Portfolio and Atlantic Books Today.*

**Bill Howell**

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## *The Cats Remain on Watch*

It takes them two weeks to sort out their spots.  
The best ones range from dark recesses  
on storage racks in vicarious closets  
to lairs on chairs pulled up to dining tables,  
all ideal for deep sleeping.  
Others are matter-of-factly arrived at  
to bolster circumstantial comfort  
& offhand napping. Their formal posts,  
overt perches & steadfast bastions  
are deliberately selected & tenaciously defended  
to facilitate maximum cosmic observation.

Between naps, just because they are  
the way they are, they feel they're not  
allowed to know what they know,  
so they watch & wait. With no timetable  
beyond meals & brushings, easily outlasting  
crossword conundrums, stray mice,  
Miles Davis solos, Mahler symphonies,  
street sirens, multiple pitching changes,  
CSI reruns, coffee grinders, treat packet crackling,  
odd hallway footfalls, plump robins basking  
in birdbaths & the cows coming home.

Perspective-by-incongruity carries on.  
Like cats, we once had more space to dream  
than we can remember having now.  
But cat thoughts aren't limited by logic,  
like those of humans: we lick at kindness,  
never realizing its taste. Forever trying  
to get out of it instead of just getting it.  
But choosing to go on anyway, because we seem  
to hold on because of them. I mean, if I  
could pick you up & hold you, maybe we'd arrive at this.  
Could we at least learn that much from them?

| *Bill Howell's sixth collection is The Way Things Are at the Moment. He has recent work in CV2, Literary Review of Canada, Queen's Quarterly, and Stand. Bill lives in Toronto.*

Sally Quon

## *Some Other*

Some other might look at the long night,  
hear the wind's bitter calling  
and not let it follow them  
down the canal of their dreams,  
where voices and faces of the past  
churn, tornado-like.  
Recriminations, disappointment  
reflected on the dark water.

Some other might rise in the morning  
to the rose-grey light  
and not feel the urge to crawl back into bed,  
pull the covers tight over their head,  
even if it means the voices  
will return.

Some other might step outside in the afternoons'  
sun-seething light and not blink,  
blinded by the day stretching out before them  
with the dread of a withering vine  
and the empty, hollow cavern  
of lonely  
beating in their chest.

Some other might face the evening  
with joy in their hearts,  
not haunted by the silence,  
the forbidding thoughts of the night ahead,  
not wishing for the chance  
to do it over,  
or let it end.

| *Sally Quon is a disabled Kelowna-based poet whose work appears in numerous anthologies. She is a self-identified Dirt Road Diva and haiku enthusiast.*

## *Goldfish Bowl for the Unspeakables*

The best revenge is forgetting  
my therapist calls memory loss a symptom  
when it's a skill. I smash my head into glass, to cut

the mold off a cheddar rind and Ah!  
Good as new, what's their name again?  
Oh, I can't be bothered to recall one

bruised clementine from a tangerine they all  
feel the same in my mouth, mealy amnesiacs.  
I think he was a chef or maybe a butcher?

Details, details, details. What matters is  
they both know their way around a knife.  
Glug glug glug, where am I? How'd I get on

Palmerston Avenue? I know those lampposts  
anywhere, the light swims in those warm globes . . .  
Hey, have you ever seen a show? Any show. Ever.

I'm hungry. How can you be acid crying and also  
close to cumming? I've never hated touch more.  
What's the difference between a butcher and a surgeon?

Something about the goal of the bite, I mean incision?  
One is for dinner service and the other is to draw the venom out.  
What was the last thing he texted me? I never saved his contact.

I grabbed my skin all over the floor and called the uber,  
I swear it had scales just like me only instead of orange  
they were green. Oh . . . ya.

He called me a snake.

*Cassandry Myers (My'z) (they/she/he) is an award-winning poet, performer, dancer, illustrator, and counsellor from Tkaronto, Ontario. Find them @cass.myers.poetry and at cassmyers.com.*

## Questioning Poetry

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**Nicole Raziya Fong**

*OIACULE*. Talonbooks \$16.95

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**Dale Martin Smith**

*Flying Red Horse*. Talonbooks \$16.95

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Reviewed by Scott Inniss (University of British Columbia)

Two of the five books of poetry comprising Talonbooks' fall 2021 catalogue, Nicole Raziya Fong's *OIACULE* and Dale Martin Smith's *Flying Red Horse*, have much in common, at least in their conceptual orientation. In both texts, poetry is not simply a vehicle of lyric self-expression but a mode of philosophical, intersubjective, and affective exploration. Both Fong and Smith construe poetics as a mode of questioning, with the interrogative as a prominent trope. In *OIACULE*, the questions are experiential but also theoretical and classical. Topoi include the relation of appearance to that which appears, aesthetics as a site or mode of knowing, and the relation of time and desire to memory, among others. In *Flying Red Horse*, the questions are similarly ambitious in scope. Although the language and tone are an intermixture of the meditative and the everyday, the concerns of the poems are widely phenomenological, existential, ecocritical, and anti-capitalist. Fong's and Smith's books also differ along various lines: in their comfort with divergent types of (un)knowing, in their concerns around gender and sexuality, and in their positioning of the relation of mediation to truth, to name only a few. Perhaps the most consequential difference, moreover, lies in the relative adequacy of their formal strategics to the poetic questioning that their writing at once explores and enacts.

*OIACULE* is a highly dialogical and performative text. It takes the structure of a play or opera, with dramatis personae, stage directions,

prologues, and six subdivisions, or “acts,” with titles such as “The Meaningless Divinity within the Flesh Theatre” and “She Dreams upon Fifteen Stages.” Each of these subdivisions houses a number of theatrical-poetic texts with titles of their own and whose forms alternate between dialogue and choric or antiphonal passages. The section “She Dreams a Grievous Omission” interrupts this structural patterning with couplets, and “Luminous” concludes with more broadly strophic composition. The writing is formally compelling, aesthetically rich, and highly inventive throughout, recalling at different times and in different ways the work of Lisa Robertson, Anne Carson, and Erin Moure, as well as that of younger contemporaries such as Canisia Lubrin and Liz Howard. With its hybrid poetic-theatrical architecture, *ORACULE* also invites historical comparison to the symbolist plays of writers such as Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Oscar Wilde, and Maurice Maeterlinck.

Throughout the book, Fong’s language is lyric and personal but also highly abstract. Although their syntax is normative and sentential, the poems possess a considerable degree of narrative opacity, in part due to a relative lack of an immediately apparent empirical referent. In a back-jacket blurb, the artist and writer Tiziana La Melia notes that “*ORACULE* slows you down,” and this is very much the case. Much of its diction is explicitly philosophical, with key areas of inquiry ranging from ontology and epistemology to aesthetics, subjectivity, and identity. Despite this philosophic inclination, however, Fong’s poetics take the form not of a logos, but rather of a queer *mise en scène*.

*ORACULE* opens with a feminist restaging of the Platonic dialogue *Theaetetus*, where this time the student gets the better of the teacher. The title also hints at the book’s peculiar relation to the phallic logics of Western philosophy. Classically, the oracle operates under the sign of the creaturely female body. Yet agency and the aegis lie elsewhere, in the Olympic prerogative of the deity. With its diminutive suffix and Cyrillic Я, Fong’s title suggests that the text’s oracular voice is multiple, choric, extra-subjective, molecular. “Heroine isn’t what you think,” Fong writes in introducing the book’s nominal protagonist: “It isn’t you. It isn’t your mother. It isn’t even me” (10). The titular *oracule*—a Romanian word for oracles—is a similar (perhaps overarching) vector of non-identity.

The book's queer feminist concerns are most apparent in its all-female and gender-non-specific cast. In the opening scene, Socrates and Theaetetus are played by Heroine and Luminous, respectively (and presumably wearing masks). This scene configures the Heroine-Luminous dyad as the main author and actor of the dramaturgy to follow. Frequently enough, these characters employ a symbolic vocabulary of pathfinding, journeying, discovering (or having lost) the trail. However, for a quest narrative of sorts, Fong's text registers at times as strangely static, atemporal, invariant, and lacking in material base. Although it is a work of multiple voices, its uniformity of style, tone, and lexical range makes it difficult to individuate its dramatic personages, at least beyond their archetypal stage designations (e.g., Maternal Love, Child). To a degree, this undifferentiation makes sense thematically. Yet it also risks producing the poetic action as effectively ideal, metaphysical, absolute.

Despite appearing as a totality, however, *OJACULE* also thwarts any totalizing interpretation. Tracking the relation between its two central figures, it is possible to engage the text as a (tortuous, non-linear, non-synthetic) movement through which Heroine endeavours to exchange the mask of appearance for the face of the other. The contours of this movement defy summary and reward careful rereading. Suffice it here to suggest that this movement begins with Heroine's complaint, "Why won't you print me in your discourse?" (8), and ends with Luminous' declaration, "I wrote myself into a thesis of change" (128). Yet it is not the place of Luminous—or, more generally, luminosity—to conclude the long poem either. The onto-epistemological quandaries and impasses continue, a type of eternal return—but with (as always) a difference. In the final analysis, *OJACULE* is highly worthy of recommendation and evidence of Fong's ongoing development as a major poetic talent.

*Flying Red Horse* is Dale Martin Smith's fifth book of poetry. Originally from Texas, Smith is a literary scholar as well as a poet, with a particular interest in the work of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson. His new book is Olsonian in its attention to geographical locale, public mythologies, and the relation of place to home. In its stylistic and formal dimensions, however, it perhaps more closely resembles the later work of William Carlos Williams and George Oppen, with its

prioritization of ordinary-language poetics, vernacular culture, and the material intentionality of the world and its objects.

*Flying Red Horse* is divided into four sections. It begins with a short lyric essay after which follow three long poems. An introduction of sorts, the titular essay offers auto-theoretical recollections and flashbacks as well as preliminary explorations of the book's key thematic concerns: aesthetic experience, capitalist spectacle, analogue and digital modernity, surveillance culture, social alienation, climate change, mass mediation and communication, race and class, reification and the body, song and the voice, patrimony and family romance, nature for itself but also as climate crisis, and (Heideggerian) standing reserve.

The figure of the flying red horse ties these diverse yet intersecting thematics together. Drawing on the iconic Mobil Oil "Pegasus" sign perched atop the Magnolia Building in Dallas since the early 1930s, Smith deploys this figure as a symbol of triumphalist global extractive capitalism and its anthropocenic logics. "I drove by the flying red horse with my father on our way to see Charley Pride in 1977 at the Dallas Convention Center," Smith informs the reader (10). This moment of the essay introduces Smith's remarkable musings on Pride's importance, as a Black country musician, to the burgeoning affective-cultural imaginary of Smith's childhood and youth. It also adumbrates Smith's attendant worry about the extent to which "the flying red horse" of fossil-fuel capitalism is the inevitable sign under, for, and through which all of life's most intimate and meaningful encounters now take place.

For Smith, the encroachments of an increasingly totalizing capitalist realism are economic and social, but also profoundly ontological. In a quasi-Heideggerian manner, Smith tends to regard the communicative media particular to digital modernity as a dangerous extra-phenomenological enframing of something essential to human being. Indeed, *Flying Red Horse* is shot through with images, declarations, and interrogations that outline a twenty-first-century recalculation of Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology": "Screens fracture my days . . . Surveillance corporations wash out residues of the past" (8); "Eyes cannot be averted from spectacle . . . a total immersion and dispersal of communal bonds" (16); "How I am to

myself, to my sons? To others in othered bandwidth image streams? . . . Or it's just the flying red horse again. Illusion and distraction" (21).

As with Heidegger, Smith is careful enough to recognize that questions concerning technology are equally questions for language and poetics. For both the philosopher and the poet, the promise of poesis lies in its capacity as a type of saving power from the technological clearing. In the face of "screens active with images and fragments, gross stupidities and lucid animations . . . the conserving urgency of poetry finds vitality in temporal *unrestraint*" (21–22). Yet Smith's assessment of the strength of poetry and lyric association remains tentative relative to the communicative ecstasy of platform capitalism. "What is lyric's relation to history, to a public today?" Smith asks. "How does song appeal to a sense of groundedness in our ungrounded now, in contrast or collusion with images?" (8). Smith's pessimism is such that he twice dismisses his own questioning as rhetorical at best and radically "inadequate to the situation" (16). Yet poetry and the question continue to guide his writing and thinking:

When national narratives fail, where personal stories collapse into the socially mediate, I wonder if song might conjure earth back into flesh? Writing provides an opening, but few answers, or none that I am capable of discerning. Instead I wonder how poetry works in range of so much that is incommunicable, mute, a driving public force of fragmentation and ruin? (20–21)

Summary and description do little justice to the artfulness with which Smith's introductory essay weaves together personal recollection, socio-political detail, noetic conjecture, and cultural reference (to Faulkner, Pride, Gorgias, and others). As an affirmative enactment of writing as productive questioning and opening, "Flying Red Horse" perfectly places the reader in anticipation of what is to follow. Unfortunately, however, none of the subsequent long poems is quite able to meet the expectations (and challenges) that the introductory essay establishes. Why is this? What goes awry?

Often, although far from exclusively, the chief issue seems to come down to insufficient formal determinations. "April \* Ontario" features the speaker and his son walking along the shore of Lake Ontario, with

the young boy's anxiety over ecological calamity serving as a springboard for the father's meditations on similar themes, including patrimonial, socio-cultural, and environmental inheritance. The poem takes the form of short stanzas, typically of five to eight lines in length, with each line generally comprising two to five words at most. Each short stanza ends in a question mark and is syntactically a sentence in disguise. As spatial markers, decorative tildes separate each stanza. The purpose (or effect) of such forms is typically to slow down reading and to amplify attention to what's going on the page—to map and mimic the ideational force of image (Pound), the play of signification (Ashbery), or the movement of breath and cognition (Olson). In Smith, however, these forms chiefly have the effect of thwarting the disjunctive connections that his essayistic style so successfully enables—but also of exposing the poem's various contents to a pressure and scrutiny that they are unable to sustain or withstand.

This feature of *Flying Red Horse* becomes especially stark in the concluding poem, "Sons," in which Smith's commitment to a poetics of the everyday butts up against its limits:

A kiss  
 Goodbye  
 Goodbye  
 A kiss  
 These days  
 In a book  
 Far away  
 .....  
 We look  
 For home  
 And go  
 On pretending  
 It's a place  
 On a map (92–93)

Reading the poems quickly, against the grain of formal cues and direction, allows them at times to gesture to what Smith reverences as "the sound and smell of earth. Song as mediating potential" (20). Yet instances of infelicitous diction, rhyme, enjambment, and cadence also

conspire against the poetry's investment in folk signifiers and phonologies, while also jarring its not infrequent epiphanic moments (whose singularity lies in the largely unrelenting—yet far from unrealistic—darkness, despair, or negativity of their content). Echoing Olson in a 1953 letter to Duncan, Smith notes how “[o]nly that belief in form and love makes possible the force of relations here in the making of poetry” (123). Like Fong in *ORACULE*, Smith's poetic questioning is important—crucial, even. At least in *Flying Red Horse*, however, Smith falls a bit short of this constituent Olsonian configuration.

# *A Mystery Milestone: Gail Bowen and Canadian Crime Writing*

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**Gail Bowen**

*An Image in the Lake: A Joanne Kilbourn Mystery.* ECW Press \$34.95

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Reviewed by Heidi Tiedemann Darroch (Camosun College) and  
Manina Jones (University of Western Ontario)

In 2021, mystery writer Gail Bowen published *An Image in the Lake*, the twentieth installment in her popular amateur detective series featuring now-retired academic Joanne Shreve (formerly Joanne Kilbourn) and set in Saskatchewan. Bowen is one of the most prolific and popular mystery writers in Canada and has often been lauded as “the queen of Canadian crime fiction.” Crime Writers of Canada has recognized Bowen with a special achievement award for contributions to the genre of crime and mystery writing and in 2018 named her the first and, thus far, only woman Grand Master of crime writing in Canada. Bowen, who has also written plays, a spinoff mystery series for young readers, and a how-to guide for writing mysteries, inaugurated the Joanne Kilbourn mysteries in 1990 with the novel *Deadly Appearances*. She has developed a strong cohort of devotees who have followed Bowen’s amateur sleuth through a multipart biographical narrative developed over a succession of novels. In the early years of the millennium, the novels were adapted into a series of six television movies produced by Toronto-based Shaftsbury Films, featuring Wendy Crewson as Joanne and airing on CTV. Given this distinguished career and long-lived success, it is surprising that Bowen’s work has generated so little critical attention: only one scholarly essay is devoted exclusively to her work (Bedore), and two further critical readings position Bowen’s fiction in relation to other authors (Haliburton; Perkowska-Gawlik).

With her two most recent novels, *The Unlocking Season* and *An Image in the Lake*, Bowen has shifted from publishing with McClelland and Stewart to the smaller ECW Press, suggesting that her long-time loyal readers, who have followed the series for decades, are perhaps not being joined by the numbers of new readers that Bowen deserves. McClelland and Stewart reportedly wanted her to bring the series to a close after over more than thirty years of publishing the Joanne Kilbourn mysteries; Bowen declined, taking the most recent two books to the Canadian indie publisher (Portman). So, Bowen's heroine heads confidently into her fourth decade of solving mysteries. In light of the author's continuing career accomplishments with this durable series, now is an opportune moment to take stock of the distinctions and deficiencies of the most recent novel, *An Image in the Lake*, and to review their context within the broader currents of Canadian popular mystery fiction.

In the introduction to their 2014 collection of essays, *Detecting Canada*, editors Jeannette Sloniowski and Marilyn Rose note how little critical work has been done to date on Canadian mystery, detective, and suspense fiction. Their volume is the first to address the popular genres in depth and across historical periods. Over the seven years since *Detecting Canada* was published, the dearth of critical work on the Canadian mystery has remained largely unchanged, with only a handful of essays on Canadian writers in the academic journal *Clues*, as well as two chapters in Monica Chiu's *Scrutinized! Surveillance in Asian North American Literature*. At the same time, in 2005, the *Globe and Mail* heralded a new golden age in mystery fiction in Canada; by most measures, this prediction has been realized. Several Canadian writers are published in dozens of languages: Louise Penny's *Three Pines* mysteries have become an international publishing phenomenon, as have Peter Robinson's Inspector Banks procedurals and Linwood Barclay's thrillers. Acclaimed adaptations of Maureen Jennings' historical Toronto series, *Murdoch Mysteries*, and Giles Blunt's northeastern Ontario Cardinal novels have been produced for television, and an adaptation of Penny's *Three Pines* novels was streamed internationally on Amazon Prime in 2022, with Alfred Molina as Inspector Armand Gamache. Given the surge in the popular appeal of the genre as practised by Canadian writers, sustained critical attention seems overdue. Indeed, established Canadian authors have

long been influenced by the formulas of the mystery novel in so-called literary fiction, including novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Carol Shields' *Swann: A Mystery*, Timothy Findley's *The Telling of Lies*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*.

The mystery genre is conventionally broken down into sub-genres, which reflect differences in setting, characterization, style, plotting, and degree of graphic violence. The police procedural, for example, is an enduring favourite, with its origins dating back as far as Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*. It features law enforcement professionals investigating a significant crime, typically a murder. Canada, with its stereotypical pretenses of peace, order, and good government, has dozens of works in the procedural sub-genre, including fiction featuring RCMP officers, such as the excellent novels of the late L. R. Wright, set on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. Eric Wright, Louise Penny, and Peter Robinson have set their very different police series in Toronto, the Eastern Townships of Quebec, and Yorkshire, England, respectively. Recently, the procedural hero has been refashioned in Ausma Zehanat Khan's Rachel Getty and Esa Khattak team in the Toronto Police Service. In Khan's series, Canadian-set plots expand to international contexts and are grounded in issues related to Detective Khattak's Muslim identity. All these authors adhere to the convention of focusing on a police investigator whose integrity is unshaken through the turmoil of difficult investigations that expose them to violence and corruption.

Hard-boiled detective fiction is an alternative generic permutation that, in instances from the 1920s onwards, features a lone private investigator drinking and wisecracking through violent exploits on the "mean streets" of the modern North American city. Véhicule Press has recently celebrated Canadian contributions to the hard-boiled tradition by republishing several noirish novels originally released in the 1950s and set in Montreal by David Montrose. The sub-genre is gently parodied in the late Howard Engel's comic, Niagara-based, "soft-boiled" Benny Cooperman mysteries and, arguably, in Thomas King's current series, which features laconic Cherokee ex-cop Thumps DreadfulWater. Eve Zaremba's Helen Keremos series, with the first openly lesbian private-eye character, broke ground in the genre in the 1970s and '80s; the series was revived last year with Amanda Deibert and Selena Goulding's graphic novel adaptation of Zaremba's 1987

novel *Work for a Million*, published by McClelland and Stewart. Howard Shrier's hard-hitting Jonah Geller books, each instalment set across the Canada-US border, are a recent incarnation of the hard-boiled narrative that makes the American roots of the genre palpable in the transnational geography of the plot.

The historical gendering of the genre is worth noting, with writers like Raymond Chandler expressing masculine scorn for the more feminized form of the "cozy," a mystery novel typically set in an idealized small town or otherwise closed community and featuring an apparently unlikely amateur investigator, such as Agatha Christie's elderly Miss Marple, an eagle-eyed spinster who restores order to a disrupted community by solving an intricately plotted puzzle. As the saying goes, the cozy is a story in which several people are killed, but nobody really gets hurt. In contrast to the hard-boiled novel, the cozy treats violence with delicacy. This sub-genre, whose origins are in the interwar period, continues to thrive. In the late Lyn Hamilton's mystery series featuring Torontonians antiquities dealer and amateur sleuth Lara McClintock, for instance, crimes invariably occur in a remote social setting, such as amid an isolated archaeological crew or en route among a tourist group. It is indicative of this series' cozy identification that, in 2003, one of these novels, *The Celtic Riddle*, was adapted as a TV movie for the *Murder, She Wrote* franchise, with iconic amateur investigator Jessica Fletcher (played by Angela Lansbury) substituted into Lara's role. Alan Bradley has put his own successful spin on the sub-genre, further, with his historical Flavia de Luce cozies, narrated by an unlikely eleven-year-old crime-solving prodigy. The mystery, then, in various permutations, continues to be a robust Canadian genre.

The cloistered setting of the cozy is refined in the popular academic or campus mystery, where a closed college or university environment gives rise to violent crime and the investigator is a member of an intellectual community. This sub-genre provided the initial generic matrix for Bowen's series. A former professor of English herself, Bowen introduced Joanne Kilbourn, an instructor in the department of political science at a university in Regina and commentator and aide-de-camp in Saskatchewan progressive politics. Over the course of the series, university politics of various kinds come to the fore, from the contentious manifestation of anti-violence feminism on campus to

department-specific turmoil. Indeed, Elżbieta Perkowska-Gawlik has compared one of Bowen's instalments in the series with Amanda Cross' groundbreaking feminist take on the campus novel *Death in a Tenured Position*. (Cross is the pen name of Columbia English professor Carolyn Heilbrun.) Situated at the intersection of the internal politics of the university and the party politics of Saskatchewan and Regina, as Pamela Bedore puts it, "each novel's central crime raises a major socio-political issue . . . placed alongside more insidious issues such as political, journalistic, and legal ethics" (154). Bowen has not shied away from depicting the seamier side of contemporary life, including child sexual abuse, prostitution, and gang activity—not typical topics for academic mystery novels. Among Bowen's significant contributions to the genre are the ways in which initially insular settings become bound up in issues such as gender, class, and racial politics; her focus on social inequality is matched by only a handful of writers, including the late Toronto author Pat Capponi in her two Dana Leoni mysteries.

Bowen's series introduced an unusual protagonist: a mid-life widowed mother of three children who had to fit sleuthing between writing political speeches, teaching university classes, and caring for family. An overachieving Everywoman, Joanne Kilbourn proved to be a resilient series protagonist whose multiple work and community commitments rendered her involvement in solving a long string of murders at least somewhat plausible, although the series has a high body count. One of the most impressive accomplishments of Bowen's work has been not just its longevity, but also the ongoing development of its heroine and her family and community networks over successive instalments. Joanne goes from being a part-time university instructor in the first novel to a full-time professor; she goes through relationships and losses to, in the most recent books, remarriage and retirement. One thinks of parallels with Scottish author Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus novels, which have followed his protagonist over a similar biographical scope through conflicts and career moves and into the challenges of later life. Unlike loner Rebus, however, the dynamics of Joanne's community and family relations provide a complex infrastructure for both the individual mystery plots and the series as a whole. This infrastructure goes back to Joanne's childhood; through the murder of her politician first husband; over subsequent

romantic involvements; and through the marriages, divorces, births, and adoptions of her burgeoning family and friends. Bowen has pioneered in the genre by using the form of mystery to explore her protagonist's domestic life and community, situating her stories among this rich and engaging set of family, professional, and community ties.

In the beginning of the series, Joanne is in a relatively precarious position: the mother of three children and the widow of the province's attorney general, who was murdered a few years earlier after he stopped on a snowy highway to assist a young couple. Although over the worst of her immediate grief, Joanne is faced with rebuilding a life for her children and tackling a PhD to try to make her contract employment at the university more permanent. Her challenges are compounded when her close friend and provincial leader of the Opposition, Andy Boychuck, is poisoned while delivering a speech at a rural political rally, leading Joanne to investigate his family and personal lives in order to solve his murder. Over the course of the next several books, Joanne takes on investigations involving neighbours and friends, university community members, and, in one especially poignant book set in Saskatoon, childhood friend and noted artist Sally Love, whose adolescent affair with her agent becomes the stuff of scandal. This particular plot strand has proven a rich vein for the series, with Joanne's discovery, several books ago, that Sally is in fact her half-sister, and that Sally's daughter Taylor, whom Joanne adopted and raised after Sally's murder, is her niece. In this way, Bowen creates a rich and distinctive hybrid between the mystery novel and the family melodrama.

In *An Image in the Lake*, Joanne deals with her past in the midst of a set of conflicts that include the tangled realms of politics and broadcast journalism. As the novel opens, Joanne's son-in-law, successful radio host Charlie D., seeks her advice about an increasingly toxic network television workplace where two senior women have been driven out—one by a sex scandal and the other by the complaints of a group of student interns. Joanne and her lawyer husband, Zachary Shreve, provide backseat counsel to Charlie. Soon, however, events transpire that force Joanne into closer contact with the emerging drama's principal players, including a charismatic young woman and her destructively unhappy mother: a scarred, fragmented, and violent family that contrasts Joanne's copious and loving kin. Meanwhile, Taylor has discovered that her girlfriend, Vale, has been

having an affair with the co-star of the TV miniseries based on Joanne's early life, leading Taylor to flee to the security of the family home. Many of the novel's events are recounted second- or third-hand, with key plot elements recapped in dialogue rather than depicted directly. This format gives the book a less vigorous pace than previous instalments in the series, where Joanne investigates more actively and experiences more personal peril as a consequence.

To make sense of the convoluted plot, the narrative must also describe characters and revisit events from previous novels. The cast of players in Bowen's series has expanded dramatically as Joanne's four children have each developed their own romantic entanglements or started a family; Joanne, at sixty, is a matriarch overseeing an ever-expanding brood. These loving and complex relationships are at once the backbone of the series and an increasingly obtrusive element in each novel's mystery and detection plot which, indeed, becomes almost perfunctory in *An Image in the Lake*. Unlike the earlier books, where Joanne undertakes dogged investigations despite her myriad domestic responsibilities, in this novel the investigation of crime is secondary, with Joanne leaving the more active detecting to the police while she busies herself with domestic routines, social events, and rituals of the early fall season. The growing cast of characters and plotlines, dating back to the earliest instalments in the series, assume the reader's knowledge has accumulated through the previous books. Yet the network of affiliations is becoming unwieldy, even for well-versed devotees.

Recent novels further complicate this complexity with a set of dramatic events related to an equally elaborate cast of characters for a television adaptation of Joanne's life story that is developed in *A Darkness of the Heart*, produced in *The Unlocking Season*, and aired in *An Image in the Lake*. The overwhelming extent of this constellation of relationships is acknowledged in *An Image in the Lake* by the inclusion of a long prefatory list of dramatis personae describing the characters' roles and relations—a sprawling group whose connections to the protagonist require considerable explanation. ECW attempted to address this issue when, in coordination with its release of Bowen's previous novel, *The Unlocking Season*, it published an online companion character guide, complete with intersecting family trees, to initiate readers into the world of Joanne Shreve.

On the positive side, this network of affiliations and proliferating stories, developed over a number of books, has allowed Bowen to explore the extended repercussions of violence and loss in a way that is unusual for the mystery genre. Indeed, *An Image in the Lake* involves creative narrative dimensions by which the story gestures towards not simply solving a mystery, but also healing the wounds of broken relationships and tragic death. For example, Joanne's former best friend, Jill Osiowy, whose personal betrayal led to the rupture of their relationship in an earlier book, returns in this story to make amends with those she hurt. Jill's reconciliation with Joanne's eldest daughter, Mieka, is portrayed as one of the novel's several illustrations of *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of "repairing broken pieces of pottery with lacquer and powdered gold" in order to show rather than hide the seams (350). In the same spirit, Joanne's artist daughter Taylor paints a mural in the Shreve family home in commemoration of a community and family tragedy from an earlier instalment in the series.

The focus on home is elaborated in the wider setting of the novels. From the first introduction of Joanne Kilbourn to the most recent volume, Bowen has produced a socially and politically informed series with a unique and emphatic sense of place. She has imbued the city of Regina with the kind of fascination more often seen in larger, signature urban settings for mystery novels, such as Chandler's Los Angeles or Rankin's Edinburgh. Bowen's Regina is a living, breathing, flawed city in need of attention and repair, but vibrant and diverse to its core. Set in various Regina neighbourhoods, Bowen's novels explore the city's complex cultural geography and socio-economic divides. In light of the ongoing popularity of Canadian mystery fiction both at home and overseas, it is worth noting that Bowen's particular form of prairie regionalism is far less romanticized or prone to cliché than the settings of many of her most successful contemporaries. In Louise Penny's Gamache series, for example, the Eastern Townships of Quebec are an idealized, almost magical country region, while in Robinson's grittier Yorkshire, where contemporary racial and sexual politics do surface more readily than in Penny's work, there is a sentimentalization not found in Bowen's fiction.

In several recent novels in the series, Joanne's social conscience is pricked by the stark contrast between her own family's affluence and the poverty of inner-city Regina. In these novels, Bowen engages more

directly with issues related to Indigenous urban populations and the legacy of residential schools and colonialism. Nevertheless, she has been attentive to anti-Indigenous racism since the first books in the series, as particularly emphasized in Joanne's relationship over several novels with Ojibway police officer Alex Kequahtooaway. In recent books Bowen has provided a nuanced appraisal of how developers and urban planners can work collaboratively with residents—sometimes with a tinge of noblesse oblige—to increase the life-chances of Indigenous children caught up in intergenerational poverty and trauma. But while urban problems and Indigenous issues have been prominent in Canadian culture in the past several years, these elements have become more muted in Bowen's fiction of late: Alison Janvier, aspiring Saskatchewan premier and new leader of the provincial party Joanne and her husband support, is of Métis heritage, but this detail receives only cursory attention in a plot bustling with interesting secondary characters, several of whom are robust enough to merit their own plots.

In this novel, too, Bowen's socio-political concerns have receded in favour of attention to Joanne's large family. In *An Image in the Lake*, many of Joanne's encounters find her nestled contentedly into her family's gated-community cottage complex or among social elites at clubs and refined dining establishments. Joanne's pleasure in these privileges is at once well-earned and somewhat frustrating for readers who have grown to admire a protagonist who has previously demonstrated an ability to juggle myriad responsibilities and weigh competing moral imperatives. Joanne has always been the moral—and even moralizing—centre of each novel, and Bowen's series has explored weightier topics than is typical for academic or domestic mystery novels. As Joanne's financial stability has increased, in substantial part due to her marriage to cutthroat attorney Zack Shreve, she has been vulnerable to accusations of complacency, which this particular volume seems to bear out. At the same time, Bowen's compelling characters and her careful attention to Joanne's relationship to husband Zack, who suffered a spinal cord injury in childhood and uses a wheelchair, is one of the ongoing strengths of the series, and her depiction of their passionate and mutually supportive married life avoids either stigma or stereotype.

All of the disparate elements—the depictions of politics, of media, of family life, and of violent death—that make Bowen’s series successful are present in *An Image in the Lake*, but they coalesce less readily than in some previous novels. Some threads are left hanging, such as a brief subplot involving the party candidate’s sexual abuse by a high school teacher. The novel’s adversaries, too, are relatively puerile and underdeveloped compared to those in previous novels, and their motivation is thin: Bowen works with a Nietzschean theme that is superficially applied, although it ostensibly inspires the interns’ machinations. And she seems unselfconscious about how the urge for power works closer to home, in Zack and his partners’ sometimes venal legal practice. Zack’s ruthless, individualist approach to law is an intriguing contrast to Joanne’s largely compassionate attitude and liberal politics, but we don’t see them engage directly. Many of the secondary characters are undeveloped, and their integration into the novel’s whole often seems desultory. As the family melodrama comes to the fore in this book, the detective and mystery elements fade into the background, and for the first time Bowen’s different genres seem to be genuinely clashing.

While there is some faltering in the most recent instalment, the enduring appeal of Bowen’s novels is indisputable. As Bedore has noted, much scholarly work remains to be done on the Joanne Kilbourn-Shreve series—and, more broadly, Canadian manifestations of the mystery genre. For those who have not yet dipped their toes into Bowen’s work, *An Image in the Lake* will likely prompt readers to reach back to the earlier contributions to the series, allowing them to immerse themselves in the immediate pleasures of a whole series of satisfying mysteries. Such readers will experience the distinctive ways in which Bowen has made her mark on the genre of the mystery by developing a social vision, a distinctive regional setting, and a collection of characters who continue to have the potential to expand, mature, and intrigue.

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# Converging Traditions in Rawi Hage's *Fiction*

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Krzysztof Majer, ed.

*Beirut to Carnival City: Reading Rawi Hage*. Brill €113.00

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Reviewed by Olga Stein (York University)

*Beirut to Carnival City: Reading Rawi Hage* is a collection of essays on Hage's novels. Editor Krzysztof Majer has bookended these fine essays by European and Canadian scholars and literary critics with a masterful introduction, "'Let's Not Belong': Situating Rawi Hage's Elusive Fictions," and an epilogue, "*Beirut Hellfire Society*: Beyond the Carnavalesque." An additional essay by Majer, "'The Commotion of the Tangible': Gravity and Levity in *Carnival*" appears in the collection's fourth and final part, "Bodies/Grotesques." That section also contains Lisa Marchi's "The Alchemy of Rawi Hage's Fiction: Transmuting Frozen Indifference into a Desire for Change" and Ewa Urbaniak-Rybicka's "Angels and Demons: Images of Women in *Cockroach*." These titles speak volumes, and like other aspects of "Bodies/Grotesques"—and the three preceding sections, "Homelands/Cityscapes," "Justice/Rights," and "Languages/Narratives"—they orient the reader by providing a sense of the authors' aims, as well as their relation to the larger project of this collection. It should be stated from the outset that the scope of this volume's critical grappling with Hage's fiction, and with Hage the writer, is ambitious. As far as I know, it exceeds previous efforts to map Hage's oeuvre onto the terrain of anglophone Canadian Lebanese, Arab Canadian, immigrant/diasporic, or "minor" writing. Moreover, *Beirut to Carnival City* delivers considerably more than the sum of its parts. Together, the essays invite a deeper appreciation of the connections among Hage's novels, their underlying ethos, and his literary affinities.

In his introduction, Majer eloquently shows that Hage has tapped numerous Western and Eastern literary, aesthetic, and intellectual traditions. Hage has co-opted some and subverted others, but above all he has scrupulously avoided being identified with any particular nationalist, political, or artistic mandate. Majer explains that the reasons for this avoidance are in no small way related to Hage's personal history as an immigrant from a country decimated by religious and political sectarianism. Yet as contributors to this collection demonstrate, Hage's work resonates with a range of critical approaches and frameworks. For the most part, these are helpfully outlined in the introduction. Thus, in addition to Majer's highly informed readings of the novels *Carnival* (2012) and *Beirut Hellfire Society* (2018), the book includes essays by experts from a multiplicity of fields: postcolonial and exilic literatures of Africa and the Near East, Levantine poetry and prose, and postwar Lebanese fiction. Some essays reflect personal experiences of military conflict, migration, and efforts to reconstitute cultural identity or community in exile. As a whole, the book provides nuanced elucidations of thematic and formal preoccupations that persist across several or all four of Hage's novels, and that justify renewed or supplementary attention.

### **Containment vs. Freedom**

Novelist Madeleine Thien's prologue is a poetic meditation on the recurring symbolism of light and flight in the subversive writing and paintings of Ma Jian and in Hage's novels. Hage studied photography in the 1980s and 1990s, and Thien contends that the pronounced imagery in his novels bespeaks the constant longing—at times impossible—for freedom or escape from containment. Containment is tantamount to various forms of confinement, such as forced ideological conformity or allegiance to a nation-state. For Hage, the notion includes the physical limitations of human existence, which can exacerbate deprivation and suffering. In *Cockroach*, the unnamed protagonist, an indigent and suicidal refugee from a war-torn country, clings to a fantasized insect identity because it holds the promise of easy escape as well as access to nourishment and shelter.

The representational elements and related motifs that Thien emphasizes foreshadow, according to Majer, the readings in the ensuing essays. They show that Hage's overarching intent is to expose the curtailments of human potential that all political, religious, and gender- and race-based ideologies enact. For example, the essays in "Justice/Rights" address governmentalities, their animating ideologies, and the prevailing attitudes they reproduce; although not everywhere to the same extent, they invariably and systemically oppress, marginalize, and naturalize the hardships of the displaced and vulnerable—migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. In "Expanding the Space of Human Rights in Literature, Reclaiming Literature as a Human Right: *Cockroach* and *Carnival*," Rita Sakr shows how Hage's novels contribute to the study of and advocacy for human rights. Sakr draws attention to the disturbing predicament of second-class citizenship, or of having citizenship withheld, and the abuse to which those who are marked with (un-)belonging are subjected: "Hage's narrator rages against the socio-economic exploitation and marginalization of the low-waged worker whose situation renders him both highly visible and invisible in the neoliberal economy and its biopolitical system of governance" (93). André Forget's "The Vengeful Refugee: Justice and Violence in *Cockroach*" builds on Sakr's reading by exploring the strained and volatile subjectivities of those who have suffered violence but are denied justice, even within refuge-giving societies. Forget asks: "[W]hat does vengeance do (to the avenger as well as the offender), and at what point does it become not only justified, but necessary?" (105). Forget comments on the compounding of the protagonist's and others' psychological injury by unfeeling government officials, underscoring Canadians' overt sense of superiority as well as expectations of unconditional gratitude from refugees: "This expectation that the narrator adopt a posture of gratitude for Canadian *largesse* is profoundly dehumanizing" (109). (Forget directs readers to Peter Nyers' "Object Cosmopolitanism"; see Nyers.)

In "Languages/Narratives," Kyle Gamble, Ewa Macura-Nnamdi, and Dima Samaha tackle marginality and "refugeeness" using other theoretical means (Forget 109). While Gamble's "A Political Representation of the Lebanese Civil War: *De Niro's Game* as Minor Literature" does not, strictly speaking, address the scourges of displacement, it does offer valuable insight into Hage's portrayals and

repurposing of linguistic and cultural second-class citizenship in and through his fiction as a Lebanese immigrant in Canada. Gamble applies Deleuze and Guattari's notion of linguistic deterritorialization in his analysis of embattled individual and collective identities and the reconfigurations of political power and influence that linguistic currency represents. Readers are invited to extrapolate from Bassam's experience of wartime sectarianism in Lebanon, where how one speaks marks individuals as belonging to one side of the conflict or the other, and think about the struggles involved in the effort to reconstitute diasporic identities in host nation-states through assertive acts of enunciation—like, say, writing novels—wherein members of a cultural or ethnic minority are pitted against *inhospitable* social and political conditions.

In “*Cockroach*: Compassion, Confession, and ‘Wonderful Stories,’” Macura-Nnamdi deploys Foucault's power-apportioning mechanism of confession to show that the narrator of *Cockroach* persistently undermines its intended function. For Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, confession “not only reflects the power relationship that gave rise to it but also (re)asserts this power and upholds the authority that compels it” (Macura-Nnamdi in Majer 154). The protagonist of *Cockroach* subverts the process of “therapy” with Genevieve through a mixture of silence, omission, and fabulation, or “wonderful stories” (Hage 48), that gives him a measure of control over the narrative in the face of vampiric authority that sustains itself on confession.

In “‘Not Settling for Half the Story’: Speech, Fantasy, and Empowerment in *Cockroach*,” Samaha elaborates on the theme of “wonderful stories” as counter-narratives to what Ruth Amossy, in *La présentation de soi: Ethos et identité verbale* (2010), calls “*ethos préalable*” (qtd. in Majer 178), which Samaha translates as “prior ethos” (178). This is the already-formed opinion about the presumed-helpless refugee held by an interrogator-therapist. In Genevieve's case, it is an opinion based on “social and ethnic status, his background, and the sum of his experience available to her” (178). Samaha points out that the predicament of *Cockroach*'s defiant and astute self-constituting subject is analogous to that of Scheherazade, the resourceful protagonist of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The hidden goal of therapy, she states, “is to entertain the therapist, a woman invested in every word of her patient's exotic tales and eager to hear

ever newer tales of wonder” (175). Samaha helps us see that Hage has empowered his narrator and himself with this intertextual bridge to another teller and her tales, which spans historical time, literary traditions, and languages.

### Cities and “Othering” Public Spaces

In “Diaspora and Double Consciousness” (1996), Samir Dayal writes that all refugees—individually and as entire communities—invariably have to confront and psychologically accommodate their host nation-states’ diverse national narratives and shared liberal fantasies, many of which are embodied incongruously in monuments and other symbols of war, conquest, and subjugation. Lauren Berlant would call such monuments examples of the “National Symbolic,” or the historical-cultural complex of “images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness” (Berlant 5). “The National Symbolic,” Berlant explains, “seeks to produce a fantasy of national integration” that, like the Statue of Liberty, is “fully saturated by a century of collective fantasy” (22). *Cockroach*’s narrator demonstrates his grasp of the ironies contained in such constructs when he tells his therapist that he may be more forthcoming with confessions or “wonderful stories” if he were to walk “in the park across the street . . . around the war-hero statue” (Hage 48). As Sakr asserts: “[T]his is one of the most charged moments in the work . . . [mocking] the pertinence of a ‘clean’ monumental-natural space to the narrator’s war-scarred psychological and cognitive map” (95). Genevieve, like many Canadians, is largely sheltered from truths that are all too apparent to “others.”

The connection Sakr touches on between city spaces dedicated to the celebration of national identity (as with other “narratives” of nationhood) and their failure to evoke a sense of inclusion among immigrants and refugees continues a discussion that is central to “Homelands/Cityscapes.” The essays here, I believe, build on the tradition of a number of seminal works that theorize the relationship between cities and the subjective physical and psychological experience of navigating them. Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Frederic Jameson’s “The

Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), and Kevin Lynch’s prescient *The Image of the City* (1960) lay the groundwork. Jameson extracted ideas, such as cognitive mapping, from Lynch’s book to explain the “situational representation on the part of the individual subject [in motion] to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (Jameson 40).

The three essays in “Homelands/Cityscapes” problematize the idea that the “practical reconquest of a sense of place” and the successful “reconstruction of an articulated ensemble” are always available, or available in the same coherent and mitigating way (Jameson 40). In “The Body and the City: Race, Sexuality, and Urban Space in *Carnival*,” Alex Ramon shows that Fly’s journeys across the metropolis exemplify the antagonistic “mapping”—racial, sexual, and political—that becomes part of navigating multifarious spaces (in Majer 62). At the same time, the city’s diverse social and topographical features resist efforts to map its totality. Analogously, in Judit Molnár’s “The Psycho-Spatial Continuum in *Cockroach*,” the “search for cultural acceptability . . . undertaken by the unnamed immigrant protagonist” across Montreal forces Hage’s narrator “to situate himself in liminal spaces—geographic, linguistic, cultural, religious, or sexual—which exist in unusual configurations of coherence or contrast, with hope and bare survival placed side by side” (74).

### **Motion vs. Stasis: New “Poetics of Subversion”**

Samaha’s linking of *Cockroach* to *One Thousand and One Nights* is representative of the juxtapositions in Hage’s novels of different cultures, histories, and literary traditions; this volume’s highlighting of the complex intertextuality in Hage’s work endows it with its critical mass—its worldliness, in the best possible sense. Molnár notes, for instance, that “Hage lays claim to the long tradition of metamorphic plots, from Ovid and Apuleius . . . to more contemporary uses of the Todorovian marvelous” (77). Yet contributors to *Beirut to Carnival City* never lose sight of the fact that Hage underscores the common denominator in people’s lived experiences. In *Cockroach* and *Carnival*, Hage uses protagonists of

unspecified nationality to highlight the universality of suffering and the universal in suffering. Cities, too, are left unnamed because they are stand-ins for metropolitan capitalism—spaces that accentuate global economic disparities, reifying extreme poverty alongside fetishistic and excessive types of conspicuous consumption.

In *Carnival*, far more than in Hage's previous novels, universal experiences of itinerancy or transience are juxtaposed and contrasted; they become versions either of displacement and homelessness or of what Ramon calls "independent, peripatetic rootlessness" (62). Meanwhile, Elizabeth Dahab explains that *Carnival's* "atmosphere of contrapuntal restlessness" is "an allegorization of motion and its reverse, stasis and permanence, in all their disregard for the human condition" (121–23). Yet another dimension comes to light in the way that motion functions in *Carnival* due to its associations with the city's multicultural, multilingual, and cosmopolitan ethos. Dahab presents an illuminating passage that continues to play on the "thematic binary oppositions of movement/impermanence versus motionlessness/permanence . . . [and] that clearly celebrates and favours the former" (121):

We witness literal and figurative acts of motion, two systems of travel: on the one hand, a physical one . . . on the other, the mental, abstract movement, encapsulated by an inherently intertextual narrative that evokes an array of writers from various continents, e.g. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Stokely Carmichael, Albert Camus, James Joyce, . . . Jorge Luis Borges, Abdelrahman Munif, Jean Genet, or Bohumil Hrabal . . . [There is] an evocative wink to Le Clézio (himself a prolific transnational traveller/writer), from whose *Book of Flights* Hage selected a motto . . . "but those who flee over the wandering earth, and those who are motionless on the motionless earth: what should they be called?" (125–26)

Fly's cosmopolitanism, in the sense of reading and adopting diverse and disparate literary and intellectual traditions and genres, is in itself an act of dissident contestation that "flies" in the face of nativists who

would disparage the foreign-born “cosmopolitan” in their midst for lacking the expected values and loyalties to the nation-state that have given them succour. Significantly, Sakr, like Dahab, continues unpacking the literary implications of Carnival’s ambient and dissident cosmopolitanism—this time by quoting from Joseph Slaughter’s *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007): “many contemporary postcolonial *Bildungsromane* (like few of their European predecessors) translate these *mise en abyme* scenes of reading to construct literary genealogies that situate readers . . . in an international imaginary” (qtd in Majer 100). Like Fly’s literary immersions, Sakr argues, these Bildungsromans thus “imaginatively contribute to a trans-linguistic, intertextual order of literary resistance to all forms of parochialism and exceptionalism” (Sakr in Majer 100).

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## A Knack for Anachronism

**Mark Callanan**

*Romantic*. Biblioasis \$19.95

**Jason Camlot**

*Vlarf*. McGill-Queen's UP \$17.95

**Kevin Irie**

*The Tantramar Re-Vision*. McGill-Queen's UP \$17.95

Reviewed by Carl Watts (Huazhong University of Science and Technology)

Mark Callanan's *Romantic* draws on, according to its press sheet, "Arthurian myth, the Romantic poets, the ill-fated 'Great War' efforts of the Newfoundland Regiment, modern parenthood, 16-bit video games, and Major League Baseball." It's not fair to read too much into promotional text, but foregrounding these at once disparate and fairly commonplace topics raises some questions. Given the mass of diffuse cultural references past and present that makes up pretty much any effort at writing poetry today, is it really so notable that a collection deals with a good variety of stuff? To whatever extent the statement's arrangement of terms implies a mix of "high" (Arthuriana and Romanticism) and "low" (video games and, I guess, sports), this form of supposedly transgressive boundary-crossing has ceased to be out of the ordinary.

Reading the poems themselves, one finds that Callanan is in on the joke. The book's first poem, "Arcane," physicalizes the conceit:

You waved a wand  
that made a man appear  
to walk across a screen,  
drawing out a string  
of foes that issued  
from the lines of code  
concealed within  
the program's sleeve. (1)

After more sleight of hand, heroism, and spellcasting, the poem's conclusion wraps itself up with a take on self-fashioning that acknowledges the universality of the practice while also imbuing it with nostalgia: "We were golden, then, / and took the shape / of anything we chose" (1). "Cliché" does something similar, its layers of technological obsolescence cascading in varied grammatical moods:

Came a time, the web  
of self-delusion set its net  
worldwide. Dial up. Early  
Internet. You remember.  
Then the tone switched

from sacred to paranoid (7)

"Romantic" expresses this swirling anachronism stylistically. "Gawain," it almost exhorts, "accept his dubious challenge, / then hack the very head off him— / off him who now stands up" (9), coming across like contemporary English twisted into Arthurian shapes. "Cyclic" deals in a similar mock-heroic register as it describes the monotonously shifting landscapes of suburbia: "but from the rubble / rose a grocery store / whose produce, / if not great, is passable" (25). It often seems like the most notable heterogeneity in the book is its style and register, not the grab-bag of topics in the promotional text. "The Odd Couplets" is, despite its rendering in oddly stately language, a stripped-down take on the mundane dissonances of a relationship. Two-line comparisons, like "He read her journal while she slept; / she hates it when he gets half-slapped" (20), give way to the concluding statement that "they talk of kids, but not right now," followed by the standalone line "The flat's too small. There isn't room" (20). The asymmetries are again physicalized, the poem a manifestly made thing the purpose of which is to show a marriage, half-made as it is, nevertheless in the process of being unmade.

Jason Camlot's *Vlarf*, as indicated by the title, mines the discourses of the Victorian world in the same way that flarf harvested the textual junkyards of the early internet, in the process rehabilitating sentiments that today might seem anachronistic or shameful. The result is a form of avant-lyric that might bring to mind Sina Queyras' ideas about lyric conceptualism. And the steady pace of the opening poem, "Lost Days," gives the impression that Camlot is re-creating period verse more systematically than Callanan does:

The Victorian period is alive today.  
The sandwich men are lurking in the streets.  
They invented new machines for threshing wheat,  
hammers for pummeling men back into clay,  
systems to guarantee that workers pay  
with lacerated hands and blistered feet. (3)

But *Vlarf* also uses found text and actual mining (as opposed to the fundamentally lyric practice of just choosing some words and not others). In being more systematic, it's also more alien, its overlaying of styles generating awkward, Tennysonian clumps that fall and linger like Tetris blocks amid the book's more synthesized swaths. See, for example, "Men of Letters," which draws on John Stuart Mill's and John Ruskin's autobiographies:

... In a monthly repository he stored  
ideas about the intuitive truth of some words.  
His father had raised him as an experiment  
in education, and had taught him the uselessness  
of wild imagination. (20)

"In the Criminal's Cabinet, Sherlock Holmes Discovers Himself" is situated at a natural confluence between the Victorians and flarf, with the cabinet of curiosities aligning naturally with the crass pop-info overload of early Google:

snuffed tapers and chandeliers,  
and beneath a glass table top,  
instruments for the manipulation of teeth.  
Holmes admired the Japanned goods. (6)

"The Fruit Man," a long Rosetti reimagining, employs repetition in a way that's both affecting and too much, its excessive end-rhymes reducing hybrid style into hyper-doggerel:

My mother alone  
in the paisley kitchen,  
talking on the phone,  
one of her sisters wishing  
calamity upon  
her other one  
as far as I can tell,  
from my little room upstairs. (8)

The plundering eventually gets a little less systematic. "Lines Left" resembles a Victorian diary entry as much as a throwaway LiveJournal confession from the early 2000s, reading, in its entirety, "I had a string / of futile-feelings / about the dabchicks. / But no longer" (35). "Limerick of the Sea," from "Two Limericks," twists up the doggerel one turn further: "A wrench his skiff he liked to twist with. . . . Then a rag the tool he'd wiped forthwith with" (50).

"Why I Am Not a Modernist," depicting an encounter with Hugh Kenner, is a humorous celebration of the verbosity of Victorian texts—about two-thirds of it consists of the preposterously long-winded title of the speaker's thirty-nine-volume masterwork, which begins: "*The Queen of Autumn's Sepulcher: / A Study of Inscrutable Codicils, / with Official Tables Appended, / Summarizing the Report*" (46). Its opening and closing lines, meanwhile, manage to parody and contain the existentially blunt, self-defeating minimalism of the modernist, with Hugh Kenner beginning an essay—"I sip; we sip. I look / down. 'You have MODERNISM in it'" (45)—and the poem eventually ending, "And one day in a little magazine / I see Hugh's essay, called MODERNISM" (48). The poem also reconciles the book's different registers and techniques, in doing so articulating what might be Camlot's organizing take on voice, sentiment, authenticity, or whatever poetic language is or might do. The notes reveal that it's a cut-and-replace of a Frank O'Hara poem; these more haphazard methods complement Camlot's "purer" uses of found text, like erasures.

A little less varied is Kevin Irie's *The Tantramar Re-Vision*, which, the resonance of its title with Charles G. D. Roberts notwithstanding, takes its primary inspiration from John Thompson's *Stilt Jack*. While Thompson's 1978 volume takes part in the sometimes-maligned loosening of the ghazal form into free verse, what stands out about it today are its strings of monosyllables that trace out fragmentary images, shift among grammatical moods, and imbue objects with a physical weight even as they're

left lingering agrammatically. Lines like “On the hook, big trout lie like stone: / terror, and they fiercely whip their heads, unmoved” continue to surprise (Thompson 1); one can understand why Irie chose it as an access point into one of Canadian poetry’s most written-about landscapes.

*The Tantramar Re-Vision*’s first poem, “Recognition,” provides a smoothly prosaic evocation of the weighty particles one finds in Thompson’s ghazals: “Fog finds its shape in the bodies that breach it— / a cow, a leaning barn, a man” (3). But the enjambment into the following line, “coming closer to just being seen” (3), saps it of Thompson’s gravity and pacing. A little of the latter shows through in the following stanza—“You know him by the way he walks, stands, / and how it is not the fog that contains him” (3)—but, given the simplicity of the images, the patterning doesn’t achieve *Stilt Jack*’s level of disorientation.

“The Tantramar Re-Vision” does something similar, presenting a succession of spare images. Stretches like “just a trail / straight as a finger that points from no hand” spread Thompson’s loose ghazal even further, making some use of white space as well. Much of the poetry parses grammatically—it’s free verse, but it could very well be reformatted as standard prose. “Crossing Tantramar Marsh,” for example, is close to disorienting; it begins, “Bales of rolled hay large” (10), its monosyllables culminating in the awkward physicality of the final term. But, despite the hanging indents of the subsequent lines, the image ends as straightforward simile: “as industrial oil drums” (10).

Irie’s lines coil up a bit more tightly on occasion, like when the end of “Welcome to the Marsh Visitor Centre!” approximates Thompson’s shifting grammatical moods with narrative twists: “This marsh keeps to corners you’ll never reach, / knows not even Nature // can hold on to its looks” (20). “Red Alert” does something different by fixating on “That cyst / on your otherwise flawless back, / which never had acne but burned so easily” (60), balancing the weightlessly philosophical sections with a blunt corporeality one also finds in some of the book’s uncomfortably direct references to Thompson’s alcoholism. By “Blasphemies: Erasures/Extractions from John Thompson’s *Stilt Jack*,” however, the careful pacing and manifold disorientations of its inspiration are flattened into a straightforwardly prosaic series of images: “The moon / in its right place lives / in darkness” (75). It reverses what the erasure technique usually does, in that it’s the source poems that are unpredictable, and the vignettes revealed by the erasure comparatively conventional. *The Tantramar Re-Vision* is smoothly systematic in its use of a source text and hallowed poetic landscape, but it leaves one wondering if the ugly composite voices of Callanan and Camlot are more valuable as core samples.

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## A Luxury of Textures and Traditions

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**Edem Awumey; Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott, trans.**

*Mina among the Shadows*. Mawenzi House \$22.95

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**Elizabeth Allua Vaah**

*Maame (Mother)*. Mawenzi House \$22.95

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**Yejide Kilanko**

*A Good Name*. Guernica Editions \$25.00

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Reviewed by Misao Dean (University of Victoria)

These three books by African Canadian authors, all of them first-generation immigrants—one from Togo, one from Nigeria, and one from Ghana—are a fascinating introduction to a diversity of literary traditions and approaches. A wonderful discovery for me among these three books is Quebec novelist Edem Awumey, whose novel *Mina among the Shadows* is translated from French to English by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott, an accomplished partnership. In the novel, photographer Kerim returns to his childhood home in an unnamed West African country to search for his muse and former lover, Mina. Kerim finds a very different city to the one he left; the nation has been seduced by religious extremism, and his former collaborators in a revolutionary theatre group have become conservative and cynical.

Kerim's memories of Mina emphasize her continuing hope and daring political commitment, as well as her sensuality and beauty. As Kerim searches for her at her bookstore, among her old friends, and at her brother's new mosque, Mina comes to represent much more than herself, becoming a figure for the energy, optimism, and spirit of creativity and critique that she alone seems to have been able to preserve "among the shadows" of fear and violence that now haunt the city. Kerim's quest for her calls to mind the search for the elusive K in Hubert Aquin's *Prochain épisode*, with its mix of symbolic, realist, and popular narrative conventions.

Edem Awumey works very much in a French tradition, which makes his work stand out among the many contemporary African novelists (like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for example) who are perhaps more influenced by African American realist fiction. *Mina among the Shadows* uses language poetically, in short, allusive chapters, and relies on metaphor and symbolism as well as realist dialogue and description. The book references Sartre's *Les Mouches*, which provides the name for Kerim's theatre group as well as its most prevalent symbol, a cloud of flies. While, in Sartre, the flies represent the inevitability of death, in *Mina among the Shadows*, their meaning is not so clear; periodically, they engulf the characters and hinder the action, expressing (perhaps) a kind of disgust, chaos, or loss of hope. Kerim's work as a photographer, and his chosen speciality, portraits of women, also provide the opportunity for visual description and meta-commentary on art.

*Mina among the Shadows* is definitely political, but its evocative imagery resists paraphrase, and its commentary on art and the ethical issues attendant to its creation complexify all of its representations. Edem Awumey is an author who repays careful rereading, and a lovely discovery.

*Maame (Mother)*, by Elizabeth Allua Vaah, is a much less self-consciously literary book. *Maame* is a volume of fictionalized stories of rural West African mothers and

children, with lots of information about traditional lifeways in a small Ghanaian village. In this way, it seems more like a cultural document than fiction, or perhaps it escapes these categories altogether to exist simply as a stories, ones that preserve histories and teachings that we can learn from. The information is arranged into narrative form by a first-person narrator, who describes her own life and those of their friends, while also explaining traditional beliefs and practices of childbirth and spirituality. These narrators describe the impact of modernity on traditional cultures, and their struggles to help their children escape the limits of their rural upbringing. This would be a good text for a course on life writing, or on mothering and gender, in addition to being a fascinating and heart-warming read.

*A Good Name*, by Yejide Kilanko, is, by contrast, a conventional, realist novel about a Nigerian immigrant to the US who returns home after ten years to find a youthful wife. Frustrated by his lack of economic success in the US, Eziafa is determined that his marriage will make up for his disappointments. He inspects the many young women trotted out by their mothers as possible mates and chooses a much younger woman whom he barely knows. After their return to the US, he fences in his new wife, Zina, with so many rules and requirements that she is unable to fulfill any of her own dreams. Predictably, she rebels and threatens to leave him.

This bare plot summary does little to convey the descriptive texture and challenging narrative voice of *A Good Name*. The novel conveys the wide gap between Eziafa's expectations and his ability to achieve them, as his dogged work as a taxi driver seems barely to support him. Eziafa's lover, a Nigerian woman raised in the US, constantly points out the way that his stubborn conformity to Nigerian cultural expectations sabotages his own happiness. And in the background is the constant voice of the family that he left behind, whose inflated ideas about American financial success reinforce Eziafa's sense of shame and failure. Zina gradually achieves independence and American cultural literacy, but Eziafa becomes even more recalcitrant, with violent results.

Where is the space for "Canada" here, and for these books in a journal called *Canadian Literature*? All three seem to resist national identification and to assert the artificiality of such categories. All of these books should find audiences in Canada, thanks to the groundbreaking work of Mawenzi House and the always-reliable Guernica Editions. Their diversity and their excellence reiterate something that North Americans sometimes forget—that "Africa" is not a single place, but a luxury of textures and traditions, inviting both careful scrutiny and joyful engagement.

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## Seriously Playful / Playfully Serious

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**Ian Williams**

*Word Problems*. Coach House Books \$21.95

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**Angela Szczepaniak**

*The Nerves Centre*. DC Books \$19.95

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**Franco Cortese**

*Lip*. Penteract Press £12.00

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Reviewed by Eric Schmaltz (York University)

In step with recent trends towards lyrical and identity-based poetry and poetics, experimental and avant-garde poets—who once might have distinguished themselves from the authorial *I*—have become gradually more prone to investigating and emphasizing the role of subjectivity in the poem. The aesthetic and political boundaries that once might have distinguished poets continue to trend towards dissolution, as evidenced by the three collections here under review. They each notably wield formally playful and inventive composition strategies, often associated with experimental poetics, to explore bodies, identities, otherness, and subjectivity in the poem and the world.

Multi-award-winning author Ian Williams is simultaneously playful and serious in *Word Problems*, as he investigates concerns of our socio-historical moment. Williams spins lyrics through an array of ostensibly non-literary forms: math book problems, grammar lessons, audio spectrums, drawings, text-message threads, and more. Single lines spiral out or run across multiple pages to intersect with otherwise separate poems, while others are occluded by a finger imprint or an overlaid audio spectrum. These features result in poems that at times resist legibility, shift dramatically in perspective, traverse cultural allusion, and swerve discursively, all to resist critical closure and complicate the “problems of identity” that are central to the book:

Before class, at a faculty meeting, Sam’s chair refers to students as *customers*. During class, Sam returns response papers. After class, a point guard approaches, paper in fist, to tell Sam that he deserves a better mark than a B+ he received. He might be a linebacker, not a point guard. His response paper is 500 words and the assignment requires 750. Determine whether Sam is male or female, white or not. (19)

Such dark humour is found in many of the poems and adds to the playful quality of the book, but the concerns, of course, are quite serious. These issues of identity are catalyzed, as the title of the collection suggests, by language’s primary function of naming and categorizing things in the world, establishing separation and dissimilarity between persons and things. These poems offer no solutions to language’s emphasis on difference and hierarchy; they offer problems only. As a result, *Word Problems* thrusts these issues onto the reader, insisting that you “show your work” (48).

While Williams gestures towards a broad spectrum of social issues, London-based writer Angela Szczepaniak offers an investigation of the anxious subject in her third collection of hybrid experimental works, *The Nerves Centre*. This time, as the subtitle

describes it, she offers us “a novel-in-performance-anxiety in ten acts, 131 stanzas, 2417 phonetic utterances.” Composed “from recordings of actual panic attacks that were poorly transcribed by increasingly confused transcription software” (“Nerves Centre”), *The Nerves Centre* is about and enacts performance anxiety. Each time the hopeful speaker approaches the “defiant” microphone (15), their speech sputters and vocalizes little more than extralinguistic expressions: “mmmmhhhhhaaaa” (17), “whaaaa” (21), or “tah tah tahhhh” (80). As poet J. R. Carpenter points out on the book’s back jacket, these are poems meant to be felt “in your belly,” inviting the reader to perform the speaker’s heaving sighs and gasps. The book has the striking quality of a multi-act sound poetry score; thus, it intersects with a rich tradition of proto-semantic poetics that might recall the spontaneous emotional release of 1970s sound poetry. However, *Szczepaniak* revitalizes the sometimes-solipsistic sound poem, giving rise to a meaningful exploration of mental health, wellness, and the inward dramas of the anxious self.

While *The Nerves Centre* comprises poetry made from the self’s unintentional swerves, Franco Cortese’s *Lip* employs virtuosic constraints that differently negotiate the tension between authorial intent and the poem as an agential force. In *Lip*, Cortese presses formal play to extremes with a variety of innovative “limit-case” lipograms that are construed into “real-world forms” (252). Such innovations apply immense external pressure to language, and one would expect the subject to be pushed out entirely, leaving us in an alien world of molecularized language. On the one hand, these poems read in just this way, as though created by “a bruise forming words emphasizing contempt for a subject” (55). Pages of vowel columns, for example, look at first glance as though they have been written by an extraterrestrial. Some poems speak directly to the project’s attempt to dislocate the self from the poem:

thorn:  
I am  
nothing,  
I was  
nothing,  
upward  
smoke  
to sew  
water  
current:  
ceremonial purification. (15)

At other times, there are scattered moments of profound and, dare I say, tender humanity:

his father  
at all times  
someone else  
come  
together  
between  
indigo

dust  
ever  
still. (45)

The push and pull between self and other is central to the text, a dynamic further emphasized by its collaborative elements. Celebrated poet and painter bill bissett provides hand-drawn images for the collection that, like the poems themselves, emphasize the collection's central tension with imagery ranging from abstract linework to human figures. Likewise, poet Sacha Archer smears the title word *Lip* across a fleshy cover image reminding us of the bodies in the poems. The meaning of the word *lip* itself oscillates through discursive registers pertinent to human and non-human contexts. A lip is "the projecting rim of an open container," for example (251). And yet, lips are also a source of human sounding, a means of linguistic expression, a site of human agency. As integral organs of speech, lips can make and unmake the world, just as, in *Lip*, Cortese, like a mad scientist, gives life to a language that is a world maker unto itself.

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## Indigenous Futures: Possible and Present

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**Drew Hayden Taylor**, ed.

*Me Tomorrow: Indigenous Views of the Future*. Douglas & McIntyre \$22.95

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**Robert Henry**, ed.

*Indigenous Women and Street Gangs: Survivance Narratives*. U of Alberta P \$24.99

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Reviewed by Michael Minor (University of Manitoba)

It seems fitting that one of Métis leader Louis Riel's most influential declarations is not precisely documented. It is, apparently, passed down from a time near Riel's death in 1885 to today, mostly through word of mouth. Regardless of the exact context, there can be no denying the power that Riel released when he said, "My people will sleep for a hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back." We are living in the present of Riel's prophecy. It is a present where Indigenous voices continue to speak about the future and a present where prophecies of the past are confirmed. These two volumes embrace diverse Indigenous views of what could be and what is.

*Me Tomorrow* is the fourth installment of Ojibwe author Drew Hayden Taylor's "Me" series, which already includes *Me Funny* (2006), *Me Artsy* (2008), and *Me Sexy* (2015). Each of these edited volumes collects writing from a wide range of Indigenous people in what is now called Canada. Robert Henry (Métis) is an Indigenous studies scholar who has compiled the stories and photography of six Indigenous women who have lived as part of street gangs. While these two volumes are collaborations representing diverse Indigenous perspectives, they each present visions of the present

and future where Indigenous knowledges, lifeways, and peoples are depended upon for survival.

Like previous editions in the series, *Me Tomorrow* offers an intentionally diverse and discursive approach to its topic: predicting the future. From mother and son collaborators Cyndy Baskin and Minadoo Makwa Baskin, to experienced political leaders like Romeo Saganash and Clarence Louie, to activists like Tracie Léost and Autumn Peltier, or writers like Lee Maracle and Drew Hayden Taylor—this volume collects the wisdom of generations to project the hopes and anxieties of Indigenous futures on Turtle Island.

Darrell J. McLeod's essay "Me Tomorrow: Paint It Red" sets an ambitious tone for the collection. It interweaves the four elements and the Four Directions into what McLeod dubs the "Nehiyaw cosmovision" (6). He draws on the unparalleled visions of his mother and Vine Deloria Jr. to plot a future of reclamation and hope for Turtle Island. As is true for so many of the contributors to the collection, McLeod's hope for the future is hard-earned. He reveals the thoughtless harms done by believing the earth can be owned and the colonial quest for ever more "fire power" (15). His hope for the future is born out of the many crises facing the earth and Indigenous peoples. There is hope for the future as long as McLeod and his co-conspirators can "paint it red."

Cyndy Baskin, Shalan Joudry, and Shelley Knott Fife are among those who, directly and indirectly, focus on the concept of *two-eyed seeing*. Related to Indigenous prioritizations of balance and holistic being, "Etuaptmumk (Two-Eyed Seeing)" is a concept taught by Mi'kmaq Elders Albert and Murdena Marshal (44, 96). It is the art of seeing "with Indigenous ways of knowing" in one eye and "mainstream ways of knowing" in the other (44). The critical element of this balancing act is "learning to see with both eyes together." Similar to McLeod's perspective, the hopeful predictions of proponents of two-eyed seeing are contingent on balanced, relational ways of being.

Alongside the prediction that Indigenous knowledges and lifeways are the solution to so many of the world's existential threats, there is a deep weariness of what Nez Perce Chief Joseph described "over 120 years ago" as "the good words and the broken promises" (105). Former MP Romeo Saganash and Chief of Osoyoos Indian Band Clarence Louie draw on their considerable experience with broken promises to give heavily guarded predictions for the future. For these men, something major in the current political system will have to change before Indigenous peoples can live in the world that they dream of for their children. They are both unequivocal that, regardless of the remote possibility of significant improvements, Indigenous peoples today need "to put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children" (Sitting Bull qtd. by Louie 119).

Lee Maracle is, most appropriately, given the final word in *Me Tomorrow*. Maracle died in November 2021, just a few short months after this volume was published. With characteristic candour and care, Maracle points to, among other things, quickly accelerating political instability in the US and concludes, "We appear to have fallen on dark times" (198). The world on the brink of a global conflict and yet another devastating wave of covid-19 do nothing if not bolster Maracle's understated conclusion. Yet she preternaturally predicts that, with incredibly hard work, in one hundred years, "I will be looking down at my grandson's and granddaughters' aging children, who are such golden-hearted human beings, and I will swell with pride" (206).

*Indigenous Women and Street Gangs* is part of Henry's "photovoice" work with six Indigenous women. This work is in collaboration with STR8 UP 10,000 Little Steps to

Healing, a program helping people leave street gangs in Saskatoon (xi). Photovoice methodology blends the stories of participants with photos that they take to illustrate their experiences. It is becoming increasingly common in social sciences and social work pedagogy. However, Henry's work stands out because there are few examples of photovoice being published for general audiences. As Henry points out in the introduction, there is also a deficit of photovoice work "with Indigenous women who are or have been engaged in street gangs" (xi). In many ways, documenting these women's stories is a powerful form of decolonization, and it fulfills calls to hear Indigenous women's voices without the interference of researchers speaking for them. Henry has made a concerted effort to give agency to the authors in all editorial decisions and encourages readers to look past facile assumptions about victimization. Instead, readers are urged to understand these experiences as "acts of survivance."

The remarkably unified message delivered by each of these women is familiar to readers of Indigenous literatures in Canada, especially path-setting works by Maria Campbell and Beatrice Mosionier. Amber, Bev, Chantel, Jazmyne, Faith, and Jorgina clearly articulate the almost incalculable damage done when children are isolated from places of love and belonging. This isolation takes different forms for each author, but they all find the corresponding community and loyalty that they require in street gangs. Taken together, the women's stories are compelling evidence that child welfare, social assistance, and judicial systems have mistakenly prioritized mere biological survival at the expense of fulfilling the human need to be loved and to belong.

In a present that continues to defy past predictions of the demise of print publishing, both books create innovative new spaces for Indigenous knowledges. Still, the ever-increasing pressure to shorten the time to bring books to press is occasionally apparent. In *Indigenous Women and Street Gangs*, there are a small handful of conspicuous typographical errors, and there seems to be some uneven copy-editing between different sections. Despite these minor concerns, the collaborative process that Henry engaged in for each participant has succeeded marvellously in transmitting a distinct oral character for each speaker. Similarly, the selection and organization of the photos serves to powerfully reinforce the agency of each participant to tell her story on her own terms. *Me Tomorrow* might benefit from a little more experimentation with form. Aside from Jordanna George's excellent cover art, which includes an artist's note, and Norma Dunning's stunning poem "Future We In-U-Wee," the remaining pieces are fairly standard essay forms. Then again, not every book can be large format with full colour photos.

*Me Tomorrow* resounds with some of the only credible predictions of a future that is anything other than disaster for all of us. *Indigenous Women and Street Gangs* reminds us that we are living in yesterday's future. How happy is the present, when the voices that nations were built on silencing are now amplified? How pregnant with potential is the future, when the gloom of this colonial apocalypse clears to reveal a path to wellness?

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## Complex Simplicity

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**Michel Tremblay; Sheila Fischman, trans.**

*The Grand Melee*. Talonbooks \$16.95

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**Michel Tremblay; Linda Gaboriau, trans.**

*Twists of Fate: If by Chance and Destination Paradise*. Talonbooks \$19.95

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Reviewed by Ralph Sarkonak (University of British Columbia)

*The Grand Melee* is the fifth book of Tremblay's nine-volume *Desrosiers Diaspora* novel cycle. It plays the role of a narrative pivot, connecting these novels to Tremblay's earlier *Chronicles of the Plateau-Mont-Royal* series, by means of a 1922 marriage between Nana and Gabriel. The preparations for the wedding, the ceremony, and the reception of Rabelaisian proportions are at the core of the novel. Before these events, the novel describes the impact of the wedding invitation on the myriad characters, in a *tour d'horizon* that serves as an introduction to this middle volume of the saga.

The novel is a prequel to Tremblay's earlier works. Characters who first appear in his plays later reappear in the first novel cycle, *Chronicles of the Plateau-Mont-Royal*. Now the writer has managed to knit together the two fictional canvases. Not coincidentally, knitting is at the centre of the novel's fantastical dimension. The three *tricoteuses* and their mother, Florence, may be invisible to everyone but Josaphat, over whom they stand guard, but they are no less real for that. Josaphat is a gifted but troubled being, going back to his incestuous relationship with his sister, one of whose results is the bridegroom. In *The Grand Melee*, we meet younger versions of some of Tremblay's most memorable characters, starting with Nana, the eponymous *grosse femme d'à côté* of the first novel cycle. Yet despite numerous allusions to the writer's literary past, *The Grand Melee* can and will be appreciated equally by first-time readers; there is ample paratextual material to guide the Tremblay novice.

Two of the novel's main themes are the body and creativity. The ageing body is illustrated by Louise's liver spots. A classy sex worker who lives in a suite at the Château Laurier, Louise is thinking of retiring but not before making a regal appearance at the wedding in Montreal. A retired Mountie just manages to get into his dress uniform. One character has terrible hot flushes; another develops panic attacks, still another diabetes. One is losing his hearing, and another suffers from delirium tremens. In fact, alcoholism affects more than one character, for alcohol is "the only solace ever available to men of his race" (71). Some of the female characters suffer from blatant exploitation because of their gender, whether at the hands of a boss, a loan shark, or an unforgiving priest. Nana's sister, mother, and mother-in-law are all feminists, for they are willing and able to tell off men in powerful positions. Many of the characters have a creative bent. The janitor in a run-down building was once a proofreader and talented translator. Though diminished in standing and health, he still loves to recite poetry. A good pianist, Régina tends to greatness when she learns to improvise in the final paragraph of the novel. But the most creative person is Josaphat, a wonderful fiddler. (In an earlier volume, we see how equally gifted he is as a writer when a younger man.)

Sheila Fischman, who has translated many of Tremblay's works, does another magnificent job, rendering his prose into readable, idiomatic, and savory English. Through the translation, one feels, and even hears, the French. Fischman uses double

negatives to give a flavour of the colloquial language. She is quite right to keep the original *mélée* in the title, where it refers to the music played by Josaphat and Régina: the beautiful reel that is “a melting pot of music from the old countries” (219).

Intertextuality is another form of nuptial: Hugo, Baudelaire, and Lamartine all appear as references. Less obvious but no less present are Proust and Sartre. Although Nana makes do with a substitute father figure, the novel also recalls *The Father of the Bride* (1950), with Elizabeth Taylor of *Hosanna* fame. The melee of the title is not only the beautiful reel, the description of which is a masterpiece of novelistic writing about music—a Proustian echo—and of Tremblay’s entire corpus. For like Josaphat’s improvisations, what characterizes this oeuvre is “the complex simplicity” (219), which has also been the hallmark of this important Quebecois writer since his debut in the 1960s.

*Twists of Fate* is made up of the sixth and seventh volumes of the *Desrosiers Diaspora* saga. The first volume, *If by Chance*, consists for the most part of five scenarios, labelled “Encounters,” that narrate various outcomes that could befall Ti-Lou, the She-Wolf of Ottawa, upon her retirement to Montreal. Things get off to a bad start when she is murdered minutes after arriving at her destination. The final scenario, by far the happiest as far as Ti-Lou is concerned, has her meeting a knight in shining armour in the person of a handsome and amiable Montreal policeman mounted on a horse. The whole volume could be construed as a demonstration of what we used to call *l'arbitraire du récit*, in which writers of fiction do what they please: hence the multiple narratives.

*Destination Paradise*, a far more successful volume, is an intertextual homage to Balzac’s novel *La Duchesse de Langeais* and its eponymous character who serves as the inspiration for Edouard as he comes out at the only bar in Montreal that allows “confirmed bachelors” to gather for the hefty price of twenty-five cents—we are after all in the 1930s! Edouard’s first visit to the Paradise is a roaring success when he self-identifies as the duchess from whom he takes his inspiration.

As always Tremblay is at his best in the in-between of literature and history or reality and fantasy. The high point of this volume occurs when Josaphat, looking for a cure for his visions, seeks refuge in Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, a lunatic asylum. There, he is befriended by a sometime poet named Emile [Nelligan], French Canada’s Rimbaud, who was interred some thirty years before by his family, who were unable to cope with his bohemian character. They make an odd but endearing partnership as Josaphat’s musical gift has a calming influence on the inmates of the hospital. Emile and his new friend collaborate, both in the laundry and upstairs, entertaining everyone with joint sessions of poetry and music.

The book ends with the description of three Christmas dinners, the first one of which is a love feast for Ti-Lou put on by her beloved policeman as she awaits the amputation of a gangrenous limb. Nana cooks a traditional feast as she awaits the birth of her third child. Lastly, Josaphat plays for his beloved sister outside in the cold, because Victoire’s husband, unable to forgive or come to terms with the initial incest, has vowed to kill her brother. Only Edouard, another outsider, is there to comfort his endearing uncle. Tremblay’s characters, some so unforgettable, are people dealing with heavy problems as they know best. The only escape from the harsh realities of Depression-era Montreal is “religion, love, and music” (127), as the epigraph from *La Duchesse de Langeais* so eloquently states.

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## “Lit up like a glowstick”

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**Ellie Sawatzky**

*None of This Belongs to Me.* Nightwood Editions \$18.95

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**Isabella Wang**

*Pebble Swing.* Nightwood Editions \$18.95

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Reviewed by Andrea MacPherson (University of the Fraser Valley)

*None of This Belongs to Me* and *Pebble Swing* are two vibrant and assured debut poetry collections from Ellie Sawatzky and Isabella Wang. While first collections can often be uneven, this is not the case with these—each writer thoroughly inhabits their own distinct voice, as they reveal a strong sense of aesthetics and style. Both poets are precise in their language, approaching a wide variety of subjects and forms within their collections, from memory and nostalgia to dreamscapes and the natural world. There are moments of levity within the poems, commentary on pop culture, and discussions of the environment, all showing how these poets are taking chances with their remarkable work.

Ellie Sawatzky's lyrical, narrative poems explore identity and belonging, the sometimes awkward and arduous shift into adulthood, and the fiery landscapes of desire. In her collection—broken into four sections, each documenting different moments in the author's life—she creates portraits within the poems, using language to deftly explore a specific place and time. The poems include, and often confront, pop culture and social media, revealing the ways in which they affect and influence our contemporary landscape. There are poems about Instagram ads, Astro Poets astrological tweets, Facebook posts, and items discovered on Craigslist—but these topics are woven into complex and layered poems that hold the mirror up to our intimate lives. The voice throughout is close and confessional, detailing crushes and disappointments, pleasure and the pain of endings—we see risky sex with a knife thrower, painful and messy breakups, fetal heartbeats played over cafe sound systems. The poems are visceral and full of sharp, startling imagery. In “Ways to Write a Poem,”

Imagine how you might be murdered, but  
make it beautiful.

Think about sex but never do it.

Unlearn how to swim. (96)

The result is intoxicating, compelling regardless of the subject. The poems move from childhood through to adulthood, often exploring relationships and love in its many forms. We see familial conflicts, moments of quiet contemplation, and the intricacies of womanhood and motherhood. Section III, the titular “None of This Belongs to Me”, details the speaker's time working as a nanny to a young girl; the speaker is often mistaken for B's mother, and this in turn begs the question of motherhood and mothering, of identity and belonging.

Despite the often dark overtones to some of the subject matter, Sawatzky's poems retain a light and airy feeling on the page. Every word is measured and purposeful, the

images building to a crescendo: “love leaves its trace, / lit up like a glowstick” (75). Sawatzky’s poems allow us access into these snapshots of moments in time, and her voice as a poet is as clear as the crystals that she describes sparkling on a bedside table.

Isabella Wang’s debut collection, *Pebble Swing*, is accurately summarized by the blurb on the back jacket by Jen Sookfong Lee: “Isabella, with her direct and clear-eyed poetic voice, takes on the markers of Canadian poetry—landscape, identity and place—but makes them entirely her own.” The four sections of the collection—“I remember,” “The last sketch of a retracting spring,” “Rain falls, falling,” and “Hindsight”—begin with explorations of memory and nostalgia, family and the complicated dynamics there. Wang uses language to move her lyrical poems forward, building to explore family connections and disconnects, her continued engagement with cultural touchstones, and the everlasting burdens of both personal and cultural loss. In “On Forgetting a Language,” Wang writes, “If I return to my birthplace, Jining, now / I will return as a foreigner / like the time I stepped onto this land ten years ago” (31). This push and pull of place and identity echoes and reverberates throughout her poems.

Wang uses form in very distinct ways, balancing her free-verse lyrical narratives with the more formal ghazal structure in many poem sequences. We see “Ghazal for Heirloom Family Recipes,” “Ghazal for a Snow Day on the Mountain,” and “Ghazal for My Grandmother.” The intricacies of the ghazal’s structure work well to explore traditional topics like melancholy, longing, and love in Wang’s poems. The third section of the collection is completely a ghazal sequence—“Thirteen Anti-Ghazals after Phyllis Webb,” as Wang titles the long poem. This section holds many echoes of Webb’s lyrics, a kind of tribute and dialogue with the poet. It speaks to another common theme in Wang’s poems; as you get deeper into the collection, you notice the many poems written to and for other poets. This creates a kind of allusion, a callback to the poets and poetic traditions that have come before; this, again, serves as a way to explore identity and community.

Place—both geographic and emotional—remains a main component in Wang’s work. There are echoes of the city of Vancouver throughout the collection, from “August,” to “It’s Been Weeks of Forest Fires,” and to “This Winter in Gastown,” where Wang writes,

The Victorian architecture stands from 1867  
as Gassy Jack had left his own tavern, right down  
to the cobblestones, to the horse-drawn carriage  
running through this triangular peninsula at night. (13)

Her poems are distinctly set, and within them we see the beauty of Vancouver—the mountains and trees, the water and beaches, the architecture and the crowded downtown streets—while also acknowledging the ways in which we have failed Indigenous peoples, the destruction of the seemingly yearly forest fires, and the Site C dam, as these elements are all connected, forever linked to each other. In this way, Wang continues her interrogation of the past and the present, and the everlasting reverberations of memory. As Wang writes, “it takes more than one person to remember” (24).

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## Vicious and Virtuous Circles

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**Rachel Cusk**

*Second Place*. HarperCollins Canada \$19.99

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**Ken Haigh**

*On Foot to Canterbury: A Son's Pilgrimage*. U of Alberta P \$26.99

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Reviewed by Dorothy F. Lane (University of Regina)

At first glance, there is little to connect these books, apart from their being the latest works by accomplished and prolific Canadian writers—one a deceptively short novel and the other a non-fictional narrative. Their reliance on the inner voice of the narrator to guide the story is one of few similarities. Furthermore, both focus on the sojourner, the wanderer, and the tension between the paradoxical impulses of rootedness in place and momentum of the journey. My title here suggests the opposing but linked concepts of vicious and virtuous circles. Both involve inhabiting an uncomfortable present, though *On Foot to Canterbury* emphasizes growth and *Second Place* emphasizes seemingly fruitless repetition. Similarly, Cusk's novel takes us so deeply inside the mind of the narrator that the claustrophobia is almost excruciating, while Haigh's book draws the reader outside the visceral and personal story of the traveller with allusions, quotations, photographs, and footnotes.

Rachel Cusk's *Second Place* is inspired by Mabel Dodge Luhan's memoir *Lorenzo in Time* (1932), which is based on D. H. Lawrence's stay at Luhan's New Mexico guesthouse. Cusk's narrator is M, and L is the visual artist whom she invites to stay at the "second place" belonging to the narrator and her husband, Tony. The title is multivalent, reflecting theme, location, and relationship. In many ways, the novel reminds me of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, envisioning hell as a room in which one must spend eternity with "other people." The addressee in Cusk's novel, Jeffers, is compelled to listen to M's rambling narration, which is steeped in self-absorption and overthinking. The only route to escape is through the story.

M's account to Jeffers begins in Paris, where she sees L's paintings and is immediately reeled in, associating them with her own internal distress and longing for what she later recognizes as the freedom of masculinity. Years later, she invites L to her coastal home, but his arrival with a young woman, Brett, never satisfies what becomes an inexorable itch to glimpse L's perspective and capture his attention. The couple's "second place," in an unidentified marsh area, becomes a controlling image in the narrative, as M initially tells L that she desires "to see what it looks like through your eyes" (17). The place is one of "desolation and solace and mystery, and it hasn't yet told its secret to anyone," but L resists painting M or the landscape and rejects her adulation. "L and Brett" import "a new standard, a new way of seeing, in which the old things could no longer hold their shape" (52). M analyzes every aspect of the guests' behaviours and her own responses, punctuated by exclamations directed at Jeffers. The narrative reflects the impossibility of escape, and thus becomes the opposite of "moving" for the reader, who literally cannot put it down until the last pages. The reader is haunted like the wedding guest in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

While Haigh's *On Foot to Canterbury* seems to evoke an opposing response in the reader—that is, a desire to remain in the physical and personal space of the story—it too describes a circular journey, with a narrator who is a restless wanderer and aspires

to “walk my way into a better frame of mind” (xiv). Thus, Haigh’s narrative aspires to be a virtuous circle, cutting flint-like through distraction and returning with the pilgrim’s boon, which it then gives to the reader (251). Like Cusk’s novel, the book is a *memento mori* in that it focuses on a journey taken in the past. As Haigh notes, travelling plays an enormous role in his life, and the linear pilgrimage from Winchester to Canterbury—a road rich with historical and literary significance—is inspired by a tentative plan made with his father. Initially, he is reluctant to carry out this plan after his father’s death, but “itchy feet” and a constant awareness “of the existential clock ticking” (116) lead him to revise it into his own journey through a process of relentless self-doubt and grieving.

My own research has recently focused on pilgrimage narratives and their common features, which Haigh’s book incorporates: the maps, the time lag between seeing and recording, and self-presentation as both reflection and guide. The link between walking in the present and narrating the journey in the past fascinates me as a scholar and reader. Haigh comments in a blog post that “serious walkers . . . tend to be writers. Perhaps this is because walking lends itself to thinking, and long-distance hiking can produce enough mental material to fill a book” (“Literary Hikes”). The linear path to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury—with multiple allusions to Bunyan, Chaucer, Raleigh, Walton, and Keats—becomes Haigh’s journey, and it ends with his hope that “it inspires you to take journeys of your own” (251). Refreshing in its admission that there is “no hand of God reaching down to touch me on the forehead, no Vision on the Road to Damascus” (247), Haigh’s book still offers glimpses of wisdom in unexpected places. One involves Haigh’s conversation about fishing with a local whom he encounters on the road. Others concern Haigh’s allusions to places on the road in Bunyan’s allegory and his use of epigraphs from multiple texts.

Both Haigh’s and Cusk’s books challenge the reader—to remain focused, present, and vigilant while tracing what seems to be a vicious circle. Haigh’s book begins where it ends, with his recurring dream of almost reaching Canterbury, from which he awakens with a reminder of itchy feet. As Haigh states, “walking should lead to self-reflection, but . . . I can’t slow my thoughts enough to think deeply about anything” (64–65). The book itself, though, is evidence that one can walk the same path as other pilgrims, multiple times, and yet “never come this way again” (251).

#### *Works Cited*

Haigh, Ken. “Literary Hikes.” *Ken Haigh: Author*, 4 Feb. 2021, [www.kenhaigh.ca/post/literary-hikes](http://www.kenhaigh.ca/post/literary-hikes).

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## **Day of Wrath, Earth in Ashes**

**Sheri Benning**

*Field Requiem*. Carcanet Poetry \$22.99

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Reviewed by Warren Heiti (Vancouver Island University)

For twenty years, starting with *Earth After Rain* (2001) and continuing in *Thin Moon Psalm* (2007) and *The Season’s Vagrant Light* (2015), Sheri Benning has been

composing a cosmology of the Prairies. *Field Requiem* is her darkest, fiercest, most powerful work. To call it an elegy would be excessively gentle. It would be to disregard the phantasmagoric violence churning under the surface and sporadically rupturing it. In a repeating fever dream, one turns the corner, and there is the murderer in the gas mask, “the throat-cut animal” slung around his neck (16). The animal is one’s father, one’s mother, one’s childhood home; it is oneself. Out of imagination’s rock-sealed reservoir surge surreal visions:

Just look at those who stayed—  
in my dream, the men from Grünau, found  
heads down, shoulder-to-shoulder, tongues  
nailed to the dining table. (16)

Benning’s book is a long poem in five movements about the extinction of the family farm and the industrial campaign to turn the earth into a waste land “possessed of nettles and salt” (71). The book’s intertexts include the Books of Psalms, Kings, and Zephaniah. The first and second movements coalesce around the characters of the father and the mother. The third movement is a matriarchal history of farming the Prairies. In it, a daughter is roped to her mother and lowered into a dreamlike well; a woman is roped to her husband, who is killed in a black blizzard, or dust storm, so “she grab[s] the knife, // the serrated blade, hack[s] and / hack[s] at the fraying rope” (45). The fourth movement visits Saskatchewan’s “wrecked farmscape” (89) and draws on “Dies irae” (“Day of Wrath”), the medieval Latin poem about the Last Judgement that features in the Catholic Requiem Mass. Grief transfigures into rage.

The intertext for the first movement’s opening poem, “Winter Sleep,” is the bizarre parable of the pounds from the Book of Luke. A nobleman gives money to his slaves and tells them to multiply it in his absence. One slave, rightly afraid, hides his mina in a cloth; upon the nobleman’s return, he is punished. We are supposed to mine the parable for some spiritual message, but Benning applies its ruthless logic to agriculture:

I wake to 6000 acres, high clearance sprayers  
with 140-foot booms. Sulfur, phosphorus, nitrogen,  
potash. Harvest done by drone. Yields downloaded  
into \$750 000 air seeders come spring. We were told—

to those who have, more will be given.  
Viterra’s actuaries betting on future markets,  
brokering grain they don’t own. We were told  
those with nothing, even that will be taken away. (16)

We must remember that, in the very same chapter of Luke, Christ drives the sellers out of the temple. (A spectre is haunting the Prairies—the spectre of capitalism and agribusiness . . .) The Prairies are vast but not limitless. Snow geese keep lifting from the stubble in a gesture of keening, “a terrible forgetting” (67).

The family farm of the Prairies is becoming extinct. But as Benning acknowledges, clear-eyed in an endnote, grieving this form of life is complex: “The Dominion Lands Act effectively granted free land to settlers as part of a process that displaced Indigenous and Métis peoples from their traditional homes” (89). In some ways,

Benning's book shares a spirit with Zwicky's *Robinson's Crossing*: the personal history (in Borson's sense) of settling the Prairies. How strangers made a *home* there, putting down genuine roots. The genocide that was—and is—the engine of the settling. How to grieve what was founded on grief? "*Where coyotes licked the blood / of those whose land you broke, / they'll lick yours*" (86).

The book is also a long meditation on place and the way that place is marked and remembered by the body. In "Nativity," the speaker walks in the snow with their mother, who is recovering from surgery:

You wanted to walk outside so I found our winter coats  
in the basement closet, still holding our shape.

I thought of matted pasture grass  
where a deer has lain. (32)

In "Plainsong," a wife and husband sleep "in the space their bodies have learned / to make from years of sharing / blood, spit, loam" (17). Similarly, in "NE 10 36 22 W2nd," the father lies in a deer's wallow, watching "catkins lift in updrafts" and listening to the "soft rattle of aspens" (68).

In the character of the father, sensitivity converges with violence in an uneasy paradox. With one hand, he touches a rose petal; with the other, he skins a snared rabbit. "Tobacco, diesel, his palms / stained, rough-cut wood, but when I was a girl / and he wiped my face, held a tissue to my nose?" (24). The convergence is most acute in two moments, associated with dogs and an owl. In the past, the family adopted two German Shepherds. When one was afflicted with porcupine quills, the father pulled them out with pliers and cared for the dog while he healed. Now father and speaker return to the sold farm to toss into a pit what they can't take. The speaker wants to ask what happened to the dogs—old, "three-legged, diabetic, blind," unwanted by the farm's buyer—

but the sky's heavy  
with shifting weather. Besides,  
I know the answer. Someone had to

lay them in the reliquary, swathe them  
in linen and spice, horsemint, silver sage,  
axle-greased polycotton, shop rags. (26)

The cliff-hanging enjambment at the stanza break implies mercy-killing, but the concluding tercet is surprisingly ritualistic. The dogs are honoured as holy beings, and even the garbage is redeemed from the pit and integrated, through tensely composed assonance and consonance, into the reliquary.

Similarly, sensitivity and violence converge in the father's killing of the owl:

This is where he came in sorrow

after his father made him shoot the horned owl perched  
in the spruce north of the chicken coop.

No proof the owl killed chicks. (68)

It's true that the father's way of life involves killing. But he intuits that there should be reasons: to feed oneself and one's family, to protect livestock. Gratuitous destruction of beauty induces sorrow. The hunter, notwithstanding the violent telos that drives him, is intimately intertwined with the lives of non-human animals in a way that the agroindustry machine-operator and the urban grocery-shopper are not:

this is where the boy felt the animal's wet-eyed stare,  
coyote, fox, jackrabbit, badger.

This is where he followed tracks, set snares in estrus-scent  
and molt, scat, shed fur.

This is where he lay, a deer's wallow of slender wheatgrass  
blue grass, brome and sedge . . . (68)

This place, shaped by the body of a deer—the biocoenosis of homo sapiens, deer, wheatgrass, aspen, saskatoon—is no longer *there*. Once vibrantly alive, it has become a waste, where the father, “neck in the noose of profit margins and farm credit . . . // . . . rakes roots for forty more acres” (69). Place, in Benning's long poem, is independent of linear time. By visiting a place, one may return to the past. But how to grieve when the gravesite itself has been obliterated? The place shaped by the bodies of the deer and the father is erased, the prayer-like lists of grains transubstantiating into lists of toxins.

Canola, pulse, cereal, flax, Roundup,  
anhydrous ammonia, nitrogen gas,  
granular phosphorus, sulfur, potash,

120 pounds per acre of wheat seed,  
broadleaf herbicide, fungicide, insecticide,  
glyphosate-resistant ragweed

in low-spots and sloughs. (67)

Some of these elements are naturally occurring; some are needed for agriculture at any scale, from the backyard garden to the factory farm, or indeed for life itself. As Jan Zwicky has argued, the difference between non-human wilderness and human agriculture is not categorical, but a difference of degree: “I want to argue that wilderness depends, not on the absence of human interaction with the land, but rather on its quantity and style. Wilderness exists, I'll suggest, in greater or lesser degrees wherever we allow communities of non-humans to shape us at least as much as or more than we shape them” (27). This definition allows for the possibility that there may be human forms of life that are more open to and informed by wilderness.

In Benning's whole book, there are only four or five poems on the lee side of the violence, sheltered by discarded cinder blocks, and even these are laced with loss and melancholy. “Plainsong” witnesses three siblings interwoven in a nest of limbs and light:

Driving home from Uncle Richard's,  
in the backseat with my brother and sister—  
weft of limbs, pearlescence of moonlit skin,  
shift and fall of their breath.

My face against the car window to watch stars, and every mile  
a farm, yard-lights,  
a voice in plainsong—

But the image radiates from the infancy of an extinguished galaxy: "Our farm's sold. Dave's too. Uncle Richard died seventeen years ago. / Only now the light of this memory reaches me" (17).

This poem, with its astronomy charting the small cosmos of family farms, is counterpointed by the lightless poem "NW 18 36 22 W2nd." The title is shared by sister Heather Benning's seventh photograph in the volume, depicting a piano with its hammers exposed in a ruined room (88). The title comes from Ottawa's grid system for designating locations on the prairie—without respecting the natural contours of the land, as Sheri Benning observes (89). From a dedication in the book's acknowledgements (93–94), one may infer that this formula—northwest quarter of section eighteen, township thirty-six, range twenty-two, west of the second meridian—locates the speaker's former home:

Farm subsidies smashed by Intercontinental Packers,  
Big Sky Pork Farms. Our barns now their finishing  
pens for 10 000 pigs from 1000 sows.

No moon. No snow. No yard-lights for miles,  
like an eye put out. (75)

When they are six to eight weeks of age, pigs are sent to the pens for finishing, i.e., to complete their fattening. When they reach so-called market weight, they are sent to slaughter. Again, it's not that there's no slaughtering on the family farm. It belongs to the way of life of these people: "After Holy Communion they picnic / on cold chicken and jelly, rosehip, chokecherry" (86). But there is a difference between a grandmother cutting the throat of a hen and a corporation incarcerating one thousand sows in two-by-seven-foot "farrowing crates." Olymel, which bought Big Sky in 2013 for sixty-five million dollars, brags that it is the third-largest hog producer in Canada with a herd of 42,500 sows ("Background"). According to the *Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan*, the swine industry in that province converts twenty-seven million bushels of feed grains into two million market hogs (920). Without witnesses, in the starless abyss, grass is reduced to flesh, and flesh, to cash. But "all flesh is grass" (Benning 64).

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## A Sense of Place

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**Zane Koss**

*Harbour Grids*. Invisible \$19.95

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**Natasha Ramoutar**

*Bittersweet*. Mawenzi House \$20.95

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Reviewed by Dani Spinosa (York University)

In the time that I have been reviewing poetry collections, I have discovered that some of the best reviews I have read—and that I have written—are reviews that put two books into conversation rather than opposition. This is most interesting and most effective if, at first, those two books don't seem to have much in common. When I was offered the opportunity to review these two radically different debut collections—Natasha Ramoutar's *Bittersweet* (2020) and Zane Koss' *Harbour Grids* (2022)—I was a bit worried about how they might work together. Koss' work is sparse, minimalist, visual; Ramoutar's is varied, emotional, lyric. But reading both works at the same time has ultimately pulled out threads from these two excellent collections that have made me appreciate each in ways I might not have otherwise. I am grateful to have read them side by side.

In the interest of full disclosure, I will say that I know Koss primarily as a scholar. Our paths have crossed a few times at conferences and I have been impressed by the politics, the rigour, and the quality of his scholarly work. I am sometimes worried about poetry by the poet-scholar; and, make no mistake, *Harbour Grids* is the kind of decidedly intellectual pursuit we might expect from such a figure. But actually, I was surprised by the lack of scholarly, contextual clues—introduction, afterword, appendices—in this collection. On first read-through, I wanted an essay, manifesto, or poetics statement to help my reading mind make sense of these visual poems where a grid of s's on each page creates a structure that holds words, phrases, and poetic lines by their own s's. But I've come to really appreciate Koss' willingness to let the poems speak for themselves, making their statements about selfhood and space, political experiences of the land, and minding of the US' colonial history.

Ramoutar, on the other hand, I don't believe I've ever met in person, but I have long been following her career as a creative writer and organizer supporting the literary community in the Greater Toronto Area. At the time of writing, *Bittersweet* is now two years old. I believe that the collection did not get the critical attention it deserved, and I think it's also worthwhile to note that Ramoutar has continued to make big moves in the industry since its publication. Her continued work has enriched my reading of this collection; *Bittersweet* is a collection by a poet clearly grounded in her writing community, and that shows in the careful, thoughtful, and evocative poetry throughout.

While these two collections are quite different formally, both collections, at their cores, are grappling with a sense of place and space. Significantly, both are also clearly

contending—in thoughtful, unique, and interesting ways—with how we might account for the multiplicities and intricacies of the individual when faced with the sometimes static, sometimes limiting ways we historicize and map land, place, and especially home. Koss' grids, for example, barely hold their words and lines; the s that binds them together often feels inadequate, like it can barely contain the thoughts therein. *Harbour Grids* ends, for example, with the lasting question of whether it is possible for the individual to “rest / in the seams / of this place” (137). Ramoutar's work, similarly, juxtaposes places, maps, streets, and buildings against self and story. After reading the collection, I'm left with the poignant image that ends “Cartography 1,” a delightful little prose poem that appears quite early in the collection. At the end of this poem, Ramoutar writes, “I witnessed the origin point: fields of cane standing tall like soldiers on patrol. But cane is raw; just long stalks, unbridled and wild and free” (2). In the image of the cane field (and several other gorgeous images throughout the collection) the revisited and longed-for homeland of Guyana haunts the poems, expressing some of the rich and varied relationship to place that is necessary to the diasporic experience.

And while this is a book that is, at its heart, set in and written from and thinking about East End Toronto and Scarborough—the places mentioned range from Kennedy Station and Bluffers Park to the Danforth Music Hall and Echo Beach—the collection still persistently reminds the reader of the incongruity of the grid of the streets and stations and map locations against the individual who walks them; in “Meadowvale,” Ramoutar writes, “These streets / are yours” (29). Koss' work is also quintessentially New York, though this is perhaps not the Brooklyn we are used to seeing in contemporary poetry. Instead, Koss questions “what histories this surface screens / asphalt smooth” (80), and his lively Spanish, which twists and turns throughout the poems, always ends up meeting the hard lines of “immigration and customs enforcement” (104). These collections work in two completely different forms towards a similar purpose: destabilizing the larger structures of history and state to ensure that they don't sweep away the individual and their stories. To that end, they are both quite effective and have left lasting impressions on me.

Language, in both collections, becomes a guiding principle rather than a recording method. *Bittersweet* boasts a grandmother who can “neither read nor write” but “always read us like open books” (4). The varied storytelling throughout this poem resists a colonial, static way of writing the self and its relationship to place and space. It's a way, for Ramoutar, of refusing the dominating “white noise” of colonialism and especially colonial language that always threatens to “drown[] . . . out” the vibrancy of selfhood, memory, and story (22). In Koss' work, the “subway stations [*sic*] tremor” is an “enclosing noise” interrupting the self, the land, the storied histories of the place, its colonial legacies and vibrant multiculturalism always tied together (132–33).

Ultimately, these voices are both fresh and fierce. These collections are exciting. Looking at them sitting next to each other on the table before me, I am so happy to have been introduced to both. As the full-length debuts for both poets, these two collections are sure signs of good things to come from these individuals and from contemporary poetry moving forward. These were pleasures to read!

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## Tides of Memory and Change

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**Shani Mootoo**

*Cane* | Fire. Book\*hug Press \$20.00

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**Shannon Webb-Campbell**

*Lunar Tides*. Book\*hug Press \$20.00

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**Daniel Sarah Karasik**

*Plenitude*. Book\*hug Press \$20.00

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Reviewed by Jane Willsie (University of British Columbia)

Water, self, and parent are all thematic elements that tie the disparate elements of Shani Mootoo's *Cane* | *Fire* together and which transcend the brokenness of the memories strung together throughout the memoir-like poetry collection. A memory of water pouring that opens the collection in "Did Water Fall?" recurs in "Answer" when the speaker's mother confirms that "there was that day / everywhere / water" on a boat crossing (32), and mother and father appear throughout the collection as the speaker negotiates her identity in relation to her past and omnipresent parents. There are moments when Mootoo's memory-filled poetry overwhelms in its sheer volume of detail. In "Inventory," the child speaker creeps to her father's cabinets to see the items inside, listing them in words strung together without breaks that evoke the breathless curiosity of childlike wonder. In their intensity, these dense lists overwhelming the page might describe, in miniature, the experience of *Cane* | *Fire*: flashes of sensory memory fragments flung across the page without breath. These brief impressions seem like flashbacks to childhood which an adult mind can make sense of only in hindsight, choosing from the particularly poignant moments that hold meaning for the past in the present. These flashes of impressionistic memories take complete shape in poems like "A True Story About Unreal Marble," in which Mootoo takes hold of every sense to construct the scene of a wilful child's flight from home, from the colours—"iridescent green, hibiscus red," "purple paper," "bevy of fuchsia poinsettia"—to the smells of "last night's gutter-piss" and "lullaby-scents"—to the sounds of rooftops as they "creak and ping"—and of movement—"passersby jiggerty jig" (18–19). Yet, much like memory itself, *Cane* | *Fire*'s poems are highly selective in what they choose to leave out. For instance, in "on the left of his left," the complexities of an opposition between two individuals is lost in the sheer bewilderment of that opposition being reduced linguistically to its most simplistic unit—a "left" and "right" binary (37)—only to be reiterated until the words lose all meaning.

If water is a thematic element of *Cane* | *Fire*, it is a central character in Shannon Webb-Campbell's *Lunar Tides*. The collection is beautifully structured around the lunar calendar, giving the poems it contains a rhythmic ebb and flow that softens its linear pages into a gentle, natural arc. *Lunar Tides* circles inward upon itself to layer moments by feeling, impression, and meaning, rather than stacking them by strict chronology. In the first poem, "Time: A Biography," only a few lines after a baby is born in a hospital room, her mother dies in palliative care in a similar hospital room. The cyclical nature of the poem puts these events together, the beginning and the end becoming overlapping moments where the cycle begins anew with grief and bodies in a room. Rigidly controlled time is questioned throughout many of *Lunar Tides*'

entries, for instance in “Tides,” which repeatedly poses questions such as “*are whales deep thinkers?*” to the tides and the moon at intervals of six hours and thirteen minutes or twenty-four hours and fifty-two minutes (22). The irregular time stamps of the rhythmically posed questions draw attention to the mismatch between human time and the time of the moon and ocean. The speaker never receives an answer to their questions, always seeming to be at the wrong time and needing to come back later and ask again. If the childhood memories recalled throughout *Cane | Fire* are fraught with brief, sensorily intense flashes of feeling, the images of childhood that *Lunar Tides* presents are softer, while interestingly also retaining an intensity of sensory input that evokes a childlike mind. Webb-Campbell’s poetry abounds with soft, beautiful lines that evoke fog-engulfed landscapes and “moonlit pinnacles” edging waves (41), interrupted by highly structured poems such as “Grief: Q&A 1,” which undermine the natural rhythms of the collection with entries formatted as Q&A sessions or dictionary definitions.

While Webb-Campbell’s exploration of grief’s language disrupts the collection’s tone to interrogate the inability of words to fully express grief, Daniel Sarah Karasik’s *Plenitude* deplores the co-optation of the terminology of grief and healing by an exploitative political and economic system in their poem “stages of grief.” Karasik puts the process of healing from grief in the context of political and capitalistic mechanisms that “encourage us to mistake / disclosure for healing” while continuing to replicate harm (18). At times imaginative, speculative poetry and at other times, political essay-like poems, Karasik’s collection blends the personal and the political in their poems, which deal with identity, sex, capitalism, and grassroots activism spanning from Toronto to Palestine, to Chile, to Hong Kong. Karasik’s poems offer insightful deliberations on the intersections of race, sex, and political power, gesturing to how these intertwining pressures are not separate categories of oppression but mutually reinforcing structures that inhibit justice. In “Among Other White Jews,” for instance, the speaker places guilt of privilege alongside rage at injustice, weaving race, nationality, and sex together into a depiction of frustrated desire for action. *Plenitude* digs deeply into an interiority at odds with an exterior in poems like “Dysphoria, Smoothed,” which deliberates on the onerous body-altering labour the speaker undergoes to “match the outside to the in” (53). This desire to “match what the world sees” reappears in “Visible to Vanishing,” the clearest depiction of *Plenitude*’s vision for a better world. This poem begins with despair and a “dull wish / just to disappear” (19) that is overcome by the second stanza in which the speaker explores a “paradox” that from this despairing wish to disappear could arise the ability to transform the world into a place “where to swing / from visible to vanishing / could be a kind of play” (90). Karasik’s evocation of play and fluidity is a substantial offering from a collection of poems: the vision of a world in which transformation is easy and disappearance a form of pleasure rather than of perishing.

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## The Luminous World of Chelene Knight

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**Chelene Knight**

*Junie*. Book\*hug Press \$23.00

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Reviewed by Minelle Mahtani (University of British Columbia)

Chelene Knight's highly anticipated novel, *Junie*, is a triumphant and breathtakingly beautiful account of a largely neglected novelistic terrain—Hogan's Alley in Vancouver. It reminded me what is possible when an author of Knight's magnitude and talent creates a luminous sense of place. I emerged from reading her captivating work with a few observations, but most of all, I felt as if I had actively visited another world at a different time—in this case, Hogan's Alley in the neighbourhood of Strathcona, Vancouver, in the 1930s.

Junie, a wise and observant young Black queer artist, struggles with her alcoholic mother and her own blossoming feelings of love for her best friend, Estelle, who has issues with her own mother for entirely different, and similar, reasons. Knight squarely positions her protagonist during this period and by painting us pictures in this vivid geography, allows us access to a social and cultural feminist geography that has too often been neglected in fictional depictions of Black Canada.

Knight is a renowned poet whose gifts were on display in her collection *Braided Skin*. *Junie* offers full view of her talents as a prose writer, with particular lines so evocative that they stopped me in my tracks—for example, “sure enough there were three empty bottles of lager resting on the side table like family” (174). It's almost as if she has taken the very best of her poetry and brought it into prose form. It is, ultimately, too, a cinematic kind of novel, one which you can see frame by frame. The story is one that gestures to the Creative (and I use that capital-C deliberately) in multiple forms, as Junie is a blossoming painter, and the colours and stories she evokes jump off the page. But Knight not only touches upon art in her storytelling—no, she also speaks to music and voice, in all their metaphoric forms. Junie's mother is a force unto herself, a singer of immense talent, albeit self-destructive and at times, cruel, thus leaving Junie left to pick up the pieces at home. What follows is a complex and poignant story about mother-daughter relations, and how we bring what we know about our parents to all our other relationships, may it be friendships or romantic alliances, or both.

After spending time with this novel, and flipping through pages and pages of the book, I still marvel at Knight's ability to weave together the points of view in this story. At times, we hear Junie's voice, at others, it's third person—or the voice of Estelle, Junie's troubled best friend, among others. It never feels gimmicky or trite, however, but serves to enrich the text. I tend to use the word “scaffolding” a lot in my teaching, and in reading this book I realized something: Knight may well be the queen of scaffolding. In a taut and careful way, Knight has created a foundation for her novel by skipping back and forth in time and through various characters, and through an innovative use of white space. I'm still not sure how she accomplished this gargantuan task as a writer; I have to admit I was a little amazed that I never once felt lost, and only felt greater empathy and understanding for the characters as a result of her fine-tuned technique.

One of the most moving elements of the novel is its commitment to speaking about mentorship in the Black community through the love and care Junie receives from two individuals who support her unequivocally. These storylines bring an abundance of tenderness to an already tender novel.

I've already put this book on my list for next year's must-reads in my social justice classes. While some less generous readers might balk at that statement, I truly felt that this book held not only magic for my students but also offered poignant insight into a long-lost community of which too many of us, even those of us (particularly those of us?) who live here are unaware. While critics might well claim that Knight does not draw from specific cartographic historical imperatives in her novel—meaning she doesn't offer us deep dives into actual places that existed—like bars and restaurants that existed in Hogan's Alley in the 1930s, I'm glad she made the choice she did. Knight's depictions of the place she visits here, as she says, are solely:

sparked from my imagination [. . .] I wanted to create a world in which the readers could fall into the daily lives of these characters, I wanted the readers to feel the everydayness of their world without distraction. And because of this, I chose not to focus on the destruction to set the book in 1933 to 1939, and instead bring back a small moment in time where everything was in full bloom. Maybe this would allow the reader to dream this place back into existence, or think about another place where life was happening and flourishing, but not truly paid attention to. (author's note)

As a social cultural geographer, I was moved by Knight's decision to "challenge the lens through which we view the world"—offering us a way to counter the violence of the white epistemic frame that governs too many historical tales of geographic spaces in Canada. The history of Hogan's Alley is thus illuminated here but in a thoughtful way, through the stories that Knight offers us, illustrated in the points of view of its residents.

This is a book that is deserving of reverence and care, and one that carries within it crucial substance in its offering of a look at a historically under-served neighbourhood in novelistic representations, and one that showcases the skill of a true creative, with all its nuances and intricate tellings.

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## Unmasking the Minister's Wife

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**Marianne Jones**

*Maud and Me*. Crossfield Publishing \$22.95

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Reviewed by Irene Gammel (Ryerson University)

"Whom the gods wish to destroy they make into ministers' wives" (162), L. M. Montgomery famously opined after marrying Presbyterian minister Ewen Macdonald in 1911. While serving congregations in the small towns of Leaskdale, Norval, and Zephyr, Ontario, until her husband's retirement in 1935, Montgomery recorded her sentiments about being a minister's wife in her private journals, hiding her true

feelings from the public eye. When these sentiments were revealed posthumously in 1985 in the *Selected Journals of L. M. Montgomery*, many parishioners who were still living at the time were shocked to learn that her professional smile had masked deep resentment and anger.

Montgomery's sentiments and the words she used to express them are threaded through Marianne Jones' *Maud and Me*, a 2021 novel set in 1985 that explores the dual life of Nicole (Nikki) LeClair as an emerging professional painter and feminist, as well as a wife and mother. After her husband, Adam, a science teacher, decides to retrain and become a minister in Marathon, a small mining town in northwestern Ontario, Nicole turns to Montgomery's journals for guidance. In this first-person narrative, Nicole's increasing social and psychological isolation prompts her to dialogue with her imaginary friend—L. M. Montgomery, or Maud, who visits and stays for tea, even helping Nicole with household chores. Maud becomes her secret ally and refuge, offering advice about being a minister's wife in a rural setting.

Structurally, the novel fuses two separate temporal narratives: Nicole's 1980s, an era of low-budget household gadgets and the rise of neoconservatism and anti-feminism; and Montgomery's 1920s and '30s, marked by both economic boom and depression. Jones deftly braids these narratives by revealing the shared struggles the two women face as a result of their roles as minister's wives and as imaginative creators. Readers of Montgomery's diaries will recall her staging of multiple identities, with each entry constituting a performance of self on the page and a deep awareness of her social environment. So, when Nicole expresses grief about having to mask her feelings, it comes as no surprise that Maud advises her accordingly: "My dear, we all have our masks. . . . Our masks are what makes survival possible" (7). Nicole echoes this sentiment later in the novel when she states "[m]y professional smile was coming in handy more and more" (128); however, the smile also requires intense emotional labour that proves corrosive over time.

Both Maud and Nicole draw strengths from being creators, finding a creative counterpoint in nature by actively shaping a rural landscape aesthetic. Just as Montgomery celebrated the small-town beauty of Prince Edward Island in her most famous novels like *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and *Emily of New Moon* (1923), so *Maud and Me* gives a deft literary voice to Northern Ontario's sparsely populated world, endowing it with real and imaginary beauty. "I breathed in the scene," Nicole observes. "It was a mild day, with a bright sun making snow diamonds on the bay. Birds' footprints created hieroglyphic patterns in the snow close to the car. I took closeups of tree branches and distance shots of the hill swooping down to the lake's surface" (96). Yet despite these imaginative evocations, the isolation of the north can be oppressive after months of monotony. Just as Maud sought connections with a cosmopolitan world, intermittently escaping to Toronto, so a birthday excursion to Toronto fills Nicole with the exhilaration of traffic noise, evoking the powerful sensory experience of immersing in the cultural life and the freedom of anonymity in the big city.

Despite such respite, *Maud and Me* is also a novel about depression, sorrow, and grief, mirroring the melancholy tenor of Montgomery's journals. Just as Maud's mental health came to suffer—her anxiety and depression increasing when her husband was diagnosed with religious melancholia (a fear of being condemned to an afterlife of hell)—so too Nicole sinks into depression. Compounding her feelings are accumulative losses and vulnerabilities including emotional distance from her mother, a wounded figure who retreats into emotional isolation; the loss of her closest friend, whose free

spirit who provided a counter balance to the oppressive social conformity of Marathon; and her realization that she is unable to help women like Heather, who escaped an abusive marriage, only to be lectured to by an overbearing church lady who insists that a wife should submit to her husband. As Nicole begins to confront her own father's desertion, her situation once again mirrors Maud's, who was similarly abandoned by her father as a child, but nevertheless idealized him. By the mid-1990s when Nicole turns thirty-nine, she is forced to unmask and confront the truth, contrasting with Montgomery whose façade as the minister's wife was not dropped until the contents of her private journal became known after her death. Nicole's own tumultuous unmasking brings about conflict and consequential clashes even with Maud.

The novel is ultimately a tribute to the power of intertextuality, as L. M. Montgomery's writings inspire new imaginative engagements and dialogues with an author a century later. Likewise, twenty-first-century readers are able to renew their own relationship with Montgomery's work, as suggested by the title, *Maud and Me*. The transformative power of reading is underscored by the novel's epigraph: "*Nothing has been the same since Maud. She had caused me to question everything. Especially myself*" (1). These creative dialogues will draw many Montgomery fans to this novel, allowing readers to draw parallels across time and space and thus speaking to Montgomery's continued relevance in shaping Canadian literature. In turn, the novel functions as a fond tribute to the literary potential of Northern Ontario, as the novel maps a new imaginative universe set between Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie with Marathon in the centre, immersing readers in the poetic evocations of landscape and people.

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## The Space Between

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**Jessie Jones**

*the fool*. icehouse poetry \$19.95

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**Michael Lithgow**

*Who We Thought We Were As We Fell*. Cormorant Books \$18.95

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**Russell Thornton**

*Answer to Blue*. Harbour Publishing \$16.95

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Reviewed by Kelly Shepherd (Northern Alberta Institute of Technology)

Some poetry collections can be read from cover to cover, in one sitting, and you more or less "get it" the first time. That's how I read both Michael Lithgow's *Who We Thought We Were As We Fell* and Russell Thornton's *Answer to Blue*. Jessie Jones' *the fool*, on the other hand, required a little more effort. To be clear, distinguishing a one-sitting book from a multiple-readings-required book is in no way a judgment of quality, or literary merit, one way or another. There are simply different types of poems. And just imagine if there weren't!

The ones in Jones' *the fool* twist and turn in on themselves, much like the creature on the book's front cover. It's intriguing, but also perhaps a little off-putting, because of its lack of clear boundaries. Is it an insect? A plant? A feathered serpent? (Answer: it's a sandworm.)

This in-turning motion, this spiralling, appears so frequently throughout the book that it might almost be regarded as Jones' personal poetics. The book's sections are numbered 0, I, II, III, and finally 0 again: the void, or a return to the beginning. In "Better manifesto," the repetitive actions and comforting domestic cycles of a normal life are exemplified by the recurring phrase "to make the bed again" (Jones 19). Elsewhere the reader is directed to count "backward from one hundred" and "backward from the beginning" (47). The wonderfully titled "Leopold Stokowski is a man of the future," which describes the music of the spheres, also seems to loop back on itself, beginning and ending with the speaker wondering about birds (34). The speaker of one poem suggests that their "self comes back in turns" (31); elsewhere, memory itself is misplaced and then found again, years later (73).

There are numerous allusions to other works of literature and art here, including nursery rhymes, nonfiction, poetry, paintings, and films, but like the "yellow room" setting of the poem "Sleep cure" (51)—get it? And that's one of the easy ones—they may not be immediately recognizable.

Jones' twisty "living image" technique (which I'm naming after a phrase from the poem "The moment before," 33) takes the reader along on a spiralling, transformative path in fits and starts that are both playful and at times disconcerting: "I move through / the city like a bundle of kindling. / All day I wait for a bit of friction / to transform me" (37). There are spiral-like word puzzles everywhere, including a place described as "the other side of the other side," and "a system with an unknown middle and a known end" (48). These poems will make the reader slow down, start again at the top of the page, and reread.

Many of the poems in Michael Lithgow's *Who We Thought We Were As We Fell* are built of imagery from the land, and descriptions of the human place—or lack of place—on it. "Indignity of Design" details the experience of walking around a traffic circle, a familiar enough space, but not intended for people outside of their cars (36). Elsewhere, fields are "pocked with tired barns" (47); the poet realizes he occupies "so little of this landscape" (6). But there are also positive, and beautiful, nature images throughout the book, moments of connection and even kinship: according to the speaker in "Startled," "[i]t feels like the jackrabbits / hold some part of me together" (17).

Moths look like "small disheveled blossoms" (27); frogs thrum "like badly tuned banjos" (28). I confess that occasionally I found the preponderance of similes a little distracting. Daisies "float like buttery eyes" (49), fireflies look like constellations, grief is "like a cold fat snake" (51). Lithgow's collection is about (among other things) liminality, foreshadowed by the early line "[i]t's the space between I'm drawn to" (8), and perhaps this sense of uncertainty, or greyness, explains the similes.

There are physical spaces of in-betweenness, like suburbs, which are neither urban nor rural, and the porch of a farmhouse, which is not entirely indoors or out. In the poem "The Confession" a Greyhound bus becomes a liminal space between point of departure and destination, a place of confession and even renewal (43).

There is the liminal space you occupy just before you get married, and the stretch of time, marked by aches and injuries, between youth and old age. There are touching moments of a parent acting as buffer between the child and the dangers of the world: "I am a cradle / in a windstorm" (13), a potent image later paralleled in moments with the poet's father. The liminal zone exists between one state of being and another: between life and death. But as these poems show, it is also a place of belonging, which can be occupied by a loved one in the service of another.

*Answer to Blue* is Russell Thornton's eighth poetry collection. Some familiar territory from Thornton's previous books is revisited here: genealogy, architecture, the idea of home. Fittingly, for a North Vancouver poet, there is also water imagery everywhere. Raindrops on the window are "the hands of people with no memories" (87); rain "arrives like a beggar at the door" (93). One of the book's most striking poems is "When the Whales Return," in which "orcas have been sighted / swimming into the inlet for the first time in eighty years" (104), and in which the poet's mother, who has recently passed away, is lovingly remembered.

In "Breaking Into the House of my Father's Father," the poet trespasses in his own family history, and plants devices that will help him spy on a grandfather who has long since passed away: "I lie down in a bed somewhere within the house [. . .] and in my sleep conduct surveillance" (23).

Physical objects in these poems have the power to conjure memories and mythologies. The HVAC system in a library reminds the poet of a grandfather who worked on similar installations; a cup of coffee contains memories of an earlier time, a café, and an unresolved relationship. Other sensory, sometimes visceral images, starting with the front cover art (is it a map? Or does it show neurons, a visual representation of memory?), include a ram caught in the mist, in a personalized study of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, and a crow that blocks out the sun.

Elsewhere, an heirloom contains a different side of the poet's family history: "[h]ere is the travel trunk that once carried the belongings of my father's mother" (24). A nostalgic poem veers abruptly into mythical territory, as the grandfather is said to have sealed the grandmother into the trunk, sawed her in half like a stage magician, and then opened the trunk again, only to discover that she had already escaped. The reader is left wondering, with the poet, about what really happened. "If it is a memory," according to the speaker of "The Other Life" (65), "it is written in your body."

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## Dying, Knowing, Fleeing

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**Theressa Slind**

*Only If We're Caught*. Thistledown Press \$24.95

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**Aaron Schneider**

*What We Think We Know*. Gordon Hill Press \$22.00

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**Anaïs Gachet**

*Du coup j'ai fui la France*. Hashtag Press \$20.95

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Reviewed by Alice Hinchliffe (University of Guelph)

"Gritty" is the word I would use to describe Theressa Slind's *Only If We're Caught*. This collection of fifteen short stories written in accessible language spans characters and topics such as a young child visiting a nursing home, a gravedigger who talks to ghosts, a woman coping with the loss of her child by wearing a hare mask, or a colleague who might have committed murder to get a promotion. Slind remains consistent in her writing from beginning to end. Her use of longer sentences to allow the reader to get into her characters' mindset only to undermine it all suddenly with short punchy sentences articulating unforeseen plot twists is a tour de force. The

diversity of topics does not make this collection incoherent or leave it without overarching narratives and themes. Slind is particularly interested in exploring what happens to humans when life and death crash into one another. How does one grapple with loss, with mortality, or even monstrosity? For instance, her story “Amydgule” featuring a gravedigger who communicates with ghosts becomes a meditation on the relationship between life and death. The unexpected plot twist of this specific story conveys the rawness of life in a way that leaves readers wondering who or what could be buried in their backyards, as well as how far into monstrosity their own neighbours or colleagues could venture. “Crypsis,” the story that no doubt inspired the cover of the collection offers another look at what could happen when life and death meet. Here a mother always wears a hare mask as a mechanism to cope with or hide from the grief from her son’s death. Being given access to the character’s thoughts, the reader is made to trust them. This only makes the plot twists more jarring, and allows us to share in the breaking down of the human mind. The juxtaposition of seemingly realistic and uneventful stories—such as “Their Fever Dreams Were Child Drawings” about a young child’s visit to a senior home—with ones invoking the supernatural with ghosts and vampires—like “Careful, Children”—is made possible by the consistent writing that remains true through every single page of the collection.

Aaron Schneider’s *What We Think We Know* does what its title suggests: it undermines the reader’s certainty and interrogates ways of knowing and ways of producing or receiving knowledge. Separated into three widely different parts — “The Cara Triptych,” “Taxonomies of Loss,” and “Life Maps and Assemblages”— this collection of short fiction uses meta-fiction to articulate epistemological issues. Schneider explores the various forms that storytelling can take, from stories written as a direct conversation with “you” the reader, graphs that analyze a character’s romantic relationships, seemingly disjointed slices of life introduced with an italicized sentence, to the fragmented mapping of an entire house room by room. The first section, “The Cara Triptych,” is a remarkable piece of writing that immediately calls attention to the practice of reading. The story “Sex (with Footnotes)” forces readers to interrupt their reading flow to read the footnotes in order to get the full narrative. Schneider closes the first section with Appendixes. These are multiple graphs that do not give out a straightforward narrative and force the reader to sometimes turn the book to read them. In a similar and yet different way, the mapping of “The House: North of Owen Sounds” calls attention to place, making the reader aware of where in their home they are reading. This last story also plays with the spacing between words and sentences in a way that fragments the reader’s experience of the story. Aaron Schneider’s collection of short stories is interested in subverting the potentially passive role of the fiction reader, forcing us to turn the book or receive information in deeply fragmented ways.

Anais Gachet’s *Du coup j’ai fui la France* is a true account written in French, of her permanent immigration to Montreal. She frames her departure as “fleeing” France and therefore has to grapple with reconciling her feeling of having run away, with her privilege as a white immigrant voluntarily leaving a wealthy and peaceful country. Aware of the importance of language, she opens her book on a well-structured discussion of the vocabulary of immigration and departure, trying to identify which words work for her, while acknowledging how complex and slippery the terminology is for anyone who is not a well-off white immigrant. In chapters about life in Montreal she often tries to convey her feelings of disorientation, framing herself as a “cultural other.” She even discusses some “anti-French” sentiment she perceives in Quebec

quoting some articles on the topic that almost go as far as to call this sentiment racism towards (mostly white) French people. She is quick to dismiss that extreme position and to acknowledge her privilege. However, combined with multiple instances of claiming to be a cultural other and her failure to acknowledge that French people make up a considerable part of the Montreal population and cultural force, the discussion cannot help but feel tone-deaf. This is particularly the case in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests and the discovery of unmarked graves for Indigenous children under “old” residential schools all over Canada. However, she also writes about her decolonization process when she writes about an Indigenous theatre company she works with in a way that I hope could encourage her French readers to begin a similar educational journey. Gachet’s book seems to be trying to make a larger statement about immigration to Canada by sharing testimonies from other French immigrants, but she undermines her own effort when she fails to share stories of people who moved to anglophone parts of the country. This book will only speak to a very specific and small minority of people in Canada.

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