

# Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

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We acknowledge that we are on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmiñəm-speaking Musqueam people.

# Meanwhile, Home

## Tinder-Dry Conditions

*Laura Moss and Brendan McCormack*

**A**s we write in Vancouver in the summer of 2017, British Columbia remains in a state of emergency as hundreds of forest fires continue to burn across the province. Wildfires in BC burnt an estimated 1,170,000 hectares of land between April 1 and August 23. In early July at the height of the fires, 45,000 people were evacuated from their homes at one time. After one of the wettest winters on record in Vancouver with 240.2mm of rainfall in November 2016, we've seen one of the driest summers, with only 1.8mm of rain in July 2017 ("Total Precipitation" n. pag.)—making this the province's "worst wildfire season on record" as of August 17 (Ghoussoub n. pag.). As Aritha van Herk explained of the fires that raged in Fort McMurray in 2016, the boreal forest that surrounded the city was "a tinderbox: the aspen, spruce, and pine trees bone-dry fuel when the conditions—drought, early heat and gusting winds—combine to make the perfect storm of a wildfire" (n. pag.). The same "perfect" conditions have held in much of BC this year. Autumn will, inevitably, bring rain and the threat of fire will subside, until next year. Meanwhile, however, precariously dry conditions persist across our home province and new fires begin every day.

Of course, wildfires play a significant role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem. They naturally lead to the regeneration of forests and their surrounding environments as fires burn through undergrowth, accelerate the decomposition of organic material, clear forest floors, and open seeds and pine cones. Wildfires allow advanced ecological restoration as densely burnt areas become ideal new habitats. When considered in these terms, fires are a necessary part of a cycle that leads to regeneration, revitalization, restoration, and increased biodiversity. And yet, even though some wildfires are sparked naturally by lightening, some are caused by humans, and they

rarely limit themselves to forests. Fires are unpredictable. When the wind shifts directions, when more lightning strikes, when they jump barriers and bodies of water, and when they travel along root systems underground, fires are hugely dangerous to humans and the environment alike. Evidence of destruction has been clear in BC this year.

With both the destructive reality and the regenerative potential of wildfires in mind, this editorial was conceived early in the summer as we considered the implications of drawing an analogy between the recent “firestorms” of CanLit (as amorphously defined as that field has become in public discourse) and the wildfires. After a year in which the asymmetries of power and privilege operating within and upon the field have been newly illuminated by a number of high-profile flare-ups, we have seen many people drawing on fire metaphorically on social media, often with images of dumpster fires accompanied by #CanLit. Statements like David Gaertner’s succinct tweet in response to the distressing re-emergence of the Appropriation of Voice debates abounded: “If this is #CanLit, let it burn” (n. pag). It’s a provocative metaphor to think with, given the state of both our home province and our critical fields this summer, for its power to acknowledge the damage wrought within a combustible climate but also to spark ways of looking forward and affirming new futures. What does CanLit need to regenerate after critical destruction? What conversations might grow after the critical fuels have burned away the old and sometimes even decaying ideas? What might thrive in a newly cleared out ecosystem that promotes diversity and enhanced habitability for a range of critics, writers, and publishers? What kind of impact could shifting winds have on public discourse? What is the critical, literary equivalent of fireweed? Given the pervasively tinder-dry conditions in Canadian literary culture these days, what might catch fire next?

History reminds us, however, that “regeneration” is a slippery concept with which to speculate. Sometimes it means the emergence of something new, while other times it materializes as the re-emergence, renewal, and restoration of the same (even under the guise of a new ecology). The hegemony of the “old growth” is resilient because it re-seeds itself even while it is being put to flame. Hence, we witness dialectical cycles of burning, growing, burning, growing, but perhaps less systemic or structural transformation as might be anticipated because of the power of power to replicate itself. Further, fires are always burning, in both sustaining and destructive ways. This year was a flashpoint—conditions were particularly combustible, and the fires hit close to home(s) for many

different stakeholders. But the cycles of burning and regeneration have been happening in all corners of the province, and the cultural field, for years, whether they get media attention or not. For many Canadians and Canadianists, fighting fires, experiencing loss, and doing the labour of rebuilding have long been perennial realities rather than ruptures that intrude upon an otherwise peaceful status quo. What seems important about this historical perspective is that it cautions against the types of complacency that will inevitably arise once this most recent CanLit “firestorm” dwindles down, because the questions it has ignited are not entirely new, and they clearly haven’t been solved.

If playing with fire is dangerous, then, so too is the metaphoricity of critique. And as the BC wildfires intensified and progressed this summer, the limitations of such an analogy for both the survivors of the fires and for CanLit have become evident. We might talk about how wildfires are natural and regenerative but that would provide little comfort to someone standing, staring at the remains of their burnt home and community. They would likely be uninterested in having their losses read metaphorically, let alone optimistically. Metaphors are helpful and necessary to think through, but they are not neutral and they shift in meaning and application along with the tenor of the real world; like fire, they are sometimes generative, sometimes damaging, and always doing different work at different times for different people.

The impact on writers, critics, publishers, and readers of CanLit this *annus horribilis* goes far beyond clearing debris if we think about the damages experienced within the literary community during the firestorm. Meanwhile, others have said “Enough!” and have set fire to exclusionary orthodoxies. One reason the wildfire-regeneration metaphor is imperfect for thinking about CanLit is that, while there is likely consensus that the destruction in BC this summer has been heart-breaking, for many, the idea of CanLit burning isn’t all that tragic. Indeed, it might be the goal. This is the conditional logic of tweets like Gaertner’s: “if” the inflammatory events of this past year are in fact what CanLit represents, “then” by all means burn it down. The question of whether the “if” is true is debatable, but it needs to be asked. The point is that many work hard to spark and stoke flames of change and find those fires consistently fought, dampened, or extinguished by an establishment heavily insured against damage to academic capital, power, and privilege.

The question is now, if we don’t want *this* heated moment to pass without altering the conditions re-cycled in literary history, what needs to be done in order to rebuild differently? It isn’t enough to sit back after the firestorm



and let things grow as they may because things have a tendency to regenerate in ways that look remarkably similar to what existed previously. Doing so may also cop to the logic of the market and the sustenance of the status quo. So, it is not enough to ask “what might thrive” and “what might grow” in an ecosystem disrupted by fire. It is more about what type of ecosystem we want to actively cultivate, what types of new relationships we want to enter into with the land and each other, what seeds we want to plant and protect, which species hog the light and should be pruned or weeded out, where we might renegotiate critical claims to territory, and who constitutes the “we” that collectively takes these actions.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, as some of CanLit simmers, or not, the articles in this issue engage complex notions of home—as a space of failed futurity, as a space of refuge, as a volatile space, as a space to run to, and as a space of witnessing.

Two sections and nine poems in Emily Nilsen’s collection *Otolith*, reviewed by Nicholas Bradley in this issue, contain the word “Meanwhile” in their titles. In the collection Nilsen details fog, intertidal life, and coastal ecologies. “Meanwhile” signals poems about daily acts, family, and evolving versions of home (“Meanwhile, I Take a Glass of Scotch to Bed,” for instance, or “My Lip Sits in a Petri Dish, Meanwhile”). Nilsen’s repetition of the titular “Meanwhile” is mesmerizing. Repetition pushes it beyond a temporal pause or a statement of simultaneity, as dictionary definitions might have it. It moves past meaning “nevertheless” or still. “Meanwhile” also signifies “so long as a period of intervening time lasts; for the interim” (*OED*). Thinking about CanLit as a kind of home for criticism, meanwhile, we ask what futures will emerge from the embers of the intervening present and the interim.

We are in the meanwhile, it seems, in CanLit criticism, where conditions remain tinder dry.

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## Under the Stars, What a Wonderful World

Your bark, Katsura, is the colour of barred owls, your circumference, its texture sine-waved as an owl's flight through firred forests, supple-winged, rivering, the owl, folding, unfolding through a tangle-twig maze. Your trunk that scalloped, that muscled. I could take you to bed—kinky or comfort or all-night conversation. My sister's daughter died in her sleep, mid-November, the season when the world disappears in bottomless sleep. In a hospital ward, not yet thirty-six. She could sing. Her voice, woodsmoke in morning. What a Wonderful World. She memorized every word. Her voice, overflowing the depth of her wheelchair, ribbons a deep river still with us now.

ice like jackknives  
ruts the cold winter streets  
is this all there is?

# On Refugees, Running, and the Politics of Writing

## An Interview with Lawrence Hill

Lawrence Hill writes in the spaces where the personal and political intersect. A former journalist and political speechwriter, Hill has published ten books of fiction and non-fiction. The impact of his work as a novelist, essayist, memoirist, activist, and educator speaks to the power of writing to effect social change. “Artists have voices,” he affirms in the interview below, “and their voices can help influence—profoundly, sometimes—the way we see ourselves, and the way we see our country and the world and our roles in them.” Hill’s voice has contributed widely to pressing conversations about race, Black history, and social justice in North America for over two decades, most famously through his narrative of Canada’s Black Loyalist history and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade in *The Book of Negroes* (2007). Yet Hill’s multi-genre oeuvre is linked not only by its sustained meditations on belonging, identity, race, and history, but also by storytelling as an art where private life and public history merge. From the autobiographical elements in his early novels *Some Great Thing* (1992) and *Any Known Blood* (1997), to the intimacy of social critique in his memoir *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001) and Massey Lectures *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (2013), to the archival negotiations with history in *The Book of Negroes*, the borders separating fact from fiction, story from history, text from context, and body from body politic are crossed and so become permeable.

Hill’s most recent novel, *The Illegal* (2015), questions borders literally, exploring the contemporary refugee crisis in a global context. Set in a near-future fictional dystopia that presciently foretells the dangerous resurgence of far-right politics and immigration policy now unfolding in the West,

*The Illegal* has won numerous awards, including CBC Radio's Canada Reads, which Hill previously won for *The Book of Negroes*. Following the success of the six-part TV adaptation of *The Book of Negroes* (2015; CBC and BET), *The Illegal* has been optioned for a television miniseries development by Conquering Lion Pictures. In 2015, he won the Governor General's History Award, and in 2016, he became a Member of the Order of Canada, not only for his contributions as a writer to Canada and its literary institutions, but also for his social activist work with such organizations as Crossroads International, the Black Loyalist Heritage Society, and the Book Club for Inmates.

During his stay as the 2017 Cecil H. and Ida Green Visiting Professor at UBC, Hill sat down with Laura Moss, Brendan McCormack, and Lucia Lorenzi at UBC's Green College for an interview. Meeting on April 3, 2017, coincidentally the day before Canada's Refugee Rights Day, questions prompted by *The Illegal* opened to a broader discussion about the conjunction of art and politics in Hill's work as an author, public intellectual, and prominent voice within the Canadian literary community, broaching topics such as Canada Reads and UBC Accountable.<sup>1</sup>

Laura Moss: Your recent lecture at the Vancouver Institute was called "Crossing Seas: Refugees in the World and in the Imagination." At the lunchtime discussion in the UBC English Department today, you're going to be asking us to consider "What business has fiction in politics?" So I want to begin by asking two questions: how *do* you bring the imagination and refugees together, and what business *does* fiction have in politics?

Lawrence Hill: Well, it's funny, because in some parts of the world—let's say, in the various West African countries where I've worked as a volunteer—it would be almost absurd to suggest that the creation of literature should be divorced from politics. But in North America, and certainly in Canada, you might get, "Oh, you're a political writer, why would you do that?" It's almost as if that's a strange incursion in a territory you don't belong in. I don't consider myself to be a highly political writer, but *The Illegal* is my most political book. When it comes to social issues including policies relating to refugees, there are a thousand ways to contribute to public debate. My role is no more important than that of a historian, or an English professor, or an advocate who works for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, or anybody else. But artists have voices and their voices can help influence—profoundly, sometimes—the way we see ourselves, and the way we see our country and the world and our roles in them.

LM: I teach African and Canadian literatures and I would say that in both there's a conjunction of art and politics that's inextricable in many ways. I think that so many important African writers have been concerned with how to make creative and imaginary writing engage a problem and then show possibilities of different ways forward. You also do this in *The Illegal* so well. It's amazing how prescient this novel is—

LH: —unfortunately—

LM: —the Family Party, it's unbelievable, really.

Brendan McCormack: You said that *The Illegal* is maybe your most political book, and I wanted to ask about its form, or the way that you engage with the novel as a genre. Coming after *The Book of Negroes*, I'm struck by how different these two novels are formally, even though they're both interrogating a fundamentally similar interest in giving a voice, or a story, to people whose stories or voices are often forgotten. *The Book of Negroes* was very historical and contextual, archival in many ways, whereas *The Illegal* is a much faster-paced novel. It has some of the conventions of a political thriller—

LH: Yes, it does.

BM: —and satire. You've said that you weren't really interested in writing another *Book of Negroes*. I'm wondering how form and content were working together in your writing process, how the different way you engaged the novel as a genre relates to the different kind of story you wanted to tell.

LH: *The Illegal* is closest in my body of work to my first novel, *Some Great Thing*, which is set in Winnipeg. It's quite a political novel too, in many respects; it's kind of mouthy, and the narrator's voice is very prominent, and there are as many people taking turns telling the story in *Some Great Thing* as there are in *The Illegal*. I guess you step into a book the same way you step into a relationship. You follow your needs, and I needed to break free of any obligation to write a novel that offered an authentic replication of history or current socio-political issues in specific countries. My publisher suggested that I write another historical novel and I declined, because I didn't have it in me and I wasn't interested. I needed to sort of break out and do something else.

I experienced a personal tragedy, which was the accidental death of my sister, and I wanted to cope with and explore that loss, but to do so in an outrageous, funny, playful way. And I also felt the need to invent places, and go into a kind of creative mode that was more irreverent and saucy than the tone of *The Book of Negroes*.

I didn't want to have a really colourful survivor of genocide and have him cross the seas, and be all lively like most protagonists have to be. How would I create a readable character who wasn't spilling over with life, who was a sedate character? I chose to invent some vibrant secondary characters to lift my protagonist off the page. It helped to create a different time, with made-up countries, and not to feel the obligation to write about Canada. I didn't want a reader coming behind me and saying, "It's not like that in Canada, so how can you write that?"

BM: Right. Had you ever considered setting this book in Canada, or in any real place?

LH: No, I just wanted to break free and borrow from some of the worst anti-refugee policies I've seen in the world, and then imagine things, which, unfortunately, are happening now. And some things I discovered afterwards which I wish I'd known when I was writing. Did you know that in Switzerland, and I think in Denmark—countries who wouldn't usually have done such a thing—if you arrive now as a refugee they strip you of your possessions, and they say: "Well, fine, but we're taking everything you own—that watch, hand it over—you have to enter and be stripped of most of your belongings." I can't think of a more effective way to criminalize a person arriving as a refugee. I wish I'd known that while writing the novel, because it seemed like a great device to accentuate the hideousness of some anti-refugee thinking.

LM: I first read *The Illegal* last summer, right before I went to South Africa. I went to Cape Town—

LH: —Did you go to some of the townships?

LM: Yes, I went to Khayelitsha and it seemed so much like I had imagined the Africtown community you created. It felt like I recognized part of where I was from your descriptions. The expansiveness of that township was striking to me. I wondered if you were drawing on a place like that.

LH: I was channeling Khayelitsha . . . for sure, but I was also thinking (but not so literally) about Africville in Halifax.

LM: Because of the displacement of that Black community?

LH: Because of a Black community that's basically an underclass living where they're not supposed to be: a disregarded, underserved community with no municipal services, but still, people are there, carrying on. There are certain similarities, but not too many. So I was thinking a bit about Africville—it was bulldozed, of course, and people want to bulldoze Africtown. There were also Black people living here [in Vancouver], in an area called Hogan's

Alley, which was also bulldozed around the same time as Africville. In Cape Town, there was a formerly-defined-as “coloured” community, District 6, that was also bulldozed. So we have these three partly or entirely Black or “coloured” communities that are being bulldozed in the late 1960s: Vancouver, Halifax, and Cape Town. So I was thinking about communities at risk of being flattened. I was thinking about people living—in the case of, say, Khayelitsha, or other townships—in large numbers together, sometimes hundreds of thousands, some of them with legal status and some of them without. People living without legal status, even in South Africa, is a huge issue. And there’s a certain amount of xenophobia against foreigners—say, people from Zimbabwe who take people’s jobs. That’s the perception. There’s some antagonism about that, even among the most disenfranchised South Africans. So yes, I was very much thinking about the townships, which I visited a few times. My last visit to a township was during the filming of *The Book of Negroes* miniseries, which was shot near Cape Town.

BM: You recently wrote in *The Globe and Mail* about Harper Lee and the legacy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the Canadian classroom and the Canadian psyche. You discuss a type of comfortable “Canadian-ness,” I think you call it, of studying histories of racism—particularly Black history—as American, which allows us to examine “evil in another era and another country” (“How Harper” n. pag.). For readers, one of the really important things creating a fictional world for this novel does is that it draws on a lot of political conditions that are, if not universal, at least prevalent—particularly in the West, with respect to Freedom State—in attitudes towards refugees. But I wonder if you had also thought of that idea of obsession over evil in another era and another place with *The Illegal* because it *is* in a created universe, and whether there’s a chance for that same kind of convenient reading of “this is not here, it’s somewhere in this made-up world.”

LH: Do you mean is it easier to read because it’s not where we are?

BM: Yes, in terms of not having it located in a particular place, because this novel clearly could be set in so many places.

LH: It’s true that when you set a story in an imaginary place it’s easier for the reader to step into it without feeling personally challenged. Consider the typical thirteen-year-old reading *Harry Potter*. It’s a meditation on the Holocaust: the whole story is about the extermination of mixed-race wizards. You can enter the story without feeling personally challenged. It is one thing to read a fantasy or a book set in an imaginary time and place, or to read, say, a historical novel like *The Book of Negroes*. Most readers of that

novel, even people who are quite conservative politically, would probably be able to agree that the transatlantic slave trade was an abomination. However, you won't win such an easy moral when offering the reader a twenty-first-century novel about refugees. In terms of reactions to *The Illegal*, the responses I get are far more across the political spectrum, and the way people engage with the book seems to reflect their politics. It's easier to engage with an issue that's over than to enjoy a contemporary novel that goes against your political grain. Look at the response in the world to refugees today: you're either for reaching out to them, or you are hoping to shut down your borders. It's rare to be in the middle and to not have an opinion.

LM: You just mentioned that you started to think about this novel at the time of the accidental death of your sister. I'm sorry to hear about her passing. One of the things I see in the novel is an incredible love between the siblings, between Keita and Charity, and also the love of the father and mother. There's a lot of love in this book, which is very powerful, and it ends in this interesting way with things working out. That sense of love is there even in the middle of the intense politics and the political engagement with refugees.

LH: Well, there's some horrible stuff that happens in this book, even though it's told with a lighter touch than *The Book of Negroes*—playful, sometimes satirical, sometimes downright goofy. The goofiness and touches of lightness help get the reader through what would otherwise be a painful story. Keita Ali endures losses which are as hideous as the losses that Aminata suffers in *The Book of Negroes*. So in writing *The Illegal*, the question for me was how to meditate indirectly on the loss of my own sister, and to meditate on loss that others experience too. I needed to guide that meditation along a boisterous path.

In Canada, we tend to disrespect a novel that has a comedic thrust. We think it's not serious, or that it lacks gravitas. I think that's reflected in so many ways in the establishment of Canadian literature: what's taught, but also what wins prizes, what gets reviewed and how, what gets talked about. Books that are funny generally don't get the same respect, and I think that's unfortunate. Our lives contain elements of humour and love and comedy, and often those are saving graces for people who have survived something awful. Humour is part of the human experience, so why not integrate it into fiction?

Lucia Lorenzi: You spoke about the kinds of books that might win awards, and also about the social value of literature and the role that authors play. I'm thinking about the Canada Reads competition in particular, and how it very explicitly situates literature not just as something that we should do because the arts are great, but also because art and literature are social



goods. Around the Canada Reads table each year, the social function of literature is what a lot of the conversations centre around. So I'm curious, with two of your novels having won Canada Reads, what do you think these competitions do for the role of the author, both within the nation as well as within the social fabric?

LH: What do they do for the role of the author as opposed to the reader, or for Canadians generally?

LL: Does it put pressure on authors to write about certain topics, or to pursue it for political purposes rather than maybe for purely aesthetic purposes?

LH: That's an interesting question. I've often been asked, "What's the value of something like this for Canada, or for Canadian readers?" But what does it do for the author? I don't think many writers in Canada would say, "I'm going to write this book because it's likely to win a prize." Most of us don't operate that way. Most of us write the book—whether it's a thriller, an openly commercial book, or a literary, poetic novel—we need to write. It has to speak to us, and excite us. Do we, as Canadian writers, hope to win a prize? Of course we do. But do we say, "I'm going to write this kind of book because it's more likely to win a prize"? We're probably not going to succeed that way. If you're not writing the story that speaks to you, you're likely to write a lesser product, because it doesn't really come from a place of engagement and passion.

LM: There's a question too, though, of responsibility. Since *The Book of Negroes* did so well, and has reached such a large audience, do you feel a sense of responsibility while you're writing? I mean certainly to the subject matter, but also to a range of readers? That's also a "what does it do for the author" kind of question.

LH: Responsibility can be paralyzing. I don't want to feel any responsibility on the first draft. I would rather be responsible to myself, and try to do the best work I can without worrying about whether I'll excite or displease Reader X. For example, my work is situated mostly inside different aspects of the Black diaspora. Well, there's a certain pressure in Black Canada to write characters who act as role models. That's hardly a formula for authentic fiction. My grandmother, an African American woman born in 1896—May Edwards Hill—she hated *Porgy and Bess*. Hated it! She didn't like a musical that showed Black people cavorting around, being sexually free, doing things that they shouldn't have been doing when they were married. She didn't like the way that musical reflected on Black culture. So she was just incensed by *Porgy and Bess*. In a way, May wanted her art to contain good people

who would reflect well on the Black middle class. Well, it's understandable why she'd feel that way, being born in 1896 and living in America as a Black woman, and I get that. But that doesn't work for me as an artist, to feel that I must create a story that a grade nine teacher might be happy to teach because the protagonist is behaving well on the page. But it swings both ways. I *do* want to be responsible. I don't want to write something that's going to insult or mistreat or demean the dignity of a group of people or their experience, or even an individual. So I feel a responsibility to write as authentically as I can about the human experience, but that doesn't mean that I must not write a character who does bad things, or that I have to uplift a segment of the population with my book, which is a heavy thing to put on an artist's shoulders. I think the responsibility is to be honest to your understanding of the world, and to your understanding of people, and to your own literary intentions, and to be transparent, to allow the reader to see and understand what you're trying to do. But I don't feel that it's necessary to have a responsibility towards, say, historical accuracy. What if you're writing a book that deviates from history intentionally or playfully, like [Michael Chabon's] *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, which sets Alaska as a place where Jewish people go after the Holocaust instead of Israel? That's a deviation from history, but that doesn't make it a lesser novel. It's playing with history. So I don't think that a historical novel is less valid because it's inaccurate. Maybe the inaccuracies are necessary to drive home a point.

LM: That's what Salman Rushdie says in his essay "Imaginary Homelands." He talks about how, after he published *Midnight's Children*, people got in touch with him to correct him about Bombay, and he argues that he needed the imagined spaces to deviate precisely so his story could go the way it had to go.

LH: Oh, I'd like to read that. Do I feel responsibilities as a novelist or essayist? Well, they are different, too, because being an essayist I feel the responsibility to be literally, specifically accurate in the traditional sense of the word, whereas of course I don't feel that in the case of writing as a novelist. Yes, I feel a great deal of responsibility, but it's to be honest to my own values, and to respect my characters, and to respect people, even when they're doing disrespectful things on the page.

LL: You mentioned your grandmother's opinions of how Black people are portrayed. A couple of years ago, bell hooks said that she would be happy if she never saw another slave story being portrayed onscreen, and I'm curious about that tension in creating narratives around Black people. There are a lot of historical narratives about people who might be slaves or maids,

and while those are certainly real Black experiences, they risk becoming stereotypical and sombre portrayals of Blackness—but then also, there’s the other spectrum of Black exceptionalism or Black resilience. I’m curious, then, given the current political climate around Blackness, both in the States and in Canada, what your thoughts are about both the historical portrayal of the Black experience and the contemporary Black experience?

LH: Sometimes, within the Black community, I’ll encounter opposition to writing about slavery. A grade nine teacher at a school with a lot of Black kids in Scarborough, Ontario, may well come to me and say: “We don’t need another story about slavery, that hurts my students’ feelings. I’d rather have an uplifting story about an astronaut or somebody who succeeds in the Black community. Why can’t you give us something uplifting? Why do we have to rub our children’s noses in this awful past?” So sometimes, from within the community, you receive vociferous opposition. I guess my response has to be—well, first of all, not *everyone* is writing about slavery, and *The Book of Negroes* is not in my opinion a novel about slavery. It’s a novel about the strength and resilience of a woman who spends some years enslaved, but who also lives free for many years. It’s not fundamentally a novel *about slavery*. But even if it were, I still think that’s fine. Do we ask people not to write about love, or war? People write what they need to write. In every generation, somebody—or many—will want to explore the decline of the Roman Empire, or the Holocaust, or the transatlantic slave trade, or residential schools. And why shouldn’t they? Why should we bar people from exploring what they need to explore in their own time and in their own generations? We have to talk. We have to express ourselves. And if some people are made uncomfortable by the subject of a book, well, books aren’t supposed to be about comfort anyway. I’m sorry for people who are pained by the experience of reading, but I can’t worry about a person being uncomfortable because a subject doesn’t make them happy. That’s not my preoccupation. I have to write honestly and if I need to write about slavery, I will. And anyway, we *still* don’t know about it in Canada: most Canadians don’t know about slavery here. They can happily tell you about Abe Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation and the slow process of desegregation in the United States, but they couldn’t tell you a damn thing about slavery in Canada.

LM: That’s why *The Book of Negroes* was so important, I think, and so well received. It was eye-opening to many people. Picking up on what Lucia was asking regarding exceptionalism, it’s interesting in this novel that the characters are exceptional—

LH: —yes—

LM: —they're not necessarily exceptionalist representations, racial representatives who are representative of any one thing. But they *are* exceptional. Keita is an exceptional runner—

BM: —“elite” is the word that's used—

LM: —elite, yeah. Viola is exceptional. Candace is exceptional. Yoyo is exceptional. Each of them excels at his or her position. They need to be tested to their extremes to get through to the end and to come together communally. But it's interesting, because you're not shying away from the exceptional in here, right: the story relies on it.

LH: So, exceptional in that case as opposed to, say, an Alice Munro character who's an ordinary person struggling in ordinary ways. Or a John Cheever character, somebody who really does look ordinary, and we derive our pleasure as readers from watching them struggle as ordinary people, as opposed to people with stellar accomplishments or exceptional abilities.

LM: Right, but they work for it; it's not predetermined. You see how hard Keita trains to run, you see what Viola has to go through to get her stories, you see how hard Candace has to push as a police officer. However, they *do* excel, and that's really interesting.

LH: Is the question really whether exceptionalism in this respect is the way to go, is that the best way to deliver a story? Would you consider expressing a narrative in another way that doesn't derive from the notion of exceptional behaviour or skills—is that the heart of your question?

LL: I'm thinking about the conundrum that refugees face, insofar as exceptionalism can become a way in which some people justify allowing certain people into the country: if we don't let this person into the country, they may not become the next famous scientist, and so on. It seems that this is a challenge that refugees have to deal with: what value we assign to them based on what they might accomplish.

LH: Leaving aside literature for a minute and talking specifically about refugee politics, yes, there are altruistic principles that should drive us, because it's the right thing to do to open up Canada to more refugees and to accelerate their possibilities to engage in Canadian life, whether it's through ESL classes or medical attention. Some refugees to Canada need to see a dentist or doctor quite urgently. There's so much to do just to get people stabilized in a basic medical way. But in addition to the altruistic motivation—we should do the right thing because we're human beings—I think that it's important to be a bit humble about this and admit that we're acting in our own interests,

too, and that today's refugee will be tomorrow's mathematics professor or Giller Prize-winning novelist or street cleaner or cardiac surgeon. Today's refugee will be carrying our country forward tomorrow. I think our cabinet minister now representing refugee-related issues is a refugee himself, if I'm not mistaken.<sup>2</sup> I think it's important to remember this exceptionalism. People have phenomenal skills and abilities and if we just set them free and let them live, they'll be helping in whatever way they choose to build our country tomorrow. So it's in our best interests to do this: it's not just a nice thing to do because we're good Canadians.

LM: Tracey Lindberg, who wrote *Birdie*, and the Amnesty International Book Club have promoted your book for tomorrow, April 4th, which is Refugee Rights Day. Have you seen their response to the novel? They lay out a set of guided reading questions on the AI website.

LH: Tracey did something with *The Illegal* and me about a year ago, in which we connected. I quite like Tracey and her writing, but I didn't know they were doing something right now.

LM: Yes, right now . . . it's lovely. It's interesting, though, because it's set up as a brief description of your book, and then a set of questions from Tracey Lindberg and some questions from Amnesty International, and then several screens on Canada's changing positions on refugees, and the myth of Canada's role on refugees, and the reality of the Canadian government's actions. And so there's an *absolutely* explicit link between what you do in your novel—and they're very careful to depict it as a creative work—and debunking the history, myth, and realities of refugees and Canada.

LH: Oh? Is it on the Amnesty website?

LM: Yes, it is—

LH: Okay, thanks, I'll check it out.

LM: My question was really, what do you think of this? What do you think of the link between an organization like Amnesty International doing this and your work?

LH: It feels fantastic. It's great that a novel—any novel—would drive a set of readers to communicate actively about a vital issue. I think a UN Under-Secretary-General is talking about the current famine in East Africa as being probably the greatest humanitarian crisis we will have seen since the Holocaust. He made this comment just last month in a report. The plight and the needs and the absolute desperation of millions of people are going to continue. It's probably going to be one of the most pressing issues the world faces over, I'm sure, a good chunk of time, and so how do we respond to this,

how do we situate ourselves as Canadians? Do we embrace the xenophobia that we've seen in Marine Le Pen and le Front National in France, or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, or Donald Trump and his people? Just remember, many are to the right of Donald Trump; he lost the Obamacare repeal because of Republicans to the *right* of him, which is scary. So are we going to embrace hatred? And often, the more desperate people are, the more a certain segment of us wants to hate them. It seems like desperation and hatred rise hand in hand, and that terrifies me. So I feel satisfied if any work of art incites deeper conversation about how we want to live, and feel, and see this issue.

LM: I just read *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book*, and you take up the intersection of art and politics right there. You write about censorship, and you argue in a nuanced way around why people would censor a book. One of the things you do with *The Illegal* is address censorship and storytelling through journalism. You have three journalists who each tell stories differently. I am thinking here of Yoyo, Viola, and John. You don't just have one journalist, you have three: one who is killed for writing about the coup in Zantoroland and two in Freedom State who save the day because of their reporting and videography. It's fascinating to think of the role of journalism in the book, but also in the world.

LH: I'm influenced by my own personal background. My working life after university began as a journalist. I was with *The Globe and Mail* for a little bit, and then with the *Winnipeg Free Press* for three years in Winnipeg and Ottawa. So my background was as a newspaper reporter. I can draw on that knowledge to create an interesting character. But also, journalists are great characters in fiction because they have to interact with many characters, and can help to hold a story together. As is a marathon runner, because everybody interacts with him, whether it's a spectator, or the coach, or the event organizer, or a corrupt agent trading in athletes, or another runner.

BM: You still publish in newspapers quite often—maybe not journalism, but non-fiction about things you feel the need to respond to. I'm wondering how you see the relationship between writing fiction and writing journalism, and the types of different political work these modes of writing do. How do you negotiate those two media and writing genres, not just as an author but as a public intellectual?

LH: Sometimes I explore the same issue in fiction and non-fiction. Maybe I haven't satisfied myself with the way I represented it in fiction, so I return to it later in non-fiction. You bring out different tools to explore the same

subject in different ways. I like to try to exercise my intellect in an essay. I've written about the Ku Klux Klan coming to Oakfield to oppose a marriage between a Black man and a white woman. I wrote about it fictionally in a novel called *Any Known Blood* and I didn't feel that I'd gone as far as I could, and then I wrote about it in an essay in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*.

BM: With respect to the Canadian literary community more specifically, one of the moments where you exercised your public voice as an author—as a prominent author—in non-fiction was to speak about the UBC Accountable case here at UBC surrounding Steven Galloway.<sup>3</sup> Why did you feel it was a particular moment where you needed to speak, as an author whose voice would be heard?

LH: I wasn't going to say anything publicly until that letter came out. I was so offended by that letter—the UBC Accountable letter—signed by so many powerful, notable Canadian writers, that I felt that I couldn't let that moment go unchallenged. I have nothing against Steven Galloway, and I don't pretend to know the precise details of the case. But I think that the result, the effect, of that letter—intentional or unintentional—was to disrespect the women who had brought forward concerns about their own safety, and to disrespect the process of being able to lodge an anonymous complaint in an administrative context and to see the investigation carried through to completion.

LM: The public could only hear very partial stories reported by the media.

LH: The administrative process is supposed to offer anonymity to the complainants, or at least privacy. Anyway, I spoke up because I was ashamed to see a huge body of Canadian writers—perhaps unintentionally, in many cases—contributing to the vilification of women who are complaining about mistreatment. I'll use the word “mistreatment” because I don't know exactly what happened, so I'll use the word as a placeholder for some kind of wrong that they had experienced. I don't think that we should be vilifying those people, and I think that was the result of this letter. That's why I spoke.

LL: Simon Lewsen published a piece in *The Walrus* about how the UBC Accountable incident was the moment of the “great rift” in Canadian literature,<sup>4</sup> and that previous to that, CanLit enjoyed a sort of “happy consensus.” I believe that is how he worded it. I wonder what you think about the way that CanLit as a community and as an institution has been portrayed to the public in the past few months, and what happens to how the community is perceived when something like this occurs.

LH: There have been other rifts. [Everyone laughs.] Writing *Thru Race* was something that drove writers into camps, and I followed that controversy. This isn't the first time that we've been split at the seams, and I don't think it's actually unhealthy that writers should disagree vehemently with each other. It's uncomfortable, especially if some of your closest friends have taken opposing positions, but it's inevitable from time to time.

LM: I think in a way it was interesting because it made public the fact that there is not *a* Canadian literary community. There are many communities that oscillate, that sit side by side, and that's very important. There are voices—not just *a* voice, many voices—many voices who disagreed with each other, and said so strongly. It's challenging to talk about the case here at UBC because I know some of the faculty and some of the students involved, and it's a very complex situation, the whole thing. But I really valued when you said that it was important for the women to be heard, and that the UBC Accountable site was an act of silencing, and an act of people in power who didn't seem to know they were in power. Many of the people who signed that letter have at other times been cultural dissidents in some ways. So they didn't see themselves as disempowering the students, and when that was pointed out, some of them stepped back, and some of them stepped forward.

LH: That is what makes the whole thing so painful in the writing community. You know, if you're a reader, and your favourite writer signs that letter, it could be even more shocking to you, if you're concerned about respecting the women who came forward with complaints.

LM: Okay, to change gears a little bit. I wanted to bring you back to *The Illegal*, and to talk about running. I see this book, in a way, as a love story to running. I'm a former long-distance runner, and I recognize so much of it. You capture the pain and the strange mental games you play with yourself so beautifully. As an English professor, of course, I have to see it as a metaphor as well! [Everyone laughs.] You balance the literal act of running with the important metaphor of [Keita Ali] running a race for his life.

LH: I can't run anymore, by the way. My knees are shot, which I regret. I did run hard for forty-two years, and ran marathons and half-marathons, 10Ks, and shorter races. I wasn't very good at them but I certainly know what it feels like. By the way, I raced for the UBC cross-country and track teams while I was here—

BM: Oh!

LM: Really! Well that's cool!

LH: I wasn't very good—



BM: We should look you up in the history books.

LH: Well, you'll see that I was not very good—I can guarantee you'll find me in no history books. I was not a successful or elite athlete. I was merely fit, but I wasn't ever able to win any important race.

LM: That's not what it's about, generally, for most people.

LH: I'd figured out before coming to UBC that I was never going to be an elite athlete, but I still ran my legs off because I just loved to do it and it felt wonderful in a thousand ways. One of the things you notice, if you go to lots of races, is that sometimes African runners come to run in the North American races for the prize money. I started thinking about the refugee in this novel and how he's going to make money living illegally in a country from which he'll be deported, if he's caught. What better way to move him through his paces of survival than to have him running for cash, hoping to scoop up the prizes for winning local road races in Freedom State? His legs carried him toward the possibility of Olympic stardom when he was in his home country, but when genocide and war force him out, he runs to stay alive as a refugee and to help his sister stay alive. I like that transition, in the purpose of his legs, and that he's using his body to stay alive. Also, I think running is a beautiful thing. To watch a pack of runners fly by, at the 21K point of a marathon, there's such beauty and fluidity and poetry in the movement, it's really something. So I've always loved to watch runners fly along, much faster than I could ever go, and more smoothly. So there's a poetry in that movement—

LM: I've written down here that you write with the poetics of running, so there you go!

LH: To me, it's interesting to watch how Keita survives in this land. Running becomes his survival tool. And it does reflect, in a lovely, metaphorical way, on his Black body and how he's using it to stay alive in this place where he doesn't belong. It brings him to all these places and moves him through all these spaces, and so it seemed perfect for Keita's situation and character that he be a runner.

BM: It is interesting how as a refugee running for his life—which you see in all the publicity for this book, Keita is “running for his life”—he's also running into a certain kind of security.

LH: He's in trouble. He's not a person who's going to vanquish every challenge, and he has problems, even physical problems; these accentuate his humanity. He's going to suffer, and he's going to fail sometimes. Refugees have problems. You think about all those thousands of people crossing the Mediterranean or

walking across Europe: some of them will be pregnant, some of them will have bleeding sores on their feet, some of them will have broken bones or serious medical conditions, unattended, and they're on the move. So why shouldn't my character also have problems that would complicate his desires?

BM: And in the end, second place is good enough.

LH: I had somebody complain to me, "Why couldn't he win the race?" And I said, "Well, he kind of *does* win. He wins what he needs to win." It doesn't really matter in his life if he places first or second. It matters that he can accomplish something that is accomplished by placing second. That makes him a little more human, anyway. I tried to write the book in a way that the reader would feel that they were stepping into a marathon on page 1, and running—or at least following the race—all the way to the last page. Naturally, there had to be a sprint toward the finish line near the end of the book.

LM: We should probably wrap up here, since we have to get up to the English Department in twenty-five minutes, so thank you so much.

LH: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

#### NOTES

- 1 This interview is a transcription of that conversation, edited for clarity and slightly condensed. The interviewers thank Mark Vessey, Principal of Green College, for facilitating our conversation with Lawrence Hill and providing the Principal's office as a lovely place to hold our conversation.
- 2 Ahmed Hussein, a former Somali refugee, became Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship on January 10, 2017.
- 3 In November 2016, eighty-eight writers and other members of the Canadian literary community signed a letter posted to the UBC Accountable website in support of increased transparency over the controversial dismissal of Steven Galloway, former Chair of the UBC Creative Writing Program. A Counter-Letter petition signed by 552 cultural workers voiced solidarity with the complainants in Galloway's case and critiqued the UBC Accountable signatories for having "chos[en] to close ranks around one of their own and to say nothing about what the women who came forward actually want and need" (Rak n. pag.). Separately, Hill published an opinion piece in *The Globe and Mail* titled "Women have a right to be heard and respected," in which he situated UBC Accountable's defense of Galloway within wider contexts of sexual violence and hostility toward the rights of complainants, writing that he "refuse[d] to join any social movement that silences and hurts women who have brought forward complaints related to harassment or assault" (n. pag.).
- 4 In "The CanLit Firestorm," Lewsen argued that the UBC Accountable letter was "turning peers against one another and cementing what feels like an irreparable generational rift" in the CanLit community, which he describes as having previously "operate[d] under a broadly progressive consensus" (n. pag.).

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# realistic endless loop

riverbank unstable  
collapsing bridge skeleton

chimes unsafe anchor  
untethered to polestar

killer goes home to bed  
without killing anyone  
would-be  
wouldn't-be

when years ago I stopped answering the phone  
I imagined that after some time it would stop ringing

# Witness, Signature, and the Handmade in Rahat Kurd's *Cosmophilia*

**P**oetry is a technology of witness in Rahat Kurd's *Cosmophilia*. To understand poetry's witness, it is valuable to look for the poet's mark as writer. Through the artist's mark in *Cosmophilia*, handicraft and writing become linked activities in which the work of the hand recalls and recreates artistic tradition. The ghazal tradition in particular, which Kurd uses in this collection, conventionally includes the poet's name in a signature verse. The signature within the poem evokes the idea of a poet's unique voice. The signature also recalls the unique work of the hand, particularly in relation to *Cosmophilia*'s poems about calligraphy and embroidery. To examine such work with reference to technique, technology, and the technical is to emphasize poetic writing as a craft with, especially in witnessing, a significant relationship between the writing hand and the written words. What does it mean for an artist to sign art in the context of witness? Witness poetry takes this signing as a central problematic. The mechanism of the speaker, for example, complicates a poet's signature, and this complication is particularly interesting in relation to a witness, typically understood to be an individual who speaks from authentic, personal experience. Kurd's collection invites consideration of the nature of witnessing through poetry by examining the poet's mark. This mark differs from the more easily recognizable signature. The poet's mark is essential to witnessing as that aspect of the poem (a different aspect in every poem) that demonstrates the relationships among poem, poet, reader, and tradition.

In *Cosmophilia*, the evocation of ritual and convention comes alongside the witnessing of political events and atrocity shaping Kurd's family's history. Kurd writes about the traditions she inherits through her familial

connections to Kashmir and Pakistan and through her Muslim identity across *Cosmophilia's* three sections. The first section's epigraphs—one from Elaine Scarry on beauty and one from memoirist Sudha Koul stating that “[i]n Kashmir the real thing is what we are after” (n. pag.)—demonstrate its interest in tracing inherited culture and history, particularly through ornament. The second section, beginning with epigraphs explaining the stoning of the Jamarat, examines the speaker's divorce through reference to this Islamic pilgrimage. The final section's epigraph from Lal Ded—in part, “And then I wrestled with the darkness inside me, / knocked it down, clawed it, ripped it to shreds” (55)—introduces the speaker's wrestling with both gaps of inheritance and the breakdown of marriage. Kurd's poems witness political conflict and violence—as, for example, in the first section's engagement with the partition of India in “Wagah Border” and “Wagah Border II”—alongside the beauty of cultural creations like Persian script and Kashmiri embroidery. *Cosmophilia* means “love of ornament” (a definition appearing on the book's back cover), and Kurd's collection suggests such loving looking is implicated in witnessing.

*Cosmophilia's* theory of poetic witness as a way of looking through cultural tradition connects witness and ornament, as evident in Kurd's treatment of calligraphy in “Nastaliq Confesses at Twilight.” The collection's two ghazals raise the subject of the artist's mark through their conventional inclusion of the poet's name as an inclusion in tradition. A multilingual code in the first ghazal and the encoded name in the second write the speaker into continuing tradition while contributing to the collection's interest in lost or hidden names. Moreover, the title poem creates a distinction between signing and marking through its examination of handwork. In the poem entitled “Cosmophilia,” the speaker is not connected to the poet but to an unnamed ancestor who creates the poet through her intention to pass on her embroidery to this future descendent. Through the idea of inheritance, this poem examines the embroidered and poetic marks of the artist.

### **Witness, Ornament, and Tradition**

Poet and human rights advocate Carolyn Forché defines poetry of witness as “evidence of what occurred” (“Poetry of Witness” 139). There is no simple way that poetry performs evidence of a poet's life; nevertheless, Forché defines poetry of witness as the poet's authentic relationship to what is witnessed in the poetry. As Forché writes, “[i]n the poetry of witness, the poem makes present to us the experience of the other, the poem *is* the

experience, rather than a symbolic representation” (“Reading” n. pag., emphasis original). Claiming poetry as the delivery of authentic experience is thorny not least because a poem is a mediating device.<sup>1</sup> A poem cannot present a speaker that speaks exactly or simply as the individual writing the poem. In other forms, witnesses might speak more recognizably as themselves and emphasize the facts they tell over the way they tell them. For this reason, it is useful to understand poetry as a technology of witness in which the ornament of the poem is not excess that can be divided from the truth it expresses about the world, but the technique of poetic witness itself.

Kurd’s collection offers its centrality of ornament to discussions of poetic witness. Forché’s position aligns with the concept of witnessing that trauma theorists have explored in relation to poetry and other arts. Cathy Caruth, in her enduringly influential text *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), reads art as a vehicle for the delivery of writers’ unconscious trauma to witnesses, a project she continues in *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013). Shifting away from the assumption of the critic’s power to find what Forché calls “the mark or trace of extremity” that the poet is too traumatized to know (“Reading” n. pag.), I look for the poet’s mark as writer. This mark’s role is overshadowed in a discourse influenced by Forché and Caruth that focuses on witness poetry as experience, not ornament.

I consider Kurd’s *Cosmophilia* through the lens of witness poetry because its poems engage the partition of India in relation to Kurd’s family history, including her great-grandparents’ death in the Jammu massacre in 1947. When asked in an interview about her collection’s inclusion of these historical events, Kurd responds:

The creative or technical challenge becomes, can you pull the reader into the experience, and still leave room for them to decide what it meant? Can they gain even the flicker of a sense of how huge and devastating something like partition, or the Jammu massacre must have been? And I also wanted the poems . . . to show that I didn’t necessarily know if I could succeed, that wrestling with the questions and being afraid of failure was part of the process. (“Kashmiri” n. pag.)

For Kurd, the collection’s purpose is to meet the technical challenge of bringing readers closer to an event without disrupting their ability to consider it from their own positions. Meeting this challenge means navigating the actual distances involved between event, poet, speaker, and readers. Kurd writes the poems “to show” the process of writing, including writing’s potential failure to represent witness adequately; by indicating her wish to include her unknowing, her wrestling, and her fear, Kurd presents witness

poetry as poetry that creates a sense of historical events through recording the process of poetic witness itself. What the poems provide is not access to the experience of the events but access to the process of poetic witness.

Kurd's method of witnessing her inherited history is precisely through ornament, as the speaker of "Modern (Abdul Rehman)" declares: "Samarkand, Iznik, and Esfahan, / I declare myself heir / to your discipline of looking" (71). Speaking to "[m]aster craftsmen" of these cities, the speaker wonders, to the "harmony" of colours, "can a mere human hand / outstretched to another / ever compare?" (71). However, the ornaments

rebuke, from across four centuries,  
that I'm missing the point;  
that you hold in your beholder  
the anticipation of how,  
in what precise lyrical sphere,  
to be properly humanly held. (71-72)

Whether of hand held out to hand or hand working in cultural tradition, ornament demands faith that art holds and beholds this future human life—even beyond "the war games and quagmire / for which India and Pakistan / abandoned the onyx and carnelian / of their real names" (74). The ornament that might be held, metonymically standing in for its original context, shows the distance from the present day to this time, but also, held in hand and beheld in witness, facilitates connection across war's quagmire.

*Cosmophilia* invokes handicraft and writing as cognate technologies in its reflections on ornament in poetry, calligraphy, and embroidery. More than poetry does, these other arts, given their visual natures, invite looking and, more specifically, looking for evidence of the craft's relation to the hand that made it. In "Nastaliq Confesses at Twilight," Kurd—inspired by an article reporting that, since popular electronic platforms find the Urdu script, nastaliq, too complicated to offer, it is consistently replaced with the Arabic script, naskh (Eteraz n. pag.)—imagines Nastaliq as a woman on her deathbed. After recalling the script's relationship to "tyrants" (Kurd 16) and twentieth-century atrocities (17), Nastaliq then posits her ability, "over all the centuries before," to unite "those who wanted most / to know each other's voices" (17). In the final two stanzas, Nastaliq says to the speaker,

"I was not made  
for people to sit alone at night  
ruining their eyes  
in search of lost expression.



You know I lived in the breath,  
in the quick movement  
of human hands. What else  
can satisfy the human heart?" (18)

*Cosmophilia's* theory of witness through cultural creation is evident here. The script does not present "lost expression," so those who wish to witness should not waste their time "ruining their eyes" looking for it. Rather, witnessing is in the work of the hands as the work unites individuals in a living, "breathing" tradition. As Nastaliq says, "It mattered only / that I gave them a way / to be together" (17). *Cosmophilia's* poems give the poet not an experience of the witnessed past, but a way to be together with those who came before and will come after.

### **The Poet's Signature**

As she enters into this inheritance of cultural creation through participating in living tradition, Kurd's relationship to the poems she writes is evidenced within the poems themselves. Notably, the ghazal form conventionally gives expression to the relationship between poet and poem through, Paul E. Losensky explains, a "signature verse" in which "poets mention their own names" (244). The form thus seems to create a direct connection between speaker and poet. However, this signature is more complexly about a poet's presence and absence. The signature verse, Franklin D. Lewis writes, "developed perhaps as a seal of authorship for ghazals sold to musicians as lyric texts, to be performed in the poet's absence" (571). Indeed, Losensky finds, in his study of Arabic and Persian ghazals, that the "sentiments expressed by the poem's persona or lyric 'I' cannot be identified in any immediate way with the experiences or emotions of the historical poet who wrote the work" (239); Losensky's perspective both "discourages the naive reading of the poem as autobiography" and "encourages the study of the collective, generic 'deep structures' of situation and diction that inform the tradition as a whole" (239). Kurd's ghazals offer their signatures in relation to these deep structures of tradition.

The first of *Cosmophilia's* two ghazals, "Ghazal: In the Persian," is about lost languages, lands, and relations. In her article "Learning Persian," Kurd explains that her interest in Persian develops from losing other languages that shaped her childhood: "Since I can't recapture the multilingual environment I grew up in, I have decided to make one up, based on the Persian literature Urdu poets would have studied before partition" (n. pag.). According to

S. R. Faruqi and F. W. Pritchett, the ghazal “is at the heart of that tradition” of Urdu lyric poetry and is “a natural vehicle for every kind of longing and passionate desire” (111). Because its signature verse dramatizes the relationship between poet and poem, the lived experience and the art, the Urdu ghazal has a special capacity for producing poetic witness, if that witnessing depends, as I argue it does, on showing the process of writing oneself into tradition, like the tradition of the ghazal form which itself might long for tradition.

The signature verse for “Ghazal: In the Persian” contains the poet’s proper name twice:

As a serene heart? Rahat’s *that* comfortable in the Persian.

As paradox? Being Rahat’s *kheili mushkel* in the Persian. (11, emphasis original)

The mirrored italics function as a kind of rhyme between the lines, thus drawing these words into comparison. In the first line, the italicization is for emphasis; in the second, it signals the use of another language. Yet, because of the first line’s set-up, the second’s italicized words also seem emphatic. The emphasis on “*kheili mushkel*” becomes important as these words encode layers of meaning regarding the relationship between the poet and the poem.

The name “Rahat” means “peace” or “rest” (“Rahat” n. pag.); the question of the “serene heart” invokes this meaning so that the proper name has a double function. Rahat is rahat: the speaker is so comfortable in the Persian, she is what her own name says she is. The suggestion is that, writing in Persian, she is completely herself. However, as its question about paradox suggests, the second line contradicts the first. These two lines are emphatically paired and contrasted with each other through the repetitions of the initial questions, the final phrases, and the proper name. In Persian, “*Kheili mushkel*”<sup>2</sup> means “very difficult,” so the paradox comes from the contrast between Rahat’s serene comfort in the Persian and the difficulty Rahat has being in the Persian. But this line also could be read, “Being serene is very difficult in the Persian.” By invoking the difficulty of being serene (which is, more than simply a feeling, a part of Rahat’s identity as the meaning of her name), Kurd uses the ghazal form to express the complications of identity built out of a history of loss and forgetting.

Further, “*mushki*” means “abstruse” in Urdu, which has the sense “hidden” as well as “difficult to understand.” This meaning—“Being Rahat is very hidden in the Persian”—would suggest that the Rahat of this poem loses herself in the difficulty of learning this language.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the closeness between the Persian and Urdu words also includes a suggestion that Urdu is hidden in the line. In “Learning Persian,” Kurd writes, “Urdu and

Arabic are the keys I inherited in childhood; Farsi is the treasure they are helping me unlock. Their common words are indelible proof of connection” (n. pag.). The poem participates in the process of unlocking one language (Farsi, another name for Persian) with other languages. At the same time, the poem questions to what extent poems can unlock the poet’s identity (shaped by all these languages) for readers: yet another reading of the line suggests that the poet is very hidden in this poem called “In the Persian.” That is, even with the direct inclusion of the proper name, readers do not have access to the poet. Indeed, readers could exclaim along with the speaker in the ghazal’s first line, “What secrets—and from me!—you kept in the Persian!”: what secrets this poem, “In the Persian,” keeps—and from its readers!

In my reading, this coded signature verse is the “improvised device” Kurd’s poem mentions earlier:

The warmongers jeer: “Even the Taliban write poetry!”

But my improvised device pulls Sunni closer to Shia in the Persian—

Listen: Shujaat Husain Khan weaves Mevlana in the sitar strings of Hind;

Kayhan Kalhor bows his kamancheh’s deep approval, in the Persian. (11)

The second *she’r* (two-line unit) names musicians, musical instruments, and a poet (Mevlana, also known as Rumi); together, the two *she’rs*, positioned just prior to the signature verse, consider the role of art in countering cultural and political division. The dash signals a connection between the verses, which is unusual for the ghazal form whose *she’rs* are usually independent in mood and topic (Faruqi and Pritchett 113). Warmongers increase division by suggesting the Taliban has destroyed art’s integrity by writing poetry. Yet, the speaker argues, her “improvised device” works against division by bringing groups with religious, cultural, and political differences closer together, an action the dash performs between typically autonomous *she’rs*. Since the device does this work “in the Persian,” the improvised device might be the poem’s only Persian words, the ones that suggest Rahat finds it difficult to write in the Persian, or to be serene about it, but that also suggest the poet or another language she speaks may be hidden in the poem. By including herself in the multilingual diversity of her familial past, Kurd writes a poem that unites across difference at the deep level of the poem’s structure, form, and convention. Through the tradition of inserting the poet’s name into the poem’s concluding verse, this poem creates a multilingual code evoking the connected traditions in Kurd’s inherited past.

Kurd’s collection has an interest in hidden names, as in the final section (set in 2048) of “Wagah Border,” a poem witnessing the aftermath of

partition, when the speaker claims, “We undid Wagah border step by step, / smuggling the names / of all who died not reaching it” (23). “Wagah Border II” (set in 1998) ends with the affirmation of poetry’s role in smuggling names within violent legacies when “the customs official / at Amritsar” reacts to the speaker’s inability to share one of her poems with him “as if I have broken a promise” (24). He later sends a reminder of this promise that the poems themselves seem to have made simply by existing: “Don’t forget to send me your poems” (24). Poetry promised itself as part of border crossing, and, if remembered, can circulate the names of those who could not cross.

A similar consideration ends “Ghazal: On Eid”: “Broken threads, friendless cities, whole scarred mountain ranges—Rahat’s lost legions. / Why ask for their names? She embraces their ghosts when her arms hang slack on Eid” (12). The speaker embraces these ghosts while “her arms hang slack”—that is, without moving to embrace: just to participate in that day is to embrace the lost.<sup>4</sup> The speaker need not ask for names because what has been lost in history is hidden in the structure of life, particularly in the calendar structure of holidays. This sense that Eid’s date structures life beyond the day itself arises in the third *she’r*: “Each year you complain: Hijra, lunatic, mocks solar clockwise in widdershins skips / But your delight shines all twelve months when your birthday falls smack on Eid” (12). Referring to the Islamic calendar, the speaker evokes the structure of the whole year as understood through the special falling of holy days. Eid is a day that hides the lost names; to celebrate this day is to embrace the ghosts of what has been lost, and its effect can last the whole year.

When Eid falls on the speaker’s birthday, it seems to shine personally on her. This poem is about the speaker’s personal relationship to Eid, and while her name appears in the poem’s signature verse, it is also hidden in the *she’r* referencing her divorce: “Cold thicks our plot: a marriage dismantled, as Ramadan mantles seven summers *karim*. / Speak the blessing: so hollows our fiction! Does a heart or the facade now crack on Eid?” (12). In these lines, two words appear with the following spacing in which I find the name “Rahat” (as I demonstrate by striking through the superfluous letters):

Ramadan  
heart

In my reading, the speaker’s broken heart combines with the Muslim holiday to produce her name. Does the “crack[ed]” heart become in some ways whole when united with this tradition? It seems likely, since the word “heart” appears again in the following poem, “Nastaliq Confesses at Twilight,”

where, as I noted earlier, it is the act of contributing to tradition that satisfies the human heart. *Cosmophilia*'s ghazals are about the poet's relationship to poetry as well as to the Muslim tradition as part of the histories the collection witnesses. Faruqi and Pritchett argue that the ghazal "is a non-realistic genre" that typically addresses topics like "war, revolution, or other social or political problems" if "they are transmuted into metaphor" (123). Ghazals are thus characterized by an "obliqueness" (125) in which "real events are pushed far into the background" (125). Working in a tradition of subjects encoded by metaphor, Kurd follows Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Ted Genoways notes that Faiz's "The Dawn of Freedom" conflates the common ghazal figure of the beloved with the beloved country to explore partition through the "conventional theme" (112) of "the anguish of separation" (111). Kurd's interest in exploring her divorce alongside legacies of partition in *Cosmophilia* is as much a personal mark as it is an engagement with this poetic tradition in which Kurd positions herself.<sup>5</sup> Her backgrounded, hidden name serves as a metaphor for lost names while also suggesting that the poet participates in and creates new relationships with the cultural traditions attending the historical events the poem witnesses.

### Handwork

"Ghazal: On Eid" connects the work of the poem with the work of embroidery by naming the lost as "Broken threads" that may be reattached through the cultural traditions in which the ghazal participates. Lewis explains that the Arabic root of "ghazal" "encompasses the gazelle, the act of spinning/weaving" (570).<sup>6</sup> Fittingly, the collection's two ghazals follow "Cosmophilia," the title poem, which I suggest gives a theory of witness through handicraft. The publisher's website includes this description of Kurd's book:

What earthly use is the love of ornament? Slowing down to look closely at an inherited shawl made by hand, the title poem in Rahat Kurd's *Cosmophilia* traces an object of luxury to the traditionally male art of Kashmiri shawl embroidery. The poet works with images from Kashmir, her maternal family's place of origin . . . ("Cosmophilia" n. pag.)

In this collection, the art made by hand includes poetry, and the love of ornament has use for witnessing as it pertains to making one's mark in tradition, an artist's mark, the mark of the working hand.

In "Cosmophilia," the poet imagines her ancestor, an embroiderer, in turn imagining her own future existence. When the speaker imagines passing on an embroidered shawl to a descendent fifty years hence, the poem expresses

a mutual creation in which the descendent inherits the object marked by the ancestral embroiderer's initials but also the ability to embroider herself. The poet, who can be sensed behind the poem, imagining the ancestor's imagining of her, inherits the skill of embroidery (which possibly materializes as poetry), but she also embroiders herself into being as she imagines an ancestor creating and marking her in the inherited object. In being marked by her ancestor, she also inherits herself.

"Cosmophilia" is about the distance between the ancestor and the descendent, and among speaker, poet, and readers. The speaker says, "I will sew my initials / into the fresh length of wool / she will inherit" (4). The poem subsequently details this handwork and the distanced initials: these initials are metonymically connected to the hand, which is itself a synecdoche of the embroiderer whose initials we never actually get. In one sense, the poem collapses this distance by imagining the original embroiderer as the speaker; it makes this voice accessible. Yet, accordingly, the "her" that refers to the poet does not speak. As the speaker tells us, "We will never meet. / I will not live / to know her name" (4). Kurd signs this poem in absence, making a space for another voice by imaginatively relinquishing her own voice and signature as they might be connected to a speaker. The absence intensifies when no new name fills the space, but instead only the insinuation of the speaker's initials. The poet's presence as the third-person construction of an imagined voice means that readers cannot conflate the poet and speaker to find the poem's decisive meaning only or primarily in the poet's biographical connection to the witnessed events, thus emphasizing the significant mediation of the poem as a technique for creating witness. This poem is about what can and cannot be known from and achieved by a poem, embroidered shawl, or other "useless ornament" (7).

As the publisher's website suggests, though embroidery is "traditionally male art," Kurd may seek a matrilineal inheritance through "her maternal family's place of origin." The epigraph to "Cosmophilia" explains, "It was hereditary for an embroiderer's son to be an embroiderer's son." Since there is a daughter rather than a son in this poem (the one who inherits is referred to as "she"), it is possible that the fore-father also becomes a fore-mother. There is no pronoun to signal the embroiderer's gender, and Douglas Barbour interprets the speaker as a man: "Kurd has fascinating histories to explore, not least in the title poem, which tenderly takes up & renders into words the history of an old embroidered scarf, made in the traditional Kashmir way by a man, but given unto the women of the family

down through the years” (n. pag.). Yet, given Kurd’s interest in lineages of art through women, I read the speaker as a woman, whether or not such an ancestor really existed. Kurd’s interest in finding such an inheritance is evident in the other poems I discuss, with the speaker losing Urdu “every time I left my beloved women” (“In the Persian” 11) and “crav[ing] a female muezzin to praise” (“On Eid” 12). Indeed, Kurd’s interest in tracing matrilineal connections is evident throughout her collection, notably in “Return (Fahmida Begam),” which considers the grandmother’s “daughters and their daughters” (27); matrilineal inheritance (28); “centuries of women’s voices” (30); a daughter writing the family history (31); and the speaker reflecting on “merciless act[s]” committed in Jammu when her grandmother was “carrying the girl / who, twenty-two years later, / would become my mother” (34). Moreover, this poem’s concluding sections consider women in relation to their “true work” (37), which many are made to think must be only “silence” (38). Nevertheless, after cataloguing the kinds of poems Fahmida Begam recites to her, the speaker declares, “We had arrived, she and I, / at the hour of the true work” (38).

The pervasive insistence on women’s work as creation shared across generations of women in Kurd’s collection reinforces my reading of “Cosmophilia.” Kurd’s epigraph from Lal Ded—“I gulped down the wine of my own voice” (55)—for her final section (about speaking English and finding voice after divorce) likewise puts her into an inheritance of women’s artistic voices. Moreover, her “Seven Stones for Jamarat” series ends with a poem wishing for historical accounts of women throwing their stones at the pillars. The poem concludes with a comparison of this ritual gesture with poetry: “I seize the ancient gesture, weighted / with my fierce gleanings. I never write a verse now but I hurl it” (52). In an interview, Kurd speaks about her search for a literary lineage through reading work by Muslim women: “Reading what other Muslim women have written about their lives is the best, most direct way to find the necessary courage to write about yours. Trace your lineage and you will find your voice” (“Kashmiri” n. pag.).

“Cosmophilia” details its own coming into being as this voice is not her own but one coming before her that allows her to write the poem as an inheritance.

“Cosmophilia” raises the question, whose poem is it? The speaker signs her embroidered item with her stitched initials, but no one signs this poem except in the sense that we, outside of the poem, know that Kurd wrote it because it is in her collection. Inside of the poem, we know there is a poet behind the speaker because the speaker knows about the inheritor’s life

in a future world presumably unimaginably unlike her own (for example, the speaker imagines a first-grade classroom's cloakroom and the jeers of contemporary children [5]). Ultimately, "Cosmophilia" is marked by the invoked tradition more than it is by an individual; the poem works to construct the setting of inheritance. The embroiderer's initials were a mark beyond a proper name referring to a person; made within a tradition of inheritance, her mark also refers to a relationship into the future, where the next mark will be written.

"Cosmophilia" expresses art as a technology of inheritance insofar as the stitched initials create the next marker; artistic creation forges relationships across time and with new artists. Signing is in pursuit of future signing, and the anticipation of that future in some sense creates it, insofar as a tradition is created or upheld for future people to work within. Jonathan Culler, explaining Jacques Derrida's well-known comments on signatures, writes that the signature "seems to imply a moment of presence to consciousness which is the origin of subsequent obligations or other effects. But if we ask what enables a signature to function in this way, we find that effects of signature depend on iterability" (126); "a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form" (126). The work of the signature, as I am expanding it beyond the individual, seems to be precisely what "Cosmophilia" explores: the ancestor's conscious intent to stitch her mark as inheritance, an inheritance that would require the poet to take over the mark by making herself (making art herself and making herself as an artist). In writing this poem, Kurd makes the ancestor's signature repeat in a new context; the ancestor signs this poem as its speaker, even though Kurd signs it as its author. Since Kurd imagines the speaker's intent, she posits a motivation for the initials that allows her to be part of a tradition she, as one participant in it, creates.

The context of this work is the descendant's existence in a world lacking the handmade: "From the ubiquity / of the machine-made / she will fatigue" (6). The speaker envisions her descendent "prepar[ing] for the work" (10), believes "She will make it work" (5), and explains, "We must search quickly, quickly / for the tools that best fit our hands" (9). In her interview with *Muslim Link*, Kurd discusses the handmade:

The admiration of the earth's natural beauty is common around the world, but in Kashmir there is a whole culture around expressing that beauty through skilled craft. I don't just mean that it's part of the economy. There is a deeper social and spiritual value attached to the practice, the discipline, in making something by hand that is beautiful to look at and which is meant to last, as there is in the repetition of patterns. Many of the poems in my book draw upon



traditions and ideas in Islamic art and reflect on the conditions in which art gets made. ("Kashmiri" n. pag.)

These comments come in relation to Kurd explaining that her collection's title "speaks with particular acuteness of the very fine Kashmiri handicraft traditions I've grown up surrounded by" (n. pag.). "Cosmophilia" aligns the skill of writing with that of embroidery, and evokes both art forms as handicraft through its attention to hands. The speaker explains she and the poet have "the same" experience with their hands as they begin work:

she will press  
the same stiffness  
I press from my finger joints  
wrapping both hands  
around ritually prepared  
cups of hot liquid. (10)

This ritual time for beginning work recalls "Ghazal: On Eid," where the ritual time of Ramadan may heal the speaker's broken heart by tying her into tradition. When the speaker in "Cosmophilia" posits "a collaboration" in traditional handicraft, she imagines "our fingers will touch" (4). It matters that this touching is imagined such that "my deft hand" (4) becomes linked to "rigorous thought" (4), "lines of my thought" (6), and "reverie" (7). The work of the hand is linked with the work of the mind, so that the inheritor will "discern / with pleasure" (4) and "become fluent" in the tradition (5). The collaboration unites the work of the hand with the work of imagination, and "the skill" "with which we made each other up" (10) is of both kinds of work. It's not just that they made each other, but that they made each other up: the poet imagines the speaker imagining her. As the speaker says, "I will have become her creation / as much as she is now mine" (10).

Thus, the speaker and poet create "a collaboration / that insists and insists, / . . . / on being looked at" (4). This is the ornamentation central to poetic witness. The speaker says,

I will remind her  
how to pick up the thread  
when the end of mourning comes;  
  
how to mark the rhythms that mark us  
as we cross our given spans of time. (9)

The thread recalls the previous section's "[t]hose who tied thread / at Char-e-Sharif" (7) as a mark of vows. The thread that the ancestor will remind the poet to pick up is the thread of tradition beyond the thread of embroidery.

The speaker explains, “Even at our vanishing point, the marks we make / must stun with delight, the force of life itself. / Death must be satisfied with just our bones” (9). Names have to do with the “vanishing point” and “our given spans of time,” but marking has to do with what “we make,” marks in the world that also “mark us.” We are ornamented by tradition. Only the bones are subject to death; the bones may have been ours, but they are not the portion of us that is marked. The body must be aligned with the name and the hand that worked, but the mark that is “the force of life itself” is made through the product of the hand’s work, the handicraft, the artistic creation. When Kurd’s name appears in the ghazals, the name itself only alerts readers to the mark that is aligned with the ungiven initials mentioned in “Cosmophilia.”

When a poet witnesses through a poem, the witnessing cannot be simply the poet’s experience; rather, the witnessing comes through the poet’s mark. Peggy Kamuf, translator of Derrida’s work, writes in her book *Signature Pieces*, “When you sign, you do not merely write your name, which anyone could do in your place: you affix your name as a particular mark” (ix). Kamuf explains that a signature “is not an author or even simply the proper name of an author. It is the mark of an articulation at the border between life and letters, body and language” (39). It can also be the mark between an individual’s experience and a shared tradition or history. Poems navigate that border. Kurd does not give herself or her signature but her mark, which shows the border between the poet and the imagined speaker. This speaker marks the poem by embroidering her shawl. An obsolete meaning of “to mark” is to embroider, and an active meaning is “[t]o put a person’s initials or other identifying mark on (clothing, linen, etc.) by means of embroidery or stitching” (“Mark, v” n. pag). At the same time, “to mark” means “[t]o record, indicate, or represent by a mark, symbol, or marker; to record, note, or represent in writing” (“Mark, v” n. pag). Embroidery and writing are linked in the poem’s consideration of marking. The reoccurrence of marking in the poem—“the rhythms that mark us” and “the marks we make”—suggests a theory of witness in which handicraft (including writing) gives witness through the mark of the hand. This artistic creation is to “make one’s mark”: “to make a permanent, important, or obvious impression on a person, field of study, activity, etc.; to attain distinction” (“Mark, n1” n. pag). To mark is also “[t]o commemorate or celebrate (a person, event, etc.)” (“Mark, v” n. pag), and commemoration is an aspect of witness that aligns with “the marks we make” that “must stun with delight, the force of life itself,” that elude death through being remembered.

## Conclusion

The artist's mark is what a reader can access. A name might be explicitly available in a poem, but it points to the encoded mark, which is the work of the hands with the intention to create a tradition which must be reiterated by the work of new hands. This mark shows and shapes the relationship between poet and reader, poet and poem, and poem and tradition. The mark as the "improvised device" of poetic witness holds the set of relationships inhering in a witness poem. Thus, the inclusion of the poet's proper name, as in the ghazal's signature verse, does not point straight outside of the poem to the actual person and experience; rather, the signature, used as a component of the art, examines and expresses the poet's relationship with the poem. In "Cosmophilia," the poet's name also draws attention to how the poem expresses its relationship to cultural traditions. Since "Cosmophilia" expresses its theory of witness through handicraft, the concept of the signature evokes cultural forms relevant to Kurd's life while also serving to raise questions about the relationship between the embodied witness and the art object. The hand's work is revealed only in the mark it leaves behind. It is in this sense that a witness poem is encoded with the life of the writer.

## NOTES

- 1 For an extended critique of Forché and others, see Thomas Vogler's "Poetic Witness: Writing the Real." I have written about Forché and trauma theory in relation to compassion in *With the Witnesses: Poetry, Compassion, and Claimed Experience* (2017).
- 2 *A Specimen of Persian Poetry* includes this definition: "Mushkel signifies both *difficult* and a *difficulty*" (Richardson 8). According to translated phrases available at *mylanguages.org*, "kheili" is Persian for "very." Given that Kurd's collection is in English, many readers may be in the position of looking up these two Persian words. Through a Google search, the answers Kurd's readers are likely to find most quickly are a *Yahoo! Answers* definition for "kheili" as "very" and the *Hamariweb* definition of "mushkil" as "abstruse" (in Urdu). Another *Yahoo! Answers* user gives a variation, "xeyli," which John R. Perry, in his chapter on Persian Morphology in *Morphologies of Asia and Africa*, defines as "very, much, many" (985). My sources are unusual because I could find no Persian dictionary giving definitions in the Roman alphabet that included the words in the forms in which they appear in Kurd's poem. However, a Persian-speaking colleague has confirmed this definition.
- 3 In "Learning Persian," Kurd explains the complications of her multilingual childhood: "Rippling through these polyglot exchanges were a number of silences, hinting at the sorrows of India's partition and other old mysteries: national and sectarian lines ruling which language to speak, to whom, when; the private resentments of some toward the cross-border fluencies of others" (n. pag.).
- 4 The shifting pronouns "I," "you," and "she" refer, as "Rahat" does, to the speaker in this poem.

- 5 Faiz was himself heir to Muhammad Iqbal and Ghalib (Genoways 100). Kurd names all three poets in her collection (11, 14, 15).
- 6 Pritchett's claim that "ghazal" "means something like 'conversations with women'" (n. pag) is also interesting for Kurd's book, as I will argue that she crafts a matrilineal inheritance.

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# For

time, like plastic, lasts forever.  
You think in prose the poem  
cuts into. What are you thinking about?

The plastic computer eats the signal  
forever. The evergreen forest,  
rainstorms, program music

are signals. But a diamond  
in its loneliness  
doesn't outlast anything —

the signals pass over into plastic,  
rainstorms and program music.  
Nothing in the uncut diamond.

I would write to you in poetry  
on the computer and you  
would read a computer, not

the evergreen forest,  
not the lonely little diamond  
made up inside it.

# Writing the Canadian Pacific Northwest Ecocritically

## The Dynamics of Local and Global in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

A regional literature takes root when writers begin rewriting antecedent place-texts, in homage and parody combined.

—Laurie Ricou, *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*

**W**hile Ruth Ozeki's earlier novels *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), which have earned her the reputation of prominent locavore and slow food proponent, discuss controversial practices of the beef industry and the harmful effects of genetically modified organisms, respectively, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) embraces several broader political and cultural issues and connects them with ecological concerns. Ozeki also inserts herself more fully and intimately into her latest novel in the character of an author-figure named Ruth. She explains that in response to the catastrophe of the tsunami and nuclear disaster that followed the 2011 earthquake in Japan, "fiction didn't seem enough," and that "instead of writing a fictional character," she "almost had to step in there to intervene in [her] own fiction and to respond to the events in a way that felt more real to [her]" (Ozeki, Interview by Thomson n. pag.). Crossing the boundaries between life writing and fiction, Ozeki links the intergenerational trauma of the Japanese Canadian internment and the lingering traumatic effects of World War II on contemporary Japan with the degradation of the environment. By drawing attention to the connection between local and global ecologies and between environmental and social justice she answers Rob Nixon's call for "writer-activists" who will make the invisibility of "slow violence" visible (Nixon 5-6). Ozeki, a writer of mixed Japanese and Irish American background who calls

both the US and Canada home, also explores her personal and professional affinity for British Columbia and her position as an American Canadian author in this novel. I will show how Ozeki writes herself into the BC literary canon and enters a conversation with both earlier and contemporary environmental texts from the Canadian West Coast. In its discussion of transpacific literary, political, and ecological relations, *A Tale for the Time Being* presents ecological issues as having transnational relevance more pointedly and more effectively than in Ozeki's two previous novels.<sup>1</sup> As *A Tale for the Time Being* reminds us, social and environmental injustice is hardly ever contained within national borders. Moreover, while *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* are predominantly American novels in both their settings and cultural references, *A Tale for the Time Being* is decisively Canadian in its attention to coastal British Columbia and its literature, albeit in a transnational rather than a parochial way.

According to the editors of *Greening the Maple*, “literary respondents to Canadian environments have attempted to discover or invent vocabularies and literary forms appropriate to the scale and the particularities of the country” (xxv). Their assessment points to the strong connection between Canadian literature's ecocritical tradition and the country's national mythology. Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, at the geographical edge of the country, have held a special position in the Canadian environmental psyche even prior to the conflict over Clayoquot Sound in the early 1990s, which received significant international attention. Proto-environmentalist texts such as Roderick Haig-Brown's novel *On the Highest Hill* (1949), M. Wylie Blanchet's memoir *The Curve of Time* (1961), Malcolm Lowry's novel *October Ferry to Gabriola* (published posthumously in 1970), Earle Birney's play *The Damnation of Vancouver* (1952), and Jack Hodgins' novel *The Invention of the World* (1977) portray rural coastal British Columbia as what literary scholar Allan Pritchard has called “earthly paradise” (36).<sup>2</sup> In his important thematic analysis of the literature of coastal BC from 1984, Pritchard argues that “the Atwood survival thesis in its primary form, man as victim of nature, has little relevance for British Columbia writing” (38) but that “nature as victim of man,” is one of the major themes of the literature of the region (38). He claims that in addition to portraying the coastal and rural areas of the province as earthly paradises, most BC fiction—he refers mainly to the writers mentioned above—associates Indigenous people with “wilderness and an ancient rural culture” (43); condemns intrusive forces in the shape of American developers; and has a negative view of the city. I would argue that the perception that



coastal British Columbian literature differs in its relationship to the natural environment from the literature of the rest of the country goes hand in hand with the close association of coastal BC literature with magic realism as exemplified by some of the texts discussed by Pritchard.

Although some of these novels have fallen off the radar of the Canadian reading public, they are still important in any assessment of BC writing, and they are particularly relevant in the discussion of *A Tale for the Time Being*, a novel much concerned with the importance of genealogy and the desire to reach out to the past. I will begin by showing how *A Tale for the Time Being* rewrites, in “homage and parody combined” (Ricou 85), some of the themes identified by Pritchard in order to question the assumptions the texts discussed by him make about the nexus between human and non-human nature, the connection between Indigenous people and the environment, and between nature and nation as well as to reassess the ecocritical potential of magical realism. I will show in the second half of this article how Ozeki’s novel has more in common with Don McKay’s *Deactivated West 100* (2005), a collection of prose poems and essays in which McKay provides a geopoetic reading of southern Vancouver Island, and even more with Rita Wong’s *forage* (2007), which explores the link between environmental degradation, social injustice, and environmental racism with a similar focus on “slow violence” as *A Tale for the Time Being*. These recent texts, including Ozeki’s novel, indicate a major shift in environmentalist BC writing away from a perception of BC as isolated and/or marginalized and away from a focus on local concerns toward a stronger sense of global interconnectedness. Ozeki’s Cortes Island is an “earthly paradise” threatened by intrusive forces as the debris of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami makes its way to the Pacific Northwest coast, and the ocean is being polluted by the fallout from the Fukushima meltdown. The novel de-romanticizes and decolonizes Indigenous reality by portraying the novel’s sole Indigenous character, Muriel, as a down-to-earth retired anthropologist who repeatedly reminds the other characters that they live on unceded Coast Salish territory.<sup>3</sup> Two of the main characters in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth and her husband Oliver, have made Cortes Island their home after moving from New York City to BC for medical reasons.<sup>4</sup> Although the island is not explicitly identified as Cortes Island, the reference to its having been named for “a famous Spanish conquistador, who overthrew the Aztec empire” (*A Tale* 141), implies its identity. Ruth and Oliver, a novelist and an environmental artist, respectively, were living in New York City when Oliver was “stricken with a mysterious flulike illness” (57).

Consequently, they decide to return to Cortes Island, where Oliver had taught permaculture before he met Ruth. In addition to offering more affordable healthcare than the US, Canada also appears to be a “safer” place (271). After the couple spends September 11, 2001, with friends in Wisconsin, where Ruth has given the keynote address for a conference on food politics, they immediately return to the island.<sup>5</sup> But despite idealizing Canada as a safe haven, *A Tale for the Time Being* makes it clear that the local and the global have become interconnected to such a degree that even a secluded place like Cortes Island does not remain unaffected by acts of mass violence and by natural and human-made disasters elsewhere in the world.

On one of her walks on the island’s main beach, Ruth finds a Hello Kitty lunchbox sealed inside a Ziploc bag. Inside it she finds some letters, a kamikaze watch from World War II, and a diary that we soon learn was written by a suicidal sixteen-year-old named Nao. While Ruth’s narrative strand is set in 2013, the diary seems to have been written around 2002. West Coast critic Laurie Ricou observes that in addition to the boundary between Canada and the United States, the “land-water boundary” and the “beach-boundary” are important in writing and reading of the geography and culture of the Pacific Northwest. Quoting from Sean Kane’s *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, Ricou claims that the “land-water boundary” is where “exchanges happen, where things, good things and bad things, are given by the sea to the land” (154). The “beach-boundary,” according to Ricou, “is the site of first contact between Aboriginal dwellers and European visitors” (154). He adds that it is also “the form and metaphor of cultural exchange, of a trans-Pacific transaction where gifts are given by Asia to North America and by America to Asia” (154). Although Ruth and Oliver suspect that the lunchbox drifted to the island in the wake of the 2011 tsunami, Ruth never finds out for sure. Fortunately, she can draw upon a number of experts on the island, whose inhabitants—with the exception of Muriel—hail from different parts of the world. While Callie, a marine biologist, attempts to determine how long the box might have floated in the ocean by examining the gooseneck barnacles attached to it, French Canadian Benoit and Japanese Canadian Kimi translate into English a historical diary written in French and a stack of letters written in classical Japanese. Although these characters form a close-knit community whose members are eager to help each other out, this “earthly paradise” has experienced a twofold fall from grace: Japanese Canadian internment and the colonization of Pacific Northwest Indigenous territories.<sup>6</sup>

The novel draws attention to the colonial history of the coast by having

Ruth point out that the unofficial name of Cortes Island is “Island of the Dead”: “Some said the name referred to the bloody intertribal wars, or the smallpox epidemic of 1862 that killed off most of the indigenous Coast Salish population. Other people said no, that the island had always been a tribal burial ground” (142). As if to assert her territorial prerogative, Muriel, an avid beachcomber herself, exclaims when examining the content of the Hello Kitty lunchbox: “I still say this should have been my find” (34). Once the other islanders hear about Ruth’s discovery, they, too, start looking for “treasures” drifted over from Japan, provoking Muriel’s obvious disapproval: “‘Scavengers,’ Muriel said. ‘Looking for stuff from Japan. On *my* turf’” (152, emphasis original). The conflicting interests of those living on the island make it clear that the local cannot be treated as a given category. As West Coast scholar/artist/environmental activist Beth Carruthers observes:

There is within Canadian settler culture a deep, pervasive ambivalence in the relationship between self and place—an ambivalence and a tension that, although significant, is for the most part backgrounded. I understand this tension as a fault line lying deep under the Canadian psyche. It makes its presence felt from time to time, as does the earth when it adjusts its skin. Perhaps this tension and deep instability lie closer to the surface of the west coast, mirroring the real instability of living in a place of seismic activity. The ground is continually shifting beneath our feet. (68)

Carruthers’s observations are particularly relevant in the context of the recent general shift in environmental BC literature with its heightened awareness of Indigenous rights to the land. The role of settler anxieties in shaping Canadians’ relationship to the natural environment was neither addressed by early literary critics such as Pritchard nor in the texts discussed by him. Moreover, early BC literature did not consider global interconnectedness to the degree that contemporary texts do. In this vein, Ozeki’s novel questions the isolation of local political and ecological phenomena by connecting the colonization of British Columbia with that of the Miyagi prefecture in the Tōhoku region of Japan, where the Buddhist temple of Nao’s great-grandmother was devastated during the 2011 earthquake and tsunami: “This area was one of the last pieces of tribal land to be taken from the indigenous Emishi, descendants of the Jōmon people, who had lived there from prehistoric times until they were defeated by the Japanese Imperial Army in the eighth century” (*A Tale* 141). Lack of governmental financial support for Buddhist monasteries, which are desperately in need of repair, and ultimately the earthquake are responsible for the demise of another kind of “earthly paradise” that is not of interest to global capitalism.

Furthermore, the novel draws attention to close connections between colonization, global capitalism, and the degradation of the environment. The intrusive forces that threaten the “earthly paradises” of this world, many of them places that have been subjected to colonial rule, have become more amorphous, and their effects are often invisible. With regard to visibility and spectacle, such effects cannot compete with a tsunami or the events of 9/11. According to Nixon,

Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match. Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss due to ravaged habitats are all cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations. (3)

Nixon uses the concept of “slow violence” to describe the gradual, cumulative global effects of toxic pollution, oil spills, deforestation, and climate change and claims that we do not pay sufficient attention to them as they are often invisible. Aware of the dangers of the effects of pollution and nuclear fallout, the islanders worry that flotsam from Japan will add to the Great Eastern Garbage Patch, which, as Oliver points out, is already the size of Texas (*A Tale* 36). They are also concerned that seafood has become radioactively polluted once they learn that “Tepco received permission from the Japanese government to release 11,500 tons of contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean” (197). Radiation will affect oyster farming, one of the few industries left on the island: “Oyster farming was the closest thing they had to an industry, now that the salmon run was depleted and the big trees had been cut” (187). The text’s focus on the importance of species in defining place emphasizes the interconnectedness between the local and the global. Wild salmon plays a crucial role in the local economy and the health of the local population as well as that of the forests and species living along the salmon streams. But its depletion also has an impact on planetary ecosystems. The island’s biotic community has become further unbalanced as wolves have recently killed several pets. Moreover, apart from being threatened by pollution in the wake of the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear fallout, the island is also at the mercy of logging companies. Oliver is involved in a tree-planting project:

Anticipating the effects of global warming on the native trees, he was working to create a climate-change forest on a hundred acres of clear-cut, owned by a botanist friend. He planted groves of ancient natives—metasequoia, giant sequoia, coast

redwoods, *Juglans*, *Ulmus*, and ginkgo—species that had been indigenous to the area during the Eocene Thermal Maximum, some 55 million years ago. (60)

But one day, without warning, the site where he plants his climate-change forest was clear-cut by a logging company because they considered his trees as exotic. Subsequent reforestation would be limited to species that were native to the geoclimatic zone (120).<sup>7</sup> This violent incident not only demonstrates the power of logging companies, but it also draws attention to misinformed ideas about “invasive” species. As Jenny Kerber observes,

[w]hile members of plant and animal communities cross borders in ways ranging from the dispersal of seeds using wind and water to animal migration for feeding and reproduction, humans profoundly shape the movements of such biota in the form of trade agreements, restrictions, and state policies that outline the acceptability or unacceptability of different species. (210)

Trade agreements and conflicts over local and global resources are intimately linked to the commercial and technological exploitation of nature and to consumerism, a point that Oliver makes at several moments in the text.

While there is no reference to Vancouver as the site of corporate greed and environmental degradation in the name of development as in earlier BC fiction—Birney’s *The Damnation of Vancouver* is likely the most prominent example—Silicon Valley and Tokyo, where Nao’s family returns after her father loses his computer programming job in the dot-com bubble burst, are portrayed as the epitome of consumerist culture or “liquid life” (Bauman 2). According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, “liquid life is consuming life. It casts the world and all its animate and inanimate fragments as objects of consumption: that is, objects that lose their usefulness (and so their lustre, attraction, seductive power and worth) in the course of being used” (9). Both Nao’s father and Nao herself lose their “lustre” in Japan and feel that they have become disposable. Because Nao’s father is unable to find employment, the family moves into a small, run-down apartment on the outskirts of Tokyo. In her own diary, Nao describes how she acts and feels more American than Japanese because she has lived most of her life in California. She also details how she is bullied physically and emotionally by her classmates, who stage a funeral for her, rape her, and auction off her underwear on the Internet. As a consequence of their bullying and her own depression, she drops out of school and ends up as a sex worker in a maid café. Her father, who feels responsible for his daughter’s suffering, attempts to commit suicide, twice. In the diary Nao is not aware that her father lost his job because he refused to apply game interfaces to the design of military

weapons (*A Tale* 387). As he explains to her later, he did not want young American pilots to use his interfaces to kill Afghani and Iraqi civilians and to suffer from lifelong trauma as a result (388). The novel here draws attention to the often forgotten or hidden global history of technological innovations, or natural resources like uranium or asbestos for that matter, and the moral responsibility of scientists and decision makers in dealing with these issues.

One of the many connections that Ozeki makes in this novel is that between pernicious long-term ecological effects and the effects of social phenomena like bullying and intergenerational trauma, which, from a sociological and psychological perspective, can also be perceived as effects of “slow violence.” We learn from the secret diary of Nao’s great-uncle Haruki (which he kept while serving as a kamikaze pilot and which he wrote in French to avoid the fatal consequences of disclosing his treasonous thoughts about the war) that he decided to fly his plane into the ocean instead of crashing it into the enemy aircraft carrier (*A Tale* 386). Here, the novel makes visible the connection between bullying and suicide in contemporary Japan as social and cultural behaviours that can be traced back to the torture of kamikaze pilots, Japanese amnesia, and the culture of shame. Nao’s father explains:

They say we Japanese are a culture of shame, so maybe we are not so good at conscience? Shame comes from outside, but conscience must be a natural feeling that comes from a deep place inside an individual person. They say we Japanese people have lived so long under the feudal system that maybe we do not have an individual self in the same way Westerners do. Maybe we cannot have a conscience without an individual self. (308-09)

These observations reflect one of the novel’s major concerns: individual and communal responsibility for social and environmental injustice. By making connections between Fukushima and Chernobyl, bullying in the Imperial Army and in a contemporary Japanese high school, Japanese Canadian internment and anti-Islamism in the wake of 9/11, the genocide of Indigenous people, the senseless killing of civilians during times of war, and the brutal slaughter of whales, *A Tale for the Time Being* promotes environmentally inflected global citizenship.

Ozeki uses “magical realist moments” (Sandín 1) not only to make apparent connections between the local and the global, but also to acknowledge the responsibility of the “writer-activist” who faces the representational challenges that “slow violence” poses.<sup>8</sup> As of yet, not much research has been devoted to exploring promising links between

environmental writing and magic realism. Arguably, magic realism, with its inherent tensions between the real and the magical and the spatial and the temporal, is a mode prominently suitable to making visible “the often hidden effects of climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes” (Nixon 2). Marxist critic Fredric Jameson’s argument that “the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present” (Jameson 311) is equally relevant here. Jameson is referring to the inherent tensions in the historical realities that magical realist novels (or films) attempt to portray, such as the violent conflicts between Indigenous populations and European colonizers. The “magical” elements in those narratives are usually read as subversive and anti-colonial in contrast to the historical reality described in realist fashion. Magical realism is thus often seen as providing a means for writers to express a non-dominant or marginal position. In his 1980 introduction to the fiction anthology *Magic Realism*, Geoff Hancock goes as far as to claim that “Canada is an invisible country in the same way that Colombia, Peru, Argentina, and Paraguay are invisible, and the art of the magic realist is to make it real for us on their [writers who use magic realism] terms” (11) in order to give Canada’s West Coast a voice. In somewhat hyperbolic fashion, he refers here to Canada’s marginalization vis-à-vis its powerful neighbour to the south as well as the marginalization of British Columbia by Canada’s “heartland,” Ontario. His observation ties in with literary scholar Jennifer Andrews’ claim that the alliance with the Latin American literary movement also gave Canadian writers of the 1970s and 1980s the opportunity to liberate themselves from British narrative traditions and to set their writing apart from American literary modes (Andrews 3). While Hancock’s observations about Canada’s and BC’s marginalization are still valid in some political contexts and Andrews’ insights shed light on the transnational links of magical realism, Ozeki gives this literary mode new relevance by connecting it to the role of the “writer-activist,” by drawing attention to the intergenerational consequences of “slow violence,” and by emphasizing that Cortes Island is equally as important as Manhattan when it comes to resolving globally relevant issues.

In its exploration of “the process of fiction writing itself, and what happens when an imaginary character reaches out to you” (Ozeki, “A Universe” 162), Ozeki uses a literary strategy that Jon Thiem, in his discussion of magic

realist fiction, refers to as “textualization of the reader” (235). As Thiem explains: “A textualization usually occurs in one of two ways. First, a reader or sometimes an author, or even a non-reader, will be literally, and therefore magically, transported into the world of a text” (235). A second type of textualization takes place “when the world of a text literally intrudes into the extratextual or reader’s world” (236). Ozeki’s novel predominantly uses the first type of textualization. Ruth loses the detachment “that keeps her out of the world of the text” (Thiem 239) and ultimately becomes an “agent in the fictional world” (239). She magically intervenes to save the life of Nao’s father by telling him that his daughter is waiting for him at the bus stop in Sendai on her way to say her final goodbye to Jiko, her 104-year-old grandmother, who is lying on her deathbed at the temple. Ruth also returns the French diary of Nao’s great-uncle to the temple, so that Nao can learn about his heroic act of responsibility. In a similar way, the “writer-activist” is asked to step up to the challenge of finding adequate literary strategies to represent the elusive violence of delayed harmful effects. Furthermore, the world of Jiko’s temple is described in magical realist terms, where things often appear to be what they are not. For example, what seems to be “a ghostly monster climbing toward” Nao in the shape of an ancient dragon or a “caterpillar monster” turns out to be “a long line of very old people from the danka,” whose “round humped backs and wobbling white heads looked like the caterpillar’s body” (*A Tale* 237). However, as Nao’s meeting with the ghost of her great-uncle shows, ghosts have the power of intervention in this novel. Seeking a second encounter with him the following day, she discovers his letters in a box on the family altar. As Lois Parkinson Zamora observes with respect to the meaning of ghosts in magical realist fiction:

Their presence in magical realist fiction is inherently oppositional because they represent an assault on the scientific and materialist assumptions of Western modernity: that reality is knowable, predictable, controllable. They dissent, furthermore, from modernity’s (and the novel’s) psychological assumptions about autonomous consciousness and self-constituted identity and propose instead a model of the self that is collective . . . Magical realist apparitions also unsettle modernity’s (and the novel’s) basis in progressive, linear history. . . . (498)

Nao’s discovery of Haruki’s diary (after Ruth has time-travelled and placed it in Jiko’s sanctuary) both propels the plot forward and, by allowing Nao to make this personal connection with her ancestor, places emphasis on the importance of the past and of family genealogy for Ozeki’s characters as well as for Ozeki as a writer. Both Ruth’s magical “transportation” into the world of the text and the presence of Nao’s great-uncle’s ghost question the



hegemonic construction of everyday reality as it hides colonial histories and trauma and their intergenerational effects.

In addition to “textualization” and references to ghosts, the novel uses coincidence as a trope to further explore the relationship between the past and the present. Ruth’s discovery of the lunchbox and Nao’s father’s finding out about Nao being bullied because she forgot to clear the cache in their shared computer’s web browser disrupt the narrative chronology of events and serve to probe the nature of time and reality. As Ozeki explains in an interview with Eleanor Ty:

With this new book, it wasn’t a single issue, per se, that interested me; it was more a sense of the way the world is now; it was sort of everything. It was everything that has happened in the past decade, personally as well as globally, in the post-9/11 period and since the turn of the millennium. But as I worked, this material kept expanding and looping back further in time, which makes sense because it is a tale for the time being. Time itself became the issue that I was exploring. (“A Universe” 161)

Ruth and the reader receive crucial information about Nao’s life before she records it in her diary. This temporal paradox is created by the fact that Ruth does not read the diary in one sitting. Moreover, she learns why Nao’s father quit his job in an email exchange with a professor in California before she reaches the point in the diary where Nao’s father shares this information with his daughter. Ruth also continues to think about Nao as a suicidal teenager, despite the fact that she would be in her late twenties by the time Ruth reads the diary (313). She becomes so obsessed with attempting to prevent Nao from harming herself that she has no time to continue working on the memoir of her mother that has occupied her for the previous years.

Another, more playful, magical realist moment in the text is the sudden appearance of a Jungle Crow which seems to have travelled along with the lunchbox. Ruth is skeptical when Oliver, who observes the crow being harassed by the local ravens, suggests that it rode over from Japan to the BC coast on the flotsam (*A Tale* 55). She believes that the crow is a messenger from Nao’s world. Their differing responses to the crow emphasize the validity of different ways of perceiving the human relationship with the non-human natural environment, including Buddhist and Indigenous knowledges. As magical realist moments interrupt realities that are taken for granted, the crow remains a curious presence at the periphery of the couple’s property and eventually assists in rescuing their pet cat, which was hiding under the deck after being wounded by a larger predator. Once the crow has fulfilled its rescue mission, of both the cat and of Ruth, it disappears. In addition to being an “invasive species,” the crow is yet another “gift” from

Asia, to borrow Ricou's metaphor for cultural exchange between Asia and North America (Ricou 154), that connects Ruth with Nao's life, as it appears to have been sent by Jiko to draw Ruth into Nao's world. The intrusion of unexplainable phenomena questions temporal and spatial logic as well as the boundaries of the text. By ending her novel with Ruth's letter to Nao, Ruth calls Nao into life as much as Nao called her into life at the beginning of the novel. All of these "magical realist moments" serve to challenge and revision Western epistemological paradigms, which Nixon (and Ozeki) view as contributing to social and environmental injustice.

Other texts by West Coast writers like Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) and *The Kappa Child* (2001), Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), Lee Maracle's (Stó:lō/Métis) *Ravensong* (1993), and Eden Robinson's (Haisla/Heiltsuk) *Monkey Beach* (2000)—novels with which Ozeki might be familiar—have also been associated with both environmental writing and magical realism. While *A Tale for the Time Being* shares a decolonizing and anti-racist position with the novels of Goto, Lai, Maracle, and Robinson, it has in its attention to "slow violence" more in common with McKay's *Deactivated West 100*. McKay's speaker's musings about the slow catastrophe of the last few billion years, his use of the fault line as a metaphor for the clash between colliding perceptions, his definition of place as "a function of wilderness" (McKay 17) and of "memory [as] the momentary domestication of time" (30) are all echoed in Ozeki's text. As Susan McCaslin puts it: "McKay's form of natural contemplation, even in the face of the collision of tectonic plates as big as Iceland, does not end in nihilism or despair, where human consciousness comes to seem meaningless, but in an acceptance of our place in the unfolding of mysterious powers within both us and in nature" (70). The speaker's suggestion that we ask "what am I to the beach?" rather than "what's the beach to me?" (17) sets his perspective of "wilderness" apart from that of the earlier BC writers discussed by Pritchard. In McKay's view, "place is wilderness to which history has happened" (17). In paying "poetic attention" to "the unfolding of mysterious powers," he creates his own moments of magic realism through his trademark "outlandish comparison" and "outré juxtaposition" (Bradley 171). Like Ozeki, McKay is interested in finding an adequate literary mode to represent the Canadian ambivalent relationship to place, the "fault line lying deep under the Canadian psyche" and a little closer to the surface at the BC coast (Carruthers 68).

In addition to sharing thoughts about place and time with *Deactivated West 100*, Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* explores the relationship between

environmental degradation, social justice, and decolonization in similar ways as Wong's poetry collection *forage*. Through her foraging and recycling poetics, Wong draws attention to the connections between environmental and social injustice. As she explains:

*forage* arises from the process of exploring everyday life and perceiving what's overlooked within it. For example, when you examine something as common as a personal computer, its life cycle reveals a path of destructive mining and exploitative labour practices, and toxic pollution as electronic waste is shipped to places like China and Nigeria, where its dismantling poisons the air and water that eventually circulate globally. ("Rita Wong" n. pag.)

By framing some of the poems in the collection with handwritten marginalia, Chinese characters, and photographs, *forage* addresses various forms of violence with the intention of making the invisible visible. One of the photos in *forage*, for example, shows the factory worker Agnes Wong of Whitecourt, Alberta, assembling a gun produced for China by the Ontario-based Small Arms Plant in 1944. The photo reveals the complex global networks of violence and warfare, and how Asian labour has often been used for hidden purposes. That Nao's father was fired in Ozeki's novel because he refused to support the American war industry is another example of how such networks operate.

In addition, both *forage* and *A Tale for the Time Being* are concerned with foraging and recycling, literally and metaphorically. Wong's poem "perverse subsidies," for example, which opens with the line "will pay for you to take my garbage away so I never have to look at it" (21), questions waste production and the consumer's complicity in creating social inequality and contributing to increasing the body burden, the total amount of a toxic or radioactive substance in a person's body. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, the weekly trip to the local dump is a social event for the islanders, and many of the discarded objects are recycled and put on display at the Free Store: "They liked to come to the dump to dispose of their waste personally. They liked to haul their sodden boxes of cans and plastic bottles to the recycling table, sort their paper from their cardboard, and hurl glass into the crusher" (219). Unfortunately, these local efforts seem to be a drop in the bucket in light of the ocean's considerable contamination by plastic which Ozeki is also careful to point out. The novel also humorously discusses creative ways of ridding the Internet of personal "waste." Once Nao's father recovers from his depression, he invents Mu-Mu the Obliterator to remove his daughter's name from the search engine databases:

I began to research and was able to develop a neat little spider that could crawl up search engine databases and sanitize all instances of my daughter's name and personal information, as well as all the pictures and nasty videos, until there was not even one trace of her shame left. It was all clean again. "Super squeaky clean!" Naoko said, and she was very happy to make fresh start in her new life in Montreal, Canada. (382)

The ability to obliterate hurtful information virtually thus renders the actual act of suicide in response to Internet bullying redundant, so to speak.

In addition, Ozeki uses literary foraging practices that have much in common with Wong's copious references to other texts and extensive borrowing from them. When reading Nao's diary, "Ruth found herself logging on to the Internet to investigate and verify the girl's references, and before long, she had dragged out her old kanji dictionary, and was translating and annotating and scribbling notes about Akiba and maid cafés, otaku and hentai" (29). As with Wong's use of marginalia, Ozeki "frames" the page with Ruth's copious footnotes that provide translations from Japanese into English and explain Japanese cultural phenomena. Like Wong's insertion of Chinese words in *forage*, the Japanese words in Ozeki's text serve to slow down the reading process, to disrupt perceptual logic, and to make connections across languages and cultures in an attempt to undermine capitalist and consumerist objectives. Nao's diary itself, which is bound between covers of an old copy of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is a product of creative global recycling practices. As Nao explains: "The girl who makes these diaries is a superfamous crafter, who buys container loads of old books from all over the world, and then neatly cuts out all the printed pages and puts in blank paper instead. She does it so authentically you don't even notice the hack" (20). The two texts require a foraging reading practice as they both use textual mediation and intertextual references to challenge readers' assumptions about reality, language, literature, temporal logic, and sense of place. Moreover, Wong's reference to herself as an "interbeing" (5), a Buddhist concept that recognizes the idea of an independent self as an illusion and emphasizes human interdependence, is echoed in Ozeki's notion of the "time being." The definition of a time being as "someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be" (*A Tale* 3) entails the vision of a creative symbiosis between writer and reader as exemplified in the relationship between Nao and Ruth. As Ozeki explains, "Nao is the writer. She writes her book and sends it into the world, and in so doing, she calls Ruth, her reader, into being" ("A Conversation" n. pag.).

Apart from creating what Ozeki calls “a place within a lineage that is bigger than [herself]” (Interview by Thomson n. pag.), she demonstrates how the past continues to shape the present. By reworking some of the prevalent themes of earlier and entering into a creative dialogue with more recent coastal BC literature, Ozeki writes herself into “place” while retaining an acute awareness of the dynamics between the local and the global. The “magical realist moments” in *A Tale for the Time Being* do not celebrate the perceived magical difference and subversive potential of British Columbia vis-à-vis the nation, but they connect the province historically, politically, and ecologically with Japan, the US, and the rest of the world. As a literary mode that is characterized by its disruption of time, space, identity, and perception, magical realism is able to make the invisible forces that lurk in our daily environments visible. Ozeki seems to concur with Carruthers that “Canada is a nexus where important questions and issues of self and world, of place and belonging, of colonialism, resourcism, empire, and industry—and, in particular, a clash of differing world views—are visible and foregrounded” (68). British Columbia needs to play a major role in both decolonizing Canada and promoting environmental justice “because it is the location of some of the last intact wild and functioning habitats in the world” (Carruthers 68). *A Tale for the Time Being* thus captures the unique spirit of the BC coast and its literature while suggesting at the same time an ecologically inflected transnational trajectory.

#### NOTES

- 1 Ursula Heise has criticized Ozeki, Barbara Kingsolver, and Karen Tei Yamashita for creating “multicultural and transnational family romances to function as narrative solutions to environmental problems” (“Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn” 394) and she suggests that “ecocriticism . . . needs a more nuanced engagement with theories of transnationalism” (387).
- 2 I use the term “proto-environmentalist” to indicate that these texts were written prior to the environmental movement and the coming of age of ecocriticism as an academic discipline.
- 3 Although Muriel is not explicitly identified as an Indigenous character, clues in the text suggest that she is.
- 4 Ozeki modelled the relationship of Ruth and Oliver on her own marriage with German Canadian husband Oliver Kellhammer. Like the fictional couple, Ozeki and her husband have made this Gulf island their second home.
- 5 As Scott Slovic observes, environmental justice ecocriticism emerged almost contemporaneously with the occurrence of the 9/11 attacks (94).
- 6 In the novel, “Jap Ranch,” an old homestead on the island that once belonged to a Japanese

family “who were forced to sell when they were interned during the war” (*A Tale* 32) is now owned by an elderly German couple.

- 7 The portrayal of the power of the logging companies is reminiscent of the conflict between a logging company and a group of activists defending the old growth forest on Vancouver Island represented in Ann Eriksson’s *Falling from Grace* (2010). Ozeki’s comment on the book’s cover reads as follows: “Ann Eriksson evokes the awesome beauty and complexity of the Canadian Pacific Northwest landscape, from the perfect symbiosis of flora and fauna to the conflicts, sometimes noble, often tragic, between nature’s ecologies and our powerful human desires” (n. pag.).
- 8 Sandín and Perez coined the term magical realist “moment” to draw attention to “how magical moments appear episodically in the otherwise realist fiction of contemporary US authors of so-called ethnic derivation” (1).

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# Burial at Sea

The dead are the life of the party.  
Sharks, sure. But small fish too, puckering

at the taste of you. Then come the crabs  
with their busy hands

groping their way into your heart.  
The tube worms rave

until nothing remains.  
Not even the naked architecture of bones.

Just a disturbance,  
a footprint in the quicksand;

one last stab at posterity: A liquid name  
on a discarded napkin.

You watch your friends sail off  
pretending to know the way.

But death's an empty dance floor  
and the wake's run out of whiskey.



# “Coming Home” Through Music

Cree and Classical Music in  
Tomson Highway’s  
*Kiss of the Fur Queen*

After seating himself at the nine-foot Bösendorfer during the climax of part four in Tomson Highway’s novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, “Jeremiah played a northern Manitoba shorn of its Gabriel Okimasis, he played the loon cry, the wolves at nightfall, the aurora borealis in Mistik Lake. . . . These weren’t keys on a piano but a length of curved, peeled spruce, the handlebar of a sled” (213). Here at a prominent classical piano competition for the Crookshank Memorial Trophy, two cultural “voices”—Cree and classical—work in counterpoint, resulting in a “passion[ate]” performance featuring a “scorching” melody (*Kiss* 213). Transforming into a dogsled, the piano connects the pianist back to his Cree childhood, recalling the passion that had driven his father to win another trophy, the Millington Cup at the World Championship Dog Derby. Although the term “counterpoint” originates from the Latin *punctus contra punctum*, meaning “point against point” or “note against note,” and is therefore suggestive of contrast, in this scene Western art music and images of Jeremiah’s northern Cree home blend together. In musical counterpoint, despite the relative independence of simultaneous melodic lines, these lines are harmonically interdependent: “transitory and dependent” dissonances lead to consonant resolutions in tonal music, as “two or more melodic lines combine into a meaningful whole” (Salzer and Schachter 13, 3). This notion of counterpoint helps to illustrate the novel’s cultural politics, for the ending points toward a new understanding of the modern Cree artist and personal healing for the central character, as European musical traditions give way to and become part of Indigenous cultural renewal.

To date, Sarah Wylie Krotz's "Productive Dissonance: Classical Music in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*" is the only scholarly article which specifically focuses on music in the novel. Persuasive in her analysis of classical music as a representation of the "productive dissonance"<sup>1</sup> between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in the text (183-84), Krotz considers how Highway "writes back' to Eurocentric practices and ideals" (183). My article will expand on Krotz's analysis of the purpose of music in Highway's novel by exploring its connection to the growth and development of one of the two protagonists, Champion/Jeremiah<sup>2</sup> Okimasis, who becomes a classically trained concert pianist after being captivated by the sound of the instrument at Birch Lake Indian Residential School and subsequently requesting lessons. Some important questions arise when considering this connection: How does Highway's use of musical aesthetics help to exemplify and yet also problematize the use of the *Bildungsroman* or, more specifically, *Künstlerroman* structure as well as to illuminate the ways in which youth establish their place in the community? More importantly for the scope of this paper, how does musical aesthetics help us rethink the concept of home and belonging, if not on a Canadian national basis, then in terms of Cree culture in the 1960s? In considering the growth of Jeremiah's character, I examine the connection between music and the development of Cree youth identity as well as the re-establishing of a cultural or ideological "home." Ultimately, I reveal a musical trickster poetics at work in the novel, as demonstrated by music's ability to lure characters into and out of cultural spaces of belonging, and illustrate how music acts as an important method for Cree cultural survival, particularly through the text's movement from linear Western art music to more cyclical Cree forms.

Krotz's paper begins by privileging the European classical tradition amongst "a heterogeneous musical backdrop" (182) and concludes with an assessment that "[t]he political force of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* lies in its ultimate refusal to privilege any single cultural or generic influence," and that such a formulation might be termed "contrapuntal" (199). However, more needs to be said about the politics of reading this "contrapuntal juxtaposition of equal-but-different voices" in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as "often dissonant," and about whether the novel "preserves this feeling of being out of tune," as Krotz argues (200), or, as I will discuss, whether it emphasizes counterpoint as a dialogue that shapes not only the structure, but also the cultural politics of the novel.

Highway's semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* spans several decades, following the Cree brothers Champion/Jeremiah and Ooneemeetoo/Gabriel

as they are torn from their families in their small northern Manitoba community and are forced to negotiate the harsh realities of a Catholic residential school and later the urban landscapes of Winnipeg and Toronto. The nature of such a *Bildung* presupposes a movement *toward* or a teleological progression—an “emergence,” in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, or “the image of *man in the process of becoming*” (19, emphasis original). How do we read a novel in which the emphasis is not so much on this progress *toward*, but on a *return* to Cree cultural traditions? Although the novel traces the development of the Okimasis brothers from birth until well into adulthood, in many ways the text resists the forward trajectory of a traditional *Bildungsroman*. Highway reconfigures the development-oriented *Bildungsroman* genre by placing it within a Cree worldview that favours a cyclical rather than linear concept of time.<sup>3</sup> Combining these two culturally different models in order to complicate and dismantle culture-based binaries, the novel simultaneously operates under a cyclical home-away-home structure that returns to and recuperates Cree cultural practices through music and dance, a structure perhaps best exemplified musically by Champion’s caribou song “in its simple circle of three chords” (Highway, *Kiss* 42). Susan Cocalis expresses the link between the *Bildung* and an odyssey (400), a word which conjures up Homer’s ancient Greek text on Odysseus’s ten-year journey home. This home, however—a cultural rather than a geographic home in the case of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*—is no longer intact and unchanged, or arguably was never “intact” to begin with.

For instance, non-Indigenous music and instruments have historically become part of Cree traditions: as a child, Champion inherits his father’s battered accordion, just as he inherits “a gift for the making of music, one to whom [Abraham] could pass on his father’s, his grandfather’s, and his great-grandfather’s legacy” (Highway, *Kiss* 27). The musical legacy embodied by this accordion reveals the lasting impact of colonial contact, and neatly collapses the binary thinking that sets cultures in opposition, as none can claim to embody a false ideal of “purity” free of outside influence—all cultures are dynamic and constantly evolving. Such binary thinking is simultaneously upheld and dismantled at an Ojibway house party in the novel, where the Wasaychigan Hill Philharmonic Orkestraw and its audience reject Jeremiah’s rendition of Chopin’s Sonata in B-minor as being “whiteman music,” and yet seem to identify “real music” as “honky-tonk,” “Half a Nageela,” and “a sentimental country waltz” (256-57). Although these types of music initially appear to have about as much to do with traditional Cree music as Chopin

does, they share an important similarity which weakens the cultural boundaries dividing them: a folk aesthetic. Although the term “folk music” has been often debated, it tends to indicate an oral tradition of communal, culturally representative music. In fact, even Chopin can be seen to parallel traditional Cree music in this way, for he counted Polish folk dances among his influences, as evidenced by his many mazurkas and polonaises for solo piano. In this scene, “real music” is identified as not necessarily classical or European, but simply as being for the people. The transcultural connections made possible through musical aesthetics help to highlight the impossibility of any “pure” culture; thus the notion of a simple home-away-home structure is problematized by the fact that the “home” environment is mutable, undergoing constant change while the characters are “away.”

The notion that one’s environment<sup>4</sup> can and does have an enormously far-reaching effect on a person is conveyed in Douglas Mao’s book *Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature 1860-1960*. In the chapter “Stealthy Environments,” Mao summarizes some of William James’ arguments from his 1890 publication *Principles of Psychology*: “The smallest stroke of virtue or vice leaves a scar; acts that consciousness might wish to banish still find a corporeal location among the nerve cells and fibers; nothing we ever do is wiped out” (50). Of course, this idea of the permanence of actions can not only be applied to the individual, but also to the collective. Cree culture has been affected by its contact with European settlers as well as other Indigenous nations, interactions which sometimes left “a scar.” For instance, in *Essential Song: Three Decades of Northern Cree Music*, the first detailed ethnomusicological study of subarctic Cree hunting songs, Lynn Whidden remarks on the gradual disappearance of traditional songs particularly due to “the music and entertainment of the mass media” (3), that is, the music of the dominant culture. Cree-Swedish poet and academic Neal McLeod echoes this loss when he explains how a dominated group loses some of its narratives when the dominating group imposes its own (“Coming Home” 18). He goes on to argue that the process of alienation—specifically Cree alienation—occurred in two simultaneous and interconnected ways: through Cree peoples’ removal from their land (“spatial diaspora”) and through their removal from their own stories or collective consciousness (“ideological diaspora”) (19). McLeod continues, “In contrast to ‘being home,’ diaspora is the process of being alienated from the collective memory of one’s people,” “a state of exile” that Indigenous peoples may experience even while residing in the land of their ancestors (19).

The imbrication of home and exile also appears in Mavis Reimer's work on youth and homelessness in which she discusses the mobile subject and contemporary literature's "embrac[ing of] metaphorical homelessness as an ideal" (2). She argues that "the geographical and psychological separation of 'home' and 'away' typically is represented as impossible," since both "are enacted on the same place" (2). Although Reimer is writing about English-language Canadian children's literature, her ideas are still applicable to *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, especially her identification of "the most valued story" within this body of literature (1). The kind of story she refers to bears a striking resemblance to the general events of Highway's novel: "a narrative in which the central child character, pushed out of an originary home by the decisions or behaviour of powerful adults, journeys to an alien place" (1). Although it can be argued that Jeremiah and Gabriel "choos[e] to claim the unfamiliar space as a new home" (1), their search for home and belonging is necessarily a cultural quest as well. If colonization in North America has resulted in Indigenous cultural homes that are no longer intact, might we see Jeremiah as being—and in some ways remaining—"unhomed"? Although returning to their originary home is impossible, Indigenous peoples—and Highway's novel—are involved in the creation of a *new* cultural home, one that perhaps does not bridge the gap between cultures so much as it lives in the space between them.<sup>5</sup> One of the ways in which the creation of this new home can be accomplished is through the retelling of stories, a concept explored by McLeod in "Coming Home Through Stories" and later in his book *Cree Narrative Memory*. At the beginning of his article, McLeod considers what it means "to be home":

"To be home" means to dwell within the landscape of the familiar, a landscape of collective memories; it is an oppositional concept to being in exile. . . . A collective memory emerges from a specific location, spatially and temporally, and includes such things as a relationship to land, songs, ceremonies, language and stories. Language grounds *Nehiyâwiwin* (Creeness). To tell a story is to link, in the moments of telling, the past to the present, and the present to the past. (17)

This explains the number of references to Cree stories and mythologies that appear in Highway's text: by retelling such culturally specific tales, Highway is "link[ing] . . . the present to the past," not only highlighting the circular nature of the Cree conception of time, but also grounding the present in Cree history and thus aiding in the survival of a culture. I consider a similar method of "coming home" or effecting cultural survival: through music.

A character in Highway's novel that provides a substantial link between music and cultural survival is the trickster, a transformer who leaps in and

out of the text in a variety of guises: as Weesageechak;<sup>6</sup> as the Fur Queen; and as the arctic fox showgirl Maggie Sees, also called “Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap-oh-you-should-hear-the-things-they-call-me-honeypot-Sees, weaver of dreams, sparkler of magic, showgirl from hell” (233-34). This trickster figure, particularly in her latter form, is often associated with music, appearing as a “Cree chanteuse” “leaning against a grand piano made of ice” who dispenses sage advice to Jeremiah about life (234, 231): “[W]ithout entertainment, honeypot, without distraction, without dreams, life’s a drag. . . . Without celebration, without magic to massage your tired, trampled-on old soul, it’s all pretty pointless, innit?” (233). It is only after internalizing Maggie Sees’ life lesson that Jeremiah is able to harness his musical gifts and use them to tell Cree narratives and celebrate Indigenous culture in stage productions. Coral Ann Howells similarly notes that this showgirl scene “marks the beginning of Jeremiah’s psychological and spiritual healing” (90). Like music, the trickster’s insights also become—to use the words from Highway’s retelling of the Cree myth of the Son of Ayash—“magic weapons [to] make a new world” (*Kiss* 227, 267). The connection between Maggie Sees and magic weapons is made in one of Jeremiah’s stage scripts when he types out a mother’s line to her son: “Here, the *weapons* you will need: a spear, an axe, a *fox’s pelt*” (275, emphases mine). In this way, music, magic, and trickster all become linked in the text. Such figures appear in numerous Indigenous narratives, and are explored by Dee Horne in relation to Indigenous cultural survival in her article “Settler Culture Under Reconstruction” where she, like McLeod, recognizes the need for “continuity with the past” (79). Specifically, Horne points to the traditional trickster Nanabush as an embodiment of cultural survival in two of Highway’s other works, the plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, and argues that this “post-colonial trickster, and trickster discourse . . . [are] deploy[ed] as a paradigm for resisting colonization” (80).<sup>7</sup> It is the trickster’s “weapons” that aid in resisting colonization in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, but it is important to note that such tools are meant not for destructive purposes, but for positive and creative change—to “make a new world.”

Besides Maggie Sees and the Fur Queen, there is “another woman in white fur” that appears in the novel (Highway, *Kiss* 96), also “leaning against the crook of a Steinway” (99): Lola van Beethoven, Jeremiah’s “piano teacher nonpareil, grande dame of the Winnipeg classical music scene” (99). Krotz positions Lola as an anti-trickster, “an oppositional, destabilizing force that

encourages a turn away from Aboriginal ways of seeing” (192). I wonder, however, if Lola is not so much an “anti-trickster” as simply another manifestation of the trickster, whose very nature presupposes a certain degree of deception and subversion. Considered in this light, such a figure helps to not only complicate but also break down binaries of Cree and classical music and, more generally, Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices. This is similarly noted by Judith Leggatt, who writes, “Trickster figures break down either/or dichotomies, with their propensity for being both/and: *both* male *and* female, *both* creator *and* destroyer, *both* role model *and* cautionary figure, *both* spiritual *and* physical, *both* animal *and* human” (221). Heather Hodgson recognizes the trickster as “Native peoples’ most important teacher” who not only “assume[s] various guises and can change shape at will,” but who also “teach[es] by negative example and, in doing so . . . do[es] something good and regain[s] our trust, only to hoodwink us again” (n. pag.). As a piano teacher, Lola van Beethoven encourages Jeremiah’s dedication to and passion for his craft as well as his pursuit of the Crookshank Memorial Trophy. As a trickster who teaches, however, she and her Eurocentric classical music act as a catalyst for Jeremiah’s later identity crisis and self-reassessment, which ultimately allow him to reconnect with, rejoice in, and “champion” his cultural heritage. The notion of a trickster figure can be expanded in order to discuss the presence of a trickster poetics or discourse in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, a concept often attributed to Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor that recognizes the “comic trope” of the trickster as both an identifiable character and a textual form (Vizenor 282).

Although by definition the term “poetics” is concerned with the literary, I propose there is a *musical* trickster poetics at work in the novel. If tricksters “dismantl[e] and decentr[e] words, language, narrative structure, and discourse” (Leggatt 226), the novel’s musical trickster poetics similarly unsettles the binary of Cree and classical music, eventually transforming into “both/and” during a Toronto stage production. The notion of a musical trickster poetics is supported by the fact that Highway considers music to be a language in and of itself: in his recently published lecture, *A Tale of Monstrous Extravagance: Imagining Multilingualism*, he describes music as “a language with its own history” and “the original and only universal language, the only one understood and spoken in all 195 countries on this planet” (28, 25). Stó:lō author and critic Lee Maracle also links music to poetics when she writes, “our community needs the old stories, the old poems, and the old songs—our poetics—which have charted this journey to the good life

for thousands of years. The revival of these songs, poems, and stories are [*sic*] critical to understanding that we are and always will be” (309-10). While Maracle recognizes the importance of song and other orature to the identities of Indigenous communities, Highway elevates music to a universal form of communication, one which, due to its cross-cultural nature, is able to strengthen relationships and induce greater understanding between cultures. The necessity of contemporary Indigenous poetics in “map[ping] the past . . . and imagin[ing] future possibilities” for Indigenous peoples—thus effecting cultural survival—is echoed by McLeod, who adds, “One of the challenges of contemporary Indigenous poetics is to move from a state of wandering and uprootedness toward a poetics of being home” (Introduction 10). Citing Christine Sy’s use and translation of the Anishinaabe term “biskaabiiyang,” or “returning to ourselves,” McLeod connects a poetics of place with cultural healing, at the same time suggesting that “our home is already within us” (10).

Art as a vehicle for forging relationships, developing understanding, and effecting cultural healing has been discussed by numerous Indigenous authors, including Highway. In *A Tale of Monstrous Extravagance* he emphasizes the importance of multilingualism—including the language of music—as a means of not only understanding others’ perspectives, but ultimately as a tool for “aid[ing] in the process of bringing the world together, of helping in the nurturing of world peace and stability” (36). In effect, Highway advocates for the use of cross-cultural dialogue to initiate positive global change through the building of relationships. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, however, music has a dual role to fulfill, a “trickster” function: it has both the ability to lure Jeremiah further away from his cultural heritage via the Eurocentric ideologies of classical music and also the ability to lead Jeremiah back to his cultural heritage via the dissemination of Cree musical practices such as hunting songs and round dances.<sup>8</sup> In other words, like Lola van Beethoven and Maggie Sees, music can both obscure and illuminate the way “home.” At the same time, however, music’s trickster nature allows the reader to interpret this dual role without simply reinscribing binaries about culture and authenticity. This is achieved by revealing the mutual influence of these musical traditions as exemplified by the literal blending of Cree and Western art music in Jeremiah’s hybrid compositions on the Toronto stage.

From the beginning of the novel, Champion is connected to both the Fur Queen trickster and to music. Nine months before he is physically born, he appears as a spirit baby, bursting “from the seven stars on [the Fur Queen’s]



tiara . . . fully formed, opalescent, ghostly” (12), and floating “above the aboriginal jamboree” of music and dance that is held in honour of Abraham Okimasis’s victory in the World Championship Dog Derby (17). Champion is born with a musical talent, and it is his father Abraham’s “greatest pride to have finally sired a child with a gift for the making of music” (27). Abraham presumably teaches his son how to sing and to play the accordion, passing down his knowledge of traditional Cree hunting songs. As Whidden notes, such songs “provided facts about the animals and the local environment; they contained ancient wisdom . . . ; they were prayers . . . ; they energized the hunter . . . ; they were mental play, bringing disparate subjects together, as well as artistic creations” (50). Most importantly, “the songs also allowed the hunter’s spirit to communicate with the spirits of the animals” (51), something that Champion seems to have forgotten by the time he converses with the fox-cum-lounge singer Maggie Sees as a young man. Champion initially uses his musical gift to call the caribou and assist in his father’s hunt by singing, “*Ateek, ateeek, astum, astum, yoah, ho-ho!* . . . Caribou, caribou, come to me, come to me, *yoah, ho-ho!*” (Highway, *Kiss* 23). Perhaps the fact that Champion’s music causes a stampede not only attests to the sheer power of art—specifically Champion’s music—to effect change, but also suggests a trickster poetics (and perhaps also a trickster polemic) at work: here, music seems to have the capacity to both sustain life and to threaten it. Interestingly, Champion protects himself and his brother from being trampled by remaining still and clinging to a rock in a sea of “a thousand caribou swirling around him like rapids” (45). Here, Champion acts as the immovable rock amid a sea of change. As he has yet to move “away” from his childhood “home,” perhaps this scene implies that the key to cultural survival is to remain still and cling to “home” or, more specifically, to the land, as evidenced by his repetition of the traditional Cree caribou song to celebrate his continued existence.

As a young boy growing up in northern Manitoba, Champion inherits the Okimasis family’s “ancient treasure” (27), its musical legacy: the accordion. At age seven, Champion is forced to leave home and attend residential school. Amidst the strangeness of a new place, a new language, a new people, and a new way of life, he latches on to the one thing he can relate to: music. When he hears a piano for the first time, Champion is reminded of the natural beauty of his childhood home: “Pretty as the song of chickadees in spring,” the sound allows him to forget “the odour of metal and bleach, and . . . the funny shape of his exposed [shaved] head that had caused such jeering

from the boys of other reserves” (56). For a moment, the sound transports him away from the harsh reality of the residential school and takes him home. Initially thinking the instrument is “the biggest accordion [he] had ever seen” and “want[ing] to listen until the world [comes] to an end” (56), Champion effectively trades his Cree music for Western art music, just as his birth name is replaced by a Judeo-Christian one by Father Bouchard during baptism. The literal exchange takes place when Champion asks Father Lafleur, principal of the residential school, for piano lessons, demonstrating his affinity for music by singing his beloved caribou song, “*Ateek, ateeek! Astum, astum!*” (66).

It is the teachings of the residential school that result in the Okimasis brothers’ “splintering from their subarctic roots, their Cree beginnings” (193), leading to the loss of so much of their Cree heritage, as Amanda Clear Sky’s grandmother Poosees points out: “‘You northern people,’ she sigh[s], as with nostalgia, ‘it’s too bad you lost all them dances, you know? All them beautiful songs? Thousands of years of . . . But never mind. [. . .] Them little ol’ priests,’ Poosees persist[s], ‘the things they did? Pooh! No wonder us Indian folk are all the shits’” (175). This “splintering” becomes particularly evident when Jeremiah moves to the city of Winnipeg and, while practicing the piano, imagines the people of his childhood community crying, “Come home, Jeremiah, come home; you don’t belong there, you don’t belong there” (101). The rejection of indigeneity within urban space is similarly demonstrated by an “Indian woman” Jeremiah sees reflected on an image of Vladimir Ashkenazy’s piano in a Plexiglas-covered advertisement for a Chopin concert, a woman whose murder is later reported in the *Winnipeg Tribune*, but relegated to the back page (106-07). It is only later that Jeremiah realizes that not only is the term “concert pianist” untranslatable from English to Cree (189), but also perhaps that his brother Gabriel is right when he accuses him of wanting to “become a whiteman” (207). Indeed, Jeremiah’s denial of his heritage is seen much earlier in the text, such as when he is uncomfortably “confronted . . . with his own Indianness” upon first meeting the “undeniably Indian” Amanda Clear Sky at Winnipeg’s primarily white Anderson High School (123), despite having “worked so hard at transforming himself into a perfect little ‘transplanted European’—anything to survive” (124). Winning the coveted Crookshank Memorial Trophy for piano performance loses its meaning when Jeremiah eventually suffers an identity crisis and rejects Western art music altogether: he says to Amanda, “I just couldn’t figure it out. I mean, what the fuck are Indians doing playing . . . Chopin?” (257).

Here at the Wasaychigan Hill house party, the cultural gap between classical music and what one woman calls “real music” seems insurmountable (256), and Jeremiah experiences acute feelings of displacement from his own racial and cultural heritage.

Highway’s indebtedness to Western art music such as Chopin’s sonatas is made evident through the use of Italian musical terms as titles for each structural section of the text, thereby framing the novel in an imperial discourse. As Highway says in an interview with Hodgson, “the novel is like a grand piano: it is built as a sonata, to which the younger brother dances” (n. pag.). The term “sonata,” originally used simply to differentiate music that was played from music that was sung, evolved throughout music history until it became known in the Classical period (ca. 1760-1830) as a very specific form for organizing large-scale works usually composed for a solo instrument. It is interesting to note that while Highway likens his novel to a sonata, it does not quite behave as a typical sonata should. The titles of the first four parts of the novel—*Allegro ma non troppo*, *Andante cantabile*, *Allegretto grazioso*, and *Molto agitato*—are characteristic tempi for the standard four-movement later-period Classical sonata. Highway adds the movements *Adagio espressivo* and *Presto con fuoco*,<sup>9</sup> however, subtly subverting the teleology of this European structure and perhaps suggesting a continuity more indicative of the Cree circular notion of time. His sonata does not cease after only four movements but persists, much in the same way that Champion Okimasis’s story—and indeed, the “story” of the Cree in today’s society—is ongoing. Significantly, it is not until the final section of the novel, which lies outside or beyond the typical Western musical form, that the piano becomes “a pow wow drum propelling a Cree Round Dance with the clangour and dissonance of the twentieth century” and that, with the encouragement of his brother and friends, Jeremiah finally reconnects with some of his Cree heritage (Highway, *Kiss* 267). By appropriating a Western musical instrument and form and transforming them into “magic weapons” with which he can “make a new world” (267), Highway ushers in a new kind of Cree artist, one that Howells recognizes as a “modern Cree culture warrior” (90).

Performed by a quintet of male dancers onstage, this Cree Round Dance—whose basic dance formation is clearly a symbol of unity and continuance, “a large circle in which people join hands” (Whidden 110)—is not just a form of entertainment, but also an occasion to experience community. Whidden describes the round dance as “an opportunity to bring wellness and healing

through social interaction. It is a sacred event in that the drums are blessed and prayers are said to the Creator. Above all, the dance is about creating good feelings among the participants” (110). Thus the dance performed by Gabriel and the other cast members is a way to experience positive communal interaction and to share that positive energy with the audience. If the piano acts as the powwow drum, the idea that this “drum” is blessed suggests not just the appropriation of the piano, but more specifically its acceptance into Cree culture. Highway’s deliberate inclusion of a Cree Round Dance near the end of the novel is also an indication of Jeremiah’s re-embracing of his cultural heritage, especially since this is the first time in the novel that he performs an original work with his brother rather than a piece by a classical composer.

What is particularly interesting about the Cree Round Dance is that, like the powwow,<sup>10</sup> it has no historical roots in northern Cree culture: it is an adopted Plains event, and is likewise “a new music borrowed from the outside” to help combat cultural disintegration (Whidden 126). Notice, however, that in Highway’s novel it is specifically identified as belonging to the Cree, which signifies their adoption of the music. More importantly, the dancers performing the Cree Round Dance simultaneously chant the caribou hunting song Champion learned in childhood, a musical genre which *is* historically Cree. In this way, Jeremiah and Gabriel’s “casual improvisation” from less than a year before grows “into a showpiece stomped to by professional dancers, a sonata in four contrasting movements scored, phrased, liberally fermataed” and then into “a Cree Round Dance” (Highway, *Kiss* 267). This movement from Western art music to Cree music—a return home for the Okimasis brothers—also indicates movement from a linear to a cyclical conception of time due to the sonata’s highly structured, goal-oriented nature, and the round dance’s tendency toward repetition and continuity.

The Round Dance scene is also significant in that Jeremiah moves from performing solo piano works to performing as a member of a theatrical production, a shift from isolated individual to member of a community. Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episknew highlights the importance of community—which she states is “one of the values common to the many diverse Indigenous cultures” (148)—in her exploration of the adaptation of European theatre to Indigenous contexts, noting that “[u]nlike other literary forms, theatrical productions are not the creation of solitary individuals working in isolation. They are communal both in production and in performance” (147). In *Taking Back Our Spirits*, Episknew examines linkages between Canadian

public policy, Indigenous historical trauma, and the individual and communal healing powers of Indigenous literature—cultural powers that might be extended to include music as “a catalyst for healing” (149). Jeremiah expands the border of this healing circle by disseminating Cree songs and stories to the theatre audiences as well as to the children of the Muskoosis Club of Ontario he teaches (*Highway, Kiss* 269), thus cementing his “destined . . . didactic role in society” (*Cocalis* 408).

Although Jeremiah can be seen as eventually taking on a position akin to an elder wielding music and narrative as his “magic weapons,” music—trickster-like—assumes both culturally distancing and culturally healing roles in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and this binary cannot be simply divided between non-Indigenous and Indigenous music. Significantly, it is a Western instrument that allows Jeremiah to eventually return to his roots and revisit the first song he ever learned, a traditional Cree hunting tune. It must be noted, however, that this song has evolved from its original form in the novel: while it was first performed as a solo by a young boy accompanying himself on his father’s old accordion, at the end it is performed by a group of artists on a Toronto stage with the percussive accompaniment of a piano. By demonstrating a movement from the individual to the collective through music, the novel positions Jeremiah as a protagonist who, in Bakhtin’s terms, “emerges *along with the world* and . . . reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. . . . What is happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man” (23, emphasis original), and the emergence of a new Creeness. As Howells argues, in “work[ing] through and beyond the European literary model, transforming it with drum music and dance until it is filled with the sounds of [N]ative voices, the howling of the north wind, and the figures of Cree mythology” (91), Jeremiah as “modern Cree culture warrior” does not just transform Western cultural models, but Cree ones as well (90). His trickster-inspired amalgamation of Cree and classical musical aesthetics suggests that this new Creeness is one that is adaptive—a “transfigured [N]ative cultural identity,” as Howells proposes (91)<sup>11</sup>—and able to utilize Western musical practices to celebrate Cree culture. Through his final piano performance in the novel, Jeremiah counters the old colonial notion of the “vanishing Indian,” instead demonstrating the resilience of a people who possess an adaptive spirit and who work to carve out a new cultural home. Using the contrapuntal framework of Cree and classical music to shape the novel’s cultural politics, *Highway* moves toward

consonant resolution by pointing the way back to Cree cultural traditions, thus evincing cultural survival and creating new space within “the liminal space between Cree culture and the mainstream society” (McLeod, “Coming Home” 20). Western music itself, despite its fundamentally teleological nature, also often contains an element of circularity. Highway reminds the reader of this when Jeremiah ends Bach’s D-major Toccata by “[coming] back home to the tonic” (*Kiss* 101), a piece’s tonal centre and place of resolution. In this way, Jeremiah, too, accomplishes a kind of homecoming.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Krotz argues that Highway uses classical music not to bridge the gap between cultures and create harmony, but to “[dwell] within the chasms between cultures” (183), which “creates . . . a productive dissonance from the violent clash of worlds through which Highway’s characters move” (183-84).
- 2 I use the names Champion/Jeremiah and Ooneemeeto/Gabriel interchangeably in this paper, according to how the novel refers to the Okimasis brothers at specific times.
- 3 In conversation with Highway, Heather Hodgson’s mother notes that “Cree time . . . works in a circular way because the past and present inform each other” (qtd. in Hodgson n. pag.), a comment to which Highway responds: “It’s the Cree way of thinking: not hierarchical but communal . . . and simultaneous” (qtd. in Hodgson n. pag., ellipsis in original). In *Canada and the Idea of North*, Sherrill E. Grace also notes the way in which the structure of Highway’s novel “bends to the power of Cree story-telling as its linear progression . . . slows, then circles back to its beginning, then repeats earlier scenes with disrupting variations and speed, until the narrative soars free of Western, Christian teleology to float off into mythic space and cyclic time with the *Fur Queen*” (259).
- 4 For Douglas Mao, the term “environment” has a large scope that includes both “the largest set of factors affecting youth and the conditions of the individual household” (38).
- 5 A similar notion is voiced by Dee Horne in her article “Settler Culture Under Reconstruction” when she asserts that “First Nation writers can subvert settler society by playing in slippages—cultural cracks in-between settler and First Nations societies” (79).
- 6 A note at the beginning of the novel explains that, as there are no words denoting gender in many North American Indigenous languages, the trickster figure—“‘Weesageechak’ in Cree, ‘Nanabush’ in Ojibway, ‘Raven’ in others, ‘Coyote’ in still others” (n. pag.)—is gender neutral. For the sake of readability—and because the manifestations of Highway’s trickster are feminine, contrasting the male Christian God—I will use feminine pronouns throughout my paper when necessary.
- 7 The potential problems of using postcolonial terminology should be noted, as some critics within the debate argue that it is inherently hierarchical. In “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” for instance, Thomas King wrestles with the “monstrous” terminology of

postcolonialism which makes a number of assumptions regarding Indigenous peoples and their literature, the “worst” being that “the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions . . . and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression” (185). To describe the range of Indigenous writing, King offers several alternate terms that refuse to privilege one culture over another, such as the word “polemical” (186). As Katherine Bell recognizes, “in order to treat Indigenous literature with respect, we need to indigenize methodology” (n. pag.).

- 8 Although Krotz does not use the term “trickster” to describe Highway’s treatment of music in the novel, she does capture its trickster-like function when she states, “Music embodies a capacity to unite as well as divide, to liberate as well as oppress, to create as well as destroy, to transcend barriers as well as erect them—often all at the same time” (183).
- 9 The Italian tempi can be translated as follows: *Allegro ma non troppo*: fast but not too much; *Andante cantabile*: a walking pace (moderately slow) in a singing style; *Allegretto grazioso*: fairly quick (slightly slower than allegro) and graceful; *Molto agitato*: very agitated; *Adagio espressivo*: slowly expressive; and *Presto con fuoco*: very fast with fire. The movements in a typical sonata shift from fast to slow and back again, but Highway’s addition continues this cycle.
- 10 Whidden defines powwow as “a musico-religious movement that proclaims Indian identity and that is spreading through the subarctic” (101), a movement that invites participation in “a broader Native American heritage” (3). Although she views the adoption of this music—so different from traditional Cree hunting songs—as a signal of the weakening of local traditions, she also recognizes how it has revitalized Indigenous music in general, “serv[ing] politically to unite the very diverse First Nations groups across Canada” and “le[ading] many Cree back to the study and appreciation of their own hunting culture” (103, 3).
- 11 Howells’ paper does not focus on music, but is instead interested in what she calls the “double vision” of the novel, “where different cultural systems of representation are held together in tension” (84). While this image aligns more with Krotz’s notion of “productive dissonance,” Howells’ use of terminology indicating transformation also gestures toward the dissolution of cultural binaries and a positive change. Although the word “transfiguration” has strong Christian associations that complicate such a reading, *Oxford Dictionaries* also defines it as “a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state” (n. pag.).

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# Moral Shadow

Every act is  
A runway  
To where a god is  
We are the ones  
Being timed  
And Confounded  
By all the joists  
And trusses.

We are animals  
By heartbeat  
And bunched thoughts  
Nothing a god would  
Do with a rightful mind  
Only the origins matter  
The end always the same  
Birth the seamy coincidence  
The moral shadow  
That follows us  
As we fall in with the others.

# Kicking Up the Dust

## Generic Spectrality in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*— An “Asian Canadian Prairie” Novel?

“[B]ut Habermas is his field, he says, and at this stage of his life he will be offered no other to roam in. Is he a man or a pony?”

—Rachel Cusk, *Outline*

**A**t the conclusion of Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, the character Naoe appears riding a bucking bull at the Calgary Stampede. Naoe narrates her ride:

A funnel forms from where we spin and spreads outward with dust and howling. Blowing blowing spinning round and cowboy hats swirl in dizzy circles. . . . We spin tighter, tighter, an infinite source of wind and dust. . . . Weather patterns will be affected for the next five years and no one will know the reason. It makes me laugh and I'm still riding, the bull is still beneath me. (224)

Goto's recasting of Naoe as cowboy in *Chorus of Mushrooms* has reverberations longer than “five years” from its first publication date. My paper begins with Naoe, an elderly *issei* woman, configured by Goto in the role of cowboy, a role usually associated with rugged white men. I read Naoe-as-cowboy as a metonym for *Chorus of Mushrooms*' institutional reception in the field of Canadian literature. While Goto's figure reconceptualizes a seminal Canadian prairie trope of the man on his horse, I interrogate why this text has thus far been omitted as a work of Canadian prairie literature. In the afterword to NeWest's twentieth anniversary edition of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Larissa Lai writes that the text has “remained important . . . inside the academy, where it is taught all over the world through a range of different kinds of courses: including Introduction to Literary Study, Western Canadian Literature, Comparative Canadian Literature, Food and Multiculturalism, Women in Literature, and Asian Canadian Literature” (239). In spite of its appearance on Western Canadian Literature course syllabi, the text remains to be considered as a work of Canadian prairie

literature.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the majority of scholarship on *Chorus of Mushrooms* codifies this text as a work of Asian Canadian literature and therefore locates the subsequent scholarship within the corpus of Asian Canadian critique.

*Chorus*' omission from the Canadian prairie literary canon is not a coercive act of generic prohibition—the text's codification is a product of its heated and influential historical context. The year of the novel's first publication, 1994, marked six years since the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988); according to Donald Goellnicht, "The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature" occurred in 1993; and *Chorus* appeared thirteen years after Joy Kogawa's heralded *Obasan* was published in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Further, the controversial Writing Thru Race (WTR) conference took place in 1994 and Goto attended the incendiary proceedings. The WTR controversy illuminates the fraught racialized atmosphere of 1990s Canada; it is in the context of what Larissa Lai has termed the cries of "reverse racism," which arose during the WTR conference,<sup>3</sup> that *Chorus* appeared.

*Chorus* is an endemic text of Asian Canadian literature and a key cultural artifact of 1990s Canada. It is bound up with the struggle, activism, and political efforts of minority authors determined to gain recognition, funding, and representation in this country's literary landscape. Despite ideologically sound intentions, Asian Canadian literature and critique are fraught enterprises within the field of Canadian literature. For Donald Goellnicht, writing in 2000, the term Asian Canadian literature "has validity only if it can be made to work for the benefit of Asian Canadians by performing as a sign under which forces fighting racism, classicism, sexism, and colonialism can find some form of solidarity for the purposes of resistance to the dominant hegemony" (29). A recent special issue of *Canadian Literature* entitled *Asian Canadian Critique Beyond the Nation* interrogates the efficacy and futurity of terms such as Asian Canadian literature and Asian Canadian critique. The compendium of scholars in the "Asian Canadian Critique Forum," especially, expertly point to the value of these terms in promoting activist movements and ideologies within the aesthetic sphere, while also highlighting their potentially restrictive faculties. Robert Diaz explains that

[i]n order for Asian Canadian critique to be truly radical and capacious then, we must continually question the ways in which these terms . . . exist within a nationalist paradigm that functions through the continued disempowerment of certain communities and the privileging of others. (191-93)

To be clear, I do not label *Chorus of Mushrooms*' codification as a work of Asian Canadian literature as an act of "disempowerment." Instead, my

argument interrogates generic intersections between Asian Canadian and Canadian prairie literature in terms of the analysis of this text, thus challenging potentially reductive readings. In a recent interview with Tina Northrup, Goto states: “The problem with labels, across the board, is that they can be used in reductive ways . . . I don’t think of genres as mutually exclusive. It’s a spectrum, kind of like sexuality” (n.pag.). Like the literal dust that plagues the Tonkatsu family in Goto’s novel, the generic dust that swirls around this text has archived its place in English Canadian literature according to aspects like the historical context of its publication date and the Japanese Canadian ancestry of its author. My method kicks up this generic dust by demonstrating the text’s deconstruction and reconfiguration of Canadian prairie tropes. *Chorus of Mushrooms* is a masterwork of Asian Canadian, Canadian prairie, Canadian regional, and Canadian feminist writing. My article thus seeks to broaden this text’s generic spectrality, therefore enriching its critical purchase.

### **I: Ties That Bind and Occlude—Spatial and Generic Signifiers**

In *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (2005) Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison explain that eighty percent of Canadians live in cities (3). However, just five years before *Chorus of Mushrooms* was published, late prairie author and critic Robert Kroetsch wrote that the “rural or small-town setting somehow remains the basic place of Canadian fiction” (“No Name” 46). While the “rural” has long been a popular national literary setting, the rise of “regionalism” has also operated to market certain “rural” areas as “regions,” especially in terms of tourism, and economic and cultural production. The development of regionalism within English Canadian literature originated as a series of nodal, aesthetic reactions by authors in provinces outside Ontario in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Such authors were compelled to create works of literature that more acutely represented their own experiences, as opposed to the experiences solely of Ontario writers. Regionalist literary efforts were not wholeheartedly embraced since some critics interrogated regionalism as parochial.

Other critics, notably Frank Davey, pointed out that popular anthologies including *The Prairie Experience* and *Western Windows* took for granted that the regions they depict possess stable meanings. Davey allied himself with critics such as George Amabile who objected to the notion of a singular “prairie voice,” labelling it “conformist and prescriptive” (1). As such, Davey’s important essay “Towards the End of Regionalism” considered

both regions and regionalism as “ideological response[s]” (5) or “social creations” (2) as opposed to “locations”—as signifiers that act to distinguish an area by geographic location rather than by gender, class, or age, among others. Davey formulates his “ideological” interpretation of regionalism as “territorialization” via Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari:

regionalism operates as a transformation of geography into a sign that can conceal the presence of ideology. The individual called to by regionalism is invited to hold certain restraining and shaping beliefs not because of political difference, but because such beliefs are perceived as ‘true’ or ‘natural’ to the inhabiting of specific geography. (3)

Thus, in Davey’s schema, geography acts as a metonym for social identification. However, these zones of social identification also serve the economic drives of the nation state. While regions serve these efforts, their cultural and aesthetic productions can also act as forms of resistance to such homogenizing processes. Since “regionalisms” often operate as regulating forces, Davey suggests a move towards the term “regionalities,” which he views as open to “internal differentiation” and “ideological diversity” (8). Conceiving of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as connotive of a “regionality” presents a step towards the text’s viability as a text of Canadian prairie, and thus Canadian regional, writing.

Scott Herring’s pivotal *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* develops a theory of the “rural” as an “anti-urban space.” Similar to Davey, Herring views the “rural” as an “ideological” rather than a geographic region, writing that the “‘urban/rural’ distinction is as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and . . . standardizing as it is geographically verifiable” (8). In Herring’s in-depth etymological research, the “rural” and the “urban” are always juxtaposed as binaries and are often presented as analogous to the “country” and the “city,” opposing affective/ideological/spatial spheres interrogated by Raymond Williams in his *The Country and The City*. Herring’s text takes as its origin “the dismissal of rurality” in “recent strains of queer theory and recent forms of LGBTQ politics” (5). In order to recuperate the “rural,” to evince its complexity and deconstruct its supposed “backwardness,” Herring advocates dismantling the urban/rural binary by viewing the terms, instead, as “materialized social space[s]” rather than identifiable geographic spaces. Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi’s *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* calls for a similar reconceptualization of a specific “rural” space, the American South, in light of its presumed demographic as starkly black or white. Harkening to Herring’s “anti-urbanism,” Desai and

Joshi pose this question: “If we begin with the premise that the South historically is a space of transnationalism, contact, intimacy, and presence rather than isolationism and absence, how might we understand the Asian American South differently?” (6). The American South and the Canadian prairies possess dramatically different histories, literatures, terrains, ideologies, and critical frameworks for analysis. By citing eminent American critical regionalists, I gesture towards possibilities for kicking up the generic dust that has settled upon *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Goto’s novel represents the migratory, cultural, racial, and feminist complexity of the work’s setting. Critically locating this text within the Canadian prairies demands that scholars and readers engage with the complexity of this region.

Kristen Warder’s 2007 article “(Un)Settling the [Canadian] Prairies” illustrates a shift to interrogating Canadian prairie literature for privileging white heterosexual authors and themes, and for failing to depict the social diversity and complexity of prairie realities about the waves of international immigration that have led to large populations of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants inhabiting “rural” parts of Canada (Loewen and Friesen). Warder’s reading of Shane Rhodes’s *The Wireless Room* functions to “re-spatialize the gay imaginary” onto the Canadian prairie, thus challenging the “often simplified portrayals of prairie society in contemporary Canadian public culture” (129). Warder attests that “cultural representations play a central role in determining the identities of places” (116); therefore, re-representing the Canadian prairies through the diversification of its cultural production may well produce changes in the social demographics of the region.

The historical demographics of the Canadian prairies reveal that the region has been a transnational, multi-ethnic space for a hundred and fifty years and yet it is only recently that the label of Canadian prairie literature has been applied to texts by authors of colour and Indigenous authors, thanks to important scholarship by Warder, Fred Wah, Karina Vernon, and Jenny Kerber, to name a few key critics. Broadening the generic scope of Canadian prairie writing to include authors of colour alters the fates of individual texts and university course syllabi. Further, in line with Warder’s argument, such broadening may also lead to social effects for the text’s regional setting and inhabitants.

The epigraph to this article, from British Canadian author Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* (2014), speaks to the concept of scholarly fields as physical entities that cordon off certain bodies, thinkers, texts, aesthetic productions, and arguments from interacting or overlapping with each other. For example,

just as Scott Herring views queer criticism and politics as relegated to urban spaces, Asian Canadian literature has the propensity to be relegated to the realm of “area studies,” which can prevent its texts from being analyzed according to their cultural specificity, while also foregoing their generic and formal lineages. Smaro Kamboureli explains that Asian Canadian literature has been “othered” through its categorization as “area studies,” which “delimits its object of study by the geographical terrain it inhabits, a terrain that also reflects and inflects the identity formations and histories it accommodates” (“Reading Closely” 59).<sup>4</sup> Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* illuminates the dangers of conceiving of both Asian Canadian literature and critique as lump sum signifiers which encapsulate the entirety of Asia, its peoples, and its diasporas as their “areas.” One of the most frequently analyzed scenes in this text is the one in which Murasaki is interrogated by a white shopper in a grocery store who wants her to explain the differences between Asian and Western vegetables. Eleanor Ty diagnoses this scene in her article “Thrumming Songs,” writing that “innocent signs at a supermarket are indirect, daily reminders of the tenuous position of Japanese culture in Canada in the past and today” (158). Murasaki’s Japanese Canadian identity is thus negated by her white interlocutor since she is read, generically, as Asian. Similarly, Roy Miki analyzes Murasaki’s encounter with the white shopper in the Canadian grocery store as a scene of “vegetable politics.” He writes,

“Vegetable politics” is another way of pointing towards “race politics,” or “ethnic politics” or “cultural politics.” . . . The Asian inside Canada, which is to say, the fabricated Asian, has functioned less as a descriptive term and more as the sign of the not-white—the formative lack—against which the white settler body has been valorized as a centralizing figure. (“Can Asian” 97)

In this essay, Miki underscores another danger complicit with the arrival of “Asian Canadian” as a literary/cultural signifier into the late-twentieth-century Canadian cultural landscape, one permeated by official multiculturalism. He writes that the sign assumes “that such an identity has a stable point of reference and is not the outcome of the constitutive process and thus a representation that is always subject to change and negotiation” (93). Such “stable point[s] of reference” include the co-opting of “Asian Canadian” as a codifier for “visible minority,” in opposition to centralized “white” citizens, and the fetishization of minority groups and their cultural productions in a nation impelled by its self-congratulatory “multiculturalism.”<sup>5</sup> In 2000, six years after the publication of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Himani Bannerji argued that “[a]s long as ‘multiculturalism’ only skims the surface of society, expressing itself as

traditional ethics, such as arranged marriages, and ethnic food, clothes, songs, and dances (thus facilitating tourism), it is tolerated by the state and ‘Canadians’ as non-threatening” (296). Bannerji echoed Miki’s caution of the dangers of dominant Canada idealizing or cordoning off minority cultural production as uniform or “stable.”

When the terms Asian Canadian literature and Asian Canadian critique are reconfigured through settler-driven official multiculturalism—thus “stabilized” and sterilized—they are often used to homogenize difference. Further, these terms can be defused of their ability to be “truly radical and capacious,” to cite Diaz. Iyko Day contends that “Asian Canadian critique was forged as a challenge to the fictive unity of the settler nation and in opposition to the mandates of liberal multiculturalism” (198). The generic codification of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as a work of Asian Canadian literature was and is a salutary act insofar as such a label is utilized by Asian Canadian and other minority critics, scholars, and artists for the purposes of coalition, empowerment, visibility, and politicization. The critical lineage of this text must corroborate the ideologies present in the text itself, thus enacting Day’s notion of challenging the fictive unity propagated by official multiculturalism, instead of enabling the text to become sidelined as an Asian Canadian cultural supplement to a settler practice of denaturing minority literatures under policies reminiscent of Bill C-93.

My outlining of both the dangers and the possibilities of the terms Asian Canadian literature and Asian Canadian critique notwithstanding, I return to the thus far critical omission of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as a work of Canadian prairie literature. My intention is not to dismantle the Asian Canadian critical history of this text; it is to offer *Chorus of Mushrooms* another field in which to roam, echoing Cusk. I argue that *Chorus of Mushrooms* belongs both to Asian Canadian, as well as to Canadian prairie literatures.

## II: Where Have All the Asian Canadian Cow[girls] Gone?<sup>6</sup>

Laurence Ricou’s *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (1973) was one of the first regionalist studies of Canadian prairie literature. While the Canadian landscape was generally thought to incite fear in its inhabitants (read: “white” settlers) through pervasive thematic tropes such as Northrop Frye’s “garrison mentality” and Margaret Atwood’s “survival,” Ricou viewed inhabitants of the Canadian prairies, gleaned through twentieth-century fiction that is set in and/or produced by white-settler “natives” of the region, as “wishing to meet the challenge[s] of the land . . . by raising a crop or



monument, by interpreting his experience in paint or words” (111). Ricou conceived of the overlying unity of Canadian prairie fiction: “[M]an’s nature or outlook will be linked to his curiously abrupt position in a vast and uninterrupted landscape. . . . In the best of Canadian prairie writers . . . universal expression [is achieved] through a consideration of the particular situation of man on the wide land . . . marked by an enduring sensitivity and power” (137).

Robert Kroetsch’s seminal essay “The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space” appeared in 1979, six years after Ricou’s *Vertical Man*. The essay presents a controversial reading of prairie fiction—employing the masculinist undertones of Ricou’s text and enacting them as method. In Kroetsch’s schema, the tension in prairie fiction is the conflict between a man’s love of a woman and his fear of her as “the figure who controls the space of the house” and who “speaks the silence” (76). Kroetsch’s essay invokes his famous horse/house binary that metaphorically links men with horses as symbols of mobility and women with “the house,” which he interprets as a symbol of stasis/fixity. According to his essay’s logic, men’s sexual anxieties towards women translate into their “fear[s]” of the prairie landscape: “[h]ow do you establish any sort of close relationship in a landscape, in a physical situation whose primary characteristic is distance?” (74). Kroetsch’s antidote to strained human relations in the face of a bewildering physical setting is for fiction to produce an “erotics of space,” which operates to reconnect the two genders. For both Ricou and Kroetsch the production of art (in this case, literature) unifies people in spite of an antagonistic physical environment that defies human connection.

Goto’s novel both reinforces and reimagines time-honoured Canadian prairie literary tropes such as: the realist depiction of the prairie landscape; the creation of art by way of overcoming the physical and social distance of the landscape; and the stark gender binaries posited by Kroetsch’s paradigm. Kroetsch’s notion that the prairies’ undeveloped physical distances enact affective strains on human relations is realized in the heteronormative relationship between Murasaki’s parents since her mother, Keiko/Kay, becomes synonymous with “the house.” *Chorus of Mushrooms* is a text that counters different oppressions of the prairie landscape than in Ricou’s paradigm—oppressions specific to its female characters of the diaspora. Naoe describes the impetus behind her creative language, a hybrid mixture of Japanese and English: “You cannot move to a foreign land and call that place home because you parrot the words around you. Find your home inside yourself first, I say. Let your home words grow out from the inside, not

the outside in” (56). In these lines, Naoe is critiquing her daughter Keiko/Kay, whom she calls “a child from my body, but not from my mouth” (56), because her daughter so readily conforms to occidental cultural practices of their adopted Albertan home, especially in regards to her privileging of English and her Western cooking practices. I read Goto’s creation of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as “words” (literature) that grow from the inside of an author and her imagined characters and rise up to create a monument to challenges of prairie living that are induced not only by the physical landscape, but also by the cultural landscape, thus developing Ricou’s schema. Prevailing associations between man and landscape within early Canadian prairie criticism are deconstructed and reconstituted in the novel via female characters who are multiply subjugated—not only by gender, but also by race and sexuality. As with Naoe, who “scrape[s] [her] heel into the black ice on the highway and inscribe[s] [her] name across this country” (114), Goto’s text inscribes itself in the Canadian literary landscape, defying imposed labels.

Two key prairie tropes, the description of the landscape and the impulse to create art to combat the solitude and overwhelming expanse of the landscape, are features integral to both Goto’s text and to W. O. Mitchell’s *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947)—an iconic Canadian prairie text. In one of his conceits of the landscape, Mitchell writes: “the prairie was forever, with its wind whispering through the long, dead grasses, through the long and endless silence” (246-47). Susan Gingell writes of Mitchell’s novel that “[t]he poetry of the prairies is nowhere better captured than in [his] description of the landscape” (2). Invoking the conventional prairie homage to the wind, Part One of *Chorus* begins with Naoe’s first-person narration: “[a]hhhhh this unrelenting, dust-driven, crack your fingers dry wind has withered my wits, I’m certain . . . Don’t bother dusting, I say. It’ll come back, surely. Let the piles of dust grow and mound and I’ll plant *daikon* and eggplant seeds. Let something grow from this daily curse” (15). Naoe’s fury at the wind is exacerbated by her family’s inability to understand her Japanese language. As a young girl in Japan, she experienced the wind as “[g]entle as a wish, as thought and [there was] certainly no need to challenge it with my voice” (17); however, as a woman in Nanton, Alberta, she experiences the wind as a combative force: “[s]omeone, something must stand against this wind and I will. I am” (16). As Naoe’s rebellion grows and she moves closer to becoming “someone” who will stand against her family’s cultural capsizing into the “Canadian melting pot” (179), she begins to perceive the wind differently. Naoe explains: “The wind in Alberta is harsh, but he is also constant. The wind will wear away at

soil, paint, skin, but he will never blow with guile” (79). Once on the road, Naoe’s affective reaction to the wind changes yet again: “Funny how I hated the wind so much when I was sitting still. I guess it is an easy thing to read what you will when you can only see it from one side of your face. But a body can never be objective. . . . Easy now to admire the wind, sitting inside a warm cab of a truck, beer in the belly, and a cigarette between my lips!” (143).

The trajectory from Naoe’s viewing of the wind as a “daily curse,” to a male personified wind that “will never blow with guile,” to a force she can “admire” is directly influenced by the character’s increasing mobility. Naoe is housebound, even chair-bound, at the novel’s opening, evoking Kroetsch’s woman/house model. She calls the wind “guile[less]” as she prepares to leave Nanton; in my reading, Naoe warms to the wind’s endless whipping because it acts as a catalyst for her transformation. By the time Naoe is on the road she experiences the wind as sensationally different because she is in motion. Though she is driving a truck and not riding a horse, Naoe is expressing her vigour and autonomy against the landscape and its gender roles, in effect inverting Kroetsch’s schema.

For Mitchell in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, the prairie wind represents eternity and is admired for its “endless[ness].” The wind acts to further stifle Naoe’s speech, reminding her of the oppressive “agricultural hell” she inhabits within the “great Canadian melting pot” (179). Mitchell reveres the wind, infusing it with Christian undertones; Naoe suggests planting *daikon* in the piles of gathering dust gusted by the wind. This response represents an ironic twist on Ricou’s conceptualization since the planted *daikon* could act as a small monument/crop grown to combat the oppressive landscape. In *Chorus*, then, the landscape is not to be venerated; it is to be challenged as another tool of Canadian colonization. Like in Ricou’s and Kroetsch’s readings, the landscape must be overcome through creativity, but *Chorus*’ spatial anxiety is propelled by motivations divergent from a white cowboy’s intimidation at the sight of a white woman through a ranch house window. Naoe explains: “A body isn’t meant to be brittle dry. It’s hard to keep the words flowing if you have to lick them, moisten them with your tongue before they can leave your lips” (18). This paragraph begins with “*Pichi pichi, chappu chappu*,” Naoe expressing herself in her native language. It is “hard” for Naoe to keep her language “flowing” in a landscape that is drying up her culture and her passion. Her landscape attempts to enclose and wither her: “No. I cannot sit here forever. The prairie wind will dry me out. . . . I’ll be trapped for eternity uttering hollow sounds, words without substance” (81).

The prairie landscape is the antithesis of Japan's, which is subsumed by potent water imagery. Wetness, moistness, and water enable transformations for Goto's Japanese Canadian characters, re-triggering their sexuality and reuniting them with their dissipating culture.<sup>7</sup> Before Naoe leaves for her journey she undertakes a sensual rediscovery in the realm of "fungal silence": the mushroom nursery. Elated by her entry into the "world of moist" (92), Naoe's "hands smoothed down, down, swell of the belly, curving to her pleasure. Softly, softly, her hands, her fingers, the moisture" (93). Naoe's sexual renaissance climaxes in this scene (pun intended), which Eleanor Ty reads as challenging stereotypes of Asian female sexuality. While the Asian female body is conventionally encrypted as both "submissive" and "exotic" (160), Goto's Naoe defies such markers as she is an old woman who is granted not only the "power of speech" but also the "possibility of enacting [her] desires" (161), according to Ty.<sup>8</sup> Goto's novel does not merely reconstruct Asian female sexuality, but also confronts the resident white heteronormative sexuality of Canadian prairie literature. Naoe is not only a masturbating geriatric female, but she also drives the truck with a cigarette dangling from her lips while a man rides shotgun. These signifiers lead up to her climax at the novel's conclusion: riding a bull at the Calgary Stampede and, thus, embodying conventionally male stereotypes, both of mobility and the cowboy.

### III: Invasive Species/Invasive Genres

The back matter of the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Chorus of Mushrooms* includes an interview with Goto by the edition's editor, Smaro Kamboureli. Kamboureli asks "[w]hy a mushroom farm?" to which the author responds:

I grew up on a mushroom farm in Alberta and so the environment informed me on many levels. . . . A mushroom farm is an . . . environment "foreign" to the dry prairie [that] must be manufactured in order for growth to happen. . . . I think of this as a metaphor in relation to immigration and immigrant experience. . . . This isn't to say that mushrooms are "better" than wheat but, introducing a different "crop" in the narrative of settlement unsettles a master narrative. (266-67)

That the Tonkatsus' mushroom farm is "manufactured" suggests myriad symbolic possibilities for interpreting *Chorus* through the prism of the Canadian "immigrant experience." Amidst the incessantly dry prairie wind, the mushroom nursery is its own moist and separate ecosystem. The Tonkatsus' choice to undertake farm life, common to many prairie-dwelling Canadians, speaks to Naoe's daughter Keiko/Kay's determination to integrate within her host culture. Farming is heavily coded for Japanese Canadians:

Lisa Harris suggests that “[t]he racism of internment was partially re-inscribed through food since the labour camps forced workers into food production, and many Japanese Canadian families have their history tied to farming and food production as a result” (8). Despite not being set during internment, Guy Beauregard reads the farm setting of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as intertextual with *Obasan* due to the consonant names of the prairie towns: “a beet farm near the town of Granton in *Obasan* [becomes] a mushroom farm near the town of Nanton in *Chorus*” (“Hiromi Goto’s” 52). However, the crop the family chooses to nurture is an invasive species, one that is not native to the region, which presents a literal enactment of the “monstrous”-ness of “the ‘asian’ inside ‘canadian’” (Miki “Can I” 208). The new crop raised by the Tonkatsus, just like Goto’s novel, unsettles the master narrative of what constitutes “native” Canadian.

Murasaki wants her mother Keiko/Kay to tell her stories, “but no compound sentences for that woman, she thrived on subject verb object” (74); “the only make-believe she knew was thinking she was as white as her neighbour” (39). Keiko becomes an “other” (45), in the eyes of her daughter and mother, since she uses an “Occidental” (193) version of her name, Kay, and ceases to cook Japanese food or speak her native language. Kay’s justification appears in *The Herald* newspaper under the headline “The Multicultural Voices of Alberta, Part 4: Japanese Canadians Today”: “When I decided to immigrate, I decided to be at home in my new country” (193). For Kay, being at “home” is “liv[ing] like everyone else”: “[i]f you live in Canada, you should live like a Canadian” (193). Apparently, for Kay, being a “Canadian” in Nanton, Alberta entails being a white farmer, and imbuing one’s work with “Baptist attitudes” of “responsibility,” “patience,” and “forbearance” (42). Despite Kay’s efforts at becoming a whitewashed model minority, the Tonkatsus evince signs of difference. Murasaki’s classmate Patricia questions “[w]hat’s that funny smell?” of the Tonkatsus’ home. Goto explains Murasaki’s horror at Patricia’s olfactory discovery:

Something so insidious tattooed into the walls of our home, the upholstery in our car, the very pores in our skin. . . . For all that Mom had done to cover up our Oriental tracks, she’d overlooked the one thing that people always unconsciously register in any encounter. We had been betrayed by what we smelled like. We had been betrayed by what we grew. (68)

The smell of the foreign crop of mushrooms in the Tonkatsu home thus functions as a portent of the many differences Keiko/Kay attempts to conceal from the family’s Nanton community.

Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen's "The Global South in Calgary and Edmonton" is a historiographic look at the sudden transformations in the prairie cities of Calgary and Edmonton, and their suburban areas, in the last third of the twentieth century, due, in large part, to the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. According to Loewen and Friesen, by the end of the century "old immigrant societies were replaced by a dynamic web" and the image of Albertan society was "plural, open, and cosmopolitan" (119).<sup>9</sup> While their archival work offers a portrait of late-twentieth-century Alberta as "open," *Chorus* details an alternative narrative of exclusion for its protagonist, Murasaki: "Life is hard in Canada, once you come to an age when you find out that people think certain things of you just because your hair is black and they have watched *Shōgun*, *the Mini Series* . . . The place where we lived didn't foster cultural difference. It only had room for cultural integration" (193-94). Murasaki's sexual *bildungsroman* is affected by her cultural "difference." Her first boyfriend, Hank, asks her to have "Oriental sex" with him, "[l]ike on *Shōgun*" (126), which she denies knowledge of and, thus, refuses to partake in, ending their relationship. Murasaki explains that Hank "was getting grouchy with my obtuseness, my unlearned innate sexuality" (126); he expects Murasaki to perform "Oriental sex," while Murasaki conceives of herself as "Canadian." Prior to Hank, Murasaki "held hands, once" (129) with a Chinese Canadian boy named Shane Wu. The handholding could not continue, however, for Murasaki admits that "being seen with [Shane] would lessen my chances of being in the popular crowd. The Oriental people in single doses were well enough, but any hint of a group and it was all over" (129). Murasaki's best hope to "fit in" in her society is to attempt cross-pollination, since she foresees that forming a colony would preclude her chances of popularity.

The Tonkatsus, as an example of a minority Canadian family in prairie Canada, and analogous to the mushrooms they grow, are an *invasive* species. Miki writes, "[t]he colonial legacy manifested the 'not-white' body as a sign of the monstrous 'asiatic,' then later as a deviancy to be assimilated" ("Can I" 208). The pressure to assimilate is depicted in Murasaki's avoidance of Shane, despite a burgeoning friendship. However, invasion can also act as *renewal*. In his more recent ecocritical work, Laurie Ricou has discussed "habitat studies." Ricou writes:

Disturbance . . . for an ecologist allows or necessitates a new succession of species. So disturbance enables renewal. But the human animal is the ultimate and most aggressive of disturbers, and often its disturbance allows for an invasion, in which a monoculture replaces a rich biodiversity. Hence, we have the "problem" of invasive species. ("Disturbance Loving Species" 164)

Murasaki is alerted to an “invasive species”: a salamander found in the mushroom nursery, which she cups protectively “in the palm of [her] hands” (111). Murasaki wonders: “How could it have been in the peat moss when the peat moss came from west of Edmonton? How would it get there in the first place? . . . Where did the creature come from? Displaced amphibian” (111). Upon seeing the salamander, the farmhand Joe states: “It’s very far from home, huh,” which causes Murasaki to experience “something dawning” (112) in her mind. Murasaki’s dawning empathy for the salamander speaks to universal feelings of displacement for those “far from home,” attempting to adapt to new environments. Her care and interest in the salamander’s particular journey enacts the treatment she wishes her family received in Nanton. Murasaki’s assiduousness towards the small amphibian is the same that should be offered to Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*. The novel acts as an *invasive* genre, since it is outwardly labelled as Asian Canadian and inwardly constructive of tropes from Canadian prairie literature. *Chorus* prompts “renewal,” to cite Ricou’s term, at the levels of both spatial and generic criticism, offering “diversity” to “monoculture[al]” canons. In keeping with Davey’s and Herring’s spatial reformulations, *Chorus* presents a work of “regionality” which depicts an “anti-urban” space, since these terms possess ideological flexibility and accommodate diversity of inhabitants and their cultural productions within formerly homogenized zones. While Goto is of Japanese Canadian heritage, *Chorus* pushes back against representations of Asian Canadians under official multiculturalism, which often attempt to stabilize the signifier Asian Canadian as a singular referent; instead, the text demonstrates that “representation” of cultural groups “is always subject to change and negotiation” (“Can Asian” 93), to cite Miki.

Situating *Chorus* in a liminal space, between Canadian prairie literature and Asian Canadian literature, between a whitewashed “rural” setting and widespread “multicultural” reception (that ignores its “country” roots), enables the text’s spectral vision. By opening up its imposed categorization, I have offered a reading of *Chorus* as a text invested in the power of stories and their ability to open peoples’ minds, despite the generic labels that settle upon or elude them.

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NOTES

- 1 In keeping with such institutional propagation, *Chorus* has been the subject of academic articles on: diaspora/immigration (Pavlina Radia 2009); aging female bodies (Markus M. Müller 2010); psychoanalysis and eating/abjection (Heather Latimer 2006); Japanese Canadian intercultural and interfamilial relations (Mary Condé 2001; Anne-Marie Lee-Loy 2010); storytelling/fables/magical realism (Steve McCullough 2003; Marc Colavincenzo 2005; Pilar Cuder-Domínguez 2008); and Asian Canadian Literature (Eva Darias-Beautell 2003).
- 2 In 2001 Beauregard counted fifty-three academic articles and chapters on *Obasan* and cites the text's double mentions in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* ("After *Obasan*" 53). This critical attention stems beyond the Canadian context to the US, Europe, and Asia. Beauregard cites Miki, "[t]he now canonic status of *Obasan* in Asian American literature courses . . . has resulted in the erasure of difference that 'nationalisms' make" (qtd. in Beauregard 8).
- 3 Lai writes: "as an organizer and participant in this conference, I experienced it as a devastating turning point in anti-racist cultural organizing in Canada" (214). The daytime sessions were limited to First Nations writers and writers of colour; however, such actions were interpreted by the media as a "no whites" policy, which triggered the pulling of federal funding. Lai divulges that the "charge of reverse racism [was] deeply damaging . . . because of its refusal to recognize historic racisms and the deep embeddedness of white privilege into Canadian society" (220).
- 4 In the same essay, Kamboureli describes Asian Canadian literature as a diverse yet distinct corpus of literary works gathered together by virtue of their Chinese and Japanese cultural signatures. This corpus's critical discourses are primarily concerned with the historical, socio-political, and cultural conditions of its production (44).
- 5 In posing this term through Bannerji, I am indicating the cultural effects of the passing of Bill C-93, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, in 1988. This official policy had and continues to have widespread repercussions in the nation's cultural spheres, which Canadian writers and critics such as Bannerji, Kamboureli, etc., have elucidated at length.
- 6 Paula Cole. "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?" *This Fire*. Warner Bros., 1996. CD.
- 7 In Goto's novel *The Kappa Child*, the author employs the trickster figure of the Kappa to counterbalance the dryness of the Canadian prairies (Cuder-Domínguez 2008).
- 8 Ty explains Nao's "sensual awakening" as an "experience of becoming, perhaps becoming a virgin" via Luce Irigaray's essay "How Old Are You?" As such, the character reconstitutes the "Orientalist gaze" (168), opening up new possibilities for Asian female sexuality.
- 9 Loewen and Friesen's research is founded upon primary source documents such as newspapers and civic by-laws, as well as the histories of ethnic associations in the region.

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# Up & Down Their Hill

Leaf confetti  
follows the wind's will  
while fall refrains from rain.

Remnant hedges  
confirm where they lived—out of season with  
the few beloved books they left us.

So we re-read  
these latest restless waves instead,  
sweeping up their leaving.

# Failed Futurity

## Performing Abortion in Merrill Denison's *Marsh Hay*

**M**errill Denison's *Marsh Hay* culminates with the “piercing scream” of a pregnant woman named Sarilin Serang as she falls offstage (A39).<sup>1</sup> Originally published in 1923 by a man who was once celebrated as “Canada’s greatest dramatist” (Milne 64), the play was not performed until 1974 and its first professional production did not take place until 1996.<sup>2</sup> This unique delay in production was likely due to the play’s sensitive themes, namely pregnancy out of wedlock and a fall that could be interpreted as intentional or as an accident. Aptly described in the Shaw Festival brochure as “bold and unusual,” *Marsh Hay*’s dramatization of pregnancy loss was repeatedly overlooked by critics in the 1920s, 1970s, and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Reviewers of the 1974 and 1996 productions focused on the play’s naturalistic language (Portman), portrayal of economic hardship (Whittaker; Chapman), and patriarchal figurehead (Friedlander). Scholars, in turn, have examined the play as a representation of expressionist drama (Garebian), rural poverty (Filewod), and the liberal feminist treatment of unwed mothers (Lindgren). While most critics concentrate on *Marsh Hay*’s dramatization of economic hardship, ultimately, the play’s depiction of rural poverty and pregnancy are mutually constitutive because the end of Sarilin’s pregnancy functions as a symbol and symptom of the Serang family’s continual lack of progress. Sarilin’s fall undoes the possibility of a renewed rural homestead. In *Marsh Hay*, pregnancy loss enacts a failed future.

Through a reconsideration of *Marsh Hay*, I aim to provide a rare public acknowledgement of pregnancy loss and to facilitate a critical discourse that challenges the way female bodies are used as symbols of failure. Psychologists such as Norman Brier attribute the woman’s feelings of self-loss after a lost pregnancy to the absence of “public acknowledgement” and

“rituals to structure mourning and gain support” (451). *Marsh Hay*, then, not only reveals the changing attitudes towards pregnancy out of wedlock in the twentieth century, but also calls attention to the persistent need for a public discourse that acknowledges women’s divergent experiences with pregnancy and that challenges the negative symbolism of pregnancy loss as a failure.

Sarilin’s pregnancy loss effectively dissolves the family unit and with it the potential for a rural community that accepts unwed mothers. The terms “pregnancy loss” or “lost pregnancy” denote multiple causes for the end of a pregnancy—including miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth, and even the death of a pregnant woman—and are especially applicable to *Marsh Hay* because it is ambiguous whether Sarilin miscarries or intentionally ends her pregnancy. The term “pregnancy loss,” however, risks prescribing a narrative of loss and homogenizing women’s diverse experiences of reproduction. While the play gives the audience little indication of Sarilin’s response to the end of her pregnancy, Mrs. Serang suggests that it should be interpreted as a “loss” for the family and rural community. The uncertainty of whether Sarilin’s pregnancy loss was spontaneous or deliberate gestures towards her lack of both agency and interiority in the play. The *Oxford English Dictionary* distinguishes between “miscarriage” and “abortion” in terms of choice: while a miscarriage is “spontaneous” (4a), an abortion is “a deliberate act” (1a). Literary critic Heather Latimer, however, warns against this very type of emphasis on “choice” when defining abortion because “choices,” as Latimer points out, “are always constrained by circumstances,” and Sarilin has very little choice when it comes to her pregnancy (11). Although Sarilin never directly speaks about her pregnancy, other characters suggest that Sarilin should end her pregnancy and blame an accidental fall, which is why I refer to it as an abortion. Regardless of whether the end of the pregnancy is interpreted as intentional, however, my argument still applies: Sarilin’s “fall” underscores her lack of options in 1920s rural Canada, and the pregnancy loss functions as a punishment to the family and community for condemning pregnancy out of wedlock.

*Marsh Hay* is only one example of Canadian theatre’s unexamined fascination with lost pregnancies. This sensitive and traditionally taboo topic is featured in David French’s *Leaving Home* (1972), Margaret Clarke’s *Gertrude and Ophelia* (1993), Djanet Sears’ *Harlem Duet* (1997), Jane Cawthorne’s *Abortion Monologues* (2010), and Catherine Banks’ *It Is Solved by Walking* (2012), among others. These plays use lost pregnancy to perform failed futurity—that is, the failed future of an individual, family, race, culture,

and sometimes even the nation. The term “futurity” expresses the possibility and quality of a future, as theorized by Lee Edelman in *No Future*. Edelman examines the Child as a symbol of a heteronormative temporality that excludes queer identity; in turn, he rejects “the Child as the image of the future” (3) and thereby the “unquestioned value” (4) of futurity. He defines the rhetoric and symbols of “reproductive futurism” as “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity” (2). While Edelman critiques both the use of the Child as a symbol of futurity and the value of futurity itself, I critique the use of pregnancy loss as a public symbol of failed futurity that places blame on the mother. In many literary works and public narratives, an individual woman’s lost pregnancy represents a group’s failure, and this symbolism strips both agency and privacy away from the woman. Canadian literature’s treatment of lost pregnancy presents futurity in heteronormative patriarchal terms that exclude the mother figure from a viable future.<sup>4</sup> In *Marsh Hay*, lost pregnancy foretells the demise not only of an archetypal rural family but also of rural Canada if onstage characters and real audiences do not accept pregnancy out of wedlock. I argue, however, that while *Marsh Hay* dramatizes lost pregnancy as a triple failure—of the maternal, the family, and the rural—it also contains a metacritical commentary on the damaging effects of this very symbolism.

Although the topic of lost pregnancy is generally absent in scholarship on Canadian literature and drama, recent works by Latimer and Sandra Sabatini examine the representation of pregnancy in Canadian and American literature and film.<sup>5</sup> Sabatini provocatively examines the act of *Making Babies* (2003), as her title suggests, in Canadian literature. For Sabatini, “Twentieth-century Canadian fiction portrays the infant according to changing beliefs about the baby’s importance; there is a marked evolution in both quantity and quality of infant representation” (4). The making of “babies,” Sabatini explains, “seems indicative of the mother’s vital engagement with life” (8). The inverse is true of *Marsh Hay* when Denison marks the loss of Sarilin’s pregnancy with the family’s renewed “tragic futility” (A31).

While Sabatini convincingly demonstrates an increasing social acceptance of issues related to motherhood and pregnancy, both Sabatini and Latimer are careful to underscore the limits of this progression when it comes to abortion. Latimer opens her book *Reproductive Acts* (2013) with a critique of recent films, such as *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Juno* (2007), that are about unwanted or unplanned pregnancies but that somehow “sidestep

abortion altogether and still make sense” (6). In examining the rhetoric of reproductive rights in Canadian and American cultural production, Latimer questions how these works reflect “the evolution, and erosion, of reproductive rights in North America” (6). For Latimer, “understanding how the discourse surrounding reproductive politics functions in fiction is an integral part of understanding where reproductive debates stand” (7). Latimer demonstrates how reproductive politics are “cyclical” (5) and “jarringly familiar” (4) in the literature and film from the 1980s to the present day. Turning to the discourses that have surrounded *Marsh Hay* helps to extend her analysis by revealing how the play’s theatre reviews in the 1970s and the 1990s are “jarringly” similar to their antecedents in the 1920s. While Latimer concentrates on Canadian and American works from 1984 to 2006, I focus on one Canadian play and its audience’s increasingly progressive stance on pregnancy out of wedlock in the 1920s, 1970s, and 1990s. Contrary to the audience’s growing acceptance of unwed mothers, *Marsh Hay*’s performance history and reviews also demonstrate the consistent silencing of abortion as reviewers repeatedly “sidestep” the play’s climactic moment of abortion altogether.

### **Canadian Contexts**

Literary treatments of lost pregnancy have changed throughout the major political movements and concerns of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Canada, including literature of settler-invaders, modernism, feminism, Quebec separatism, race and multiculturalism, and sexuality. Early Canadian settler narratives use pregnancy to thematize the fertility of the land, viable crop production, and nation building.<sup>6</sup> Settler narratives, such as Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House* (1941), use pregnancy to indicate the tenuous future of rural Canada: Mrs. Bentley cannot conceive a child with her husband and a local girl dies giving birth; the Bentleys’ infertility and the tragic delivery are just as symbolic of Horizon’s failed future as the false fronts that line the streets of the struggling prairie town. Sabatini points to Ross’s use of a baby as a symbol of “future possibility, some hope that [the Bentleys’] lives are legitimate and meaningful” (57), but she is quick to remind us that the child “will not afford any real or lasting solution” (56). In this novel, lost pregnancy represents a lacking marriage, a stagnating town, and the failed aspirations of a desperate narrator.

Modernist writers, including Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Jessie Georgina Sime, further develop the interiority of the conflicted maternal figure. Sime

uses pregnancy to question whether abortion is really a choice for modern women. In Sime's 1919 short story "Alone," a woman has an abortion in order to keep her job and secret love affair with her employer. In the aftermath of the abortion, the narrator "learned what it means to have small hands at your heart," but explains that "[i]t couldn't be. It was a choice between it and him . . . it couldn't be," and that she "had to lose it" (14). With the abortion comes the failed futurity of the couple as she struggles with the loss of "her baby!" (14) and then with the death of her lover. The negative symbolism of pregnancy loss is pervasive and damaging: it permeates even feminist literature and repeatedly casts the woman as the bearer of failed futures.

While Sime uses pregnancy to question a working woman's sacrifices and to foretell the failed future of a couple, Ringwood dramatizes pregnancy loss in order to examine the future of rural life in Canada. In her 1939 play *Still Stands the House*, Ringwood stages a battle between the rural and the urban as a way of dramatizing the violent opposition to a modern future in Canada. As Moira Day explains, *Still Stands the House* pits "a fertile, loving Ruth" who represents a future of urban possibilities against "Hester as an all-consuming force of stagnation and death" in rural Canada (172). By the play's end, Hester is the only character left standing as she sends the pregnant Ruth out to her death in order for Hester to maintain ownership of her long-standing rural family home. In Ringwood's play, as in Ross's novel, lost pregnancy suggests a futile attempt to break free of Canada's rural past. Denison's *Marsh Hay* participates in this thematization by using pregnancy to represent the failed future of an individual family and rural Canada at large. Where Denison's play distinguishes itself, however, is in its defense of unwed mothers.

*Marsh Hay*'s 1974 premiere was performed in the wake of changes to reproductive rights in Canada and the United States. Canada's Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1968-69 stated that women could receive an abortion as long as it was necessary to the mother's physical or mental health and, in 1973, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that women had a fundamental right to have an abortion and that laws restricting this right were unconstitutional. As Latimer explains, *Roe v. Wade* informed the rhetoric of reproductive rights for decades to come because it considers the mother's and fetus' lives as separate, and "thus set the stage for repetitive, paradoxical debates about the rights of the fetus versus the rights of the woman" (10). In response to arguments on reproductive rights in the 1970s, a surge of authors conflated literal lost pregnancy with a figurative self-loss,



including Margaret Atwood, Audrey Thomas, and Margaret Clarke. Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) focuses on the psychological turmoil of a nameless narrator after an abortion; Thomas' *Mrs. Blood* (1970) reveals the interiority of a woman as she experiences a miscarriage and, as Sabatini explains, "is frustrated by her passivity" (110); and Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia* (1987) uses an on-stage abortion to enact Ophelia's fractured self-identity and failed relationship with Hamlet. In these works, pregnancy loss signifies a self-loss. *Marsh Hay's* premiere comes at a time of continent-wide judicial and artistic discourses on abortion as well as on mothers' complex experiences of pregnancy.

The first professional production of *Marsh Hay* in the 1990s follows the 1988 *Morgentaler v. Regina* case wherein the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the 1968-69 law as unconstitutional and enabled women to have an abortion without any legal restrictions. Coinciding with this legal change, Canadian drama of the 1980s and 1990s uses abortion and miscarriage as powerful political acts and indicators of a struggling culture or race. Works from Black and Indigenous playwrights, like Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* and Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, feature pregnancy as a trope that warns of the faltering futurity of a race and culture. *Harlem Duet*, for example, opens with a discussion of the protagonist's miscarriage and abortion, which function as symbols of the "failure of the nuclear Black family" (Sears, Personal Interview n. pag.). *Dry Lips*, in turn, grapples with "damaged" reproduction in the context of forced Christianity, alcoholism, and residential schools (207). As these examples illustrate, the gradual legalization of abortion in Canada has only cemented the wide use of pregnancy loss as a powerful symbol. While Denison's depiction of abortion and pregnancy out of wedlock was quite radical for 1923, the change to Canadian law in the late 1960s set the stage for *Marsh Hay's* stage premiere in 1974 and for audiences that would be more accepting of Sarilin's predicament.

### **Marsh Hay**

Denison's *Marsh Hay* offers a unique case study for the treatment and reception of lost pregnancy in the 1920s, 1970s, and 1990s. First published in a collection of four plays entitled *The Unheroic North* (1923), *Marsh Hay* was described by book reviewers as "the most serious and ambitious" play in the collection ("Life and Letters" 22). Despite the positive reviews, *Marsh Hay* did not see the stage until over fifty years later. Unlike Denison's better-known work *Brothers in Arms*, which has become one of the most frequently produced English Canadian plays, *Marsh Hay* has been produced only three

times to date. On March 21, 1974, Richard Plant directed a student production of *Marsh Hay* at Hart House Theatre in Toronto as part of a conference on “Canadian Theatre Before the Sixties.” The Playwrights’ Workshop Montréal staged a production later that same year in honour of Denison’s eighty-first birthday. In 1996, the Shaw Festival mounted the play’s first professional production, directed by Neil Munro.

*Marsh Hay* depicts the rough, impoverished life of an archetypal rural family who have been living, as Mrs. Lena Serang tells us, “from hand to mouth on fifty acres of grey stone” for twenty years (A11). The Serang family—headed by John, the father—includes twelve children, but five of the children have died before the curtain even rises on this play. The family is poor in every sense: they have no money, no time for enjoyment, and no love. Denison shows us a family that has failed to produce viable crops and a viable family: these failures are mutually constitutive. The play’s central conflict concerns the youngest daughter—Sarilin—who has an unplanned pregnancy out of wedlock. Unlike the early-twenty-first-century film heroines that Latimer considers from *Knocked Up* and *Juno*, Denison’s character actually considers abortion. Act Two opens with Tessie advising her younger sister:

TESSIE: (*Speaking inside the room again*) You can do as you like, but I’m tellin you. You’re a fool if you don’t. (*A pause*) Oh. Tell ‘em anything. Tell ‘em you fell. They’d never know. (A32)

The stage direction, “*A pause*,” offers the only real insight we get into Sarilin’s thoughts about her pregnancy: although we cannot hear Sarilin’s side of the conversation, this “*pause*” suggests that Sarilin wants to know what to “Tell ‘em” if she were to have an abortion. As the “*pause*” also indicates, Sarilin is kept offstage for the duration of her pregnancy, and we only hear her “*piercing scream*” before her father discovers that “she fell” (A39). The sudden pregnancy loss is never directly explained and the audience is left to wonder whether it was a miscarriage or abortion. The script, however, suggests that Sarilin intentionally loses her child and takes her older sister’s advice. John later deduces that “Tessie put [Sarilin] up to it” and, showing no grief for the lost pregnancy, says, “she showed pretty good sense, too” (A45).

The “*piercing scream*” (A39) comes in the midst of a battle between Lena (who promises to support Sarilin as a single mother) and all those who oppose “illegitimate” children from unwed mothers (A34). Lena is a strong voice in support of a woman’s right to have a child without getting married, but the townspeople and minister see Sarilin’s unmarried status as nothing

short of blasphemy. Andrew Barnood, a local man of “*some education*” (A16), explains that the minister “consoled [Lena] for havin a daughter steeped in sin and says it was God’s will and that she’d have to bear it as best she could” (A22). The Serang family is vilified as “heathen, the lot of them” (A22). When John Serang tries to force Sarilin to marry, Lena strongly asserts that “[Sarilin] ain’t going to be forced into no marriage” in order to “fit some lawyer’s idea of what is right” (A39). When Barnood objects that “the child will have no name!” Lena convincingly argues that “It’ll have my name, Serang! . . . You’d tie my girl to that [pointing to Sarilin’s lover] for her whole life, for its name?” (A39). Despite Lena’s firm stance and dedication to the baby, Sarilin’s scream interrupts this argument, symbolically announcing Lena’s failure to control Sarilin and to convince the townspeople that a single mother can have a child. The abortion and decline of the family household seem to be a form of punishment for the unchanging attitudes of John Serang and his neighbours despite Lena’s pleas.

Although the play focuses on and culminates with the pregnancy loss, the topic of abortion is largely absent from book reviews of the play’s script in the 1920s and from theatre reviews of the productions in 1974 and even in 1996. *The Globe’s* 1923 review of *Marsh Hay* only alludes to illicit “pitfalls lurking for the adolescent children debarred from any form of normal amusement” (“Life and Letters” 22). Reviews from the 1970s and 1990s tend to focus on the play’s neglected status and its depiction of unrelenting economic despair. Jamie Portman’s and Mira Friedlander’s reviews of the 1996 production discuss the play’s representation of poverty in relation to the economic hardships of Canadian “farmers rooted to their barren soil” (Friedlander n. pag.). Despite her loaded description of “barren” land, Friedlander never mentions the pregnancy. Geoff Chapman’s review goes so far as to mention “teen sex” and the fact that Lena has lost five children but glosses over Sarilin’s pregnancy and abortion (“*Marsh Hay*” J1). Kate Taylor contributes the most nuanced review of the Shaw Festival production. She discusses Sarilin’s pregnancy and the fact that “her boyfriend has been charged with statutory rape” (C1); but even Taylor skips over the play’s climactic dramatization of lost pregnancy, and, perhaps in an effort to avoid spoiling the plot for prospective audiences, explains in general terms that “By the final act, the Serangs have slumped back into despair” (C1).

Scholars have shared the reviewers’ focus on the play’s bleak portrayal of economic hardship. Keith Garebian interprets the play as a depiction of “a rural world of poverty and tribulation” (170), and John Campbell approaches

the play as a dramatization of “the devastating effect that economic hardship can have on family life and on the human spirit” (97). Alan Filewod advances the interpretations of rural poverty in *Marsh Hay* by interrogating the play’s documentary realism and examining Denison’s refusal to offer any solutions. Allana Lindgren stands out as the only critic to provide an extended discussion of motherhood in *Marsh Hay* and argues that the play’s liberal feminist perspective reflects the evolving attitudes towards maternity in Canada.

Building on Lindgren’s pivotal analysis, I argue that Denison’s play not only reflects a growing acceptance of unwed mothers but also reveals the treatment of lost pregnancy as a symbol of failed futurity. A consideration of the play’s interconnection of pregnancy and futurity reveals the limits of Denison’s progressive maternal figure and her conceptions of pregnancy out of wedlock. In short, Denison’s progressive representation of maternity is constrained by the play’s use of abortion as a punishment for the community’s refusal to accept pregnancy out of wedlock.

### **The Spectral Maternal**

In *Marsh Hay*, it is not merely pregnancy but also maternal identity that define the family’s future. During her pregnancy, Sarilin remains offstage and it is her mother, Lena, who transforms into an ideal maternal figure. Lena becomes a loving, independent, and strong woman whose internal transformation converts the neglected house into a welcoming home. The stage directions for the second act’s opening scene highlight this corresponding spatial change through Denison’s use of pathetic fallacy:

*The kitchen of the Serang home has altered entirely in its atmosphere. Where before was a feeling of extreme squalor, poverty, tragic futility, there is a feeling of regeneration. The place lacked self respect before. The curtains on the windows; the kept, black look of the stove; the red table cloth on the table, piled high with dirty dishes before, and the tin can covered with birch bark and the geranium it holds, all echo the evident attempt to make the place decent to live in. (A31)*

Lena singlehandedly transforms the house, creates a plan for the family’s financial future, and distinguishes herself as the protecting mother figure who insists that the “baby is goin to be born into the world with the best chancet [*sic*] I can give it” (A39). The presence of this bright, hopeful maternal image, however, only compounds its eventual absence, and the stage is haunted by its loss. The scene immediately following Sarilin’s abortion opens on the shambles of the family home, which “*has sunk back into its old dilapidation*” (A41), in the wake of the lost pregnancy and the decline of the ideal maternal figure.

In her brief role as the ideal maternal figure, Lena becomes the political voice of the play and argues that an unwed mother should not feel ashamed—a belief that was quite radical in the early 1920s. Lindgren, for instance, explains that in 1920 the Ontario Mother's Allowance was only given to "worthy" single mothers and that the 1921 Legitimation Act decreed that children could become legitimate only if their parents married (41). *Marsh Hay* reflects these laws as the Serang family's minister, neighbours, and townspeople all cast Sarilin as a "disgrace" (A33). Lena, by contrast, challenges the shame of illegitimacy: "I ain't ashamed, anyways. And Sarilin ain't goin to be ashamed neither. . . . She's goin to want her baby and be proud" (A37). Ironically, only an ideal (conventional) mother can advocate a progressive position on unconventional motherhood within the context of the play; and the unwed mother has no voice.<sup>7</sup> Lena's political progressiveness, however, is limited to the issue of childbirth out of wedlock, and she does not seem to consider abortion as an option when she says that her daughter will "want her baby and be proud" (A37).

Lena's politics are informed by a mysterious "city woman" who suffered a flat tire just outside of the Serang family home and spoke to Lena about Sarilin's situation: "she said it was natural . . . she told me people is ruled by laws . . . just like a tree is . . . and she says no one was to blame" (A34). The city woman inspires Lena's transformation from negligent to supportive mother figure as she realizes that "to call a baby illegitimate . . . was an awful thing" (A34). Although we never see the mysterious city woman, her morals and radical speeches, as retold by Lena, echo the writings of Denison's mother, who was a leading figure of the Canadian suffrage movement and who died shortly before Denison wrote this play. Denison himself was the president of the University of Toronto's Men's League for Women's Suffrage in Canada. In conversations with Plant (the director of *Marsh Hay*'s first production), Denison explained that his mother was the inspiration for the city woman's visit. She too had once experienced a flat tire outside of a farmhouse in Ottawa (Lindgren 42, 51). Denison even dedicated *Unheroic North*—the collection of plays that first contained *Marsh Hay*—to his mother. The city woman, however, never appears onstage, and Lena as the promising maternal figure quickly reverts back to her neglectful ways when Sarilin is no longer pregnant.

With the off-stage role of the city woman and the quick loss of the ideal maternal figure, *Marsh Hay* depicts an archetype in Canadian literature: the spectral maternal or the figurative ghost of a woman's maternal identity after a pregnancy loss. A woman's identity as a mother is not publicly

carried out when she has an abortion or miscarriage, despite any private self-identifications. As a result, the maternal identity and relationship to the unborn child can exist as a phantom that haunts her. While Cynthia Sugars and Marlene Goldman, among others, have made a convincing case for the prevalence of literal ghosts in Canadian literature, one of the recurring figurative ghosts in Canadian drama is not simply the mother figure but the unrealized maternal self. In *Marsh Hay*, the presence of the spectral maternal is compounded by Lena and Sarilin: while Lena acts as the spectral ideal maternal figure, Sarilin's physical absence performs a kind of spectral haunting of the stage. Lena has borne twelve children and lost five. She identifies as the protective mother and transforms into a stand-in maternal figure for Sarilin's pregnancy. The end of Sarilin's pregnancy, as a result, marks the loss of Lena as the ideal maternal figure. The stage is haunted by what could have been: Sarilin's and Lena's unrealized maternal identities represent the Serang family's unrealized future.

In Denison's play, lost pregnancy and the spectral maternal symbolize a traditional Canadian town's inability to change their perspectives on family values. After Sarilin's piercing scream, the play ends with the Serang family home once again in disarray and dysfunction, as well as with a "dishevelled" Lena whose "valiant air [is] completely gone" (A41)—a symbolic ending that warns of Canada's future if it fails to change its social values. By the play's end, there is no hope; Denison reveals to us a failed futurity, or what Edelman describes as a future that "is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past" (31). I argue that lost pregnancy is key to the play's political messages because it symbolizes the threat to Canadian families and, by extension, to the nation's viable future if the audience does not work to understand and accept the needs of young women and unwed mothers.

### Lost Pregnancy as Lost Futurity

Sarilin's pregnancy is the lynchpin of the family's future: no baby, no future. Although Denison's acceptance of pregnancy out of wedlock challenged popular understandings of the familial unit in 1923, his use of pregnancy as a symbol of a larger community or nation was in keeping with federal teachings on parenthood at the time. In early-twentieth-century Canada, federal educational material—or *Blue Books*—written by the first director of the Department of Health's Division of Child Welfare, Dr. Helen MacMurchy, offered advice on parenthood with the goal of helping families create a "normal home" (7).<sup>8</sup> As Lindgren points out, the *Blue Books* help

to explain Denison's literary use of pregnancy as a symbol of the nation when they assert that "[c]hildren are the security of the home and the nation" (MacMurchy 7). MacMurchy goes so far as to address the "Canadian Mother" as one of "the Makers of Canada" (5). MacMurchy, Lindgren asserts, "stressed that motherhood was a national duty," and "[s]he reinforced this longstanding belief in her *Blue Books*" (37). In fact, the *Blue Books* equate children with the nation as well as with futurity: "When children come you know that your home will not pass away with your generation. It will last for another generation" (MacMurchy 7). *Marsh Hay* similarly uses pregnancy as a symbol of futurity: lost pregnancy is not only about the loss of a baby, it's about the failure to change individual, familial, and national understandings of motherhood. *Marsh Hay* participates in the idea that the child is the benefactor of a larger community by using an abortion to foretell the failed future of the archetypal rural Canadian family. Or, as MacMurchy warns in *The Canadian Mother's Book*, "No Baby—No Nation" (8).

Despite the play's conservative deployment of abortion as a trope of societal failure, *Marsh Hay* also offers a subtle metacritical perspective that challenges the negative symbolism of pregnancy loss. While Lena's response to her daughter's unplanned pregnancy was quite radical in 1923, she fails to discuss abortion and only takes a stand on childbirth out of wedlock. Lena does not challenge social perceptions of unwanted or lost pregnancies; she challenges social perceptions of unwed mothers. While theatre reviewers from the 1974 and 1996 productions generally celebrate the play's "merciless" depiction of "social disapproval and male hypocrisy," the issue of female hypocrisy and Lena's inability (or unwillingness?) to consider abortion is not addressed (Portman 1). Lindgren convincingly argues that there is an increased acceptance of Sarilin's unmarried status when comparing the 1920s reviews of the play to the reviews of the 1970s and 1990s. Sabatini supports Lindgren's findings when she argues that "the taint of unwed motherhood begins to fade" in "books by male and female writers in the 1960s and '70s" (9). *Marsh Hay's* portrayal of the end of a pregnancy, however, remains under-examined. Herbert Whittaker's review of the 1974 production condones the "free-thinking visitor" who "converts the wife to inspired maternalism" but does not address the limits to Lena's "maternalism" and sees Sarilin only as a passive victim who is "seduced by a local lout" (31).

*Marsh Hay's* representation of Sarilin's fall challenges gender roles and beliefs about unwed pregnant mothers. The play undermines Lena as the ideal maternal figure and critiques the characters' use of Sarilin's pregnancy

as a vehicle for their own agenda. After all, Lena does not consider Sarilin's desires or even give her a choice. In short, the play offers an underlying metacritical commentary about the significance of pregnancy as a public symbol. Firstly, none of the characters ask what Sarilin wants, and in this way, the play reveals the characters' primary concern for their own agenda: Lena advocates pregnancy out of wedlock; John promotes marriage; and the townspeople demonize adolescent promiscuity. Secondly, the physical absence of the pregnant Sarilin onstage calls attention to the absence of the mother-to-be's voice and agency. Thirdly, Lena's brief role as the ideal maternal figure is flawed because she tries to impose her beliefs onto Sarilin. Lena insists that "Sarilin'll want her baby" at the same time that we hear Sarilin's "piercing scream" at the loss of the pregnancy (A39); these overlapping lines dramatize Lena's inability to force her own beliefs on Sarilin. Through the off-stage scream, Sarilin asserts her final decision in the matter. Lastly, Lena fails to consider the extent of the city woman's radical beliefs. Lena explains that the city woman "told me a baby that wasn't wanted by its mother ought never to be born" (A39). Lena interprets this to mean that Sarilin must want her child in order to give it legitimacy, but the city woman's advice also advocates the rights of the mother. After all, the city woman's assertion that a baby "ought never to be born" could be interpreted to support Sarilin's abortion.

The fact that the characters are not terribly likeable is a key element in the play's critique of pregnancy as a political symbol because it fosters an audience's critical distance from both John's view that a mother should be married and from Lena's insistence that Sarilin must keep her child. All the characters are "equally unlikeable," as Filewod points out, and Lena's dramatic transformation into a maternal ideal only makes her regression that much more disappointing (74). Frederick Philip Grove's reaction to the play in 1925 similarly describes *Marsh Hay* as a "powerful picture" but mourns its lack of "redeeming" characters (237). In 1923, a reviewer of *Marsh Hay* says, "There are few heroics in this play" ("Books"); I would add that there are no heroes. Even Lena refuses to consider Sarilin's desires and she cannot force Sarilin to "want her baby" (A39). *Marsh Hay*, then, offers a social critique that extends beyond illegitimate pregnancies to include the use of pregnancy as a symbol.

*Marsh Hay* offers a subtle critique of pregnancy as a symbol for other characters' political views on marriage and religion, but it does not go so far as to celebrate Sarilin or her decision. Denison casts Sarilin as the philandering teen and the play ends in the same way that Act One concludes: with Sarilin sneaking out of the house to meet a lover. Filewod and Lindgren adeptly



interpret this scene as a sign of the family's cycle of tragedy and of Sarilin's destructive behaviour. As a result of the characters' self-imposed stagnation, the repetition of the messy homestead, tumultuous family, and rebellious daughter elicit reviewers' exasperation rather than their sympathy. Chapman's review of the 1996 production complains, "[John] Serang, constantly whining about 20 years of profitless toil, can't shake off his boorish patriarchal role and eventually the cycle of despair is renewed" ("Brutish" B3). The final tableau's repetition of youthful rebellion and of the house's disarray marks the family's and the town's failure to accept the city woman's teachings. The end of the play begs for change: a change to the family's poverty, a change to John's patriarchal self-destruction, and a change to the society's views on pregnancy out of wedlock. This conclusion, despite the metacritical commentary on the use of pregnancy as a symbol, upholds, in Edelman's words, a "pro-procreative ideology" that "if there is a baby, there is a future" (12-13). "If, however, there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*," Edelman explains, "the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments" (13, emphasis original). This pronatal logic befalls *Marsh Hay* because the play ends with Sarilin's non-reproductive sexual enjoyments, which make her one of the targets of blame for the family's cycle of despair. *Marsh Hay*, however, also places blame on the community for not accepting an unwed mother and for thereby perpetuating the lack of progress.

Pregnancy loss is the tipping point of Denison's *Marsh Hay*, as it is with so many other Canadian plays such as Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia* and Sears' *Harlem Duet*, but the topic of abortion is conspicuously absent in the plays' scholarly criticism and theatre reviews. As Latimer explains, "reproductive politics continue to be so recursive" (4) precisely because abortion remains a "dirty word" (4). While *Marsh Hay*'s performance history demonstrates the evolving attitudes towards pregnancy out of wedlock, abortion continues to be a taboo issue in the play's theatre reviews from the 1920s to the 1990s. It is my hope that we can begin to discuss the impact and problematic literary symbolism of lost pregnancies, and in doing so, foster a much-needed open discourse on the prescribed female silence on an issue that affects so many women of the past, present, and future.

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## NOTES

- 1 All citations of *Marsh Hay* are from the 1974 edition because it coincides with the first performances, includes visual depictions of scenes, and offers an introduction that speaks to the play's delayed performance history.
- 2 *Marsh Hay*'s 1974 premiere production was performed by the University of Toronto's Graduate Drama Centre, directed by Richard Plant with set design by Marlon Walker and costumes by Linda Hardy. Neil Munro directed the 1996 Shaw Festival production, which starred Elizabeth Inksetter (Sarilin), Corrine Koslo (Lena), and Norman Browning/Michael Ball (John); set design by Peter Hartwell and lighting by Robert Thomson.
- 3 Alan Filewod's "American mug, Canadian wump" offers more information on the Shaw Festival production.
- 4 Karen Weingarten's *Abortion in the American Imagination* (2014) argues that American literature uses "antiabortion rhetoric . . . to delineate the contours of the ideal American citizen" (2).
- 5 The issue of reproduction in American literature has garnered more critical attention than in its Canadian counterpart: see Karen Bender and Nina Gramont's *Choice: True Stories of Birth, Contraception, Infertility, Adoption, Single Parenthood, and Abortion* (2007); Beth Capo's *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* (2007); and Aimee Wilson's *Conceived in Modernism: The Aesthetics and Politics of Birth Control* (2016).
- 6 For a discussion of pregnancy among female settlers in Canada, see Carol Fairbanks' *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (1986).
- 7 Thank you to Brendan McCormack for pointing out the ironic dynamic between conventional and unconventional mothers in this play.
- 8 Lindgren provides an in-depth account of the federal treatment of motherhood in early-twentieth-century Canada with reference to the *Blue Books*.

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## (Up)rooting Generations

**Gail Anderson-Dargatz**

*The Spawning Grounds*. Knopf Canada \$32.00

**Sharon Butala**

*Wild Rose*. Coteau \$21.95

Reviewed by Caela Fenton

What sorts of stories are embedded in land? This seems to be the driving question behind Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Spawning Grounds* and Sharon Butala's *Wild Rose*. As Canadian authors, both writers demonstrate a curiosity towards narratives of settlement.

Anderson-Dargatz's novel takes place within the Thompson-Shuswap region, in the fictional town of Lightning River. The narrative is elliptical, alternating between the 1850s, when Eugene Robertson was the first white settler to lay claim to the river, and his present-day descendants, Hannah and her brother, Bran. Dargatz's is a story of generationality, seamlessly guiding readers through changing mindsets, clinging prejudices, and altered environments. The idea of being marked by one's generation does not apply solely to the humans of the novel, but rather to the non-humans as well. The story, during each time period depicted, revolves around the health of the river and, most essentially, the salmon.

Anderson-Dargatz's critique of colonial imposition is not subtle: "Like so many of his countrymen, Eugene had sought out the wilderness but then forced his British civilities upon it." The casual racism that Hannah and Bran's grandfather, Stew, demonstrates towards the Shuswap community across the

river, and his grandchildren's resulting mortification, capture the spectrum of shifting perspectives while offering hope for the future. Stew also supports the sale of the land to real-estate developers, a proposal which Hannah and Bran work with the Shuswap community to halt.

With the novel's call to action for the respect of both environment and Indigenous cultures, it seems hard to believe that Anderson-Dargatz also takes on an element of magic realism through the tale of the "water mystery," a figure of Shuswap lore. While the telling of Shuswap stories, through the writing of Shuswap characters, may be problematic given Anderson-Dargatz's white settler identity, the depiction is respectful and obviously deeply researched. Likewise, the ecological crisis depicted in Anderson-Dargatz's fictional town is an accurate portrayal of the Thompson-Shuswap region's issues with overfishing, overdrawing for irrigation, and warming ocean temperatures. The conservation activities carried out by Hannah and her classmates reflect Anderson-Dargatz's husband's involvement in river restoration projects in both British Columbia and Ontario. Thus, *The Spawning Grounds* goes beyond a call to action and sets out a clear plan of implementation, as seen when Hannah gives her father the same speech she gives elementary school groups: keeping cattle away, planting trees to prevent erosion, and banning fishing until numbers are up. The message that elder generations may learn from younger ones rings throughout the text.

Butala's novel offers a different version of colonial settlement through the eyes of Sophie, a member of the Quebec upper class in the 1880s who escapes the confines of societal expectations by going West with her young husband. Butala's novel, like Anderson-Dargatz's, has temporal shifts, but it stays within Sophie's own lifetime, sliding back and forth from childhood to adulthood. *Wild Rose* is a story of emerging female agency, of a woman in the land often discussed as some sort of "male Eden," a place where a woman might be abandoned with no repercussions and a wife is a hot commodity. Butala's novel reaches for the overlooked female narrative of prairie settlement in its depiction of Sophie and the staunch female settlers she encounters. While Sophie's paradigm shifts regarding what it means to be a woman, a mother, and a wife, lending a tone of empowerment to the novel, her attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and members of the lower class are an accurate depiction of snobbish Catholic prejudice. The novel's derogatory references to Indigenous peoples, while no doubt embodying the mindset of the time, are jarring in a contemporary text.

Both novels adopt a reverential tone with regard to land. Anderson-Dargatz focuses on the inseparable intimacy between the human and the non-human, calling forth Shuswap stories of "when animal and man were still family, a man's soul could flit away as an owl, or the spirit of a bear could slip under a man's skin," and defining the youngest generation of her novel by its concern for environmental degradation. Butala, on the other hand, writes a land of incomprehensibility:

No one, [Sophie] thought, could gaze at [the prairie sky] and think this vast, glittering dome could hold so puny a thing as a heaven, would tolerate a silly human paradise. In that instant she disbelieved.

(Dis)belief is what grounds both novels, and it is rooted in the land we call Canada.

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## A Translation Is Not Only a Thing of Words

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**Nelly Arcan; Jacob Homel, trans.**

*Breakneck*. Anvil \$20.00

**Sylvain Maréchal; Sheila Delany, trans.**

*The Woman Priest: A Translation of Sylvain Maréchal's Novella, La femme abbé.*

U of Alberta P \$19.95

Reviewed by Liza Bolen

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How can one be curious about something one already knows? This is the question that came to mind when I first perused Jacob Homel's translation of Nelly Arcan's 2007 novel *À ciel ouvert* (a title brilliantly translated into the snappy *Breakneck*) and Sheila Delany's translation of Sylvain Maréchal's novella *La femme abbé* (*The Woman Priest*), which was originally published in 1801 in France. To various degrees, I *knew* what I held in my hands: being from Québec, I had been introduced to superstar writer Arcan through various media interviews, and I had been deeply fascinated by this novel and others, notably *Putain* (2001) and *Folle* (2004)—which, I must add, are also available in English. I had also been introduced to the objectively lesser-known Maréchal whilst studying censorship and the Church in Québec and France, and I remember being amazed by the critical detachment of this author, who cleverly took on the subjects of religion, eroticism, and women at a time when these topics were strictly out of bounds.

So my curiosity, in that sense, did not transpire from these texts per se, but rather from the irony of finding the two authors, shocking in their own times and in their own stylistic methods, suddenly next to one another. In fact, this struck me particularly when I laid the books side by side: the front cover of *The Woman Priest* shows a drawing of a man holding a dagger in a dimly lit cave and ripping the blouse of a distressed young woman, thus exposing her bare breasts. And on the cover of *Breakneck*, as though in some

kind of coincidentally perfect continuation, is an image of two long, bare, mannequin-like legs, at the end of which are high-heeled shoes. Thus, even before engaging with these texts, we are reminded of the central role of the woman and the woman's body in them—and that we are about to enter two worlds which share the sentiment of something being not quite right. This first impression does not disappoint.

*The Woman Priest* is an epistolary novella that centres on the correspondence between Agatha and her dear friend Zoe. Agatha, who has fallen in love with a priest, decides to dress as a man in order to enter the priesthood and to be close to her beloved. The story unfolds in a series of dramatic twists through which we are introduced to the anti-clerical character Timon, who serves as a clear voice in questioning the establishment portrayed in this novella. While the contents of *The Woman Priest* make for a good story (drag, drama, and death—what more can you ask for?), the astonishing complexity of the novella seems to lie not necessarily in the general plot line, but rather in the context in which the author wrote the book—as brilliantly explained in Delany's introduction to her translation (we'll get to that). Nevertheless, the secrecy of Agatha's female body and the representation of a clearly problematic clerical structure are an excellent gateway into Maréchal's cynical and disengaged attitude towards the epoch in which he lived.

In *Breakneck*, the difficulty lies within the character relations, as Arcan proposes a deeply disturbing dive into each character's dark persona. Thus we find Rose Dubois and Julie O'Brien, two women truly obsessed with their own bodies and the idea of a perfect and ageless female form (through intensive workouts and a lot of plastic surgery). The women compete for the attention of Charles Nadeau, the son of a butcher, whose childhood memories are entangled in a web of sexual obsessions about flesh

and mutilated bodies. Arcan plays with these protagonists and pushes them to extremes, which makes for an increasingly violent storyline, a raw and sickening portrayal of humankind's desires, from which the reader simply cannot turn away.

The *vases communicants* that exist between these texts (women, violence, disguising the body—by dressing as a man or by altering it through surgical procedures) prove for an interesting new depth in reading. But it would be unfair to discuss a curiosity about these texts, or their possible interpretations, without stating the obvious: both *The Woman Priest* and *Breakneck* are translations. This, in my opinion, is possibly the most fascinating element to discuss here.

In *Breakneck*, Homel absolutely does justice to the unsettling style Arcan was known for. Beyond the story and the choice of words, the plays on temporality, the constant feeling of threat in the air, and the sadistic violence which lingers between the lines of this novel are what make it such an addictive read, and Homel was able to transfer these elements as well in his translation. Nothing seems forced, as Homel remains faithful to Arcan's strangely detached and analytical style. As for *The Woman Priest*, Delany provides the reader with a rich introduction, which proves essential to understanding the subtleties and intertextual references sown into this novella. But above all, the twenty-four-page introduction to this translation displays the work of a translator and researcher who deeply knows the author's work and has extensive knowledge of the context in which he lived and wrote. Thus the reader is given a companion for reading that critically discusses themes that appear in the main text: religion and anti-clericalism, French historical context, French colonialism (part of the novella is set in New France), and, of course, gender and disguise, which, as we are reminded, was “not only culturally transgressive but illegal” at the time. It is

perhaps through this introduction that the translation of *La femme abbé* finds its real value and the reader can begin to grasp both the intention and the impact of Maréchal. Two unconventional texts, difficult in their own subtle ways, show that the most significant part of a translation is often not the words.

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## Together in Exile

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**Tara Azzopardi**

*Last Stop, Lonesome Town*. Mansfield \$17.00

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**Shelley Banks**

*Exile on a Grid Road*. ThistleDown \$12.95

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Reviewed by Natalie Boldt

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Mountain ash, snow geese, milk vetch, CN freights—all are seen from Shelley Banks's exile on a grid road, a titular image that immediately calls to mind the lattice-like framework of Canada's prairie thoroughfares. The book is Banks's first full collection—though, as she notes in the acknowledgements, several of the poems have been published individually—and a *full* collection it is. Stylistically and formally varied (Banks has included, for example, a found poem as well as several haiku, a prose poem, and plenty of free verse) and rich with sensory language, *Exile on a Grid Road* is a remarkable first publication.

Loosely divisible into three groups of poems, *Exile* begins with a set of prairie-inspired pieces, conjuring up images of rural Saskatchewan that are felt, smelled, and heard as well as seen. Readers will *hear* as well as picture, for example, the “demolition thunder” from the hooves of “cinnamon-soft / Belgians” in “Agribition”; *feel* the unforgiving cold of prairie wilderness in works like “Carcass Walk,” “Prairie Icon,” and “Raw Desire”; and *smell* the damp and dank rising up from “backyard sinks” stricken with “two weeks of rain” in “Undone.” Banks's collection, though, offers more than just vivid descriptions of prairie

life and landscapes. Indeed, it exhibits a keen understanding of the mundanities, tragedies, and intermittent wonders of, well, *existence* that will resonate with most readers—prairie-dwellers or no. What I have deemed the author's prairie poems, themselves profound reflections on being as well as place, are juxtaposed with a series of poems that reflect on the tedium of pedestrian living—strikes, layoffs, sick days—and the unexpected, but all too common, tragedies that upset it—cancer, heartbreak, death. Exile, in this sense, is not just spatial; it is emotional and existential as well.

Exile takes on a slightly different hue in the book's third batch of poems, as Banks reflects on her experience growing up an outsider—as the daughter of Canadian missionaries in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. In this last part of the collection, bittersweet reminiscences of an “immigrant” child (“Vacant Lot, Kingston, Jamaica”) in pieces like “The Mission Field,” “Vacant Lot,” and “Green Mangoes” are reminders that the pain of exile may ultimately give way to new and delightfully different horizons—perspective, it seems, is the light at the end of Banks's particular grid road.

In *Last Stop, Lonesome Town*, fellow literary newcomer Tara Azzopardi reflects on similar themes (exile, tedium, tragedy, and combinations thereof), but relieves the seemingly intractable gloom of life's hardships in her own way—with a unique blend of macabre humour, oddball allusions, and biting satire. Unlike Banks's collection, there is, it seems, no rhyme or reason to the order of the poems in this book; it is a jumble of viewpoints, subjects, styles, and time periods. This chaos, however, is undoubtedly part of the book's charm. The poems jump from early-twentieth-century Brazil (“Brazil, 1908”), to Albania (“Albania, 1925”), to Alcatraz in the 1960s (“Alcatraz, 1962”), and touch on subjects as familiar as “The Great Depression,” as relatable as the adolescent insecurity we never quite grow out of (“A



Date with Casper”), and as unconventional and unexpected as the tacit dos and don’ts of country music (“Nashville Rules”). Even the length of each poem varies dramatically: the shortest, “October, 1939,” is a mere two lines, while the longest, “The Ballad of Zerelda James,” is several pages.

Azzopardi, though, is a trustworthy and entertaining tour guide, expertly leading her readers through a carnivalesque world that would give Alice in Wonderland a run for her money. And, indeed, as in Wonderland, in *Last Stop* nothing is quite as it seems. Nearly every poem employs some kind of thematic upset or reversal—be it the “most eligible” doctor in “The Bachelor” who “can tango with an ostrich” and “gamble with an alligator,” but whose sexual exploits (“in a lampshade / in a dumb-waiter / at a grand ball”) make him decidedly less eligible by the lyric’s end; or the decidedly unsexy “Sex Club” that appears on the neighbouring page, replete with an iconic “red room” that is, in this case, haunted by the “phony / oh oh ohs” of Santa Claus.

A former clerk in a costume shop, contract archaeologist, and construction worker, and current artist, musician, and poet, Azzopardi is nothing if not skilled in the craft of compilation. In the case of this collection, the back cover has got it exactly right—Azzopardi has made a “quirky and beautiful vaudevillian debut.”

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## Rebel with a Cause

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**Shauna Singh Baldwin**

*Reluctant Rebellions: New and Selected Nonfiction.*  
Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies, U of the  
Fraser Valley \$21.95.

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Reviewed by Susan Fisher

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Shauna Singh Baldwin, author of three novels and two collections of short stories, is not a reclusive literary figure. Management consultant, restaurant owner, public speaker, polo player—Baldwin is always vitally

engaged in the world around her. And in her case, that world is a complex, multi-dimensional place. Born in Canada, raised in Pakistan, and educated in the US, Baldwin belongs to no one nation or culture. In *Reluctant Rebellions*, her new non-fiction collection, Baldwin examines from this polycultural perspective the social and political ideas that motivate her fiction.

Some of the items in this miscellaneous collection deal explicitly with her writing career. “Conflict on the Page” explains how she got past the “nothing ever happens” impasse in her own writing. “Ruthless Terrorist or Valiant Spy” introduces *Tiger’s Claw*, her 2005 novel about Noor Inayat Khan, a Muslim woman who spied for the British in World War II. *Tiger’s Claw* is not straight biography: Baldwin discusses how she mixed research and invention in retelling Noor’s story. While “Ruthless Terrorist” by now feels somewhat dated—it was a promotional piece written eleven years ago—it remains a useful reference for students of Baldwin’s work.

Similarly, “Questions for Rumi” introduces her 2012 novel *The Selector of Souls*, explaining how it took shape over the span of seven years as she began “chasing images and voices.” Baldwin describes herself as a storyteller whose aim is to “create and explore situations where people find they must change, and make moral choices.” The situation in *Selector of Souls* is the murder of a girl baby, killed by her grandmother because the impoverished family cannot afford another daughter. While *Selector* is a novel about invented individuals, it is also a kind of social science, based on the very real problem of “missing” girls in the South Asian population and the decisions of parents not to have those female babies. In “Don’t Blame the Technology” (originally published in the *National Post*), Baldwin examines how technology, in the form of ultrasound and other forms of prenatal testing, is enabling and amplifying the traditional

preference for males. Baldwin deplores the situation, especially for mothers who are pressured to give up their daughters. However, she does not want Indian parents demonized for their choices. She points out that if people in the developed world did not have a social safety net, perhaps they too would choose sons over daughters.

Another literary piece, "For whom do you write?" examines J. G. Farrell's 1973 novel *The Siege of Krishnapur*. Having missed the irony that is Farrell's essential tone, Baldwin dismisses *Siege* as the work of a benighted imperialist. She concedes that it "is humorous once you overlook his Eurocentrism," and even allows that Farrell might be forgiven inasmuch as *Siege* was published before Edward Said's *Orientalism*. But Farrell hardly needed Said's example in order to write his devastating critique of the Raj.

As one might guess, Baldwin has a polemical side. While this is mediated in her fiction through dialogue and characterization, it comes to the fore in her non-fiction. In "Mind-Dancing with Language," an address given at a conference on the South Asian diaspora, she encourages her audience to remain multilingual:

We in North America are so anxious to assimilate and learn English that we will fully lose our multilingual abilities by the second or third generation. The practice of sending children to residential schooling is gone, yet scorn and silence can still kill our ability to dream in our ancestral languages.

This stopped me in my tracks. People of the South Asian diaspora in North America typically speak Hindi, Urdu, Telugu, or Punjabi, none of which is endangered. Moreover, no one of South Asian origin was ever sent (as far as I know) to Canadian residential schools. Why would a writer of Baldwin's intelligence conflate these two situations? Baldwin is undoubtedly sincere in her solidarity with victims of colonialism, but in striving too hard for rhetorical effect she undermines her case.

In "No Place Like Home," delivered at an event to commemorate the *Komagata Maru* incident, Baldwin presents what happened as damning evidence of Canadian racism *tout court*. For a writer whose avowed purpose is to explore how people make choices in difficult situations, there is surely more to say. What, for example, about Canadian workers who knew from bitter experience in the coal mines and fish canneries that unscrupulous employers would use Asian migrants to depress wages? Their opposition to the arrival of South Asian migrants was undoubtedly racist, but it was also founded on realistic fears about economic consequences. While I have reservations about the early part of this essay (especially when Baldwin seems to compare the incident to the Holocaust and Guantanamo), it does evolve into a thoughtful discussion of how we construct communities and nations. Who is in and who is out? Does our community consist of our co-religionists, of those who carry the same passport, of people who trace their ancestry to the same homeland? These questions remain as urgent today as they were in 1914.

A particularly effective essay, one that does not overstate its case, is "The Power of One," which recounts how in 2012 a gunman killed six worshippers at the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, Baldwin's own community. The title refers not only to the devastation that a single armed man can inflict; it also expresses Baldwin's fundamental faith that "though one person has the power to do great damage, each of us also has the power to create, heal, build, repair and replenish."

In the final essay, which gives this collection its title, Baldwin exhorts South Asian women to become "reluctant rebels." She advocates a feminism that cannot be dismissed as an ill-fitting Western import. South Asian women, like women everywhere, have the right to shape their own lives, yet, as Baldwin acknowledges, they are

constrained by powerful ties of kinship and affection. Baldwin's analysis may not be ideologically pure, but it is certainly compassionate. She recognizes that, caught as they are in complex webs of loyalty, women can shape their lives only with "incremental change" and "with kindness and concern for social justice." As both a storyteller and an activist, this is how Baldwin herself proceeds. Her mode of being in and writing about the world lends to this collection, as it does to her fiction, a moral seriousness that makes Baldwin always a writer worth reading.

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## Barwin and Bertin Make Good

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### Gary Barwin

*I, Dr. Greenblatt, Orthodontist*, 251-1457.

Anvil \$18.00

### Kris Bertin

*Bad Things Happen*. Biblioasis \$19.95

Reviewed by Joel Deshayé

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These books, Bertin's first and Barwin's eighteenth, are very good for very different reasons. In the short stories of *Bad Things Happen*, most of the narrators and main characters are young men stuck in poverty or, less often, thriving temporarily as small-time criminals. Most of them work either too hard or for too little money, usually at jobs they don't like: garbage collector, chauffeur, gas-station employee, window cleaner, call-centre scam artist. Sometimes they are hopelessly unemployed. One exception is the garbage collector in "The Narrow Passage," who becomes so good at his job that he tries to raise others' standards, and he is victim to an attack dog as a result. Another is Chris in the closing story, "Your #1 Killer," who discovers that his boyhood hobby of violent video games prepares him surprisingly well for his new hobby-become-job of exterminator. Bertin's choice of finales suggests a darkly cynical but realistic view of how poverty drives some men to

violence. With its theme of precarity—or, more accurately, reliable lousiness—*Bad Things Happen* will appeal to readers who are interested in compelling fictional representations of the economy and of masculinity. It is a solidly crafted, mostly conventional, but impressive debut.

Which is not to say that it has no unconventional angles. In "Make Your Move," there is not only one alternate ending but a few. The "move" in this game is usually a counterattack or sexual advance, which appear to be the only options for the self-conscious narrator. He's a tough guy who dissociates himself as the second-person "you" and wonders whether any of his imagined options would "be a believable story." Although Bertin's hardened driver strains credulity at times, somehow tagging along with some teenagers on a camping trip and seducing one of them, the plots and their grimy masculinity are believably the kind of story for the narrator's ironic voice. Rejected again at the end, he peruses some ceramic castles in a pet shop: "There are eight different kinds of castles, eight different colours, eight different ways to go, so you buy them all and are happy with your purchase." He imagines people around the castles "with their whole lives ahead of them." We know, however, that the real people of Bertin's gritty realism can't buy their way out of their lives.

Thus, the detritus of consumer society in the titular "Bad Things Happen" is the dark secret of the outwardly beautiful Jason, and in "The Narrow Passage" it becomes "a temple in the making." It is a temple to which the adults sacrifice their children—a clear allegory about the destruction of the natural world and the likelihood that not this generation but one of the next will suffer because of it.

In sharp contrast, Gary Barwin's world view is so youthfully creative that it can't easily be read as cynical, even though there are many horrors in the short and postcard fiction of *I, Dr. Greenblatt, Orthodontist*,

251-1457. One such horror is the use of a stun gun on an immigrant at the airport: “He fell to the floor. A man made squid.” Bertin focuses on the violence of few options, but Barwin usually diversifies the world. In *I, Dr. Greenblatt*—a book now full of my marginal check marks—my favourite story is “Coffee, Newspaper, Eggs,” which explores how two people would live if they shared a pair of legs: “Ours was a vibrant tango of intersecting free will, a mambo up the relationship decision tree.” When the legs run off on their own, the narrator’s partner asks, “How are we going to do without the legs?” The answer: “We’ll find a way . . . First coffee. Then eggs.” The snappy comedy of the rhyme and the generative symbolism of the eggs are telling examples of Barwin’s outlook. He is always seeking parallel universes, always cracking open new points of view. In “Brave Cape,” the point of view is a snowman’s. In other stories, it is a cow’s, a tree-boy’s, a bird’s. In “The Tell-Tale Heart Retold: A Tale Told by Heart”—you guessed it. Whenever Barwin’s prose seems to have become perplexingly metaphorical, as in “The Sleep of Elephants,” along come character and plot. In “The Lollygagging Prongs of the Six-Bar Blues,” Fred and George compare metaphors of love: “Love is a bright fork retrieving pickles, Fred says, munching on a sandwich.” For Barwin, the ordinary and the extraordinary are never far apart—and that’s very good indeed.

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## Surrealist Statecraft

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**Andrew Battershill**

*Pillow*. Coach House \$19.95

**Steve Noyes**

*November’s Radio*. Oolichan \$19.95

Reviewed by Carl Watts

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*Pillow*, Andrew Battershill’s Giller Prize-nominated debut novel, is the self-reflexively surrealist tale of its titular character’s struggle with an avant-garde mafia and the brain

injuries he suffered as a professional boxer. Given that Battershill’s few previous publication credits are mostly in online or student-run journals, it wouldn’t be unfair to say that Battershill and the acclaimed *Pillow* have come out of nowhere. Yet while the book is certainly something of an eruption of raw talent, its influences and techniques are more savvy than truly surprising.

Much of the novel blends the surreal with the cartoonish. In one early scene, *Pillow* makes an escape by throwing a cash-packed briefcase into the air (“It hit the ceiling hard, and the bills spread out and drifted down slowly, the way leaves fall off a tree that’s just been hit by a car”). Its outlandish descriptions sometimes give the impression that what is most preposterous is the act of description itself: “Her sergeant, Michael Simon, was no wider than a highway and no uglier than a piece of roadkill. . . . He looked like someone who smelled like the inside of a crowded shipping container.” The chicken-or-egg ruminations of Battershill’s previous work are also in the mix, such as when *Pillow* wonders “who invented wallpaper patterns. Like who did the first one and thought it would look good on some paper and then put that paper on a wall.”

The perspicacity implied by Battershill’s backstory is evident in his use of the surrealists themselves, who seem to be in a state of permanent recuperation by critics and avant-gardists. What’s more, the book’s gender-swapping of figures at the centre of surrealism (Louise Aragon, Gwynn Apollinaire) is the kind of move that could be considered provocative but that is—considering Battershill’s milieu and the novel’s publisher—more probably guaranteed to earn plaudits. These smart moves, along with Battershill’s bleak sense of humour, strengthen a story that could reductively but not inaccurately be classified as that perennially amateurish tale of a narrator losing his mind. Still, the novel’s final images, in which *Pillow* encounters that most familiar and fantastic of animals—

“He approached the largest sleeping giraffe and rubbed the giraffe’s flank, which felt firm, almost leathery”—are an instance of Battershill’s making something new out of surrealism’s enduring appeal.

*November’s Radio*, meanwhile, is Steve Noyes’ second novel, but it follows several books of short fiction and poetry. Noyes’ work has meandered from the prairie themes of his 1980s poems through his experiences in China, his interest in Islam, and his work history with the Canadian government; this succession of topics and influences indicates that *November’s Radio* exists as part of a career trajectory that is quite different from Battershill’s.

*November’s Radio* addresses topics found also in Noyes’ previous novel, *It Is Just That Your House Is So Far Away*, but widens its scope from a white male’s experiences teaching abroad to encompass the troubled Wendy and her flight to China. Wendy sets off in pursuit of artistic fulfillment and to escape Gary, who is mired in the soul-crushing world of government bureaucracy in Victoria. Each struggles with mental illness, and each becomes acquainted with the sinister power of government and business interests.

*November’s Radio* takes some risks with perspective, such as when Noyes approximates (presumably) Chinese-language dialogue:

“I am not sure about the foreigner,”  
Chen said.

“She has a power,” she said.

“Uneducated,” said Chen. “Low civilization level. She is ignorant about China. She doesn’t speak our language. She smells.”

Less dicey is Noyes’ expansion on the male perspective of his previous effort. Writing from the perspective of a Western woman marks *November’s Radio* as more ambitious yet also within the realm of what one could tastefully attempt. Wendy’s dread of admitting to Gary that she “*didn’t do a thing in China, not a thing*,” in some ways gender-swaps the trope of the ineffectual male’s acting out

fantasies of power, prestige, and sexual conquest upon migrating to East Asia.

The book effectively depicts depressingly similar Eastern and Western apparatuses of ideological interpellation and coercion. Its final sequence, in which a long-gestating, hologram-based performance is punctuated by the mundane trickle of “a few tourists” who “drift in and clump around” before vanishing, speaks to Noyes’ mastery of his diverse subject matter, but this expansive quality strips the book of the gauche insight that made *It Is Just That Your House* so appealing. While *November’s Radio* could be Noyes’ strongest work, its wide range and considered engagements with sensitive topics may leave one longing for a little more of Battershill’s raw instinct and ambition.

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## Carol Shields’ Political Project

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**Brenda Beckman-Long**

*Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic.*

U of Toronto P \$29.95

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Reviewed by Bettina B. Cenerelli

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In this short but dense and well-rounded analysis of six novels by Carol Shields, Brenda Beckman-Long points out the consistency in fiction and criticism by the prized author. Beckman-Long argues that during her entire writing career, Shields pursued a coherent and purposeful political project and positioned herself “as part of national and international traditions of women’s life writing” investigating “the potential for fiction to offer a feminist critique of dominant discourses such as autobiography and critical theory.” In her opinion, the abstract ideas of literary theory in relation to women’s lives become concrete in Shields’ writing, and reading turns into a dynamic act.

The analysis, based on doctoral and postdoctoral research, examines in chronological order earlier works *Small*

*Ceremonies* (1976) and *The Box Garden* (1977), *Swann* (1987), and the later works: *The Republic of Love* (1992), *The Stone Diaries* (1993), and *Unless* (2002). The book is structured around the questions of genre (resistance to autobiography as a genre), author (author-construction in close connection to Foucault), body, subject (multiple narration), and feminism as an object of inquiry. The author supports her theoretical framework with references to writers and critics such as Nicole Brossard, Michel Foucault, and Philippe Lejeune; in addition to archival work, she repeatedly quotes two interviews with Carol Shields done in the 1980s by Harvey De Roo (*West Coast Review*, 1988) and Eleanor Wachtel (*Feminist Journal of Literature and Criticism*, 1989).

Like the labyrinth-maker Larry Weller in *Larry's Party* (1997), Shields uses the “communicative function of the text” to embed additional discourses, allowing her to place comments on criticism or contemporary writing. Those *mises en abyme* blur the lines of identity and sources, allow the author to experiment with multiple perspectives and the communal voice, and seem to serve an educational goal: “[Shields] advances the feminist movement in Canada to address the next generation.” Interestingly, Shields does not create a portrait of one single person, but rather represents a literary community. In relation to *Swann*, whose life story Beckman-Long parallels with that of Pat Lowther, she states:

In her fiction Shields exaggerates the very real image of the woman as a victim, in order to show how this image limits *Swann's* reception and relegates her to the rank of a minor poet. In her resistance to this gender stereotype, Shields reaffirms the value of women's writing as an important, though neglected, contribution to literary history.

The multiplicity of voices reaches perfection in *The Stone Diaries*, in which other parallel

texts—additional “cultural and historical forces that shape a representative female life”—will impact the family narrative that will include Shields' own family comments, pictures, or quotations from her mother's journal: “It is a life that is interconnected with the lives of others, not a monument to an autonomous male self.” With *Unless*, Shields becomes the writer-critic that she has been preparing for and the community of women writers becomes the centre of interest, presenting feminism's liberating possibilities: “Shields thus creates a narrative space to re-examine the feminist subject; at the same time, she deconstructs notions of identity and the autonomous self. In this way, Shields becomes not only a writer but also a theorist, positioning herself as a writer-critic.”

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## Collaborations and Collisions in the Canadian Vortex

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**Gregory Betts, Paul Hjartarson, and Kristine Smitka, eds.**

*Counterblasting Canada: Marshall McLuhan, Wyndham Lewis, Wilfred Watson, and Sheila Watson.* U of Alberta P \$49.95

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Reviewed by Jeffrey Aaron Weingarten

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This collection of essays begins with its editors' promise to articulate the paradoxical endurance of the short-lived vorticist movement of the 1910s. “*Counterblasting Canada*,” the editors tell us in their introduction, “examines a rich network of Canadian intersections with, and extrapolations of, the vorticist narrative.” While the legacy of vorticism informs most of *Counterblasting Canada*, the essays that follow its introduction differ greatly in their critical offerings even as they coincide and illuminate a narrative attentive to modernist and postmodernist discourses, patterns of influence, media theory, and the future of the humanities more generally.

by thinking about the processes, strategies, and lasting impact of specific and general influences in the humanities.

The model of influence presented in *Counterblasting Canada* is compelling because it is partly a site of conflict. Influence is collegial collaboration at times, yes—but it is also contest. Sheila Watson, Morra proposes, “maintains that violence” is one way of responding when “communication has failed.” It’s a striking observation for Morra to make, given how often the writers studied in this book disagree with their mentors and colleagues: Surette questions McLuhan even as he praises him, and Tiessen presents a meticulous narrative of Wilfred Watson’s fraught collaboration with McLuhan on *From Cliché to Archetype* (which precipitated their estrangement after 1969). In *Counterblasting Canada*, influence is neither an unchallenged mentorship nor an uncritical apprenticeship. Influence is instead—to adapt Wershler’s term (who himself borrows it from Raymond Williams)—a kind of “residuality”: a “persistent element of the past that continues to play an active role” in the present. In *Counterblasting Canada*, the reception of that residuality is sometimes enthusiastic and sometimes caustic, but it remains a constant dialogue that contrasts with the bland myths of solitary genius that the contributors to this book so carefully avoid.

*Counterblasting Canada* will have obvious appeal to communications, media studies, or Canadian literature scholars (especially those interested in the recent conversations about later modernism, intermodernism, and the like taking place in American literary discourses), but it is also quite possibly a catalyst for further consideration of what literary collaborations and intellectual collisions occur or have occurred in Canada’s community of writers.




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## Remaking Poetry

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**Ali Blythe**

*Twoism*. icehouse poetry \$19.95

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**Susan Holbrook**

*Throaty Wipes*. Coach House \$18.95

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**Katherine Leyton**

*All the Gold Hurts My Mouth*.

icehouse poetry \$19.95

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Reviewed by Dancy Mason

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Each of the poetry collections reviewed here strives to reconfigure, in various combinations, assumed narratives of the self, tradition, and the objectifying gaze. Where Ali Blythe’s *Twoism* explores a quotidian melancholy in the face of identity dissonance, Susan Holbrook’s *Throaty Wipes* engages in Steinian linguistic play, and Katherine Leyton’s *All the Gold Hurts My Mouth* provides a sustained confrontation with the male gaze.

Blythe’s *Twoism* appears to announce reconfiguration through its very title and cover, the title word mirroring itself in chartreuse lettering on a white, textured cardstock background. Following this lead, Blythe’s poems explore the often quietly devastating doubling of identity that occurs when we must survive and continue our lives even through crippling sadness. The melancholy of Blythe’s speakers is often contrasted or obscured by quotidian tasks performed in countless mornings or innumerable evenings, creating a further dissonance. In “Owl,” the speaker describes how “I lie on top of the hot sheet / but night air is another hot sheet,” capturing the routine tension of being a body in the world. In “I Am Not Scoring Enough Points with You,” “Another / sunny day bashes its club / against my non-mattress ear,” while “Hit” describes the unexpected nausea of hearing a popular song on the radio one too many times. Such moments fill up *Twoism*, rendering its speakers as both full of profound sadness and yet required to face the quiet

*Counterblasting Canada* covers tremendous ground: Leon Surette offers a retrospective on McLuhan that thoughtfully honours and challenges his former PhD supervisor; Gregory Betts untangles the complex “nonlinear, atemporal, and simultaneous” consciousness McLuhan theorized and refined through his teaching and writing; Elena Lamberti imagines the ways in which McLuhan, Lewis, and Sheila Watson offered readers a defamiliarizing “awakening”; Adam Hammond charts patterns of influence in Sheila Watson’s and McLuhan’s respective readings of Lewis; Adam Welch outlines the “anti-environments” of Canadian visual art; Paul Tiessen traces Wilfred Watson’s collaborations with McLuhan; Philip Monk tells the story of General Idea, the “original bad boys of Canadian art”; Dean Irvine mines Sheila Watson’s oeuvre to explain her evolving interpretation of expressionism; Linda M. Morra studies the character of Felix from Watson’s *The Double Hook* as a way of explaining McLuhan’s concept of “counter-environments”; Kristine Smitka discusses evolving philosophies of photography and language in the thinking of Sheila Watson, Lewis, and McLuhan; and Darren Wershler ends the book with an artful and lucid reflection on interdisciplinary scholarship, media studies, and creative futures in the humanities.

As I read *Counterblasting Canada*, I had much to say about its take on twentieth-century art and aesthetics; at the same time, I found myself thinking a great deal about Harold Bloom for a few reasons. First, because he once said that literary criticism “is the art of knowing the hidden roads” that go from one text to others. In many ways, that is the achievement of *Counterblasting Canada*: it charts unusual paths by establishing and exploring concrete links among Lewis, McLuhan, Sheila Watson, and Wilfred Watson. While every essay is rich in theory and critical reflection, it is witnessing career- and life-altering conversations unfold on

every page of this book that is sometimes most engrossing. Those conversations are made all the more impressive by the archival research peppered throughout. Moreover, in putting these conversations on display, *Counterblasting Canada* does much to debunk myths of “solitary genius,” at least in Canada—and the editors make it clear that they wish to do so particularly in the case of McLuhan. To prove the existence of a community of intellectuals and to map their encounters, conflicts, and partnerships are much more arduous and productive tasks than to argue solitary genius. The refusal to shy away from the difficulty of constructing a social and intellectual web is one of the outstanding achievements of *Counterblasting Canada*.

I thought of Bloom for other reasons, though. The editors and contributors say much about vorticism, modernism, post-modernism, and pedagogy (as well as about McLuhan’s notions of media, the social function of art, and counter-environments), but they say little about a theory of influence—though they do a terrific job of noting and studying instances of influence from a historical standpoint. Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* may not have provided the most appropriate critical lens, but I was hoping to see more made of influence via Clayton, Friedman, Kristeva, or Rothstein (to name a few examples). That yearning, though, is my compliment: *Counterblasting Canada* maps a history of influence so compelling and dynamic—there is much made throughout these essays of Lewis’ impact on McLuhan, McLuhan’s impact on Sheila Watson, and so on—that it compels the reader to think more deeply on such issues. The concept seems to underpin many, if not all, of the chapters in *Counterblasting Canada*. Some essays are lucid discussions of influence that, in their own right, might be of use to future scholars of any field (Canadian or otherwise): in particular, Hammond and Wershler offer two of the strongest pieces in *Counterblasting Canada*



onslaught of these external forces, the interminable normality of these dawns, midnights, and pop songs.

Love does not escape either. Many of the love poems are labelled as numbers, which seemingly dehumanizes lovers as notches on a bedpost, and yet the poems fill these lovers with the same detail and dissonance of the collection's other poems. In "Thirteen," the speaker laments both Thirteen's and their own ability to communicate through "A twin sheet suspended between us," so that again the quotidian intrudes—here between two people, rendering their love not mystical and cosmic but inchoate even in the face of something as innocuous as linen. Blythe furthers this exploration in "Change," a poem that takes the myth of the Minotaur of Crete and transforms it into an earthly sexual, sensitive lament: "My black half-ton / My wrongly hung," a section of the poem begins, "My sweet familiar / two-in-one." In many ways, this depiction of the Minotaur represents the pith of Blythe's work: humorous, sensual, and forever a hybrid, doubled self.

Holbrook's *Throaty Wipes* contains a playfulness that *Twoism* lacks, though not at the expense of depth. Where Blythe's "Change" revisits tradition by retelling the story of the Minotaur, much of Holbrook's poetry directly or indirectly takes up modernism's linguistic play—in particular Gertrude Stein and, explicitly in "You Didn't Miss Much," one of William Carlos Williams' most famous poems, "This Is Just to Say." In the poem, Holbrook presents a photocopy of a stanza of Williams' poem, but has scratched out choice words so that it appears on the page as:

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

With ideas such as this, Holbrook manages to speak back irreverently—but not disparagingly or pretentiously—to poetic traditions,

reconfiguring them rather than disposing of or merely going against them. Thus, while this playful bent of her work may at times risk becoming gimmicky and hollowed out, Holbrook manages to nuance and complicate the traditions she works with. In "You Didn't Miss Much," Holbrook does not merely talk back at Williams, but reconstructs a wry, sexually dissatisfied speaker; despite the crossing out, her reconstitution of the poem fills it out rather than strips it down. This interest in linguistic reconfiguration continues in "My Fellow Contronym," which works with homonyms of opposite meanings, containing lines such as "I devoured the pitted / plums. You prefer / the pitted kind" and "I tabled my / apology. You / tabled your apology." The result is both witty and touching, affecting a black humour about the distance between ourselves and the people we love that is nonetheless kind and understanding. Holbrook's experiment with the series "What is Poetry," "What is Prose," "What Poetry Isn't," in which the lines of each poem are composed of anagrams of their respective titles, is somewhat less successful, for although some of the resulting lines—"throaty wipes / or what I types"—are charming, many begin to feel pat. Nonetheless, *Throaty Wipes* is filled with many more experiments that, instead of lapsing into self-indulgence, explore how language can reconfigure our experiences and poetic traditions alike.

*All the Gold Hurts My Mouth* works to reclaim female subjectivity and reconfigure a harmful male gaze that objectifies and sexualizes women's selfhoods. Leyton's collection is almost obsessive about this gaze, and yokes the cultural need for women to be seen and admired with the paranoia of surveillance. The poems acknowledge the potential as well as the danger of social media, and even though Leyton's speakers admit that platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are extensions of the male gaze, they also attempt to assert their selfhoods

through these media. In “Photograph,” the power of this gaze seems to control and sexualize the speaker fully: “You tell me to look into the lens / which I think of as your mouth,” she explains, continuing, “as you brush the hair from my face / tell me *part your lips, / part your knees*.” In this poem, the act of looking through a lens is an act of sexual domination. Yet Leyton’s speakers are not passive in this oppression; they gaze back. “I Am Riding Toward an Apocalypse and I Think It’s Mine” opens with “Watch me on my bike. / On Facebook. / On Instagram,” giving agency to the woman-as-spectacle, and the poem teeters between empowering the poster and empowering the gazer.

By the time the collection reaches “Beaut,” a later entry, the speaker is both aware of her sexuality and the vulnerability of her control over her own sexuality. She is aware of the razor-thin line between selfhood and spectacle—yet she manages to walk it. The poem opens with the speaker complaining that her lover does not want to look at her, and she wonders at “how pathetic I am / to hope for and shine in it / should I want it.” Yet, she continues, “I rarely do.” Leyton negotiates the desire to be seen and the desire to simply *be* without disempowering her speaker or disavowing the dangers of spectacle. The speaker affirms this at the end of the poem, arguing that “beauty should mostly be / someone making that spectacle inside of you,” drawing both beauty and spectacle back to her own selfhood.

Of the three collections, *All the Gold Hurts My Mouth* is both the most narrowly focused and the most nuanced, taking up different positions, dangers, and opportunities for female selfhood all while acknowledging the oppression of the male gaze. Nonetheless, all three collections use poetry beautifully in order to imagine various reconfigurations, not all ideal, but not any less poignant for their realism.

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## Time and Place

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**Alan Bradley**

*As Chimney Sweepers Come to Dust.*

Doubleday \$29.95

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**Fraser Nixon**

*Straight to the Head.* Arsenal Pulp \$17.95

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**Caroline Pignat**

*Shooter.* Penguin Canada \$22.99

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Reviewed by Beverley Haun

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Setting and time dominate as shaping factors in these three mysteries: Rosedale, Toronto, in the autumn of 1951; Vancouver at the end of the summer of 1983; and a boys’s washroom in a contemporary Ottawa high school for one hour during a lockdown.

*Straight to the Head* is a gritty noir. It is also a masterful postmodern romp. We experience the gritty noir city by night and we bump into Pierre Berton by day. In Eaton’s department store we hear this announcement: “Attention shoppers. Would the owner of an eight-year-old boy, answering to the name of Michael Bubl , please claim him at the service desk of the toy department? Thank you.” The penultimate scene of the novel is set in a lush restaurant at Expo 86 populated with a who’s who of Canadian power brokers political, cultural, and industrial. Pierre Trudeau sits with Jimmy Pattison; Arthur Erickson regales Bing Thom; the Friendly Giant and Mr. Dressup laugh; Dr. Foth and John Turner drink triple scotches on the rocks.

In *Straight to the Head*, place is evoked and its vision shaped through the eyes of a visiting eastern-European American and two Vancouverites—a young Hong Kong Chinese Canadian and an Anglo-Canadian. It is a literary novel evocatively conjuring Vancouver as it positions itself to host Expo 86. At the same time, it is a homage to hard-boiled and urban noir mystery genres. As in a hard-boiled detective mystery, there is a first-person narrator who has been hired to solve a crime. But he is not a detective.

Rather, he is a jaded, weary fixer, “the hunter,” who describes Vancouver to us as he enters by train from the United States. Where he sees American West Coast cities as fully formed, he sees Vancouver as sleepy and about to awaken. The hunter is not the only narrator. He shares the task with two other characters conjured from the urban noir tradition. Dorothy Kwan is the classic noir victim. She narrates the opening of the novel and we learn she is a young woman, an only child recently orphaned, depressed, alone in her parents’ home, shafted by her tenant who has skipped out without paying the rent. But of course things are not as they seem. The third narrator, Ted Windsor, begins as both a suspect and a victim. He is recently returned without funds from a year in Japan. To survive, he now works as the night clerk behind the desk of a sleazy downtown hotel/rooming house. But his clothing reveals another kind of life. The chapters of the book alternate among these three narrators. At times, two or all three are in the same chapter together, but we are always offered only one viewpoint.

Organized crime has broken down along the industrial waterfront of Vancouver. Money and drugs have gone missing from the corrupt local police who were overseeing this branch of underground commerce. Where and how to retrieve the drugs and money is the task of the hunter. What follows is a dance of characters moving from victim to perpetrator and back to victim in a series of episodes. The power dynamics shift and reshift as greed and character flaws have their inevitable effect. Throughout, we experience Vancouver on foot, by car, and by boat, and in homes and department stores, restaurants, hotels, and bars.

As *Chimney Sweepers Come to Dust*, by Alan Bradley, is the seventh in a series. Flavia de Luce novels are young-adult mysteries by virtue of their protagonist as well as their family-friendly content, but they are marketed to adult audiences and

have an appeal to those who have lived through the era they depict or those who are interested in period-piece mysteries. They do, however, need to be read in order as a series and not as standalones. Background information about members of Flavia’s family and their occupations has obviously built over the seven volumes and gaps in background knowledge leave the reader in the dark on several matters.

Flavia solved her first murder as an eleven-year-old living in 1950 in an English manor house. This novel is set in 1951 and she is in Toronto at Miss Bodycote’s Female Academy on a cul-de-sac just off the Danforth. In the required Gothic garb for a manor-house mystery, Flavia arrives at night and Bodycote’s is described as a couple of acres of stony darkness that had once been a convent. The Gothic atmosphere is maintained by having a strict no-electricity-at-night rule—candles only. And as so often happens, no sooner has Flavia gone to bed in her new school than a desiccated corpse, wrapped in a Union Jack, falls out of her chimney.

As to the solution of the mystery at hand—or lying wrapped on the carpet, as it were—Flavia’s extensive knowledge of chemistry comes to the rescue and aids in the resolution. Our own knowledge of science as twenty-first-century readers also comes into play and we can appreciate the dark humour in having Flavia hope that a hot water pipe she is about to crawl over is wrapped in asbestos to contain the heat and save her from being burned. It is a pleasure to have such an erudite protagonist, which made it all the more glaring to have her refer to the primitive human brain as being designed to dodge dinosaurs. Shame on you Flavia; you know better.

*Shooter*, by Caroline Pignat, is very tightly written, masterfully shaped, and narrated for maximum tension. The novel is a “locked-room mystery.” Usually in this genre the murder victim is found in a locked room and the story is spent on

efforts to solve the crime. In *Shooter*, the mystery actually occurs in real time outside the room with those trapped inside trying to figure out what is happening in the rest of the school and what, if anything, they can do to solve the crisis. The entire novel takes place in one hour. The only access to the exterior events is texting on one phone—and that phone dies partway through.

The characters, two girls and three boys, are locked in a boys' washroom on the third floor of a high school in Ottawa. The school is in lockdown, which we soon learn is not a drill. As in *Straight to the Head*, each chapter is narrated in the first person—in this case, by one of the characters locked in the room. The chapter titles are the name of the character speaking in that chapter. Digital clock faces at the end of chapters cue the reader to the progression of time. One character has autism, one has symptoms of Asperger's syndrome, one self-defines as a loser, one sublimates her own desires to the needs of her family, and one seems to have it all. As the hour progresses, the intensity of the situation brings out the worst and then the best in these teens. Pignat uses a very small space and very limited time to great effect.

Nixon and Bradley evoke a strong sense of place in their period mysteries. That's part of the fun. In Pignat's novel, place is a critical factor in the drama itself. Her novel is wonderfully accessible for younger readers. Nixon's is a delightful portrait of a nightmare. And Bradley's falls poignantly somewhere in between.




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## Memory/Loss

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**Carla Braidek**

*A Map in My Blood*. Thistledown \$17.95

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**Ulrikka S. Gernes; Patrick Friesen and Per Brask, trans.**

*Frayed Opus for Strings & Wind Instruments*.  
Brick \$20.00

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**Mary Maxwell**

*Wind Leaves Absence*. Thistledown \$17.95

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Reviewed by Emily Bednarz

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The poetry in Carla Braidek's 2016 collection, *A Map in My Blood*, showcases Braidek's ability to connect the seemingly innocuous (and yet deeply profound) moments of everyday life to the broader patterns of time, nature, and ancestry. In the opening piece of the collection, moments such as children playing in a sandbox, or the speaker visiting different friends and cities, are aligned with the larger-scale passing of time: "castles dissolve in the slow / rains of summer," while "Trish and I wove between children / and cars on our way to the park." Similarly, in "A Matter of Waiting," the scene of the speaker setting the table with her son mirrors the movements of the natural world, as "it's all a matter of waiting / while the tree grows roots then branches." The indiscernible fabric of time, the interconnectedness of the natural world, and the lingering presence of ancestral spirits (which come to form "a map in my blood") are also reflected in the objects that surround the speaker, which carry the weight of memory: the "glass mouths" of milk and beer bottles near an abandoned '65 Ford "take the wind / to form words" of "all our lives / being sung." Each poem in *A Map in My Blood* evokes a sense of "peak experience"—where the metaphysical, even mystical, can be found in the mundane—offering a glimpse into the mind of an attuned and highly skilled poet.

Translated by Canadian collaborators Patrick Friesen and Per Brask, *Frayed Opus for Strings & Wind Instruments* is a provoking

and densely emotive collection by Danish poet Ulrikka S. Gernes. Gernes' poetry is inflected with the sounds and images of the city, creating a "frayed opus" that reflects the speaker's longing, desires, feelings of alienation, and need for human connection and intimacy. For example, as the speaker bicycles through rush hour in Copenhagen, she observes in the sky "a tear in the blue / and there you are and there's my daughter, the strings, the wind instruments." She concludes by asking "have I loved, have I loved, have I loved enough." Many other poems in the collection similarly connect the sounds, sights, and artifacts of the city ("the sirens howl, columns of dust and oblivion") in order to interrogate the nature of time and memory, and the capacity for human connection in a seemingly alienating urban environment. The collection asks: how can we connect with, comprehend, or sympathize with the consciousness of an/other without appropriating their experiences? In other words, how can we ethically practice compassion? Gernes and her translators convey these complicated questions as the speaker criticizes her own "desire to fill a void, to fit / my body into the shape of someone else's solitude." Through nomadic wanderings across the lines of place and memory, Gernes' collection portrays a complex, flawed, grieving, and passionate subject, managing to capture uncomfortably familiar feelings while wrenching open new and innovative avenues of poetic perspective and expression.

Mary Maxwell's *Wind Leaves Absence* charts the poet's autobiographic experiences of loss, using poetics as a means of mapping the limitations of language when it comes to the incomprehensible nature of grief. The collection is divided into three sections (Father, Brothers, and Others), but what unites the poetry is a repeated focus on language: the use, loss, and failure of words. The speaker's father is diagnosed with dementia, and his illness slowly robs him of his ability

to use and understand language. While the pen was "once an extension of his hand," he eventually "has no words," losing his ability to speak entirely. Similarly, the speaker's words are described as "inadequate"; paradoxically, however, the speaker uses words to process and honour the lives she has lost. There is a tragic beauty in the way the speaker dissects her father's increasing dementia: she attempts to find hope, lightness, or ability within him as his mind and body slip away, but these efforts are often quickly contradicted with the grim reality of his advancing condition. While she indicates that his brain is "a house, anywhere / its windows / wide open," a few pieces later, he has "moved down the corridor of darkness . . . behind closed doors / windows that don't open." It is a privilege to share such deeply intimate subject matter with the poet, and though the collection repeatedly emphasizes the inability for words to capture grief, one cannot help but feel a sense of cathartic release upon finishing this collection.

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## Meditations on Mercy

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**Claudia Casper**

*The Mercy Journals*. Arsenal Pulp \$17.95

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Reviewed by Emma Morgan-Thorp

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Claudia Casper's *The Mercy Journals* is many things: a musing on a post-apocalyptic future, one man's story of grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an archetypal journey into the Canadian wilderness, a family drama, a love story. At its core, Casper's novel meditates on the conditions in which human beings will act mercifully, and on what is left when mercy is not enough.

Set in 2047 in the wake of World War III, *The Mercy Journals* is the story of Allan Quincy, a veteran suffering from PTSD in what was once Seattle. The author's decision to explore a post-apocalyptic world through the eyes of a white male American ex-soldier

yields unexpected rewards. The sense of Quincy as a merciful individual is muddled by his identificatory privilege, and raises the question: what position must one be in to bestow mercy? The novel is divided into two parts: Journal One, in which the reader learns about Quincy and the state of the world in 2047, and follows his relationship with a woman named Ruby; and Journal Two, in which Quincy, with his brother Leo and nephew Griffin, sets off on a journey to the east coast of Vancouver Island in search of his sons and the family cabin.

Ruby is a catalyst for Quincy—a mysterious and alluring woman by whom he is convinced to delve into a past from which he had divorced himself, and to search for an estranged family. The climax of Journal One comes with Quincy's confession to Ruby of the cause of his PTSD (also the source of his nickname, Mercy). His account of the atrocities committed by American forces at the Mexico-US border during World War III is deeply horrifying, and—more disturbing yet—feels all the more plausible in the wake of the 2016 American presidential election. For an alternative perspective on how the future might play out along that border, one might read this novel alongside Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*; both offer damning accounts of border politics and the road down which contemporary views of nation and citizenship might lead.

Journal Two sees three men set off on a quintessentially Canadian journey into the wilderness—here, a wilderness impoverished by extinctions. Due to the diminished, recovering nature of Casper's post-apocalyptic world and its location in the not-too-distant future, this is not a work of science fiction. Despite being futurist in scope, *The Mercy Journals* is not caught up in the excitement and fear surrounding possible technological advancements, but rather dwells in the very plausible consequences of our lives as we are currently living them. Casper's

post-apocalyptic North America has begun to settle into a kind of rhythm. The collapse of the nation-state and the dangerous condition of climate change have brought about strict global imperatives, including a cap of one child per family and a total halt to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

*The Mercy Journals* takes its place alongside Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* in the growing tradition of Canadian literature which wonders what will bring on our apocalypse, and what we will do when it comes. Setting the novel in 2047 draws attention to the plausibility of this kind of apocalyptic near-future for Canadians.

Casper, a Vancouver resident, clearly takes the threat of climate change seriously; her fears are reflected in the novel, which reads as an admonishment to Canadian citizens to heed climate warnings and change our lifestyles while it's still possible. Given the novel's setting on the West Coast and its emphasis on the dire ramifications of climate change, current resource extraction projects planned for the coast (the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline and the liquefied natural gas station at Lelu Island, for example) inevitably come to mind. Casper's novel thus acts as a powerful environmentalist manifesto and call to action.

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## Energy Fabulations

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**Stephen Collis**

*Once in Blockadia*. Talonbooks \$18.95

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Reviewed by William V. Lombardi

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Stephen Collis' poetry ruminates on place, activism, and the complex and conflicted layering of planetary interconnection. At the heart of *Once in Blockadia* are concepts that expose the simultaneous particularity and universality of any given place. Collis is mindful of the entwined nature of historical events and our emotional attachments to the places that we share or defend. In many

respects, Collis' work directs us toward the fluid status and meaning of locality, formerly the unquestioned site of environmental resistance, now one of the central conceptual battles of the Anthropocene. As such, *Once in Blockadia* contends with environmentalism's problematic roots in the nostalgia of the romantic tradition; it exposes nature writing's often elided, difficult relationship to settler colonialism; and it interrogates the paradoxically useful and obsolete jeremiad.

*Once in Blockadia* is a unified project composed of five sections of poetry, with sketches and photos interspersed throughout, documenting the everyday radicalization of communities whose recent acts of socio-environmental defiance have received varying degrees of exposure in the popular press. The first section, "Subversal," contains longer poems that consider problems of materiality, territory, and solidarity. The second section is a stand-alone poem, "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands," which emphasizes the theme of walking as healing that Collis has threaded throughout the book. Here, especially, Collis reflects on the bodily nature of being and responsibility. Section three is a challenging experimental piece composed of poems developed from the impossibly funny and misrepresented language of a mechanically transcribed radio interview with Collis. In "The Port Transcript," Collis reproduces the transmission verbatim, using the phrasing of its accidentally odd and baffling translation for the titles of the poems which follow. Section four, "Home at Gasmere," the story of a pilgrimage of sorts, feels the most personal. It reflects on working landscapes while contending with the spirit and consequences of William Wordsworth's poems in Collis' life. The final section of the book, "One Against Another," looks forward and outward. It imagines communities formed of friction and intimacy by returning to that keyword of science and social science, *struggle*. Here, Collis imagines the very ordinariness of the

connection between struggle and love, and the unavoidable vulnerability each engenders.

*Once in Blockadia* is a rich expression of the enduring cultural and biological connectivity currently being reclaimed through networks of care. It explores the concept of stored political energy shadowing the untapped energy of fossil fuels that, as they are developed, bring about the demise of human culture and promote global catastrophe. In this regard, among his varied lines, repeated sounds, and critical romanticism, Collis reminds his reader that the decolonial is ecological, and the ecological is decolonial. *Once in Blockadia* is a valuable book for allies, poets, and scholars because it clearly announces an aesthetics of petromodernity. Collis' work represents a nascent ecopoetics of place for the twenty-first century. I was immediately touched by it; my first impulse was to recommend it to close friends and to colleagues invested in the troublesome and shifting language of emplacement.

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## Irrepressible

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**Dennis Cooley**

*The Home Place: Essays on Robert Kroetsch's Poetry.* U of Alberta P \$49.95

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Reviewed by Laurie Ricou

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Exuberantly, Dennis Cooley marvels at the "exuberant outpouring" of Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*: "In a flurry of hope and protest [Kroetsch] speculates, irrepressibly, brilliantly, on what might be done, rejoices in the force of what is near, or happening, and what is yet to come. How do you . . . ? he asks again and again." Cooley celebrates Kroetsch's "discover[ing]" for its "profusion." Profusion. Outpouring. Terms that might also describe Cooley's critical writing—and his poetry. Or mixing with his challenging poetry, Kroetsch's poetic criticism. Again and again. There is no end to it.

So, it's not easy to summarize this critical approach. It rests somewhere in that

con-fusion of poetry and criticism. Cooley reads with a scrupulous, tactful, alert sense of his own vocabulary, of his subject's languaging. He muses for a full paragraph on the multiplicity of whispering in *Seed Catalogue*. He illuminates the poetry hiding in the bland census document quoted in *The Ledger*. He teases biography and psychology out of the lyric "Keyed In," twelve short lines of "unelaborate" diction. He shrewdly explicates "bullshitter" by *not finding* the word in dictionary or thesaurus. "This is criticism," Cooley enthuses about a Kroetsch essay (he devotes sixty and more pages to the essays), "with the tightness and force of poetry, Kroetsch's own kind of wisdom poetry, a fascination with words that skitter and spark and fit." Just such a collision of verbs—rhyming and alliterating and doubling as nouns—typifies the irrepressible flurry of Kroetsch writing to Cooley writing to Kroetsch.

Let me sober up for a moment and reflect that I am in the process of giving away my library. I just counted thirty books by and about Kroetsch into a box to give to David Eso, who recently completed an MA thesis on Kroetsch. But I still have twenty-five or more I can't bear to part with. I've written several essays on Kroetsch and a bunch of reviews. Bob was a good and dear friend. And still page after page I found Cooley riddling nuance and gap to surprise me with a meaning I'd never contemplated, a measured un-meaning. He embraces Kroetsch's "grammatical twiddling" with affectionate care. He patiently engages Kroetsch's lingo and his talky syntax. When he slides (rarely) close to highfalutin pretentiousness, he playfully mocks his own commentary.

And the irrepressible registers as "amplification" multiplied by "gusto." But then the profusion will also be inflected by withdrawal/shyness. *The Home Place* echoes the explicit back-and-forth syntax of *The Sad Phoenician*: that is, for every "and"—some

enthusiastic bulging list—there is a beguiling "but"—a reconsideration, a reticence, a moment of bemused self-criticism. So Cooley depends on questions as the core of his explications. The myriad interrogatives embed a way of understanding, even migoed a meaning, while hesitating: "Making meaning is easy enough," Kroetsch begins his poem "no ideas but in things," "but making the meaning mean is tough." "Always: 'how?'" Cooley notes just after quoting the full litany of absences in *Seed Catalogue*. "Not: 'why?' That question is not even asked. The real question is: 'how' do you do it?"

The poet-critic makes for good reading. His vocabulary provokes and amuses. A list of folk remedies in *Seed Catalogue* cluster in a "brassy collection"; Kroetsch's Phoenician is a "badly shaken clown." Cooley responds to George Bowering's describing Kroetsch as "the most readable critic" with spare appreciation: "Darn tootin." "Being over taken, taken over by words. Daring to be carried away."

Let this tribute imply *The Home Place* is all wordplay with poet playing poet, I want to recognize how adeptly, if obliquely and subtly, Cooley sets his subject in resonant contexts. In his sudden turns and ample footnotes, he is also writing valuable essays on the local ("alert to the potential in what he happens upon"), on Alberta as a home, and on writing West. Cooley keeps happening upon CanLit connections, and posing questions about the *hows* of a nation, its modes and voices. He tests analogies and influences: Williams' *Paterson*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Eliot's Prufrock, the Book of Ezekiel. Much of his method, again mirroring Kroetsch's, trusts in juxtaposition. Particularly so, perhaps, in his engaging the "high seriousness" of critical theory: he takes a germane quotation and sets it without transition next to a quotation from a poem, or a passage of explication, not arguing cause and effect or explanation but inviting speculation, or even a detour.



So for Bakhtin on masks, Ovid and Barthes on love, Marjorie Perloff on the ordinary world, and Kroetsch himself on William Gass on “and.” There is no end to it.

In the midst of much “rambunctiousness,” Cooley pauses to startle us, and maybe himself, with a realization: “Regrettably, the tenderness in Kroetsch’s writing has not received a lot of critical attention.” The observation makes explicit a muted but vital strain in a book whose title highlights the home that both lures and frustrates.

Somewhere, *The Home Place* wants to be a biography; Cooley, the long-time colleague and close friend of the writer, paying tribute, writing “in memory of.” Much of the criticism he cites comes from readers who would call themselves good friends (of Kroetsch, of Cooley, of both) and more. So the life story insists, if somewhat secretly, because Kroetsch kept writing his friends into his work, and was so ready to offer friendship almost immediately he met someone. We friends, thinking we are insiders, pause on the moments not just of tenderness, but of loneliness, of longing, of Kroetsch’s “[fleeing] to the edges of people.” “Chillingly” is a descriptor Cooley uses several times. We are surprised, puzzled, by the “anguish,” “desolation,” even “abjection,” and then we are moved by the “inexplicably moving.” So, as much as the book turns toward the unknowing, the instability of a postmodern language and outlook, we want to know more of the life than Dennis hints at in the early sections of his book. I am not sure I want a Kroetsch biography. But if I dream the one I might like to read I’d like it to be written with the playful irrepressibility of Dennis Cooley. I’d like to read a much fuller version of the paragraph in which he ventures to sum up the writer’s “personality,” the “presence”: there he pours out in an exuberant list more than thirty modifiers layered into a dozen snapshot moments. Such amplification fills every page. Reading *The Home Place*, we believe we know more

about writer and writing—and about the home place. Even if what we know is the “immense unknowing.”

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## The House Is on Fire

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**Karin Cope**

*What We’re Doing to Stay Afloat.*

Pottersfield \$19.95

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**Angeline Schellenberg**

*Tell Them It Was Mozart.* Brick \$20.00

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Reviewed by Ian Williams

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The title of Karin Cope’s collection, *What We’re Doing to Stay Afloat*, stirs survivalist impulses that continue into the poems of its first marked section: “The daily disaster”; “Of want and wit born,” where Hunger and Misery watch *Survivor*; “Pocket full of rusty nails”; “Things gone wrong”; “The house is on fire”; and, most precarious of all—“Real estate speculation.” Cope is tracing daily domestic disasters, to be sure, but shades these with a system of imagery that portends physical danger in the natural world. Edges, ice, and ice-edges figure menacingly. Without descending into cliché, she invokes familiar expressions of being on edge/on the edge/on thin ice.

Cope’s collection is divided into five sections of five to ten poems each. It proceeds cautiously at first (some early poems are so controlled they could be scanned metrically), then becomes bolder and more adventurous in the last half. Poems get bigger, lines longer, more charged. They accumulate life and give free rein to worry. William Carlos Williams famously asserts that

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

Cope accepts the challenge. She reports and predicts the internal weather of the Western middle class with reasonable accuracy, and she occasionally breaks headline news, as in

“The house is on fire,” where we observe her collection in miniature:

Why is poetry an emergency?  
Our hearts knock  
against a stubborn world. Inside,  
forever, the house is on fire.

Angeline Schellenberg would concur. How does one write about one’s children, knowing on one hand that they may have their feelings bruised by one’s honesty and on the other that strangers aren’t terribly interested in a stream of cute anecdotes? Schellenberg in her debut collection—a sturdy production printed on Brick’s characteristic toothy paper—opts for honesty over protecting herself from the moral judgment of mommy bloggers, thereby circuitously securing the reader’s respect and aegis.

Schellenberg courts the reader. The collection’s second poem, “X,” reads as a primer on the genetics of autism. “Posthumously Diagnosed” presents a hall of fame of the eccentricities of historical figures. Other poems address shame and shaming, the cyclical frustration of medication and early intervention services, the harrowing experience of feeling unloved by one’s child.

She agitates entrenched expectations of parent-child relations, that love in both directions is spontaneous, automatic, and natural (see Alice Miller’s work), by writing as one who refuses to lose the right to her feelings in her role as mother. In “Watching him sleep 2,” the speaker admits “that for just one second, / I loved her [the other child] better.”

Of course, there is love in these poems, particularly the endearing, tender-hearted ones that cast the son as a diminutive professor. Such love is rendered all the more credible because it is complicated by the speaker’s desires for and idealizations of the ones she loves.

The record of love is also a record of disappointments.

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## Marking Time

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**Myrl Coulter**

*A Year of Days*. U of Alberta P \$24.95

**Shelley A. Leedahl**

*I Wasn’t Always Like This*. Signature \$18.95

**Kenneth Sherman**

*Wait Time: A Memoir of Cancer*.

Wilfrid Laurier UP \$22.99

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Reviewed by Dorothy F. Lane

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These three books fall into the category of life writing and remarkably share a focus on time experienced and felt through the lives of the authors: Kenneth Sherman’s moving and poetic, yet gritty *Wait Time* takes the reader through the writer’s experience of cancer from diagnosis through treatment; Myrl Coulter’s *A Year of Days* tracks occasions and holidays as they recur through the years, but intriguingly draws the focus away from conventional celebrations to the subtler and yet more significant elements of the seasons; Shelley A. Leedahl’s *I Wasn’t Always Like This* shares snapshots of the writer’s life through seemingly disconnected and non-sequential journeys and choices while drawing attention to the absurdity of the statement in the title. All three books are magnificently evocative, drawing us into regional and national commonalities, whether frustrations of the health-care system, urban and rural lives, or associations with nature across the country.

*Wait Time* is perhaps the most explicitly theoretical and dense—though the shortest—of these three life studies. Sherman, a published poet and scholar, draws on his familiarity with Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), Siddhartha Mukherjee’s *The Emperor of All Maladies* (2010), and many other reflections on the literature and language of disease; he revisits the writing of Frost, Keats, Yeats, and Woolf, and even passages of Shakespeare and the Hebrew Bible, as he self-consciously constructs his narrative. He skilfully weaves these more

distanced reflections with his own lived experience, teasing out, for example, the irony of his family doctor's comment—"I can feel your spleen . . . I shouldn't be able to feel your spleen"—which was followed by his decision to buy groceries after the appointment; he created a mental list of all the reasons why he couldn't possibly be ill. His sometimes-fragmented pieces of poetry punctuate the book as much as encounters with physicians, receptionists, family members, and his remarkably resilient life partner.

Moreover, for the reader, Sherman's frustrating and painful, yet surprisingly encouraging, negotiations of Canada's health-care system resonate with bitter truth; the "Kafkaesque hospital bureaucracy," an apathetic surgeon referred to only as "Dr. X," and the mysterious "Tumour Board" are balanced by the personal care of his family physician, personnel at Mayo, and his relatives. As Sherman has stated in an interview with Jennifer Hunter, physicians have difficulty stepping out of the perception of the human as a material body, so that "you can fix it or you can't" and death is often viewed as failure. He notes that "I never felt I was battling cancer as much as I felt I was battling the medical system"—with its special treatment reserved for the famous and connected. The redemptive element is *Wait Time's* focus on poetry and language: "[P]oetry is a kind of antithesis of cancer. Poetry is such a life-affirming activity." In the end, Sherman's book—with its mix of theoretical, distanced reflection, personal glimpses of his family, narrative of treatment and surgery in which he uses second-person pronouns, and the beauty of poetic language—is uplifting on so many levels.

Coulter's *A Year of Days* is similarly life-affirming, even while its occasion is the death of the author's mother after a lengthy illness. Her emphasis is on intensified attention to recurring yet distinct moments, from the counting of "Twenty-Eight Magnificent Mexican Sunsets" (winter vacations),

through "Pesky Natal Days" (birthdays), "Death by Dementia" (Canadian winter), and the equally quirky reflections on parental days, Easter (spring), and Thanksgiving (fall). The evocative "Lakes I Have Known" is a celebration of the senses and emotions associated with water through various regions; in effect, it is a celebration of Canada from an intensely personal and yet shared perspective on years, significant days, and experiences of significance. The days are predictable—Christmas is always coming—and yet the visceral nature of these experiences through the years is somehow more transient and more powerful.

It is Leedahl's perceptive and self-effacing sense of humour that resounds through *I Wasn't Always Like This*, a foray into the genre of life writing after what she describes in a blog as a "quiet but prolific career." Her experience of the Canadian writer's life reaches out to a larger literary community—"We try and we try. It's exhausting," she states. The book is itself a stitching of journeys across Canada and internationally and family relationships as they unravel and resolve in new patterns; the places—whether coastal (East or West) or prairie, small town, rural, or urban—establish a fascinating backdrop for her recollections, admissions, confessions, and yearnings. In one section focusing on her dabbling in online dating, she provides a quirky and endearing list of her self-identified characteristics. In another, she reflects on an exchange in Mexico, and here—as in most sections—her contemplations on personality, place, and experience are candid and engaging. The arrangement of sections sometimes seems arbitrary, so that this book, like Coulter's, can be picked up and set down without a loss of continuity; the teasing out of the expression "I wasn't always like this" brings the concepts of time and stability into question. More disjointed to the reader are the selections of fictional writing that mark various sections of the book. Sections such as "Plenty of Fish" and "San

Francisco: Photos Not Taken”—ingenious experimentations with narrative and intertextuality—show Leedahl at her best.

All three of these books are brief, “quiet” (Leedahl’s word), and powerful examples of Canadian life writing; when savoured they provide wisdom, intellectual engagement, and waves of intangible spirit. They are compelling appeals to a shared and yet intensely personal humanity.

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## New Terms, Old Concerns

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**Amelia DeFalco**

*Imagining Care: Responsibility, Dependency, and Canadian Literature.* U of Toronto P \$55.00

**Paul Huebener**

*Timing Canada: The Shifting Politics of Time in Canadian Literary Culture.*

McGill-Queen’s UP \$37.95

Reviewed by David Eso

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Two recent studies address fundamental elements in the fraught construction of private identities within public lives. Amelia DeFalco’s *Imagining Care* (2016) and Paul Huebener’s *Timing Canada* (2015) fulfill the high expectations provoked by the immensity of their subjects. The texts also share ambitions of scope. DeFalco first interprets the history of international feminist (and other) ethical philosophies of care—which in some ways respond to an earlier patriarchal and professionalized moral ethics—before applying the framework she develops to a selection of memoir and fiction by Ian Brown, Michael Ignatieff, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, and David Chariandy. The author explicitly narrows her topic to what she calls “para-ordinary care”: non-professional (non-remunerated) medical care administered by friends or family, and less commonly by strangers, for individuals who cannot care for themselves due to neurological or physical ailments. By contrast, Huebener’s book considers minute time and deep time, linear time and concentric time, public or objective

time, and event or experienced time. *Timing Canada* makes a “critical time studies” argument that such multi-temporalities can counteract the hegemonic legacy of Western linearity, the monetization of time, and the myth of progress. Its author cites a wide range of literary texts, government policies, and technological innovations. Each of the books under review, then, performs a critical resistance, arguing against normative and coercive notions of care and time that dominate the national imaginary. Some readers may, however, find the texts’ merits unequally distributed.

Huebener readily justifies his project, in that time is the most common noun in the English language and “the politics of time saturate all human affairs.” Even so, Canadian critics of the millennial period have paid avid attention to rhetorical or actual control over spatial environments—through lenses provided by ecocriticism, geohumanities, psychogeography, and literatures of place—while temporality, “that other, less tangible coordinate of location,” goes largely unexamined as an instrument of domination for reasons of ubiquity rather than obscurity. *Timing Canada* offers a substantial correction to that lacuna. Against manifold categories of time, the author reads relevant canonical works—Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker*, Emily Carr’s *Klee Wyck*, and Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*—as well as more idiosyncratic choices: Jacques Cartier’s 1534 journals or Robert Munsch’s *Love You Forever*. Further texts investigated by Huebener include fiction by Shani Mootoo and drama by Marie Clements and Morris Panych.

DeFalco’s volume contributes to recent conversations about representations and interpretations of illness, disability, and interrelationality. Primarily through a selection of “life writing” exemplars, each about caring for a disabled “other,” *Imagining Care* examines the unstable ethical terrain of autobiographies that also encompass

biography about subjects who may not have consented, and perhaps cannot consent, to such publications. The most striking analysis in the book, to my reading, centres on Brown's *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son*. Perhaps because Brown himself addresses his own anxieties over the memoiristic impulse, in that the autobiographical "subject" is symbolically subordinate to the biographical "object" in the book's title, DeFalco can neatly link Brown's contentious position to philosophical principles of care. When the critic turns to Ignatieff's *Scar Tissue*, however, she loses sight of some insights gained in the earlier discussion of Brown. DeFalco relegates to the position of critical object the writer of fiction under her (albeit professionalized) care. *Imagining Care*'s third chapter, "Caring for Relative Others," paints an unflattering personal portrait of Ignatieff based on a description of his tenuous relationship to the prolonged death of a relative, supposedly the "source" of his fiction. While DeFalco's criticisms may prove legitimate, a reader lacks context for these biographical claims as well as a justification for evaluating the biographical alongside the fictive. This evident misstep does not significantly impair a book more carefully composed than this particular detail would indicate. And the contentious ethics of fictive/literal representations (sometimes exploitations) do not pervade the book's argument.

DeFalco covers this and similar issues to undo common assumptions about the totalizing meanings attached to widely accepted notions of health and care—alongside the related concepts of "affection, devotion, responsibility, even obligation." The critic hits upon a fundamental topic, if one more subtle of conception than "time," that necessitates inquiries such as "what is one to do with, or about, another person's suffering?"

DeFalco's project sets out to challenge the idea of Canada as a caring nation. The ideals of universal health care and a supposedly

less genocidal treatment of Indigenous populations north of the American border do not by themselves, she argues, counter the gendered and racialized inequities of the giving and receiving of care. Her investigation of the subject situates the universal necessity for care as being at odds with the Western and patriarchal cultural values of autonomy and independence. DeFalco enacts a feminist critique that connects ethical philosophies of care to literary representations of caregiving.

Huebener, for his part, conducts a systematic analysis of temporal power and possibility. The author follows Daniel Coleman's idea that imperial time—i.e., linear or isochronic time—dominates three contesting temporalities in Canada (allowing for inevitable subcategories, omissions, and contradictions): nation-based postcolonial time, diasporic displacement time, and Indigenous concentric time. As a solution to the present-day and historically determined impasse between these contested temporalities, Huebener develops the notion of "provisional time," which he introduces through a reading of Thomas King's comical chorus of divine or omniscient figures in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Continually interrupting the novel's supposed progress, Coyote asks "[h]ow many more times do we have to do this?" The narrator responds: "Until we get it right." Here, the critic identifies a particular form of event time with no specifications for its possible—that is, provisional—completion, or even any possibility for milestones en route. The idea of provisional time takes the author 220 pages to develop, and the concept sees him through to the book's conclusion. Although Huebener does not deploy the term with regularity, the concept underwrites the argument's denouement:

Everyday temporal discourse that is willing to disassemble and repurpose itself can help not only to resist temporal discrimination, but also to contextualize Canada's present-day existence within

long-standing issues of contested indigeneity, ownership, and priority. Incorporating silenced temporalities into normal discourse allows the everyday language that has been complicit in temporal hegemony to transform itself, embracing a consciousness of its own embattled histories.

This passage demonstrates the tone and quality of Huebener's work. The major flaw of *Timing Canada* is in its subtitle, for "literary culture" does not adequately describe the broad range of historical, philosophical, political, artistic, technological, and advertising sources that inform Huebener's rich analysis, one that threatens to endure.

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## In Still Water

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**Barry Dempster**

*Disturbing the Buddha*. Brick \$20.00

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**Monty Reid**

*Meditatio Placentae*. Brick \$20.00

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**Elizabeth Ross**

*Kingdom*. Palimpsest \$18.95

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Reviewed by Emily Wall

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The new books of poetry by Elizabeth Ross, Barry Dempster, and Monty Reid are refreshingly good. The three poets each have a respect for language and an eye for vivid images. They are keenly aware of the readers they are talking to and are clearly hoping to give us moments of real attention and quiet. Reading their poems feels like an invitation to pause for a while, to meditate, to shed our clothes and slip into the cool water.

To read Ross's *Kingdom* is to swim through pure pleasure. She is a master of walking the line between pure lyric and the core of narrative. Many of her poems exist in that space where sharp images meet snippets of story. One of her real strengths is in never trying to tell us anything. She shows us instead, and in the spaces between images we find story and meaning. "Subdivision" is one of

the strongest poems. "After you drowned, / my mother made me take / swimming lessons" is juxtaposed with "You saw the glass / edge of the surface. Sunlight / dropped a splintered ladder down." It's the estuary of images, all rushing in, that creates fertile emotional ground. The last section of the book, "Kingdom," takes us on a wave of adrenaline. We have a long rush of dark images and hard moments: bowling alley violence, a dead elephant, a burned turkey. And then we rush into the poem "Kingdom," which brings the book to its emotional climax in a moment of quiet beauty: "Where the sky is a path firs brush clean." In this collection, Ross gets it exactly right.

Dempster's poems take us swimming in a warm lake on a warm day. He has a gift for pulling up the little fish of language. The images we ignore—shredded Kleenex, cheap beer, a waxed bikini line—he makes us notice. Some of his best poems touch on the idea of God—they are a sweet blend of irreverence and belief. Like Mary Oliver, Dempster strives to make the divine present: "God was installing Eden / and slipped." His language is precise and fresh: "so hungry I could eat my weight in wings." Perhaps the strongest poem in the collection is the first, "A Circle of White Deck Chairs." The play of imagination, rich and deep, begins to help us think about the human condition. It opens the book on an exciting note, but the rest of the collection doesn't quite live up to its promise—we wish for a little more depth, more imaginative inquiry. While the poems have moments of real beauty, at times we also have the sense that there's nothing deeper beneath us. We miss the pull of tension and darkness, and the desire to touch something profound.

Reading Reid's poems is a joyful experience. He reminds us of Billy Collins or the playful poems of Dean Young. His humour and whimsical nature are apparent in each of the book's nine poems, which are divided into short sections. The use of white space

brings a particular attention and quiet into the collection, framing each moment—the poems are little islands in the sea of quiet around them. Reid’s poems feel Zen-like in that regard, except that rather than exploring the natural world or focusing on deep spirituality, they are whimsical and focus on ordinary things—tweezers, drywall, or a navel:

Every night a deep spring  
fills the small pool of my navel.  
In the soft hours all the thirsty animals  
come down to drink

Reid has two very fine moments when he concentrates on everyday objects—a cork and a shirt. In “Household Goods: Cork” he writes that the object is “punctured / at one end / and stained at the other . . . and now there is nowhere / to go back to.” That moment, coming out of levity and ordinariness, creates an emotional shock for the reader. In a poem about a woman hanging her partner’s shirts on the line, Reid writes:

Late in the afternoon she gathered them in,  
pressing them to her face,  
taking in that crisp but unmistakable  
smell  
of no one

Again, there’s a shock of the colder, deeper water we long for. It’s stunning.

All three books are strong collections: meditative, focused, masterful in their use of image and syntax. The poems invite us to wade in, lean back, and feel the wash of language around us. They give us still moments in which to think about placentas, elephants, Barbie dolls, and the beautiful moles of a lover. To open the books is to give yourself the gift of attention, to float in the still water of the poems.



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## The Centre and Margins

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**Joanne Epp**

*Eigenheim*. Turnstone \$17.00

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**Rahat Kurd**

*Cosmophilia*. Talonbooks \$16.95

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Reviewed by Connie T. Braun

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In these collections, two Canadian women address universal themes in distinctive voices. Joanne Epp, the daughter of Mennonites—a Protestant people of pacifism and migration—presents a sense of rootedness with *Eigenheim*. Rahat Kurd, with an inheritance of Kashmiri culture, the Koran, and Sufi poetry, portrays cosmopolitan restlessness in *Cosmophilia*. Each poet reflects on all that precedes us: people, tradition, language, place—tensile bonds, delicate as silk filaments, yet steely, spanning temporal and geographical distance. Reflecting on leaving and returning, on loss and endurance, each of these collections is a first for its writer.

“Eigenheim” is a German word meaning “one’s own home” and connoting centredness, the particular, an identity. But lyrically intertwined with the intimacy of Canadian rural small-town life are deep longings. In some of the poems, Epp inserts lines from Scripture and hymns from childhood, but always she invites the reader to see the familiar in new ways. In “How to Remember,” the speaker suggests that memory is not aroused by a photograph, but perhaps by objects made by another’s hands. A wooden rocking horse carved by a great-grandfather is the motif of remembrance. First the rocking horse is fixed in his memory, and when memory is absent, the material object stands in, imbued with a sense of his continued temporality. Throughout her collection, Epp evokes the ephemeral quality of loss, an enduring absence ever present.

Kurd also takes up this theme in *Cosmophilia*, the title word meaning the love of ornament, like the “circles and half circles, in tight

arabesques or loose spirals” of a vintage shawl, exquisitely embroidered long ago by the poem’s speaker. She imagines that “[a]cross half a century / our fingers will touch.” The maker and the wearer of the shawl are connected, just as its material threads also represent the poet’s own work and future reader. Moreover, the poet’s work, like the embroiderer’s, is

demanding everything;  
all her love and concentrations;  
reminding her, warning her  
about the cost of resplendence,  
the hard solitude of the maker.

Kurd’s multilingualism, her reverence for “poems in Urdu” that her grandmother recited, add texture and sheen to her use of language in poems of modern urban Canadian life.

Narrative poems and their subjects are central in each work—Catherine, Elizabeth, and Dora in *Eigenheim*, and Fahmida Begam in the long poem “Return” and other poems in *Cosmophilia*. Kurd makes more stylistic innovations with language and form, such as experimenting with the ghazal. In “Blue Glass Tulips,” the tulips arranged in a vase serve as the poem’s addressor: “when you still believed / an orderly God / would arrange to perfection all the affairs of your heart.” In free verse and prose poems, Epp’s syntax reflects her tone, mood, and well-wrought imagery. The “Catherine” poems, a series of ten about “a girl, woman perceptive to what light makes invisible,” traverse the dreamlike territory of the wandering mind. Both poets surprise with the unexpected, while at the same time proffering what we recognize within our own experience.

The two poets’ works, taken together, beg comparison with the award-winning Canadian poet Anne Michaels and her outstanding first collection, *The Weight of Oranges*. Kurd, like Michaels, employs the long poem in the exploration of history and

heritage, with place names and dates (Wagah Border, 1948) as signposts to guide the reader between two worlds and into the spaces between the lines: “What wouldn’t I risk / for the Sindh of it / and the Hind of it.” Epp’s wisdom, tone of reverence, and composure of voice echo Michaels, especially in her section called “Listen,” with its introspections on silence, language, and music. In the poem of that title, Epp wonders: “How far can a whisper carry? / How soft must our voices be / to reach across the ocean.”

*Eigenheim* and *Cosmophilia* disentangle the intricacies of a woman’s youth and aging, of transgressing the boundaries of traditional roles and crossing geographical borders, “seeing,” Kurd writes, “no disruption in the skies / that these fences and gates / should divide the earth.” Paradox is inherent in these poems that come from the centre of home, where often one is, as Kurd describes, “a stranger to oneself.” The reader, too, will ask with Epp,

Is no one else tempted  
like this? And why  
is the landscape so flat  
unless to lure you outward  
where the road disappears.

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## What Has Been and What Is Yet to Come

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**James Fergusson and Francis Furtado, eds.**

*Beyond Afghanistan: An International Security Agenda for Canada.*

U of British Columbia P \$32.95

**Robert Teigrob**

*Living with War: Twentieth-Century Conflict in Canadian and American History and Memory.*

U of Toronto P \$37.95

Reviewed by Benjamin Hertwig

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In light of the US election in 2016 and the subsequent national and international uncertainty, questions about war-making, national memory, and foreign policy are



particularly pressing. In *Beyond Afghanistan: An International Security Agenda for Canada*, James Fergusson and Francis Furtado have collected a series of essays on Canadian foreign policy post-Afghanistan, while in *Living with War: Twentieth-Century Conflict in Canadian and American History and Memory*, Robert Teigrob casts a retrospective glance at twentieth-century Canadian and American war memory, nation-building, and armed conflict.

Teigrob's central thesis is novel: "Canadian society may be more militaristic than is generally recognized." He dissects the popular notion of Canada as a naive and peace-loving nation, suggesting that the US—with its reputation as a country addicted to war—has a far more vibrant history of debate and dissent concerning warfare than does Canada. Teigrob's writing is particularly lucid when he analyzes Canadian war memory through an intersectional lens:

Works on Canada's wars maintained their traditional connections to narrative history and biography, and resisted the kind of theorizing on race, culture, gender, and hegemony that led American analysts to new understandings—and often piercing critiques—of war's contribution to empire-building."

Teigrob highlights the "latent conservatism in Canadian war-related studies" and foregrounds the need for further intersectional discussion. As concerns the US, he provides highly relevant analysis about the shift from isolationism to interventionism and the foreign-policy implications for both stances. As Canadians and Americans look to the future, Teigrob reminds readers that the careful study of the past—of war and its causes—is not only useful, but necessary.

Fergusson and Furtado, both of whom provide essays in *Beyond Afghanistan*, bring together a number of highly nuanced perspectives on Canadian military policy post-Afghanistan. Their collection is laudable for its wide range of topics, including

Arctic sovereignty, nuclear abolition, and, presciently, the future of NATO. For example, Douglas Bland theorizes about the conditions that could bring about NATO's end: "What would end NATO is erosion of the idea of the alliance's purpose and its value among citizens living under the protection of the treaty today." David G. Haglund notes that "the only way that NATO could be fatally damaged would be for the United States itself to pull the plug," while Alexander Moens characterizes NATO as "the organizational cat with nine lives." One of the issues that *Beyond Afghanistan* highlights is the precarious political relationship between Canada and the US, an uncertain and ever-changing ecosystem where Canada once went to war in southern Afghanistan as a way to appease the US over Canada's refusal to participate in the war in Iraq. Moreover, the editors are certainly correct to assert that the "international security environment is changing." No one could have predicted how quickly the changes would occur.

Fergusson and Furtado's detailed collection will be highly useful as a stepping-off point on a myriad of post-Afghanistan issues—particularly for political scientists, historians, and policy makers. Teigrob's highly readable history of Canadian and American war history is challenging for specialists within the field as well as for literary theorists and general-interest readers. None of the writers in either collection could have anticipated the election of Donald Trump and the foreign-policy implications thereof. Accordingly, some of the predictions have proven limited while others have been shown to be particularly relevant. As Canada tries to navigate a path amidst rapidly shifting political alliances and international policies, Canadian citizens can contribute by remaining in conversation about past wars, current realities, and future probabilities. Both books provide the opportunity to do just that.

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## From Nowhere and Everywhere

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**Elee Kraljii Gardiner**

*Serpentine Loop*. Anvil \$18.00

**Soraya Peerbaye**

*Tell: Poems for a Girlhood*. Pedlar \$20.00

**Sue Sinclair**

*Heaven's Thieves*. Brick \$20.00

Reviewed by Andrea MacPherson

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In November 1997, Reena Virk was murdered in Saanich, BC. Eight people participated in the assault, and more watched the beating. Virk's body was later found drowned in the Gorge Waterway. This horrific tragedy is the inspiration for Soraya Peerbaye's new collection, *Tell: Poems for a Girlhood*. The poems within it detail the murder, and the subsequent trial, in a delicate manner; never does the material feel exploitive or gratuitous. Excerpts from the trials are woven into the poems, further strengthening the core narrative. In "Clean," Peerbaye allows testimony from the stepmother of one of Virk's killers to work as metaphor for the underlying themes of racism that pepper the collection:

The Gorge by Craigflower Bridge,  
full  
of seaweed and filth and mud,  
her daughter's skin  
clean, white.

Themed collections can often feel repetitive, the content taking over the poetry, but Peerbaye manages to overcome this challenge. Her poems are varied in terms of form and voice, moving gracefully through and beyond the true story. The final section of the collection, "The Landscape Without Her," explores the physical landscape in the aftermath of the murder, and in this the very absence of Virk is moving; she is no longer there, but still remains "the fish / beneath the surface." In such poems, Peerbaye accomplishes something that Virk, as a result of her tragic young death, was denied

the possibility of realizing: she firmly grounds Virk in the present. Peerbaye's collection serves both as poetry of witness and as a reminder of our collective responsibility to remember those who have been lost.

Elee Kraljii Gardiner's debut, *Serpentine Loop*, takes its starting point from skating. Rinks, lakes, icicles, and rivers populate these poems, offering a chilled tone throughout. In "Raising a Girl":

I prod the bank with a dull shovel,  
uncover kisses, exchanges of danger.

She makes a snowpanted discovery  
of a wagon rusted with salt crust.

Crisp icicles  
spot the lines.  
Spines  
drip.

Kraljii Gardiner uses symbols, skating texts, and other found material to further amplify the collection, immersing the reader in the world of skating. Many of the poems are experimental in nature, incorporating concrete poetry, repetition, and lists, which helps to distinguish them. However, there remains a sameness to some of the poems, as they are so closely tethered thematically; certain words are often used (skate, ice, tracks), and so it can feel as if the poems are covering the same literal and figurative terrain. Ultimately, the ice itself becomes a character in the poems, acting both as antagonist (when the poet falls through the ice) and as muse (the precise joy of skating). The strongest poems use the skating motif as a backdrop, and explore alternate themes of gender, tragedy, and our relationship to physical landscape. Here, Kraljii Gardiner's voice becomes clear, distinct.

*Heaven's Thieves* is Sue Sinclair's fifth collection of poetry, and it explores big questions and themes, such as grief, betrayal, and beauty. Sinclair navigates these topics with economy and precision, creating honed lyric poems: the content is dense, but the poems themselves remain airy. From "Belief":

The floorboards creak overhead,  
heavy with stars.  
The sound makes you think of the dead,  
as though they're closer than you knew

The collection is threaded with responses to other authors and works of literature, ranging from Rainer Maria Rilke to Gwendolyn MacEwan to Francis Bacon, creating richness. Sinclair further dialogues with literature in her erasure and found poems; her ability to successfully repurpose such varied works speaks to her considerable skills as a poet. There is much to be said for the author's ability to incorporate these influences while still creating inventive, vivid poems. Sinclair's PhD in philosophy, specifically her interest in beauty and ethics, reverberates throughout the poems. Her images are striking, her language startling. The intricacy found in Sinclair's work sometimes makes it necessary to reread poems to internalize the complete effect. The poems about Anna Pavlova and the red bees are particularly striking, and deserving of a second (and third) read.

In some poems, Sinclair tackles some fairly well-known and well-used topics—think ballerinas, philosophers, Notre Dame, religion—but her approach makes the poems feel fresh rather than predictable. From “Visited”:

There's a painting of Joan of Arc in which  
golden  
people float in the trees behind her. She  
looks  
as though she sees them.

She is God's summer home, her eyes a  
bay on which he floats  
for a time of an afternoon.

Holy-crazy is the look in her eyes.

One summer, the whales came to the  
cliffs behind  
my mother's home. I was in the garden  
and heard them singing;  
it was like hearing voices, the sound  
seemed to come  
from nowhere and everywhere.

Here, as we see throughout Sinclair's body of work, she is able to elevate familiar subjects, and connect them to contemporary life. Sinclair's unique voice and approach is highlighted in this collection, offering surprising metaphors and a decidedly confident experience.

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## Hath Not a Jew

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**Nora Gold**

*The Dead Man*. Inanna \$22.95

**David Rakoff; Timothy G. Young, ed.**

*The Uncollected David Rakoff*. Anchor \$15.95

**Stuart Ross**

*Further Confessions of a Small Press Racketeer*.

Anvil \$18.00

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Reviewed by MLA Chernoff

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Stuart Ross, David Rakoff, and Nora Gold unwittingly offer curious insights into the current state of Jewish Canadian identity; specifically, they posit permutations of our capacity to produce a cohesive vision of Jewish Canada as a place of liminality and vagary. Between the conceptual chasms of cultural Jewishness, the Judaic (i.e., religiosity), and “the Canadian,” defining such a Canada is an extremely slippery task. Ought we to look to the flimsy documents of citizenship; the intricacies of geographical (dis)placement and diaspora; the question of genealogy, secularity, and (de)theologization; or, simply, faith? What is arguably most “Jewish” in the books reviewed here is the inescapability of this line of questioning, and the perpetual search for answers this loop of inquiry creates. Accordingly, a yearning to understand the self-as-Jewish necessitates the most absorbing and discordant moments of these disparate works.

Ross' *Further Confessions of a Small Press Racketeer* is the prolonged moan of a tireless but ever-belligerent author whose invaluable dedication to literature remains largely unnoticed. Ross may linger on the margins of CanLit, but his role is nevertheless central.

In addition to his impressive body of (post-)surrealist writings, he is the founder of the Patchy Squirrel Lit-Serv, which keeps Torontonians privy to literary happenings—even if Ross, currently a resident of Cobourg, Ontario, is no longer there to enjoy them. This small collection of sardonic interviews and essays-cum-rants offers a rare look into the joys and anxieties of the Canadian small-press and literary-reading scenes; there are anecdotes about Ross' experience as a juror for the Canada Council for the Arts (that panel of "evil fuckers, eating the very fabric of our nation's poetry"), the politics of literary friendships, and the difficulties of cultivating community. He spares no detail and overlooks no opportunity to brag, making sure to take credit where it is due—Ross is a curmudgeon, but a diligent one. For more than thirty-five years, he has prevailed over the setbacks of a cluttered mind and overworked life. Apropos his occasional bouts of writer's block or simple disorganization, he admits that certain works of his own have existed "only as catharsis," whereas others resemble an "old fart with its ponderous sentences that go on forever"—this is particularly true of his "surreal exploration[s] of anti-Semitism." Here, Ross is referencing what might be his magnum opus—*Snowball, Dragonfly, Jew*—the eerie tale of survivor's guilt turned murderous outside a North York hardware store. In *Further Confessions*, he dedicates *Snowball* to his mother, who always wanted him "to be a better Jew," if not a rabbi. No doubt his identification as a Jewish writer is most vivid when it comes from outside: for instance, when a student offers a close reading of his work, or when Ross recounts the excitement of co-winning the Mona Elaine Adilman Award for Fiction and Poetry on a Jewish Theme, a memory he holds quite dearly—lo and behold, the unpredictable joy of Jewishness, which is, for Ross, an unending process of interpellation.

Whereas Ross's confessions are nonchalant, *The Uncollected David Rakoff* is a

sorrowful attempt at canonizing an author whose premature death put to a halt a rather impressive and diverse line of literary metamorphoses. The editor of this collection, Timothy G. Young, chronologically gathers representative essays, interviews, diary entries, and the odd long poem by the deceased Rakoff in order to highlight his transformation from humble Canadian expat to proud New Yorker and well-known contributor to *This American Life*. Rakoff writes on a medley of subjects, from his upbringing in a "liberal-Jewish-medical-psychiatric family," to the Semitic origins of Disney's *Bambi*, all the way to a fictional correspondence between Kafka's Gregor Samsa and Dr. Seuss. No matter the theme, nearly every piece stutters with the uncanniness of being a Jew—specifically, a diasporic and increasingly Americanized "normal-looking Jewish guy" with an overbearing guilt complex—in other words, a quintessential stereotype of Ashkenazim. Even his terminal cancer harbours these associations. After a surgery left Rakoff with a flail limb, his corporeal sensibilities became transmuted, as though his body, in some kind of cultural dysmorphia, had been infused with his Jewishness. He writes of his limb: "It is attached, but aside from being able to shrug Talmudically, I can neither move nor feel my left arm."

Rakoff plays on and within the anxieties and virulence of pigeonholing: "Jewy McHebrew," as he notes, is a set of anti-Semitic roles he was repeatedly cast in, prompting him to give up acting. Feminized and "furred-up-browed," Jewy McHebrew is a "bookish-type," typically a "humanist rabbi" or a psychiatrist. Rakoff nonetheless oscillates between humorous pessimism and utter confusion concerning his type-casting, an incertitude which culminates in an act of reclamation. In a performance piece entitled "Fraud," Rakoff spends one Christmas in the window of Barneys dressed as Sigmund Freud, "the anti-Santa,"

asking, “What does it mean that I’m impersonating the father of psychoanalysis in a store window to commemorate a religious holiday?” A mystifying question which no doubt calls for further analysis.

In contrast to these sappy secular confessions, Nora Gold’s *The Dead Man* depicts in prosaic fashion the long-lasting effects of a short-lived affair between Eve, a Torontonian music therapist and composer, and Jake, a renowned Israeli music critic who is not only married but definitively psychopathic. After promising Eve a lifetime of love, Jake abandons her, as though their tryst had never happened. The narrative consists of her eventual return to Israel-Palestine for a conference on Jewish music, effectively critiquing the male-dominated and flat-out misogynistic underpinnings of these circles, as Eve struggles to be heard despite her immense talent. No doubt Gold finds solace in the certitude afforded by Liberal Zionism’s fixation on self-actualization and, or as, redemption. In this way, *The Dead Man* could easily be read as a plea, a travelogue, and a self-help book, with the crux of the text mirroring the fugue-like intensities of cognitive behavioural therapy, without any closure in sight, as it simultaneously romanticizes and debunks the wiles of emotional abuse.

Much like Gold’s first novel, *Fields of Exile*, the text displays a certain disdain for the apparent drabness of diasporic life, from which Eve is eager to flee. Here, Zionism, romance, and the trauma of repeatedly living out one’s Oedipus/Electra complex all intertwine against the backdrop of a pastoral, if not politically and socially sanitized, Israel-Palestine, as two bourgeois melancholics find comfort in the beauty of the land despite their shortcomings as lovers: “Everything is music here.” With this in mind, we can look to the narrative as the anguish of a hampered *Aliyah*, a Hebrew term which roughly translates to “rising up” and is used to describe the transformation of a person abandoning the supposedly

hopeless “exile” of diasporic life in favour of the rootedness of the hermetic nation-state. Because Eve cannot reside with Jake, she must incessantly move to and from Toronto and her would-be Zion, oscillating between lonely profanation and joyous religiosity—in hopeful proximity to the man who is, ultimately, her abuser. Once again, Jewishness is an open question, but this time, both “exile” and “homeland” seem equally agonizing and *Aliyah* is always, in advance, met by its poignant opposite, *yerida*—a descent.

Though the question of Canadianness and its many problematics remains suspended for each of these authors, Jewishness retains an enigmatic and playful role, even amidst the throes of dejection. Like A. M. Klein’s determination to translate Talmudic teachings into the Anglo literary tradition, and vice versa, Ross, Rakoff, and (to a hyperbolic extent) Gold manage to assert their Jewishness and, quite simply, humanize themselves or their characters in the non-Jewish world, pondering and sighing melodically—in the same vein as Klein’s invocation of a certain Shylock—“Hath not a Jew eyes?”

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## Three Poets, Many Voices

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**Daniel Goodwin**

*Catullus’s Soldiers: Poems.* Cormorant \$18.00

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**Brent MacLaine**

*Prometheus Reconsiders Fire.* Acorn \$17.95

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**Patricia Young**

*Short Takes on the Apocalypse.* Biblioasis \$18.95

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Reviewed by Ruth Panofsky

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Each of these accomplished collections, which show the poetic imagination at play, features verse written in multiple voices. Biblical, mythic, and historic figures, animals and inanimate objects are attributed personality and emotion and speak in voices both vital and true.

Daniel Goodwin knows the difficulty of wresting meaning out of words. He refers to

his craft as “my crazy aunt / living in the attic,” but he is a dedicated writer who counts himself among those “who are compelled to wring, / like second-rate magicians, / meaning out of the thinnest air.” Goodwin challenges himself to write poems that are “streamlined and spare,” for he sees beauty in simplicity. His work is anything but simple, however; he succeeds in probing the depths of human experience by spinning “artful webs / equal parts truth and lie.”

In several poems, Goodwin addresses a former lover, his wife, and children. Private life gives rise to poems about early romance, moving across the country from Ontario to Alberta, raising his sons and daughter, and marital joy and strife. The portrait that emerges is of love that “endures: / when we wake, we’re both still here.” “One More” is a masterful elegy for the poet’s father. Here, in an ironic reversal, a declining William Goodwin addresses a son “trying to hide his sadness / at how every man must fall eventually. / Even his father.”

Personal lyrics are balanced by poems uttered by recognizable figures: the Biblical Isaac, the Roman surgeon Galen, the general James Wolfe, the poet Catullus, the painter Michelangelo, and the sculptor Camille Claudel. In each of these poems, among the strongest in the volume, the speaker emerges as a fully realized individual. Michelangelo, for example, complains: “Each day I struggle to raise myself / to this claustrophobia high above the floor.” Goodwin’s ear is as finely honed as his eye. It is not surprising that *Catullus’s Soldiers* won the 2016 Vine Award for Canadian Jewish Literature.

In *Prometheus Reconsiders Fire*, Brent MacLaine plumbs the elemental force of fire. Overseeing the collection is the mythic Prometheus, who brought fire to humankind and who delivers the opening two poems. Despite his “chafing . . . / ankle chains,” Prometheus is “done with rage.” In its place, he has cultivated the “unflinching,

self-shaped quietude” that informs all the assembled poems. From atop his promontory “in a scrappy corner of the Caucasus,” a composed Prometheus looks down on the world below. The view is expansive and his attitude empathic.

Prometheus’ perspective takes in all facets of humanity, from the serious to the comic. The “North River Fire Hall” suites that bookend the volume are inspired by clichéd sayings in “coal-black lettering” posted on road signs that guide the speaker on his “daily commute” to work: “A Spark Neglected Makes a Mighty Fire” and “Firefighters Save Hearts and Homes,” for example. The adages and epigrams spark poems that explore the divers uses of fire; as forger, destroyer, lamp-lighter, purifier, kitchen labourer, matchmaker, the effects of fire, and rescue from fire, which together serve as potent metaphors for the triumphs and failures, comforts and risks, of human experience.

Poems rendered by Hitler’s imaginary son, a humpback whale, a wolf, and items lost with *the Titanic*—a copy of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* as translated by Edward Fitz Gerald, and five grand pianos—expand the imaginative reach of the collection, as do ekphrastic poems that take as their subjects historic paintings by Frenchman Merry-Joseph Blondell (*La Circassienne au Bain*, 1814) and Canadian Robert Harris (*The Studio Boy’s Private View*, 1886). “Relics,” the closing sequence of three poems, is an exquisite paean to the beauty of a tree whose “midnight shadows / placed soothing hands upon the field.”

The funniest of the volumes reviewed here is Patricia Young’s *Short Takes on the Apocalypse*. Young’s project is innovative. Each poem is prompted by an epigraph taken from a host of sources: writers Henry James, Dr. Seuss, and Neil Gaiman, mathematician Blaise Pascal, comedian Groucho Marx, tenor Robert Brault, and singer-songwriter Marilyn Manson, for instance. Many of the poems are sombre; more are

lighthearted; others are quirky. Although they touch on assorted subjects, from Biblical stories to secular texts, from family to celebrity culture, together they weave an intricate poetic web that summons the vast register of human emotion.

In “The First Vegans,” whose epigraph reads “Heart attacks—God’s revenge for eating his little animal friends,” Eve grows weary of cooking cabbage, turnip, and eggplant and cajoles Adam into action: “Want me to speak to Yahweh? / . . . Oh no, she whispered, don’t bother Him. / You’re a smart guy. You’ll think of something.” Another epigraph—“You know how it is in the kid’s [sic] book world; it’s just bunny eat bunny”—results in “Story Time,” in which an evil farmer “has the patience of a saint. / But he is no saint. His rifle’s loaded. He waits for days.”

“A baby’s cry is precisely as serious as it sounds” is the catalyst for “Wreckage,” in which a mother frets, “Why did they let me take this baby home, / how could they trust someone so careless, so clumsy . . . oh god, / now what have I done?” It is sheer delight to read “Coachella Festival (A Semi-Found Poem),” in which comedian Jimmy Kimmel’s television crew asks fans to rate bands with the fabricated names “The Obesity Epidemic,” “Get the Fuck Out of My Pool,” and “The Chelsea Clintons.” Young’s poems display stylistic dexterity and tonal range. They are a welcome tonic of fresh perspectives and sparkling language.



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## (Un)binding Identities

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**Lisa Grekul and Lindy Ledohowski, eds.**

*Unbound: Ukrainian Canadians Writing Home.*

U of Toronto P \$45.00

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**Robert Zacharias, ed.**

*After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North*

*America.* U of Manitoba P \$31.95

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Reviewed by Martin Kuester

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Mennonites and Ukrainians are minority groups that have left indelible traces in Canadian literature and culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Both groups arrived in Canada from Europe, although the Mennonites’s route was more indirect than that of the Ukrainians, and the histories of both clashed in what today is Ukraine. The volumes discussed here intersect as far as themes of cultural identity are concerned; in style, form, and approach, however, they could not be more different.

*After Identity* discusses questions of central importance for North American Mennonite writing in chapters from leading Canadian and American Mennonite scholars and writers. Based on a conference-like setting, its contributors explore the role of identity “in the critical conversation about Mennonite writing in North America.” Playing on the ambiguity of the title *After Identity*, editor Robert Zacharias asks: “Has the time come for Mennonite/s writing to move on, or will it always be (chasing) after identity?”

The volume consists of two parts, “Reframing Identity” and “Expanding Identity,” both titles playing with grammatical ambiguity once again. In the “Reframing” part, Julia Spicher Kasdorf first focuses on the autoethnographic strain in Mennonite writers from Joseph Yoder to Jessica Penner, locating them in the “contact zone” of contemporary multicultural societies. Historian Royden Loewen identifies a “Mennonite *fin de siècle*” feeling in contemporary Canadian writers who “seem less to reject Mennonite religion than to celebrate its historical

intersection with the sensuous and earthy.” In “Mennonite Transgressive Literature,” Ervin Beck focuses on the disquieting effects that writers (ever since Rudy Wiebe) have had on traditionally conservative Mennonitism, and he establishes a “canon of transgressive Mennonite literary works” from Gordon Friesen via Wiebe and others to Rhoda Janzen. Paul Tiessen analyzes the influence that a non-Mennonite publishing house had on the scandal that Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many* roused in Mennonite circles, while Ann Hostetler focuses on the “ethic of care” in the poetry of Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Di Brandt, building “on the peacemaking ethic of their cultural tradition.” In his own contribution, Robert Zacharias identifies a tendency in contemporary Mennonite writing towards

a variety of distancing gestures (irony, self-consciousness, and so on), strategically mobilizing notions of cultural authenticity and cohesive group identity in such a way that it is not directly readable as autoethnography.

One may wonder, though, if what he calls “The Mennonite Thing” may not also be a general Canadian “thing.”

While the essays cited so far seek to redefine Mennonite identity, the second part of the volume aims at “expanding” it. Di Brandt speaks out in favour of openness and hybridity, stating that “[i]t’s hard to give up a narrow minority martyr identity if it has been held onto for a very long time.” Daniel Shank Cruz focuses on another type of hybridity in relation to minorities such as LGBTQ writers within the Mennonite community. Jeff Gundy looks for a new personal “poetics of identity” that might be “constructed of many small pieces, not one grand narrative,” while Jesse Nathan sees writers’ reliance on traditional Mennonite structures of argument such as the catechism and traditional forms of poetry as a source of inspiration. Magdalene Redekop speaks out in favour of a more self-confident reliance on Mennonite identity in a fascinating

reading of a poem by Patrick Friesen, in which she finds the affirmation of a “value that lies so deep in the heritage of our people, a value described as the ‘erotic life’ of a gift.” Hildi Froese Tiessen, in “After Identity: Liberating the Mennonite Literary Text,” finally votes for a new critical approach to Mennonite writing that breaks with traditional dichotomies and profits from the insights of other literatures and schools of criticism that “invite new—possibly disruptive—readings.” This important suggestion in the concluding essay of an excellent and inspiring collection, as well as Redekop’s earlier reference to outsiders who have made important comments on Mennonite writing, draws our attention to one of the possible weaknesses of this fine volume: I wish there had been more “outside,” non-Mennonite contributions to its high-level discussion of Mennonite writing.

The second essay collection under review, on Ukrainian Canadian writers “writing home,” edited by Lisa Grekul and Lindy Ledohowski, is equally suggestive, but here the approach is more creative and subjective than merely scholarly, as the volume presents the work of eight Ukrainian Canadian “poet pedagogues.” Contrary to the Mennonite collection, *Unbound* starts with an “outsider’s” foreword, in which Polish scholar Weronika Suchacka tells the story of her involvement with Ukrainian Canadian literature. In her introduction, Lindy Ledohowski writes that the collection “brings together a selection of voices that have been raised in the articulation of the many different faces of Ukrainian Canadian-ness since Elyniak and Pylypiw [the first immigrants from Ukraine] first came to Canada and decided to stay.” She insists that “‘Ukrainian-ness’ must be understood as synonymous with ‘Canadian-ness’” and that “‘Ethnic’ Is Canadian.” The contributions, by Janice Kulyk Keefer, Elizabeth Bachinsky, Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, Marusya Bociurkiw,



Erin Moure, Daria Salamon, Myrna Kostash, and Lisa Grekul, are very personal approaches (by women only) to writing about being Ukrainian Canadian; about going “home” to Ukraine, which turns out not to be “home” in many cases; about writing “home” to Canada; and about Ukraine and finding one’s Ukrainian Canadian identity. There are personal essays interspersed with poetry, travels into family history and contemporary world politics, memoirs of writing careers that established or broke connections with the Ukrainian community, and many personal impressions of the recent political developments around the *Euromaidan* in Kyiv. Janice Kulyk Keefer, for example, describes her feeling, not unlike that of many others, of being “betwixt and between” her Canadian identity and Ukrainian family history, between her native English and an almost forgotten Ukrainian that had to be relearned. The rather short but stimulating volume is rounded off by a four-page bibliography of English-language Ukrainian Canadian literature.

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## Of Time and Trouble

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**Phil Hall**

*Conjugation*. BookThug \$20.00

**Harold Jaffe**

*Goosestep: Fictions and Docufictions*. JEF \$15.00

**Leon Rooke**

*Swinging Through Dixie*. Biblioasis \$19.95

Reviewed by Karl E. Jirgens

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These three authors offer meditative, disturbing, sublime, and self-aware visions, resituating writing within its larger socio-cultural context while sharing perceptions on literary predecessors, engaging with small presses, reconsidering effects of substance abuse, and while deploying disjunctive stylistics depicting socio-political discord replete with psychic rupture.

Portions of Governor General’s Award-winner Phil Hall’s *Conjugation* appear in *My*

*Banjo & Tiny Drawings*, edited and published by Joe LaBine through the exciting new Flat Singles Press (Toronto), illustrating the important role of small presses in sustaining fresh literary expression. In *Conjugation*, Hall observes: “I am in two anthologies / the one everyone is in / & the one no one is in.” The collection’s title gestures to Hall’s engagement with word, line, ink, page, reader, and author, multiplying meaning, juxtaposing narrative viewpoints, and uncovering linguistic discoveries beyond Black or Blue Mountain, while offering an alfresco alphabet released from the prisonhood of language. Exceptionally erudite, Hall knows one cannot write poems about flies or eels without having read Holub or Montale. He references Curnoe’s ink stamps, the poetry of Zukofsky, Yeats, Neruda, Lorca, Olson, Spicer, and Bishop, and the visionary paintings of Norval Morrisseau, while addressing the process of writing itself: “I work on a poem nearly a year / When it is aping nothing else & everything else / When its music is quirky-intrinsic its tone *ping*”—then, the poem is ready. Hall confesses a humble arrogance in thinking any poem ready for public viewing. Yet, it is a “*ping*” that resonates, much like fine bone china, fresh out of imagination’s kiln, heated by *embers of remembering*. Hall’s stylistics are elliptic, polysemous, kinetic, cubist, animated by cutting wit, acutely aware of social inequity, at times contemplating the plight of First Nations people, or the impact of colonialism, or tensions between materialism and spirituality set against a birchwood fire, banjo tunes, and late-night liquor, with nearby coywolves howling.

Harold Jaffe’s *Goosestep*, published by Eckhard Gerdes’ remarkable Journal of Experimental Fiction Books, is a preview from his novel-in-progress, *Brando Bleeds*. *Goosestep*, divided in three parts, offers an alternate history of Marlon Brando during his heyday. *Goosestep* is dedicated to Gil Scott-Heron (1949-2011), poet, jazz

musician, rap pioneer, and author of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” Jaffe has written twenty-four volumes of fiction, docufiction, and non-fiction. His writing is hard-wired, satiric, fragmented, and elliptic. It embraces the pornographic, while skewering social strife and reimagining writers’ roles in a schizophrenic world. His canto “Stunt Dick” addresses melting ice caps while invoking Antonin Artaud’s chant—“o dedi a dada orzoura o dou zoura a dada skizi”—which serves as a curative incantation against Nazism, ethnocide, rampant corruption, increasing warfare, the military-industrial complex, spiritual bankruptcy, mass poverty, and for-profit prisons filled with the “coloured poor.” Jaffe forwards Brando as an “agonized voice magician,” a mockingbird engaging death, summoning Whitman, Blake, Kafka, Neruda, Brecht, Buñuel, Eliot, Simone Weil, Joyce, Beckett, and Baudrillard in consort while advancing Rimbaud’s axiom, “*I am of the race that sings under torture.*” Brando journeys, and repairs Tennessee Williams’ toilet, encounters Jessica Tandy (who later plays Blanche DuBois), and boxes with Norman Mailer and KOs him. Brando encounters and deflowers a crazed cannibalistic fan, and dresses in a nun’s habit while horseback riding with a reclusive Marilyn Monroe who later performs provocative sexual acts while reading Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* out loud. Jaffe’s Norma Jean (Monroe) might be Circe, but then Bud (Brando) must be Ulysses, ever returning. Jaffe reconsiders drugs, booze, morphine, electroshock, melancholy, organ failure, and what remains of the writer faced with the difference between “anguish” and “sacred anguish” within a dissolute socio-cultural wilderness lying beyond good or evil, where you never get “something for nothing.”

Leon Rooke’s *Swinging Through Dixie* offers alternately magical, decadent, and erotic intertextual perceptions through two novellas and three short stories. Governor

General’s Award-winner Rooke depicts the paralyzing minutiae of small-town life. The title story features a rural southern US town with hucksters peddling surplus U-boats, theories on the Lindbergh kidnapping, a burning car on the edge of town (occupants living or dead), bored gossiping locals, pool sharks, beautiful self-indulgent women, and “crazy” people exchanging clashing opinions: “But if that buggy wasn’t Grey’s, you can boil me in your onion soup like you would a housefly.” Some stories in this collection appeared earlier in small-press publications, further evidencing the indispensability of grassroots publishing. The story “Sara Mago Et Al” opens like a joke: “A fat man and a thin man and a woman . . . came into the café.” But it’s no joke. A blind woman’s seeing-eye dog was hit by a car. State troopers investigate, but, in spite of the blind dog-owner’s eloquent pleas, justice is not served. Rooke attends to minutiae: the café’s unwiped end-booth, dirty cups, crumpled napkins, a spread of salt where a regular customer fingered her name onto the yellow tabletop. Small-town gloom dominates with tumbleweeds skittering past yucca, creosote, and mesquite over a scrim of ashen dust in a rubescent haze set against the limpid blue sky, while the waitress, Sara Mago, face down in besmirched uniform, mourns the death-by-suicide of her erstwhile ne’er-do-well lover, Doc. The closing magical realist novella, “Trading with Mexico,” recalls Apuleius (*The Golden Ass*) and Petronius (*Satyricon*). Set in Chiapas, and rich in hyperbole, satire, fabulation, narrative disjunction, stream of consciousness, eroticism, injustice, and political-economic intrigue, this open-ended novella features mescal-bibbing rascals, a musical ensemble of blind female sex workers, a possibly incestuous relationship between two lovers divided by intense familial rivalry, lighting supplied by electric eels, hacked bodies mystically coming back to life, and strife between the gods of Yes and No set against

a backdrop of war and guerrilla resistance. Much like Hall and Jaffe, Rooke challenges the goals of materialism as they swerve from more righteous spiritual values, leaving few consolations apart from writers' tears.

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## The North American Popular Front

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**Charles Yale Harrison; Bart Vautour and Emily Robins Sharpe, eds.**

*Meet Me on the Barricades.* U of Ottawa P \$29.95

Reviewed by Jody Mason

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First published in 1938, two years after the commencement of the Spanish Civil War, *Meet Me on the Barricades* follows the fantastical interior life of a New York City oboist whose romantic idealism is set aflame by the bloody conflict between fascist and republican forces in Spain.

Harrison's novel is the third to appear in the Canada and the Spanish Civil War sub-series of the Canadian Literature Collection (CLC) from the University of Ottawa Press, edited by Dean Irvine. The complex textual histories of previous titles published in the CLC series are not always complemented by print and/or digital apparatuses that enumerate all variants. However, unlike so many of the modern Canadian literary texts that have appeared or might appear in the CLC, the textual history of *Meet Me on the Barricades* is not particularly complicated: the novel went through a single print run, and the first edition was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in New York. In the introduction, editors Bart Vautour and Emily Robins Sharpe discuss the major variants in the three extant typescript drafts of the novel (housed at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library). Other "significant variants" will eventually appear on the website for the Canada and the Spanish Civil War project (which Vautour and Robins Sharpe direct). The explanatory notes, which appear in the print edition, are excellent.

If Harrison had been a novelist living, writing, and publishing in Canada during the 1930s, the publication history of *Meet Me on the Barricades* would be unusual. Due to the financial difficulties that the large Canadian agency publishers experienced during the Depression, it was common practice for them to make publication contingent on a co-publication agreement with a US firm. Such arrangements often engendered complicated textual histories that speak of the long historical enmeshment of Canadian literary cultures with those of Britain and, later, the US. Yet if Harrison spent his childhood and adolescence in the Montreal Jewish community and fought with a Canadian regiment in the First World War, he moved to New York City in the 1920s and spent the rest of his life there, eventually becoming an author, activist, editor, and well-known figure of the US-American cultural and political left.

Vautour and Robins Sharpe point out that Harrison's border crossing renders his work a good instance of the North American "leftist imaginary" of the 1930s, particularly as this imaginary was shaped by the poetics and politics of the Popular Front (1935-1939). While such a continental "imaginary" has been analyzed in studies such as Caren Irr's *The Suburb of Dissent*, there is much comparative work to be done in order to assess the complex networks of cultural and political exchange that characterized this period and to acknowledge adequately the role of writers with Canadian affiliations in these networks. Vautour and Robins Sharpe's edition provides new starting points for such research. I wonder, for example, if Harrison's novel was reviewed exclusively in the US, as the editors imply, or if it experienced a unique reception in Canadian media, leftist and otherwise? When he wrote *Meet Me on the Barricades*, was Harrison aware of "Friends, Romans, Hungrymen," the similarly Joycean, oneiric

romp that a fellow Montreal Jew, A. M. Klein, published in the inaugural issue (1936) of the Toronto-based Popular Front magazine *New Frontier*?

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## Canadian Herstory

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**Catherine Hunter**

*After Light*. Signature \$23.95

**Mary Soderstrom**

*River Music*. Cormorant \$24.00

Reviewed by Hilary Turner

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In chronicling the lives of single-minded and occasionally ruthless women, these two absorbing novels remind us that the fabric of society depends as much on the private struggles, decisions, and quiet ambitions of women as it does on the more public deeds of their fathers, brothers, lovers, and husbands. Novels that span several generations are especially good at showing the historical weight of the hand that rocks the cradle. In these books, both Catherine Hunter and Mary Soderstrom create plots that trace the social and psychological consequences of the actions of obscure young women. As mothers, and later as grandmothers, the central characters of each story are believably resolute and also believably flawed.

*After Light* begins in the 1920s, the years of “the Troubles” in Ireland, and ends in or near the present day. In famine-stricken Galway, seventeen-year-old Deirdre Quinn is forced to marry a widower with seven children. Understandably resentful, and in love with another man, she takes the first available opportunity to ditch the kids (at an orphanage), pocket the assets of her accidentally deceased new husband (probably illegal), and reconnect with her true love (handsome, but unreliable). The precipitating event of this lengthy novel is thus that a disillusioned, possibly criminal, and now pregnant young woman books a solitary passage to North America, packing enough ancestral anger in her trunk to frost

the psychological socks of several generations of descendants.

Alternating between episodes in the past and action in the present, Hunter explores the laws of emotional cause and effect that determine the destiny of family members. She strikes a balance between the drives and secrets of individuals and the opportunities offered to them by history. War, for example, plays an important role in *After Light*, first bestowing an education on young Frank, a gifted artist and Deirdre’s only biological son—and then depriving him of his sight and most of his confidence. The irony is compounded by Frank’s inability to provide emotional security for his own two daughters despite his determination to discard the emotional baggage of his upbringing. Family patterns repeat themselves when Roisin, of the third generation, inherits her father’s artistic gift, but is so emotionally battered that years go by before she can gainfully exercise it. Only Siobhan, her sister, seems to combine a powerful survival instinct with an ability to accommodate the needs of others. The prodigal hand of fate seems at last to grow kinder when Siobhan and her nephew Kyle, the only member of the fourth generation, collaborate on preparing an exhibition of the impressive collections of paintings and drawings left behind by Roisin. Given their legacy of misadventure, this resolution is not unrealistically tidy, but hopeful nonetheless.

A similar struggle against a powerful current informs *River Music*. The title itself captures the possibility of both acquiescence and resistance to external events. The career of Gloria Foster, a gifted pianist who comes of age in postwar Montreal, exemplifies both. She must grapple with the financial obstacles that stand in the way of her success; she must practise long hours to master her craft; yet she is pragmatic enough to realize that without male support (which must be paid for in kind) many

doors will remain closed. Gloria is manipulative, possibly narcissistic; yet she remains admirable in her stoical recognition that the emotional price of success is a price like any other. Her duplicity where men are concerned may have created “a dead spot in her heart,” and it has certainly sown its share of resentment and insecurity among her descendants—and yet she has been faithful to her talent and her art.

Only one regret remains to Gloria at the end of her life. The odds are reasonable that a child she abandoned for adoption at birth may well have become the legendary Canadian composer Claude Vivier (1948–1983). The secret of his existence, which she has kept for many decades, now haunts her as a lost opportunity—not so much for the love of a child or another human bond, but for the companionship he might have given her in the world of music. It is a brilliant touch on Soderstrom’s part to anchor Gloria’s story in historical fact, and to use Vivier’s haunting composition, “Lonely Child,” as a symbolic commentary on the perils of single-minded determination. The resolute are often successful: they get things done—and they end up alone.

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## Canadian Editing, America Pressures

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**Dean Irvine and Smaro Kamboureli, eds.**

*Editing as Cultural Practice in Canada.*

Wilfrid Laurier UP \$42.99

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Reviewed by James Gifford

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It’s inevitable. Some readers of *Editing as Cultural Practice in Canada* will hurriedly draw blue pencils to dispute the anonymity and invisibility of editors in Canadian literature. Ellen Seligman, Rudy Wiebe, and Robert Kroetsch, or Douglas Gibson, Jack McClelland, and others could be set in a list that blurs literary talents with editorial and commercial acumen. Yet the point remains: the deliberately obfuscated and belated

archival recovery of editorial interventions makes editorial work more a scholarly than a critical concern. It is outside of the mainstream appreciation of culture, Canadian culture. If we comfortably ask “where is here” and acknowledge conflicted histories and territories of what we loosely call Canadian culture as a site of contestation rather than stability, then the invisible operations of power, persuasion, and painful excision or censorship are indeed doubly occluded. For this, Dean Irvine and Smaro Kamboureli have assembled an indispensable volume to theorize editing in the unique historical conditions of Canada as well as to historicize the editing of Canadian literature.

The surprise is the recurrence of concerns, both theoretical and historical, across the diverse chapters (all of which are strong). No editorial theorist is more frequently cited than the American Jerome McGann, followed closely by Dean Irvine, often to access McGann. For scholarship cited, McGann again leads, followed by Irene Gammel and Carole Gerson, both of whom contribute fine work to the collection in discussions of their respective projects. This surprises because of recurrent references to uniquely Canadian cultural and material conditions that shaped book history and editorial praxis—chief among these is Canada’s contiguity with America. Gammel and Benjamin Lefebvre’s chapter on L. M. Montgomery considers Montgomery’s conflict with her American editor and publisher in the context of what Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm’s earlier chapter on Indigenous editorial practices describes as “mainstream success” (in contrast to success for a community, culture, or collective goals). That is, competition with/for American editorial and publishing norms is prominent in nearly every chapter, yet often not expressed as such. Gammel and Lefebvre’s contrasting case is Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap’s *The Little Review* and the editorial complexities of Ezra

Pound's entanglements, such as the "Exiles" issue containing what would become Ernest Hemingway's *in our time*. The comparison works well but naturalizes American scholarship of editorial history. Likewise, George Elliott Clarke opens an American abolitionist context for African Canadian literary production, with many works he describes published in the US. Even Hannah McGregor's excellent work on Martha Ostenso calls to her Norwegian birth and American life. Our familiarity with American book history, such as conflicts between copyright-protected local literary talent and freely pirated literature from abroad until 1891, plays a role in Canadian book history and editing too. To go "mainstream" does not just mean to reach bookstores in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver—it means to connect South.

Irvine and Kamboureli gesture to this problem in their introduction via the ostensible rarity of acknowledging or appreciating editing's importance to cultural production as well as the contrast between American and Canadian organizations and conferences on editorial practices. The unemphasized point is that American scholarship long acknowledged editing in American literary culture and scholarship, as noted in references to Maxwell Perkins, while Canadian criticism (via McGann) has given less attention to the book industry and editing as curating Canadian literary culture. For example, Gammel and Lefebvre look to Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* in its newest edition as a way of approaching the complexity of ownership for Montgomery's works in Canada and the challenges of posthumous editorial production. However, they do not gesture to the rationale for timing the re-edition: the expiration of copyright in Canada, which also shapes editions of Montgomery. By publishing a revised edition of *A Moveable Feast* prior to the work's fiftieth anniversary, the estate avoided the expiration of copyright,

even more so by stressing the creative role of Hemingway's widow. It is obvious that copyright terms (among other forces) shape Canadian literary production as it sits beside its much larger *and different* market to the south, just as the free pirating of foreign British work hindered local literary production (a staple narrative employed in surveys of American literary history).

In line with the exigencies of Canada's publishing industry being adjacent to a larger neighbour and competitor, the period of study shapes critical perspectives as well. After the introduction that emphasizes twentieth-century Canadian literature, the chapters open with Christl Verduyn's work on Marian Engel, whose archives are available for editorial interventions because of Engel's early death. This is followed by Akiwenzie-Damm's Indigenous editorship amidst contemporary authors, and generally with modern authors dominating the following chapters. In most instances, this relates to the availability of deceased authors' archives (or to editors' present work in Akiwenzie-Damm's quotations of correspondence). Hence, mid-century careers dominate. These material forces contextualizing the critical work of the project are not remarked as overarching concerns for editing as cultural practice in Canada, which again surprises yet is ubiquitous. At the same time, it is intensely gratifying to find successful Canadian editing projects discussed by the editors themselves, Gerson and Robert Bringhurst especially, but also Paul Hjartarson, Verduyn, Laura Moss and Cynthia Sugars, Bart Vautour, and others. It is even better that they have an intensely entangled set of shared concerns and contextualizing material conditions.

*Editing as Cultural Practice in Canada* derives from the Editing as Cultural Practice workshop in 2011 in partnership with Kamboureli's TransCanada Institute. Most of the contributors are, therefore, familiar from Kamboureli's TransCanada

book series and Irvine's *Editing Modernism* in Canada. This connects the book to other books, as well as the 2015 twinned issues of *English Studies in Canada* (41.1) and *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* (6.2) edited by Faye Hammill, Hjartarson, and McGregor (all contributing or cited here). These connections are the collection's success: it provokes our blue pencils. It demands much of following work.

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## Fieldnotes: First Volumes

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**Michael Johnson**

*How to Be Eaten by a Lion*. Nightwood \$18.95

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**Richard Kelly Kemick**

*Caribou Run*. icehouse poetry \$19.95

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**Kelly Shepherd**

*Shift*. ThistleDown \$17.95

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Reviewed by Kirsten Alm

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Kelly Shepherd's *Shift* establishes his preoccupation with ecological poetry just as his poetics suggest apprenticeship to a number of ecologically minded poets. Grappling with the inheritance of influential predecessors, aspects of this volume impress the difficulty of clearing ground in the overgrown field of ecological poetry more than they succeed in articulating a "new idea of wilderness." Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose," for example, looms beside the dark highway in Shepherd's "Greyhound Night Song," where "small bits / of conversation [come] from the back of the bus." Gary Snyder's vision of unifying wholeness echoes throughout the collection, most notably in "Walking Path"; one of Snyder's essays, "The Human Skin," is the source of a found poem of the same name. Some of the ideas and images borrowed in Shepherd's poems have been so often repeated, though, that they have lost their power and currency. Nonetheless, lines that sing in *Shift*—and there are many—are more often than not found in the poems that explore the ethical contradictions and moments of

paradoxical beauty in the world of manual labour, where "[d]ays of this employment become like water hitting a rubber suit."

The poems that treat human experience in an industrial economy are the bright points in this collection—"a river full of colourful stones" shining "in the cement-mix gravel"—suggesting that the mud and waste of a resource-based economy may be Shepherd's fertile ground.

Readers of Michael Johnson's *How to Be Eaten by a Lion* might be surprised to encounter East Africa instead of the West Coast of North America in the volume's first section, which begins with an epigraph from Robert Hass's "Songs to Survive the Summer" and an opening poem dedicated to Robert Wrigley. These poems revisit a childhood spent "there"—sliding down a hill in the mud after rain, attacking a wasps' nest with a group of determined boys—and turn with awe toward the rhythms of life and death in a place strikingly different from the mossy Pacific Northwest that dominates the latter two sections of the collection. The concerns in this first section and its evocative imagery—a father's "sweat on my arm like a seed of sun"—introduce a pleasant diversity to the volume. However, there is also a naive quality in the backward glances of these poems that is occasionally disconcerting. For example, "In Praise of Pain" leaves unexplored the fact that it is not the male children, who actually attack the nest, but African women who suffer the pain of wasps' stings, "screaming praises / to the wasps, the pain, through her tears: *Bwana asifiwe!* Praise the Lord," in accordance with a pastor's lesson. In attempting to once again see with the clear eyes of childhood, Johnson hasn't asked some of the questions about gender and race relationships that might have added depth and nuance to such a depiction, which begs further insights into patriarchal colonization.

*Caribou Run*, Richard Kelly Kemick's first volume, finds abundance in the Canadian

tundra. With a suite of poems that takes its inspiration from the yearly round of the Porcupine caribou herd, the volume is well conceived and executed, and displays the results of careful research, which enriches the poems and leads to surprising and delightful contrasts and metaphors. The numerous epigraphs in each of the collection's five sections draw on Indigenous knowledge, scientific studies, and travel writing and poetry from a variety of authors including Al Purdy and Don McKay, who edited the volume. Indeed, one senses McKay's influence on Kemick's poetics, most notably in his adoption of a pattern of careful attention to the physical world. He contemplates the *rumen*, *reticulum*, *omasum*, and *abomasum* of the caribou stomach in one poem, and "Caribou Moss, *Cladonia rangiferina*" in another. These meditations tend toward revelations about the unity of all things; caribou moss, for example, is found to be fractal, "its pronged reach growing / into a million small antlers" like those of the caribou who are sustained by it. Although these general notions might be familiar, the angle of approach in this volume, in conjunction with Kemick's pithy witticism, lends them a freshness that is further enhanced by the artistry with which the poet alternates between inner reflection and exterior observation. The collection is beautiful and Kemick is a poet to watch.




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## No "ramshackle thinness" Within

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**D. G. Jones; Jim Johnstone, ed.**

*The Essential D. G. Jones.* Porcupine's Quill \$14.95

**George Whalley; Michael John DiSanto, ed.**

*The Complete Poems of George Whalley.*

McGill-Queen's UP \$49.95

Reviewed by Marc André Fortin

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On December 10, 1961, George Whalley wrote to Douglas Gordon Jones about having received Jones' most recent collection of poems:

Your later work brings me to delight, mixed in a personal way with distress at the ramshackle thinness of my own published verses. The consistency and singleness of this book of yours comes from something other than lyrical accident: the imaginative sinew comes from your careful or quiet discipline.

Whalley's modest and sympathetic nature, as expressed in this letter to his former student, belies the truth about his ability to craft poems of depth and sensitivity. Although Whalley and Jones may have produced two distinct poetic voices in their respective works, both poets share the elegance of quietness and thoughtfulness in the small moments of being that resonate with the darker questions of self in their poetry. This shared search for the deeper meaning of experience through language can be seen in two recent editions of Whalley's and Jones' poetry, both of which offer chronological perspectives on their evolution as poets as well as previously unpublished poems. In these collections we find lyrical sculptures to the joy and suffering of existence, testaments to the interior vision that can arise from having thrown oneself into the task of living a joyful, careful, and painful life with grace and mercy. Michael John DiSanto's *The Complete Poems of George Whalley* is an outstanding collection that offers readers a wide-ranging and extensively researched perspective on a



poet and scholar (and so much more) who deserves renewed attention. DiSanto's introduction to *The Complete Poems* crafts an intricately woven outlook on Whalley's life, poetry, and criticism that speaks to the depth of Whalley's love for language, his breadth of knowledge and experience, and his critical philosophy on poetry. The textual notes offer readers a glimpse of Whalley's writing process and the history of a poem's production, and the explanatory notes help explain the extensive historical and geographical points of reference in Whalley's poems. DiSanto accurately points out that "Whalley's poetry has not been given a place in Canadian literature alongside the works of his contemporaries." While D. G. Jones is a recognizable name to most, Whalley himself seems to have resisted being given a place in the canon. In an earlier letter to Jones, Whalley wrote:

I hope the MS finds quickly a publisher, and you the acclaim the poems deserve—though not perhaps the free impromptu of whistles and football rattles that now customarily announces, like a Hollywood opening night, the immodest disclosures of the literary Establishment. (2 May 1960)

What DiSanto points out as Whalley's "privacy and reticence" may also have been the reason for his lack of recognition by the "Establishment."

This resistance to the accolades of the external world is perhaps what drives the inner force that underlies the depth of feeling that can be found in *The Complete Poems*, and across the ages of Whalley's life. In his 1935 poem "Testament of Youth (A Sonnet)," which rallies against the wisdom of age and mechanical wartime death in a culmination of youthful (or Yeatsian) love of life, the speaker cries out: "We seek to live!" By 1964, however, when Whalley began writing "My heart is not here in the pages," his poetry and perspective had softened into a mature expression that turns towards the majesty of existence and loss:

Beauty to me is too dear  
to rob it of all it holds  
in light and colour and sound.  
Let the others take it, wear  
the petals torn from the rose,  
the dust from the butterfly's wings.

This collection offers the full expression of Whalley's capabilities, and underscores DiSanto's exceptional capabilities as an editor.

*The Essential D. G. Jones* is a collection of poems taken from each of Jones' main publications throughout his career, with four uncollected poems at the end. It includes a short foreword by Johnstone as well as a biography of Jones. Johnstone's collection offers a perspective on Jones' evolution as a poet from a selection of poems that constructively show Jones' range of experimentation and interests. Published shortly after Jones' death in March of 2016, this collection updates his previous volume of selected poems (*A Throw of Particles*, 1983), and is an excellent introduction to his full career as a poet. It would be unfair to compare the two texts, as they serve different purposes, but DiSanto's collection suggests that it is perhaps time to compile a "collected poems" for Jones with the in-depth critical perspective given to Whalley in his *Complete Poems*.



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## Letters from Iceland

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**Conrad Kain; Zac Robinson, ed.; Maria Koch and John Koch, trans.**

*Conrad Kain: Letters from a Wandering Mountain Guide, 1906–1933.* U of Alberta P \$34.95

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**O. Alan Weltzien**

*Exceptional Mountains: A Cultural History of the Pacific Northwest Volcanoes.*

U of Nebraska P \$40.00

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Reviewed by Nicholas Bradley

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Recently I met a black bear along the High Divide in Washington's Olympic Mountains. Late summer brought furry critters in search of food into the vicinity of popular campsites that even in September were as full as regulations permit. Habituated to human presence, what rangers euphemistically call "problem bears" lack the good manners that keep us and them comfortably apart. This resolute bear, unbudgeable, blocked the trail. In a favourite and topical poem, "Meeting a Bear," David Wagoner offers wise counsel: "There's no use singing / National anthems or battle hymns or almaters / Or any other charming or beastly music." Soft, plain speech is required. But I had scarcely a thought for puns or poetry as I scampered toward safer ground.

Like my bear, the iconic volcanoes of the Pacific Northwest are threatened by the visitors who revere them. In *Exceptional Mountains*, O. Alan Weltzien examines the troublesome popularity of the great peaks, Baker and Rainier, Hood and St. Helens, Lassen and Shasta, and others. "Mount Hood has been represented as a volcano for the masses since July 19, 1894," he writes, "when a crowd gathered on its summit with the express purpose of founding the Mazamas," a climbing club. A notorious photograph depicts the ascent: dressed in what today would pass as formal attire, "with a single rope and plenty of alpenstocks," some two dozen men and women queue for the summit. Weltzien's study is

premised on the view that "[i]n the Pacific Northwest, the volcanoes form . . . one strand of regional identity"; they "distill the regional imaginary as no other feature except the Columbia River, the Northwest's primary river"—perhaps the Fraser runs second—"and powerful symbol of its heritage." Literary works by John Keeble, Denise Levertov, Jim Lynch, and Marianne Moore, the most celebrated of Rainier's poets, attest to the volcanoes' sway. Veneration, however, has a sinister edge: the mountains are essence and emblem of Pacific exceptionalism, "the notion that we're something special, given our landscapes"—a perspective that obscures the indignities to which the landscapes themselves are subjected.

Weltzien surveys the many ways in which the volcanoes have been commodified by the "industrial tourism" allowed by highways and, in particular, by the "status tourism" of climbers and skiers. A perpetually growing number of volcano visitors corresponds to a broad demographic change in the Northwest—the "regional population has escalated sharply since the 1960s, Washington's having more than doubled"—and to consequent cultural transformations. The region, he observes, "has tilted from wet (or dry) boondocks to mecca"; Starbucks and Amazon have permanently changed Seattle, a city that in the mid-twentieth century was perceived by more than one transplanted writer as an empty backwater. Now nothing escapes the grasp of commerce, not even the "career and aura" of Gary Snyder, the storied author who "marries alpinism with poetry and Zen Buddhism": the erstwhile dharma bum was famously enlisted to appear in the catalogue of the apparel company Patagonia. "Green buying shadows green climbing," Weltzien contends: "Environmentalism and environmental consumerism dance together like longtime partners, and the snowpeaks prove one sturdy setting for their dance." At times polemical, he laments both the

aesthetic consequences of overuse and the ecological repercussions. And he dwells on “the most personal, embarrassing trace of our passage” through the mountains: “Feces, like bodies, do not decompose in extreme cold or snow conditions, and increasing traffic leaves increasing deposits for subsequent traffic to encounter.” Leave no trace? The hiker’s creed is mere fantasy, and Weltzien’s sceptical investigation is imbued with sadness: “As beacons,” the volcanoes “forever lure and enhance visitors but while footprints fade away, leavings—trash—remains.”

Its resistance to the pastoral, ecotopian myth of the Northwest allows *Exceptional Mountains* to be compared to works as different from each other as Carsten Lien’s *Olympic Battleground* (1991)—a denunciation of the inept National Park Service, the all-powerful logging industry, and its unflinching ally, the US Forest Service—and Bruce Braun’s *The Intemperate Rainforest* (2002), a political analysis of western Canadian forests. Weltzien is sensitive to the displacement and exclusion of Indigenous peoples caused by the creation of legally protected wildernesses; the mountains’ familiar names reflect an imperial history. Yet *Exceptional Mountains* also celebrates (cautiously) the luminous mountains that for decades have captured the author’s attention and shaped his imagination. A mountaineer himself, Weltzien writes with an intimate knowledge of steeps and stacks alike, and despite his often sombre conclusions it is a pleasure to ramble with a trustworthy companion. An exemplary work of environmental criticism, *Exceptional Mountains* illustrates how private passions can open to readers new worlds of insight and appreciation: perceptive and far-reaching analyses arise from personal and even esoteric enthusiasms. It could share a shelf with such regional classics as Fred Beckey’s *Challenge of the North Cascades* (1969)—“The exaltation one can get in the presence

of mountains can be a memorable lesson in humility and an aid to self-realization”—and such regional inquiries as Laurie Ricou’s *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* (2002). Ricou, who crouches down to observe salal and yellow sand-verbena, and Weltzien, who peers up at bergschrund and serac, are complementary guides to a region of enormous geographical and cultural diversity. Readers of *Canadian Literature* will appreciate Weltzien’s sustained attention to local matters—but note that his Northwest ends at the forty-ninth parallel. (He does admit that Mount Baker graces the skyline from vantage points in British Columbia.) His American volcanoes, it should be added, have worthy counterparts north of the international line—Garibaldi, Meager, Cayley, Silverthorne—that await the boots and pens of critics drawn to lift their eyes unto the hills. As a reader of the Pacific Northwest, I am grateful for Weltzien’s fine account of the region; as a Canadianist, I look forward to studies of the exceptional mountains on this side of the border.

The Kain Route on Bugaboo Spire is, by modern mountaineering standards, a straightforward undertaking—it is the preferred avenue of descent for those who tackle more complex and dangerous lines up the granite monolith. Yet climbers today will understand how testing the first ascent must have been for Conrad Kain, who in 1916 set out for the summit without guidebook, Gore-Tex, or glimmer of hope that he would be rescued if things went south. In the summer of 1910 he had spied the Bugaboos, a range of the Purcell Mountains in British Columbia: “The view was marvellous: a beautiful glacier and very fine spires, which would not be easy to ascend.” He was not wrong.

Commemorated in poetry by Earle Birney, Kain is a major figure in the history of Canada’s Alpine West. His name endures alongside those of later adventurers in the Bugaboos; the Beckey-Chouinard Route on

South Howser Tower pays tribute to illustrious inheritors. (As the co-founder of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard figures briefly in *Exceptional Mountains*.) Kain was born in Nasswald, Austria, in 1883 and died in Cranbrook in 1934. His exploits are familiar to lovers of the Rockies: Mount Robson, Mount Louis, North Twin. He was, Zac Robinson writes in *Letters from a Wandering Mountain Guide*, “perhaps the singular, most superlative figure of climbing’s earliest age in Canada.”

Robinson’s edition consists of newly unearthed letters from Kain to Amelie Malek, whom he guided in the Austrian Alps in 1906, 1907, and 1912. The social gulf that separated Kain from the well-to-do Malek may have inhibited a deeper affection between the friends; in any event, Kain married Hetta Ferrara in 1917. Malek’s letters have not survived, but Kain’s correspondence is effervescent, as in this retrospective passage from September 1910:

More I need not write, because you know yourself how beautiful the day was, the time on top of the mountains, the view, and how you felt the first time in your life being *on the rope*. I can only assure you that I will think of this beautiful day all my life and thank fate that I experienced such a day as it was.

The letters register his remarkable zest and on occasion his prejudices. They evoke a bygone time of hemp ropes but also depict aspects of life in a new country. As Robinson notes,

[h]undreds of thousands of immigrants came to western Canada from around the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The unprecedented influx was sparked, in part, by a changing global economy and deteriorating working conditions throughout Europe and Asia. Changing realities within Canada, too, played a role.

Kain’s letters thus bear upon historical concerns that extend beyond the lore of the mountains.

*Letters from a Wandering Mountain Guide* supplements Kain’s posthumous autobiography, *Where the Clouds Can Go* (1935), edited and sanitized by the American alpinist J. Monroe Thorington. Devotees of the high country will enjoy the letters’ adventure and charm; literary critics will delight in certain details. In 1933, Kain mentioned to Malek “a wire from a party (English people).” The visitors, Robinson explains, were distinguished: “This was Kain’s last climbing trip. Fittingly, it was to the Bugaboos, a place Kain knew better than any other mountain guide. His clients were Ivor Armstrong Richards . . . and his wife, Dorothy Pilley Richards.” Whether the party discussed *Principles of Literary Criticism* on Pigeon Spire the textual record does not divulge.

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## Introverted and Extroverted Selves

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**Chelene Knight**

*Braided Skin*. Mother Tongue \$18.95

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**Peter Midgley**

*Unquiet Bones*. Wolsak & Wynn \$18.00

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**Shannon Quinn**

*Questions for Wolf*. Thistledown \$12.95

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Reviewed by Shane Neilson

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Though I dislike binaries, they do have their organizational uses. In terms of where the poets under review direct their energies, Chelene Knight and Shannon Quinn are emotional introverts, using a speaker’s own version of interiority as the poem-impulse. In contrast, Peter Midgley is an emotional extrovert, a poet whose speaker is more interested in witnessing the drama outside the self.

As debut poets’ works, Knight’s and Quinn’s poems often read as poetry *bildungsromane*, replete with childhood anecdotes or summarized events. In *Questions for Wolf*, Quinn writes in a lively free verse packed with medical, natural, sexual, and religious images as these pertain to the development

of selfhood—the book can, in a reductive sense, be read as the details of how a mentally ill speaker became relatively comfortable in the world. Problematically, the big-hearted moments can become uncontrolled. For example, the rather palpitatingly titled poem “Strong Roots in Casual Devastation” begins: “Our night sky inspired a wild fidelity / in her safe cracking thunder—mercy for loud goodbyes / and other dark geography of our mouths.” A little much. But it’s probably her strategy to reach transcendent moments like the following, taken from “be found not saved”:

*choose your small vanities carefully*  
for these are the burning times  
and you have not been cast in a starring role  
in this end of the world apocalyptic  
scenario  
know that perception is simply facts on a  
sliding scale  
and you are a small beautiful principality  
at an already overcrowded table[.]

The same risk of overswinging is involved in both aforementioned poems, but in the latter Quinn’s speaker is tough on the self, providing labile emotion a necessary counter in wisdom.

Knight’s *Braided Skin* is slightly more formally varied than Quinn’s text, reliant on free verse in the main but with a fair number of prose poems and sequences within. Autobiography comes in the form of family history, with poems written to previously inhabited locations or involving parents. Displacement is a strong theme, as the speaker writes about parents who are probably the same parents mentioned on the book’s inside flap (an African American mother and an Indian father violently exiled from Uganda). Knight clearly has a good ear—not common in our crop of poets—and this quality rings out clearest in her prose poems. Because of this ear, I’d encourage the poet to bet the farm on it and embrace form more, to use her musical gifts to the fullest but to lose the prose tether that

often makes a poem too linear to really astonish. Subservience to form in those with an ear pays dividends—the poem reaches beyond what we as poets could ever hope it to be if we only had ourselves to say. The poem starts speaking for itself.

Containing mostly short free-verse lyrics, Midgley’s sophomore collection *Unquiet Bones* cares to relate less about the speaker directly and more about what the speaker sees and is affected by. The poet mentions an anecdote of travel in which the speaker is mugged by a desperate young man; several poems concern areas of Africa where violent conflict is presently or has recently been occurring; in “the accident,” the speaker states: “On Monday after school, I saw a neighbour cover the blood with sand. / It oozed through to the surface, / turned black in the sun.” In these three lines is Midgley’s key technique—the speaker doesn’t drive the poems through anecdote so much as witness violence and yet record it with an awareness of what violence is. The poet’s representation of violence and trauma is a delicate demonstration of poetic facts. Midgley’s other main theme is that of positive relationships with others, be they lovers or friends, but the poems are so short, and so interested in the other person, that they aren’t as interesting as their violent cousins. The same documentary impulse that is the strength of the former poems becomes a weakness in the latter—we need the current to reverse back into the self. And my congratulations on the lines “arsenals of alphabet lie buried / beneath alexandria and alex”—now that’s beautiful.



## Un corps à corps avec les astres

Pierre-Luc Landry

*Les corps extraterrestres*. Grubbe 22,95 \$

Compte rendu par Daniel Laforest

J'ai lu ce livre en moins de vingt-quatre heures. Pas parce qu'il est court, ni parce qu'il est léger de contenu. Je l'ai fait pour lui rendre justice. On a écrit ailleurs que ce deuxième roman de Pierre-Luc Landry transpire la jeunesse, qu'il palpite d'une vie brouillonne et jubilatoire. D'accord, ces impressions s'appliquent sans erreur au livre de Landry. Mais convenons qu'elles ne nous emmènent pas bien loin. En plus d'être un peu condescendantes, elles ne disent pas ce qui le distinguerait de la masse des romans livrés annuellement. Et *Les corps extraterrestres* mérite tout à fait d'être relevé, souligné, distingué. Le plaisir de sa lecture demande d'être approfondi. C'est un des romans les plus candides, au sens noble du terme, et aussi un des plus *vivants* qu'il m'a été donné de lire depuis longtemps.

Qu'est-ce à dire? *Les corps extraterrestres* est une œuvre littéraire dépourvue de ce que j'appellerais le démon du second degré. Landry a écrit un beau roman qui sait rire sans gêne, qui sait s'émerveiller sans honte, et qui, surtout, sait penser sans s'empêtrer dans le jeu des métaphores et des déviations précautionneuses. Voilà sans doute pour quoi je l'ai lu si vite : je ne voulais pas laisser s'échapper cette parole capable d'enchanter d'une façon aujourd'hui si rare en littérature. *Les corps extraterrestres* raconte les trajectoires erratiques de six personnages — Xavier, Hollywood, Saké, Gia, Chokichi, et Antony — dont les vies sont entrecroisées en des nœuds aussi improbables que leurs noms. Deux d'entre eux sont représentants pharmaceutiques alors qu'un autre vend des stupéfiants. L'une, un peu mythomane, se trouve récemment abandonnée par ses parents richissimes. L'autre est une actrice

au caractère à la fois histrionique et fataliste (le roman la voit accoucher en pleine rue, rire et pleurer à la fois, puis dire plus tard que c'est la vie). Tout ce beau monde éprouve des difficultés à dormir, mélange sans réelle tristesse alcool et pilules, écoute beaucoup de musique, regarde beaucoup de films et enfin, comme en une contrepartie inconsciente à ces formes d'inertie, finit par voyager énormément. Le roman est structuré autour de Xavier et Hollywood dont les paroles apparaissent en exergue sur des pages où sont exposés le journal du premier et les poèmes du second. De façon plus étrange, ces deux personnages se croisent uniquement dans leurs rêves qui ont autant de consistance que leur vie diurne. Ils sont liés par les jeux de contraires qu'ils incarnent. Xavier a l'impression de rater sa vie; pourtant son cœur s'emballe aux moindres émotions et aux moindres changements climatiques dont le roman est au demeurant rempli. Quant à Hollywood, il n'a plus de cœur. C'est littéral. On le lui a enlevé pour d'obscures raisons médicales. Il n'empêche que sa vie semble pulser davantage que toutes les autres. Le roman est emporté de la sorte dans les parcours parallèles de ces deux hérauts de l'adéquation entre l'expérience de la vie et sa narration littéraire. C'est à ce titre que je parle des *corps extraterrestres* comme d'un roman qui respecte la métaphore sans céder à son empire ou, si on préfère, d'un roman qui aime la poésie à condition que celle-ci signifie d'abord prendre acte de l'immense travail en quoi consiste la perception du monde. On apprend à la page 223 seulement que les corps extraterrestres du titre ne sont, *d'abord*, rien d'autre que cela : les étoiles vers lesquelles tous lèvent la tête, ou encore la planète Jupiter qui revient comme une obsession dans le récit à travers un documentaire ou dans les fréquences sonores qu'elle émet. Il en va de même pour les conditions climatiques changeantes dans le roman qui sont des hivers sans fin, des

tempêtes ou des hausses de température inquiétantes. Un personnage dit ne pas croire en cet artifice littéraire consistant à refléter la vie intérieure dans le climat. *Les corps extraterrestres* est donc aussi, sans détour, un roman du réchauffement planétaire. C'est là un autre visage littéral du monde disloqué dans lequel évoluent les personnages de Landry et sur l'horizon duquel un homme capable de vivre sans cœur n'est pas une réalité apte à vraiment bouleverser le cours des choses. Xavier écrit vers la fin de son journal que « le réel fusionne avec la perception qu'il en a. » L'auteur Pierre-Luc Landry a fait ajouter à la fin de son roman une notice où il explique ne pas écrire pour inventer mais pour rendre compte d'une expérience des choses. Avoir peine à contenir les émotions que nous procure l'expérience du monde, cela s'appelle être sensible et lucide. Vouloir faire de la littérature avec cette vérité, cela s'appelle être artiste. Comme les personnages du roman de Pierre-Luc Landry, nous sommes tous appelés, tôt ou tard, à lever les yeux vers le mouvement des corps extraterrestres puis à réaliser que notre vie intérieure est en quelque sorte reliée à leurs dimensions impensables. Chacun de nous fait ce qu'il peut avec cela. Pierre-Luc Landry a choisi très tôt dans sa carrière de faire ce qu'il y a de mieux.




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## Three Debuts and a Prequel

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**James Lindsay**

*Our Inland Sea*. Wolsak & Wynn \$18.00

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**Andy McGuire**

*Country Club*. Coach House \$18.95

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**Kevin Spent**

*Ignite*. Anvil \$18.00

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**Kevin Spent**

*Jabbering with Bing Bong*. Anvil \$18.00

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Reviewed by Emily McGiffin

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James Lindsay's debut collection, *Our Inland Sea*, is a thoughtful and intelligent work that lends careful attention both to the precision of images and to the mechanics of verse. These poems are tight, fluid, and artfully sculpted, the line breaks precise and weighty; clearly, Lindsay has a deep respect for both language and the aesthetics of verse. While some of the poems in the collection narrate an idea or event, others constellate images and ideas whose meanings take time to shimmer through:

Take a knee for a moment and consider  
 cancer  
 as social contract instead of conspiracy  
 theory  
 to explain the innate hatred of one's own  
 voice,  
 as heard by microphones concealed in  
 the chandelier.

*Our Inland Sea* offers much for the mind, yet this very intelligence—the complex flow of ideas in meticulously paced clauses and subclauses—at times creates a pensive, cerebral mood that holds the reader at an emotional distance. The phrasing in the opening stanzas of “Day Room,” for example, removes the speaker entirely:

The day room is a solar cell, pure  
 science, light kept captive in the quietest  
 of solariums. A room made of windows.

A terrarium with commercial-grade carpet

and wheelchairs in rows at the start line of the slowest race. Outside a swarm

of snowflakes are miniscule flotsam from an exploded star raining all around. A field of silence punctuated by coughs[.]

We are left looking at things as though through a window, the poem both transparent and objectively detached. In this and other poems Lindsay presents the world without imposing editorial commentary about what things mean or what we are to make of them. His job, taken seriously, is focused seeing, leaving the feeling up to us.

Kevin Spent's *Ignite*, on the other hand, is built from the memories and emotions of his difficult childhood, the poems going straight to the heart of things. An homage both to a father whose life was destroyed by mental illness and to the family that struggled through the trauma of this breakage, *Ignite* explores poignant and fraught emotional terrain in poems that are at times bittersweet but more often heartbreaking. Take these stanzas from "Straps of Roots":

110 volts for half a second  
charged through  
the psychiatric circuit

How much would go through my father?  
.....

Did it convulse him back  
to youth when everyone's  
head is electric  
light bulbed every second?

Here, as elsewhere in the collection, the voice is direct and compelling, unsentimental yet wracked with feeling. The volume sketches the biography of Abraham Bernhard Spent, beginning with a sequence of Ward Notes and closely biographical poems in the section "For Abe." The following section, "My Father, the Physicist," intertwines the son's point of view, which becomes dominant as the son grows from child to man and his father's condition deteriorates. Throughout the collection, the family's Christianity and

Abe's schizophrenia infuse one another: "God's given me gifts," Abe explains in a poem written in his voice: "When I speak it must be in the tongues of angels. My wife won't understand when I follow my lips as the spirit moves but angels will provide."

The collection is varied in language and form, with many poems written in regular stanzas, others written as prose poems, and others drifting loosely across the page or using linguistic devices to generate particular effects. One such example is "spilling mistayks in vankuwver," which mimics the spelling mistakes of EAL students grappling with the vagaries of English orthography:

sow students kun get jawbs  
with Monsanto in meksico  
or Krapht in kolumbia or  
millton bradley in japon,  
or sow stuwdents kun  
understande holiwould movies[.]

The effect is akin to reading Chaucer; the reader is forced to slow down and sound out each word, piecing the sentences together, finding unexpected meanings in the process.

Although his *Jabbering with Bing Bong* appeared in print a year before *Ignite*, Spent notes that *Ignite*, written previously, should be considered a prequel that has much in common with its successor. *Jabbering*, too, is autobiographical, Spent's family once again a central aspect of the poems. "I took acid to get close to a man I was ashamed to be seen with in public," he tells us. "I took LSD as a father-and-son heart-to-heart mano-a-mano a mindmeld." The poems are rich with the details of place and time: the book gives us British Columbia's Lower Mainland according to the working class of the 1970s and 1980s and the precarious professional class of the present day. The poems in this collection are more formally structured than those of *Ignite*, beginning with a sequence of fourteen-line poems on the theme of growing up in Surrey. Most of the poems in the sections that follow are written in orderly



stanzas; even when the lines leave the left margin, they do so in a regular manner with a close attention to the aesthetics of form. Thus, in this collection too, the choice of form inflects the meaning of the text; the regularity of metre, line length, and stanzas lends weight and an air of ironic seriousness to topics (Expo 86, fast-food restaurants, and waterslides, for example) that in freer forms might appear unambiguously light.

Andy McGuire's debut collection *Country Club*, on the other hand, makes no pretense of formality. From the outset, McGuire makes it clear that this is going to be fun; his loping rhythms, gaudy rhymes, and preposterous metaphors romp through a country club in combat boots, knocking convention into the sandpits along the way. The opening poem, "Pool," gives us forty-two end-rhymed lines, piling the mundane—"day," "stay," "away"—into the absurd—"beaux idées," "El Presidente," "Namaste." From here, the collection moves on to "Black Box" ("The tail between my legs is yours. / Call and I come") and then "Dolphin":

Looking is what bikinis are for.  
She reaches for lotion.  
My dolphin squirms  
At all the commotion.

Like others in the collection, these poems poke dark fun at masculinity and popular culture. Yet McGuire isn't merely flippant, and he doesn't shy away from sincerity: "Your body is the only second language that let me learn it. I am sick to my stomach and overjoyed. I want to live everywhere, an architect afloat an ocean of feeling." Like the other books reviewed here, *Country Club* presents a unique voice and a singular take on the ironies and idiosyncrasies of modern life, offering new ideas of what to make of them.



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## "All is made new"

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**Denyse Lynde, ed.**

*The Breakwater Book of Contemporary  
Newfoundland Plays: Volume Three.*  
Breakwater \$19.95

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Reviewed by Michael Collins

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In Canada's national mythos, Newfoundlanders are perennially cast as warm, folksy, extroverted, traditional, and communitarian. This myth could recently be seen in two high-profile theatre productions: Stratford's production of *As You Like It*, set in 1980s Newfoundland, and the Broadway-bound musical *Come from Away*, which is about travellers stranded in Gander on September 11, 2001. Both present Newfoundland as a participatory culture with a strong sense of narrative deriving from a heritage of oral storytelling—and therefore naturally suited to theatre.

This is why *Volume Three of The Breakwater Book of Contemporary Newfoundland Plays* is particularly interesting and necessary. None of the plays depict the warm, generous myth of Newfoundlanders as Canada's "good poor" (as Edward Riche, a playwright included here, puts it in his novel *Rare Birds*). None are hidebound by tradition, or by the expectation of what Newfoundland "means" in Canada.

The plays in this collection are all unconventional. Berni Stapleton's "A Rum for the Money" (2008) is the only one intersecting explicitly with "traditional" Newfoundland, with the long history of nautical peril, of bootleggers who duck under the international maritime border between Newfoundland and Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, a French possession. Riche's "Hail" (2011) similarly deals with the social space where the criminal is interwoven with the mundane; although we are told the setting may be "a small city, under one million souls in the first decade of the twenty-first century"—it could be Winnipeg as easily as St. John's. Though

vastly different in tone and execution, both plays fixate on class, economic inequality, and masculine identity and friendship.

Aiden Flynn's "The Monk" (2010) is a character-driven two-hander that will be of particular interest to any scholar investigating the ways Newfoundland is imagined as part of the Viking world; it also takes male friendship as a theme.

Three of the plays are truly bold in their formal experimentation. Andy Jones' one-man postmodern fairy tale "Albert" (1983) is playful yet unsettling. Lisa Moore's "February" (2012), an adaptation of her novel of the same name, is choral in nature, voices weaving across temporal fragments in harmony, dissonance, and mutual solitude, meditating on grief, loss, and globalization.

The opening play, Governor General's Award-winner Robert Chafé's "Belly Up" (2003), depicts an abandoned blind man's isolation. Desperation and hunger grow while hallucinations intensify as his mother, on whom he is entirely dependent, simply does not come home one day. The play has a live actor interacting with a pre-recorded projection, demanding precise timing and absolute adherence to the script. Reminiscent of Beckett, "Belly Up" becomes nightmarish as it progresses, an existential meditation on the dread of dependency weighed against the awful impossibility of freedom. It is excellent proof of editor Denyse Lynde's thesis that "playwriting in Newfoundland is a complex and intricate field" where the limits and conventions of the form are continually pushed, reconsidered, broken: in these Newfoundland plays, "all is made new."




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## Of Apes and Automobiles

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**Yann Martel**

*The High Mountains of Portugal.*

Knopf Canada \$32.00

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Reviewed by Robert McGill

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Because each of the three connected stories in *The High Mountains of Portugal* features a protagonist mourning the death of his female intimate, you might think Yann Martel's book is about how people deal with lost love. But the volume turns out to be more interestingly concerned with other kinds of isolation, from the separateness induced by technology to human beings' sense of species-loneliness as they gaze across the abyss separating them from other animals.

The book's first story, set in Portugal in 1904, is the most impressive of the three. Its protagonist is a man named Tomás who's grieving the deaths of his lover, father, and son, and who sets off in his uncle's Renault—one of the first cars in the country—in search of an unusual seventeenth-century crucifix. The object of Tomás' quest necessarily directs us toward a religious reading, but the narrative's greatest pleasures emerge from its attention to more material matters, as Martel skillfully dramatizes what it's like for someone possessing a bare acquaintance with automobiles to drive one for days on end in a world not yet adapted to the car. We see motor vehicles from a fresh perspective as Tomás, moving across the earth at speeds that terrify him, becomes absorbed by the simple task of not running into ditches or other travellers. He finds that his "eyes tire from the strain and his hands hurt from gripping the steerage wheel," and when he pulls over, exhausted, "[h]e blinks in astonishment. The application of the brake pedal has unpacked the landscape and it billows out around him, trees, hills, and vineyards to his left, textured fields and the Tagus to his right. He saw none of these while he was driving. There was only the

devouring road ahead." The description deftly evokes a novice driver's frayed nerves while powerfully suggesting the ways in which cars have changed our relationship to space.

Frequently in the story, people crowd around the Renault to stare, spellbound. Others react with rage to its noisome intrusion on the Portuguese roads. As they do, we're reminded just how inured to the automobile we've since become, whether regarding its pollution or the dangers it poses to its occupants and others. When, at a key moment in the text, Tomás commits what must be one of history's first hit-and-runs, killing a child, our horror as he drives off is complicated by our awareness that such a response is, nowadays, all too common, and we're liable to recognize it as a response that the automobile itself has fostered by creating a culture in which pedestrians are treated as obstructions to traffic, not traffic themselves. Tomás thinks it "mere chance" that the child was killed, but from our position in the twenty-first century, we know otherwise.

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan observed: "All the rhinos and hippos and elephants in the world, if gathered in one city, could not begin to create the menace and explosive intensity of the hourly and daily experience of the internal-combustion engine." That observation resonates fascinatingly with regard to *The High Mountains of Portugal*: the Renault has mudguards made out of elephant ears, and the book ends with a sighting of an Iberian rhinoceros, a creature previously identified as long extinct, victim of the same civilization that would go on to embrace the automobile. In that respect, it's notable that Martel repeatedly depicts the Renault as a great beast that roars and growls and needs to be fed. It seems less than coincidental that "Renault" sounds a lot like "rhino."

The parallels between automobiles and animals in the book's first story gain further

resonance in the third, which includes another car trip, this time undertaken in the early 1980s by a Canadian named Peter Tovy. Stricken by the death of his wife, Peter makes the trip along with a chimpanzee named Odo, whom he has purchased from a research facility in Oklahoma. The two drive across America on their way to Portugal, where they end up living in the same village at which Tomás eventually arrived in the first story. In Peter and Odo's narrative, the automobile is not the star of the show. Rather, Martel expertly delineates the tender, complex relationship between the man and the chimp. This focus might strike readers as rather familiar, insofar as a spate of recent novels, from Kenneth Oppel's *Half Brother* and Benjamin Hale's *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* to Colin McAdam's *A Beautiful Truth* and Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, have similarly dealt with human-chimp relations. But the greater sense of narrative reprisal arises with respect to Martel's novel *Life of Pi*. That's especially true of the final scene in *The High Mountains of Portugal*, as Peter, alone outdoors with Odo, dies of cardiac arrest. (An earlier, pointed reference to Peter's heart condition means it's not exactly a spoiler to mention this turn of events.) Odo stays with the body for half an hour but then abandons it without any apparent regret. His departure strongly recalls the moment in *Life of Pi* when, after Pi has spent months at sea aboard a lifeboat with a tiger, they reach land and the beast departs the vessel with nary a backward glance, never to be seen again. Odo's departure from Peter's body similarly underscores Martel's refusal to anthropomorphize and sentimentalize animals. For all Odo's intelligence and emotional life, he remains a chimp and, thus, freer than a mourning human to move on from the past.

If *The High Mountains of Portugal* were constituted solely by its first and third

stories, it would be a highly satisfying book, but Martel complicates things by including the second story, too. In this tale, a Portuguese pathologist in the late 1930s has a pair of strange encounters. The first is with a phantasmal version of his late wife, who lectures him about the meaning of Jesus' emphasis on parables, and then about her theory that Agatha Christie's mystery novels closely echo the New Testament. The implication—namely, that we should likewise read *The High Mountains of Portugal* as allegorical fiction with spiritual import—is one that most readers will likely find superfluous given the book's religious inflections elsewhere. Moreover, the wife's speech has every appearance of being an essay on literary and Biblical criticism inelegantly shoehorned into fiction. As for the pathologist's second encounter, it involves him undertaking a bizarre autopsy that steers the story further from realism, such that the wife's earlier lecture on the significance of parables comes to stand as a form of anticipatory self-justification on Martel's part. Taken as a whole, the second story in *The High Mountains of Portugal* asserts the importance of suspending disbelief and of writers' prerogative to eschew realism's strictures. These assertions are valid enough, but the reader might feel they're unnecessary, too similar to the moves made by lesser authors who gussy up their inadequacies by insisting, in one way or another, that it's all just a dream. Of course it's a dream; it's fiction. And what marvellous fiction Martel can write.




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## Realism as Escape

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**Nathaniel G. Moore**

*Jettison*. Anvil \$20.00

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**Riel Nason**

*All the Things We Leave Behind*.

Goose Lane \$19.95

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Reviewed by Nicole Birch-Bayley

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Realism is a multifarious and much-contested term; we rely on it to explain what fiction attempts to do but cannot always achieve. Realism can be the basis for narrative play, as writers turn away from the everyday to new modes of representing human and non-human life. Riel Nason's *All the Things We Leave Behind* and Nathaniel G. Moore's *Jettison* each experiment with realism in order to establish new and strange relationships to the everyday.

Nason's latest novel, *All the Things We Leave Behind*, turns to the world of antiques. Set in small-town New Brunswick in 1977, the novel follows seventeen-year-old Violet as she manages her family's busy roadside antique store, the Purple Barn, while her parents try to retrace the last steps of her missing older brother, Bliss. Having worked as an antique collector, Nason provides rich details of the material objects cultivated and curated in the Purple Barn. However, the novel and especially its focus on antiques would have worked just as well if it had been set in the present day. As the title suggests, the novel is about things left behind, memories that must necessarily be displaced, although not forgotten, as Nason's characters struggle to move on from tragedy.

Two tensions establish the trajectory of the novel: first, Violet's efforts to procure all of the contents of the Vaughan Cottage, and second, her ability to see a mysterious herd of ghost deer, and specifically a white deer named Speckles that she and her brother encounter before Bliss's disappearance. The looming ghost herd haunts Bliss and

prompts his disappearance; after Bliss and Violet encounter a local waste site for deer killed on the highway, Bliss spirals, unable to forget the ghastly scene.

Nason carefully charts Violet's emotional state as she awaits her parents' return to the Purple Barn after they attempt to piece together the details of her brother's disappearance, later revealed as a suicide. Violet spends her summer alone at a campground and several characters look out for her in her perhaps all-too-adult role managing the family business. As the novel progresses, Violet not only looks after the store but also must shore up public opinion concerning her brother's death. Often, Violet appears to "play" adult in her interactions with customers and colleagues at the store, revealing the limitations of her coming of age in a matter of mere months. But *All the Things We Leave Behind* is not a *Bildungsroman* (although it features flashbacks to Violet's childhood moments with Bliss). Rather, the novel assumes that upon the return of her parents, Violet will return to her remaining adolescence, having gained closure regarding the death of her brother.

Although there are moments when Violet's pseudo-adulthood is unconvincing, her passion for antiques is undeniably endearing. She reflects on her collector's passion—"the energy surge . . . the rush, the thrill of the hunt . . . the little squeeze of anxiety"—which she knows that she shares with her father. Nason's obvious talent is her ability to imbue her story with exquisite details, including her characters' relationships to the eclectic objects around them. Nason brings to life not only the mysterious ghost herd, but also the entire setting of the Purple Barn.

Nathaniel G. Moore's collection *Jettison* is a jarring, absurdist, and unapologetic departure from realism. Each of Moore's stories takes up a grain of popular culture—the *Star Wars* franchise newly purchased by Disney; Jaws reincarnated in a sister-in-law;

an American Psycho but one found in a local literary circle; the Amazing Spider-Man, better known as the amazing hypochondriac. Each of Moore's titles is a confusing promise of some logical association with a popular narrative. But this is not so. Each story is dense and thrillingly nonsensical.

The special quality of the collection is the absurdity of Moore's characters. "A Higher Power" presents us with the neurotic Amanda; recounting her survivor's tale in an AA meeting, Amanda is revealed as highly unreliable in her obsession and rivalry with former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin. It is a peculiar narrative in which Amanda ends up a victim—but a seemingly grateful one:

While I'll never remember all the dance moves I pulled out in a sweat of vodka funk with the former prime minister, I can tell you this, not a day goes by when a Top 40 song from the early 2000s plays on a radio that I don't cringe in shame. Then, I dust myself off, move forward into the bright reality of modern life and feel warm gratitude that I survived.

Moore's collection is chock full of unreliable narrators. We meet the so-called son of the Zodiac Killer, but he admits to the inconsistencies of his own reading: "These are facts that add up to only a handful of moments from an entire life I was never privy to know. I truly never knew the man." Indeed, this last line is telling—he likely did not know the Zodiac Killer but nevertheless wanted to build a myth surrounding the mysterious, disappointing figure of his own father.

Many of the most memorable moments in Moore's collection are metafictional, as he teases the literary community of which he is a member. The most charming is "American Psycho," which features a confusing rivalry, one-sided attraction, and later friendship between an unstable ex-*Globe and Mail* columnist, Susan, and an up-and-coming novelist, Daniel Benjamin. Given the

unreliability of his characters, and the carnivalesque effect of the collection as a whole, it makes the most sense to approach each of Moore's stories independently, for his characters are neither interconnected nor recurring throughout the collection.

Despite Riel's perhaps untimely representation of Violet's maturation, and Moore's jarring prose, *All the Things We Leave Behind* and *Jettison* are two dynamic works that clearly present complex thematic projects. Nason and Moore offer readers a chance to explore the capacities of realist and surrealist effects in shaping human experience, whether as a confrontation with grief or to set the stage for social critique.

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## Eloquent Elegies

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**Sina Queyras; Erin Wunker, ed.**

*Barking & Biting: The Poetry of Sina Queyras.*  
Wilfrid Laurier UP \$18.99

**David W. McFadden**

*Abnormal Brain Sonnets.* Mansfield \$17.00

Reviewed by Catherine Owen

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Selecteds are strange beasts indeed—especially those collected with particular mandates in mind that may have more to do with an editorial slant than with the poetry itself. Each volume in the Laurier Poetry Series, begun in 2004, presents thirty-five poems from across a poet's "career," attempting to provide a sense of range from book to book without exhaustively plumbing each text. Erin Wunker, the editor of *Barking & Biting: The Poetry of Sina Queyras*, introduces Queyras and her work to the reader as fusing the "traditional lyric" with "conceptualism," a practice in which the "female subject is of central concern." Wunker, using Barbara Godard's term, describes Queyras as an "excentrique," although it is not entirely clear why; Queyras is—to my mind—a well-recognized writer, thinker, and academic. If Canadian women have been "uncannily present" in the

literary scene, as Wunker notes, it is also worth questioning why the sense of being equal and valued is still false, and the victimized female apparently still "abused, lost, replaced." Queyras is more empowered than this introduction suggests, and her writing is sharply exploratory of submerged voices, swimming in a dizzying flood of intertextual interpolations. Until, that is, one arrives at her fifth and by far strongest volume, *MxT*, when feeling alchemizes influences to emerge as a purer poetry rather than an entangled poetics.

Excerpts from Queyras's first four volumes feature list poems with anaphoric intensity: "If I slip now. / If my tongue is brash / if my thoughts betray." As strong as some of the pieces are—particularly the cultural upheaving of "Jersey Fragments"—the predominant strain is of "othered" voices, whether Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, or Lisa Robertson. Important as such recuperative "rhythm-ing" is, when Queyras allows mourning to etch her own vocalizing, the poetry finally rises above her "project." As Queyras herself writes: "I don't want a theory. I want the poem inside me." Thus, while allusions to influential writers and theorists continue to echo in her poetry, they do so now within a context of ruptured bonds that injects a stirring resonance. "Like a Jet," "The Dead Ones," and "Sylvia Plath's Elegy for Sylvia Plath" are especially poignant in their level of what I call "emotional scholarship." Queyras does more with language than just "bark" and "bite," and when she melds tenderness with intellect, her poems become a true force for crafted feeling.

Speaking of craft, David McFadden's latest collection explores not only material from his childhood inflected by the vagaries of a mind shifting its synapses with age, but the versatility and mutability of the sonnet form itself. Reminiscent of Robert Kroetsch's last collection, *Too Bad: Sketches Toward a Self-Portrait* (2010), *Abnormal Brain Sonnets*

returns to quirky memories, from McFadden's first hockey stick and his grandmother, to Frank Forgy, his grade ten friend, who "could stare at a leaf for thirty minutes." The first sonnet in the book to really move me was McFadden's elegy for his mother, a poem whose tone commingles the child's confusion regarding the afterlife with the adult's awareness of loss: "It's sad to see Father / struggling along without your loveliness." At his best, McFadden combines a colloquial tone—"Why you funny little darling, I don't know / who I'm talking about"—with allusions to authors he's absorbed deeply, from Shakespeare to Christa Wolf, and with his often surreal images: "My eyes are like a truck full of pomegranates / or like a pair of rowboats on a pond."

The sonnets don't rely on a rhyme scheme, nor even, in most, the traditional "turn." As a result, the poems at times become musically lax, more containers for banal content; or too personal, as in "Reverend Ratclaff," to connect with the reader beyond their own, mostly closed, occasions. The collection concludes with a 2005 interview between McFadden and his champion, Stuart Ross, which vivifies the context for these sonnets, and also highlights the importance of bonds between older and younger poets for the promotion of neglected oeuvres. McFadden, like Joe Rosenblatt, has arrived at a time in his life where his formal challenges serve as a means to remember, commemorate, and enact an honesty towards the aging yet still awe-struck realm of a unique mind.



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## Parallel Lives

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**David Thompson; William E. Moreau, ed.**  
*The Writings of David Thompson, Volume 2: The Travels, 1848 Version, and Associated Texts.*  
McGill-Queen's UP \$44.95

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**Germaine Warkentin, ed.**  
*Pierre-Esprit Radisson: The Collected Writings, Volume 2: The Port Nelson Relations, Miscellaneous Writings, and Related Documents.*  
McGill-Queen's UP \$75.00

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Reviewed by Andre Furlani

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David Thompson advertised his prospective *Travels* in the *Montreal Gazette* on 9 October 1846 as the narrative of

Twenty-eight consecutive Years, in the Northern parts of this Continent; of which twenty-two years were employed in the Exploration and Survey of Countries not then known, or the Survey and Examination of Countries known to the Fur Traders, and six years at several Trading Posts. The last six years of his Travels were in different parts of the Rocky Mountains, the discovery of the noble source of the Columbia River, and its course to the Pacific Ocean, and also its great branches. Settlements of the North West Company were made by him four years before any person from the United States settled on the Columbia River.

A paucity of subscribers and the declining health of the octogenarian author thwarted the completion of the book, and as editor William Moreau's companion volume, the 1850 version of the *Travels* (published in 2009), confirms, the manuscripts were not harmonized at the time when Thompson's eyesight failed. This has dogged the fortune of what otherwise would be a foundational text in the Canadian canon. While preceded by several other editions, Thompson's manuscripts have had to wait until Moreau's exhaustive and impeccable edition to appear in trappings worthy of their fascination and importance. The editor as well as

the publishers of this superb tandem of volumes (with a third in preparation) have painstakingly produced a woefully overdue publishing milestone. Although written 166 years ago, Thompson's *Travels* is the Canadian book of the year.

Thompson learned navigation, cartography, and mathematics at a Westminster charity school that prepared pupils for service in the Royal Navy just when Captain James Cook was making his three voyages. In the expansive decades following its victory in the Seven Years War, the British Empire closely integrated trade, science, and exploration, and in 1784 it bound the fourteen-year-old Thompson, whose career contributed singularly to this imperial amalgam, to the Hudson's Bay Company as an indentured servant. He went from reading *Robinson Crusoe* at Grey Coat School to eventually wintering beyond the Athabasca Pass with the few tenacious men who had not abandoned the perilous expedition to trace the Columbia to its Pacific estuary. The apprentice was not yet fifteen when he arrived at Churchill Factory on Hudson's Bay, and he never saw Europe again. Moreau notes that what Thompson did see, as probably no one before him ever had, was "the geography of western North America whole."

Thompson was a "practical astronomer" or surveyor, an arms dealer, a frontier explorer, an ethnographer, a naturalist, and, above all, a witness to the continent's transition from common property to open access resource and then to private and state property. He carried a sextant, a telescope, a thermometer, measuring tape, scales, and a barometer to survey; he carried rifles, wool clothing, and axes to trade. As an assiduous clerk he toted stationery to record every facet of the cultures, geography, and history of the Northwest, entries that became the basis (though not without embellishment) for the *Travels*.

The *Travels* contains finely observed details of diverse phenomena: the construction of a beaver dam, a birchbark canoe, a

rattlesnake-venom arrowhead; the elevation of the Rockies, the rate of the Columbia's descent; the prodigious tracking prowess of a Cree moose-hunting party, the succulence of bison prepared by Piegan cooks; the spawning cycles of the salmon, the grandeur of giant first-growth conifers, the sagacious wariness of the moose; the *carpe diem gusto* of *coureurs de bois*, the magnanimity of the Métis, the solemn finesse of Salish dancers; the charisma of a transgender conjurer who has taken a wife and brokered Blackfoot truces; the sagacity of Indigenous lore and the pitilessness of Plains warfare in its age of iron; the utter devastation of smallpox on Indigenous peoples and of steel traps on beavers.

Through all the hardships endured over the fifteen months it took to reach the Pacific, Thompson sustained a Presbyterian faith that could not move mountains but was able to scale them. Though the Rockies impeded his passage, thinned the ranks of his party, raised the dangers of armed Piegan reprisals, and very nearly exhausted his provisions, Thompson remained, like Crusoe, committed to a providential worldview: a benign God had placed such chains to feed the rivers and lakes and thus to ensure the welfare of His creatures. Thompson's theodicy now has little more purchase than does his calculation of the Rockies' elevation, but both were achievements of a pre-Victorian brio, confidence, and pertinacity that gloried in the splendour of an alien world it would paradoxically drive to the brink of extinction.

Germaine Warkentin's edition of Radisson's *Port Nelson Relations* and related documents complements Moreau's book: it is the second volume in a series, unavoidably overshadowed by its predecessor, yet fastidiously edited, handsomely presented, and equally engrossing. Indeed, Thompson's career was predicated on Radisson's commercial incursions into Hudson's Bay. The first volume was a superb bilingual edition



of Radisson's *Voyages*, which culminated in his 1666 arrival at Westminster—a few blocks from where, more than a century later, Thompson would be raised—to invite Charles II to enter the Canadian fur trade.

The second volume documents Radisson's subsequent reversals, when disillusionment with the fledgling Hudson's Bay Company led him and his brother-in-law, Médard Chouart Des Groseilliers, to rapprochement with the court of Louis XIV. Despite his successes on behalf of the Sun King's Compagnie du Nord, the enterprise did not prosper and, having previously outwitted his former English patrons as well as rivals from New England, he turned coat in order to return to Port Nelson under British colours, where he announced to the bewildered French traders he had established there that he was now claiming the post for the Hudson's Bay Company.

These feats of brinkmanship ensure the human interest of Radisson's *Relations*, which is a pugnacious petition to King James II to obtain remedy for his losses. The suit was unavailing, and on his death in Westminster in 1710, the “decayed gentleman” Radisson was still soliciting compensation from the usurped James' royal successor for the furs he had amassed with Des Groseilliers more than a quarter century earlier. The *Relations* is contemporary with John Dryden's translation of the *Parallel Lives*, and its hubristic pattern of loyalty, defection, rehabilitation, and demise is a Rupert's Land supplement to Plutarch's lives of Alcibiades and Coriolanus, the latter of which Shakespeare adapted into a tragedy that was staged within sight of Westminster half a century before Radisson presented his credentials there.

In the *Voyages*, the manuscript of which had once belonged to Samuel Pepys of the Admiralty, Radisson was foremost an explorer and prospector. Although still very much the hardy and intrepid adventurer to an inland sea, in the *Relations* and ancillary

documents scrupulously collected and translated here, he is also a minor court functionary seeking subsidy, emolument, and redress, sedulous to mend his fortunes and anxious to enhance his precarious social position. His adversaries are not remote Indigenes or competing traders but petty court factions, mercantile cartels, and dynasts, and these groups prove the more predatory.

Though to his acumen, stamina, and luck were vouchsafed a world-historical encounter between peoples, Radisson in these latter papers is reduced to a carrier who, having delivered his freight, presents his bill of lading and impatiently awaits recompense. Three and a half centuries later, the First Nations with which he bartered still await theirs, and these superb editions of Radisson and Thompson give context and impetus to the belated work of restitution pursued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

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## Life as a Feminist Academic

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**Erin Wunker**

*Notes from a Feminist Killjoy: Essays on Everyday Life.* BookThug \$23.00

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Reviewed by Christine “Xine” Yao

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In their groundbreaking queer and feminist of colour collection *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa articulate what they call “theory in the flesh”: “where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity.” With her title drawn from Sara Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy, one may wonder about the necessity of Erin Wunker's 2016 book of essays given the recent publication of Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*. *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* acts as an homage to Ahmed, demonstrating how Wunker's writing works as theory in the

flesh in two senses: her intersectional feminist praxis situated as a white, middle-class, Canadian cis woman academic in the twenty-first century, along with her lived experience with theory itself. *Notes* is a deliberately fragmentary, deeply personal window into how Wunker understands her everyday life on an affective level through engaging thinkers like Ahmed, Berlant, Spillers, and Lorde. She engages a genealogy of feminist theory that foregrounds the work of women of colour as an intellectual tradition that offers a way of thinking and being in the world.

Wunker explores how Ahmed's concept enables the "killing" of oppressions that masquerade as joys, and thereby opens up the joys of a better world for all. Rape culture is the focus of the first chapter: different stages of Wunker's life are framed through Black feminist theory and put into conversation with recent events that have brought rape culture into mainstream consciousness, like the Jian Ghomeshi trial and Emma Sulkowicz's art installation in response to her rape at Columbia University. In the second chapter, Wunker considers an archive of female friendship drawn from literary texts like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and cultural artifacts like the Bechdel Test in order to explore her expanding sense of feminist community with those around her and, symbolically, her relationship to the critics she cites. In the final chapter, Wunker confronts motherhood as a theory in the flesh, the bodying forth of praxis as various forms of care under the gender-neutral term "parenting." Through parenting, Wunker achieves a different orientation to the world, a killjoy refusal that calls her to political solidarity: her post-script returns to considerations of her research and teaching in Canadian literature as a settler in the wake of Idle No More, a movement for Indigenous sovereignty.

In *Notes*, Wunker's literary erudition, pop-culture references, and memoir fragments

work together as a model of intersectional feminism and allyship. As she says in her introduction, "[f]irst, we situate ourselves. Then, we widen the scope of our looking. Then, we situate ourselves again. And repeat." We as readers should situate our engagement of Wunker's work and her call for change not just into our everyday lives, but into the field of Canadian literature and the state of academia in the humanities.

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## Supreme Fictions and Strange Relations

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**Joe Denham**

*Regeneration Machine*. Nightwood \$18.95

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**Daphne Marlatt**

*Reading Sveva*. Talonbooks \$19.95

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**Emily Nilsen**

*Otolith*. icehouse \$19.95

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**John Pass**

*Forecast: Selected Early Poems (1970-1990)*.

Harbour \$18.95

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**Gregory Scofield**

*Witness, I Am*. Nightwood \$18.95

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**Johanna Skibsrud**

*The Description of the World*.

Wolsak & Wynn \$18.00

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**Kim Trainor**

*Karyotype*. Brick \$20.00

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Reviewed by Nicholas Bradley

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When scholars and teachers of Canadian poetry confess their vocation to new acquaintances, the responses range from quizzicality (“Is there any?”) to apology (“I was bad at English”) to telling silence. Such reactions are entirely justified. When poetry inches into the public arena, it is easily ignored. A poet’s obituary is skimmed or skipped; the poems slinking among advertisements on the bus go unnoticed by harried phone-checkers. Only Cohenesque fame or Griffinish lucre makes poetry truly newsworthy. And not only in Canada. Whether the genius of Robert Allen Zimmerman is comparable to that of Eliot, Jiménez, Miłosz, or Montale can be debated, but there is no question that Bob Dylan enjoys a greater audience than the other

laureates combined. What that other Dylan called the “sullen art” is a taste seldom acquired, its appeal unpublic.

I recently taught a course on modern Canadian poetry to a terrific group of students. They willingly devoted a few months to Atwood and Avison, Layton and Livesay, Page and Purdy, Waddington and Webb—and they were keen as well to seek out other poets’ works, to examine the omissions in the field as it has been conventionally understood. The students’ enthusiasm was good counsel—literary importance need not be measured only in terms of sales and reputations—but I was nagged by doubt. Would our spirited conversations about “[t]hose blessed structures, plot and rhyme” (127), in Robert Lowell’s indelible phrase, make a lasting impression? Or was poetry only a flirtation, like gin and Gauloises, before graduation and the onset of adulthood?

I kept passion and the public in mind while reading the seven books under review, which are impressive in myriad ways. Characterized by imagination and insight, and often by a remarkable obscurity, they raise fundamental questions: for whom is contemporary poetry written, and to what end? Books will find their rightful readers, but this assortment sometimes left me adrift and wondering what the poets themselves, accomplished practitioners of a rigorous but almost invisible game, hoped to realize. Surveying recent books of Canadian poetry for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Richard Greene expressed mild surprise: “[M]y sense is that far more Canadian poets than I supposed are writing well. We have a cadre of gifted, passionate, and persevering poets, whom readers and

critics must follow on their eccentric journeys” (245). That is one answer to the question of difficulty: good writing exerts itself irresistibly on readers, whoever they are, who must take in stride whatever obstacles appear—technical, conceptual, or otherwise. In his elegy for Yeats, Auden suggested that all will be forgiven if the writer can write:

Time that with this strange excuse  
Pardoned Kipling and his views,  
And will pardon Paul Claudel,  
Pardons him for writing well. (90)

On to the books at hand, then, with trust that poets will in their nearly private pursuits revivify the language or convey an idea in singular terms. And with a dash of uncertainty, too: Auden, remember, deleted his lines.

\* \* \*

“A karyotype,” Kim Trainor writes in her book of that name,

is the characteristic chromosome complement of a species; there are twenty-three paired chromosomes in the human karyotype. The word *karyotype* also refers to the iconic arrangement of these paired chromosomes in a black and white photograph. (93)

*Karyo-* derives from the Greek for *nut* or *kernel*, and a karyotype promises to show what lies at the core—whatever makes something essentially itself. The word suggests that Trainor’s poetry is preoccupied by potential or destiny, and by the representation thereof. In “How to make a human karyotype,” she provides detailed instructions: “Draw 10 mL of venous blood. Follow the protocols for lymphocyte separation and inoculation and the incubation of cultures” (61). But then Trainor implies that laboratory procedures are insufficient, and that other protocols are required to make sense of things: “Write one word after another / and then another, these stitches of ink, / these seams of fractured light” (61). *Karyotype* dwells on the Beauty of Loulan, one of the so-called Tarim mummies, and on “the attempt to extract intact DNA from the bone and tissue” (93) of ancient

bodies. From this point of departure, Trainor lands upon conflicts and atrocities historical and contemporary, and engages poets of the past both distant and recent: Ovid, Callimachus, Sappho, Edward Thomas, Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński. The result is a meditation on loss, recovery, knowledge, and identity. The web of allusions is forbidding, but Trainor also writes delicately of her own time and place:

Another storm comes in tonight  
off the Pacific. Thrum of rain  
so insistent on the skylight’s  
resonant skin. It tamps me down  
into the darkness of this night  
till I am ossicles of sound,  
small drops of swiftly falling rain. (14)

Ossicles are bones of the middle ear: the poet, it seems, is at once a listener and a speaker, a figure attuned to the world’s upheavals who also embodies the downpour’s rejuvenating promise.

Johanna Skibsrud’s *The Description of the World* is no less ambitious than *Karyotype* in premise and range of references. In the book’s notes, Skibsrud ventures from Marco Polo (the source of her title) to Charles Olson to Pablo Neruda to Plato to the National Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas: “I . . . started to see how all the ideas I had so far come up with for the poem I wanted to write had to do—as everything has to do, perhaps, eventually—with the bomb. Here was pure spectacle: the dramatic split, literalized in the material itself, between the actual and potential power of form” (81). Skibsrud’s wildly associative method is intriguing yet challenging. The book’s twenty-seven poems linger on the theme of the relation of dreams to reality, and of perception to representation, but it is often difficult to identify a poem’s particular subject. The first pages of *The Description of the World* contain a series of imperatives:

Dream a narrowing; dream: a clenched  
fist, a hollow.

Dream blood, now; dream bones.

Dream flesh for bones, and veins for  
blood to travel.

Let each dreamed thing become that  
thing. (3)

The widely spaced lines are ethereal, their meaning elusive. Elsewhere, Skibsrud writes intimidatingly dense passages, as in this excerpt from “The Real Is That Which Always Comes Back to the Same Place,” a poem with a title borrowed from Jacques Lacan:

For the thought to exist singly, as for itself.  
For distances  
to collapse, be made arable, assembled  
in rows—

along which one might even travel,  
unhindered, and from  
that perspective begin to see the way that  
the farthest  
visible point from the thought itself is not  
a limit, but only  
the point at which the thought, extending  
itself infinitely  
in that direction, encounters itself.

For it to become the sudden violence of  
that encounter.

A legion of scattered forces, already  
begun at a charge.

A final, continuous, attempt to take the  
last line. (34)

Such waltzing is not easy, and Skibsrud’s affinity for abstractions and fragments makes patience a readerly virtue. An investigative, inquisitive impulse runs through the collection; in “Ars Poetica,” she contends that a poem “[s]hould unfurl slowly, not knowing what— / until it is that thing—it will be” (71). Skibsrud favours propositions, and the connections between her assertions must be pondered. “To be born is the supreme loneliness” (69), she writes. “To be born is to be the first creature” (69). “To be born is to long,

suddenly, to be born again” (70). I was reminded of Wallace Stevens while perusing *The Description of the World*. The third canto of his “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” concludes with a sibilant line that surprises with its clarity: “Life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation” (331). Yes: Skibsrud’s book is consumed by the strange relation of ideas to ideas, and of ideas to things.

By comparison, Joe Denham’s *Regeneration Machine* is distinctly recognizable in form and theme. A book-length elegy, it bears the double burden of a sensational subject and the weighty literary past. The book’s cover explains that two decades ago the author’s friend committed a robbery and then, having been pursued by the police, shot himself; the poem treats the inexplicable details sparingly and obliquely. Denham’s drawn-out sentences make *Regeneration Machine* virtually unquotable in a short space, but a late passage exemplifies his tone and technique:

I strip down to my pinstriped boxers and  
dive face-first  
into the cold Salish Sea, let the green  
deep remind me  
that right here the world is, right now the  
senses are,  
as the skin of the arbutus is curling back,  
drying black,  
the season stuttering on, unsettled, the  
garden gone  
to seed as this northern land leans back  
into winter’s  
anteroom, apprehension. (49)

Alliteration and insistent rhymes, whether simple (“Sea”/“me,” “back”/“black”/“back”) or subtle (“stuttering on”/“garden gone”), propel Denham’s compelling but rarely pretty lines. Here “strip” is cleverly made to reappear, the short vowel lengthened, in “pinstriped”; the speaker’s deshabelle is neatly mirrored by the flensed, naked arbutus.

The salty sea is no straightforward consolation. Denham frequently writes of fishing

on the open ocean, the cruelty and peril of that occupation suggesting forcefully a universal precariousness:

We were nearly two hundred miles  
offshore when the blood  
started heaving up from my gut this past  
summer, there was  
no stopping the rhythmic convulsions,  
the tunas' blood and mine  
bile-laced, intermingling on the old fir  
decking, the sea  
in it too, everywhere, the endless blue  
and high westerly waves  
towering over us hour upon hour  
unceasing . . . (35)

Anchored in northwestern seascapes, *Regeneration Machine* is a poem of severe self-criticism, a memorable lament for the “brutal, unkind, / beautiful” world (54). The dedication—“*In Memoriam* Nevin Sample 1973-1995”—inevitably brings to mind Tennyson’s poem of grief, and Denham’s digressive, associative style is cousin to the comprehensiveness of *In Memoriam A. H. H.* The sagacious A. C. Bradley observed that Tennyson’s poem presents impediments to comprehension:

Just as *Adonais* contains allusions which would not be fully intelligible to a reader ignorant of the literary history of the time, so *In Memoriam* contains references which can be understood but imperfectly from the poem itself; and as in this case the persons and events referred to belong chiefly to private life, the reader cannot be assumed to have any knowledge of them at all. (2)

Elements of *Regeneration Machine* “belong chiefly to private life” too, and Sample’s actions remain forever unfathomable. Yet Denham’s self-scrutiny illustrates the stern reckoning that all lives face when crisis descends.

For Emily Nilsen as for Denham, the crucial geography is western and coastal. In *Otolith*, her first book, she explores the possibility of anchorage—of shelter, protection, respite from travel. The dictionary lets slip that an otolith is a piece of calcium carbonate in the inner

ear that assists in the sensation of gravity and movement. In the first of two poems called “Otolith,” Nilsen defines the term somewhat differently: “Ear Stone. Annuli within vestibule. / Age concentric, dark-light, dark-light, / each season encased in the next” (25). Her poems, sensitive to contradictory desires to leave and to roam, to be balanced and to be unsettled, record geographical and meteorological details. “Fog” is only a list, but it is no ordinary list:

Eight-headed fog, plate rattling  
fog, dirt under the nails fog, fog  
of unseen trees where the blind  
follow creeks, fog fattened  
by memory, flip-sided fog  
and swimming on land fog,  
throat-bellied fog of the broken  
hearted, night fog that slipknots  
three moons to the dock.[.] (15)

And so on—for another two dozen lines. Throughout *Otolith*, Nilsen depends on repetition and sequence. Ten poems are titled “And What of the Fog?”; three “An Address to Dusk”; three “Pre-Dawn Walk”; and three “Float House.” Eight titles begin with the word “Meanwhile,” and six with “Fragile.” Topics and words recur as if to suggest that observers and poems consistently fail to capture a vital quality—to land the slippery trout. Another walk, another foggy phrase, is always needed. *Otolith* is an evocative paean to settings named and anonymous: Kingcome Inlet, the Broughton Archipelago, “Musgamagw Dzawadañenuxw Traditional Territory” (84), “the alpine meadow / beneath a ridge” (51). Nilsen’s images depict a condition of in-betweenness. In the first “Float House,” one world impinges on another: “This house contains both / land and sea, its floorboards tickled // by stickleback and herring” (16). And in the third “Address to Dusk,” evening darkens into night:

Moon rises bent  
like the rib of a deer. Stars begin  
to peck at the sky, cleaning

and drying bones  
of the day. (51)

A covenant between poet and place, *Otolith* attends almost obsessively to such commonplace and astonishing moments.

John Pass' *Forecast* is likewise tied to place and time. As the author explains, the volume brings to light writing that has been all but invisible:

The poems in this book are selected from work written in the 1970s and '80s that was published in small literary journals, in long out of print chapbooks and in my first full-length trade-edition book in 1984. With the sudden demise/restructuring of its publisher, the original Coach House Press, that first book went out of print nearly as quickly as its shorter predecessors. (11)

The resuscitated poems, youthful in subject and spirit, reflect a past that today seems far removed: "I came of age," Pass writes,

in a society devolving into conformity and anxiety, but British Columbia's southwest coast felt simultaneously timeless, gorgeous, spacious—a lagoon of potentiality welled within wild borders of vast geography, unopened history—and my path was lit with the time's late flare of Romantic idealism and Modernist authority. (12)

The settings of various poems—Wreck Beach, Stanley Park, Upper Levels Highway—will be familiar to Lower Mainlanders, but this Vancouver belongs to a sleepier era. Echoes of *Tish* sound in early works, and Earle Birney's example registers, especially in poems of location and environment. Yet "Taking Place," the first section of *Forecast*, is not entirely representative; the collection spans twenty years. Poems of married life and fatherhood, of homebuilding and home-tending, prevail. Pass is typically playful, his short lyrics wry and witty. A poet of careful observation, he writes with admirable clarity and, as in "Renaissance," a honed sense of what bears saying:

Behind the Madonnas and the Saints  
the monumental clutter of the centuries

finally it's the landscape the eye moves to—  
a refuge, a vestige of Florentine hills  
evergreen surviving marble  
and metropolis. (22)

Perhaps the sentiment would have resonated with Sveva Caetani (1917-1994), an Italian Canadian painter who lived in Vernon, BC. Daphne Marlatt's *Reading Sveva* begins with an extended introduction to Caetani's life and works, and a statement of authorial intention. Marlatt explains that her archival research in Vernon led to an unusual intimacy between the living poet and her subject, to whom the poetry is often directly addressed: "In these one-sided dialogues with her, I have tried to read some of the energy of her questioning, reconsidering, and appraising 'self'" (8). Marlatt's introduction is followed by a long poem, "Between Brush Strokes," which has something in common with Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*. Kroetsch asked "How do you grow a poet?" (38) in Heisler, Alberta, and Marlatt asks "how does a painter grow?" (16) in the equally improbable Vernon. She replies indirectly in the poem "gifts":

given linguistic  
ebullience

given Italian, French, English  
some Hebrew, a little  
Arabic

given inner restraint

given laughter, light.[.] (63)

The shorter poems in *Reading Sveva* are generally ekphrastic, describing the practices of looking and reading as well as the works of art themselves, six of which are reproduced in colour. Probing the possibilities and imprecisions of language, Marlatt is perpetually curious. "[W]here words meet paint," she writes in "driving at," the final poem, "two subjectivities meet / tangential stories seep across / discrete lineages" (71). The textual convergence of strangers gives rise to a fascinating account of a poet's reading of a painter's life. Marlatt's interpretation

is governed by “the ontological question expressed in much of [Caetani’s] writing”: “What is the role of human consciousness in the larger orders of the cosmos?” (7).

Unlike the other volumes under review, Gregory Scofield’s *Witness, I Am* is decidedly public in orientation. Its lyric forms and mixing of languages present no great interpretative difficulty. The subject matter, however, is difficult indeed—painful, in fact, and urgent. The biographical note states that “Scofield is Red River Metis of Cree, Scottish and European descent whose ancestry can be traced to the fur trade and to the Metis community of Kinesota, Manitoba” (91). (“[N]ot the little m Metis / not the accent é Mé-tis” [84], he writes in “Since When,” “but a stand-my-ground Metis / lay my bones at Batoche Metis / kill-me-if-you-can Metis” [85].) Scofield is an observer, especially of tragedies, and his poems explore, with speech that verges on song, the meaning of knowing one’s place in the world. “Muskrat Woman,” the first section of *Witness, I Am*, is a long poem about a flood—in Scofield’s words, “a retelling, a reimagining of a much longer *âtayôh-kêwina—Cree Sacred Story*” (9). Haunted by allusions to missing and murdered Indigenous women, it laments injustices and envisions the world’s recreation. Violence, Scofield implies, is deeply rooted. Having created the animals and people, *kise-manito* (“*The Creator*”) instructs *niskam-nâpêw* (“*First Man*”), whose disregard for sacred wisdom has dire effects:

*Take good care of my people,  
And teach them how to live. Show them  
The plants and roots that will kill them  
Teach them to respect my creation.  
Do not let the animals, the people quarrel.*

But he didn’t listen. He let creatures  
Do as they wished and soon there was  
Much quarrelling and shedding of blood. (17)

After “Muskrat Woman” comes a series of short, generally autobiographical lyrics

grouped in two sections, “Ghost Dance” and “Dangerous Sound.” The poems concern the living and the dead—those who have survived forms of colonial brutality, and those who must be remembered. Scofield’s distressing acts of testimony, mourning, and dissent suggest convincingly the importance of the literary arts to public discourse about matters of grave consequence.

As these seven books attest, there are many splendours in contemporary Canadian poetry—countless whorls and zigzags of language for commentators to follow. When the ineluctable anthologists come, collecting specimens for new Oxfords and Penguins, they will find no shortage of fantastic creatures whose private faces deserve public places.

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**Articles & Opinions and Notes**

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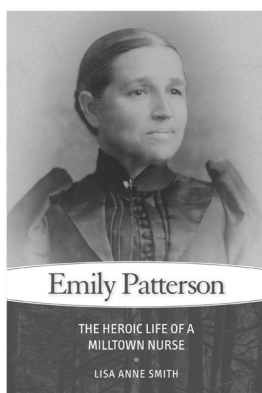
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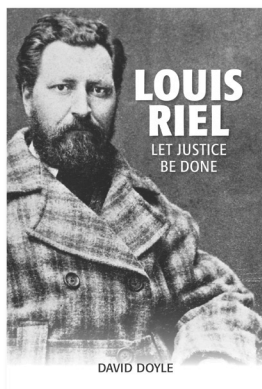


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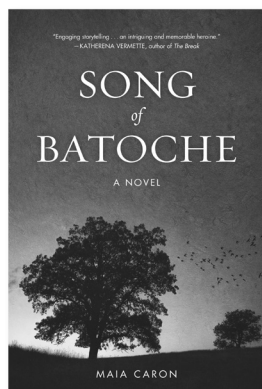


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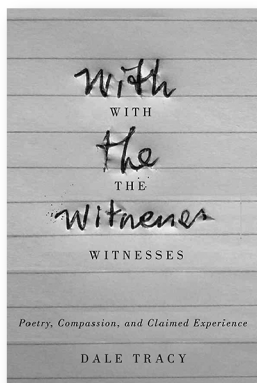
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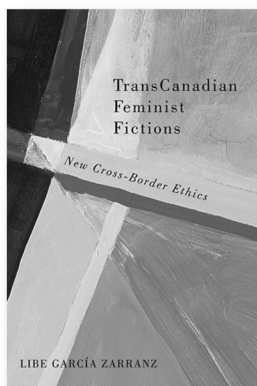
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