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

Editorial

The Cultural Politics of Pandemics Representations

Christine Kim

Writing of the AIDS epidemic as both a "medical and cultural crisis" (2), Paula Treichler draws our attention to the meanings and metaphors that shape our understandings of AIDS as well as those it has affected. Far from being irrelevant, theory becomes absolutely necessary as we seek to "understand the AIDS epidemic, its interaction with culture and language, the intellectual debates and political initiatives that the epidemic has engendered . . . and its possibilities for guiding us toward a more humane and enlightened future" (1-2). Treichler's examination of AIDS as a discursive formation has helped to guide many of us as we attempt to make sense of our complicated and often contradictory experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. That the coronavirus has circulated globally and yet been mediated so differently by local circumstances and national contexts calls into question the very naming of this event as a global pandemic. Given our differing abilities to protect ourselves from the coronavirus by taking measures such as social distancing, handwashing, and vaccination, which presume fairly spacious living and working conditions, access to running water, and wealthy governments, should we instead conceptualize the pandemic as a series of localized events rather than a global one? Who is imagined to be the subject of these national and global discourses of pandemic public health, and perhaps more importantly, who is excluded? Treichler signals comparable concerns about the cultural politics of representation when she addresses the AIDS epidemic and argues that

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war is perhaps the most useful metaphor to understand it. For Treichler, attention to these concerns means underscoring the differently distributed effects that the AIDS epidemic has had on the public. She notes that "AIDS is a war whose participants have been in the trenches for years, surrounded daily by death and dying, yet only gradually has the rest of the population come to know that there is a war at all" (2-3). Building on this observation, we can see that our collective understandings of global events such as the AIDS epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic can only ever be partial if they do not centre marginalized voices.

To reinforce the need to critique the cultural politics of representation, Treichler turns to Stuart Hall's essay "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," which argues for the importance of holding in tension the political and theoretical questions we ask about representations. Hall offers AIDS as a powerful example of how such an approach can reframe our understandings of historical events, and refuses to see the study of representations as separate from those of drug efficacy or life expectancy:

> I don't agree with the way in which this dilemma is often posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people dying out there. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? (285)

Hall is, of course, absolutely correct as he argues that it matters whose stories are told and whose are silenced. If we consider his question within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes clear that we cannot hope to move towards more just futures or even a new, more equitable normal unless our understanding of the pandemic includes those "who are never spoken of." For example, increasing representations of how pandemic life affects people with disabilities and chronic illness help convey the need for more permanent accessibility measures. Many scholars have turned to illness and disability studies as we collectively experience the kinds of isolation, digital mediation, and physical restrictions that some people with disabilities and chronic illnesses live with daily. As these scholars demonstrate, part of the problem with the dominant representation of pandemic life is that it has focused on these conditions as temporary. While the pandemic has shown

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us that accessibility measures can be implemented, these may disappear again once the pandemic is officially declared over.

I first proposed the idea of a special issue on pandemics back in June 2020, a month before I officially took up the editorship at *Canadian Literature*. The World Health Organization designated the outbreak of COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, so at the time, it was only a few months old. Many people, including myself, fully expected that it would be over by the fall of 2020. That was obviously not the case. Now, in the beginning of July 2021, the language surrounding COVID-19 in Canada has slowly started to shift from one of emergency to that of management as vaccination rates rise and caseloads drop. The dissonances within the biomedical dimensions of the pandemic are difficult to reconcile, as are those between its competing social, cultural, and medical meanings. On the one hand, we are seeing a loosening of restrictions in Canada, but on the other hand, we are repeatedly warned about the more transmissible Delta variant that is spreading throughout many other parts of the world, in large part because of a global vaccine shortage. In British Columbia, where I work and write, we have repeatedly been asked by provincial health authorities and the provincial government to trust the science that has informed their decision-making processes. But as Treichler's words remind us, doing so is neither straightforward nor easy. The public health measures encouraged us to socially distance and stay at home to lessen the spread of the coronavirus, but such measures were not always possible for those required to work in person, that experienced domestic violence, or were without stable housing. Questions of representation again come to mind as we reflect upon how these measures were intended to intersect with other forces and factors—such as pre-existing health conditions, mental health issues, and escalating racialized and Indigenous violences—that make each of us differently vulnerable. In other words, how could we follow COVID-19 restrictions that did not account for how COVID intersected with the other aspects of our lives and the structures that regulate them?

Here, I find it useful to turn to John Nguyet Erni and Ted Striphas' introduction to their special issue on the cultural politics of COVID-19. Also inspired by Treichler's work, Erni and Striphas reframe COVID-19 by

> recogniz[ing] the multiplicity of the COVID-19 pandemic—that is, to refuse to accept it as a public health crisis primarily, as though it were somehow separable from these

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> highly charged events; or, in a different vein, to reject the idea that these events were merely the backdrop against which COVID unfolded. COVID-19 was and remains so overwhelming because it is not one thing but many things simultaneously; or rather, because it refers to a series of crises superimposed with such pressure as to leave one wondering where even to begin at all. (212, emphasis original)

By approaching the pandemic in this way, we are able to think about its biomedical dimensions in relation to the political and economic struggles of the past year as well as to the collective experiences of anxiety and depression, boredom, and Zoom fatigue. In other words, rather than seeing the pandemic solely through a public health lens of case counts, R numbers, and ICU capacities, we can also consider how the affective, scientific, and political aspects of this moment are mediated through each other.

Understanding what the pandemic has meant to each of us also requires engaging with the local contexts of our experiences. Writing from Hong Kong, Erni describes how his experience of COVID involved an intersection of political and biomedical forces given that the spread of the coronavirus occurred as protests against the Anti-Extradition Law Movement were taking place (217). Moreover, for Hong Kongers, many aspects of the pandemic have been eerily reminiscent of the SARS outbreak in 2003, which similarly overlapped with political demonstrations against governmental attempts to enact a restrictive law (217). As Hong Kong had already experienced SARS, health screening and quarantine measures were easy to implement and many people were still in the habit of wearing masks when they felt ill. But the memory of SARS also informed Hong Kong's COVID experience in less visible ways, as few people "who lived through it forget the profound sense of a diminishing city marked by the intersection of a biological pathogen and a political disease. This feeling would be repeated in 2020 by another intersection of a protest and an epidemic" (218). The familiarity of pandemic then as a set of public health protocols, a time of political tension, and as a "diminishing" of the city are central to understanding what the COVID-19 pandemic has meant for Hong Kong.

In considering the cluster of meanings attached to COVID in Canada, I want to hold onto Erni and Striphas' approach to the pandemic as a series of superimposed crises, and to their call for "*radically contextualizing* COVID, as well as the broader crucible of issues related to disease, health, and

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wellbeing" (221, emphasis original). For those of us able to work from home, the pandemic has likely been the most time we have ever spent inside our domestic spaces. The various restrictions and circuit breakers imposed by provincial governments have meant that we have spent long periods of time away from our extended families, friends, and colleagues, confined to our homes and neighbourhoods, and often accompanied by children who have been out of school or childcare. While many of us have experienced extreme feelings of loneliness, heightened anxiety, boredom, and sadness, we have also experienced much guilt about our predominantly middle-class experiences of being able to stay safe within our homes, complete with modern "appliances, devices, and systems that promise so much, but deliver so little" (Burke), while others have risked their health to provide us with groceries, medical care, and other essential services. Sequestered within our homes, we have become what Andrew Burke via Baudrillard calls "atmosphere engineers" as we organize our physical households and set our Zoom backgrounds "to generate a specific sort of mediated atmosphere." That many people have sought to renovate their homes in large and small ways during the pandemic is unsurprising since it has functioned as a "substitute ordering of the world in the face of a world that is very definitely not under my control" (Burke).

While the pandemic has been marked by long stretches of isolation as we lived through tight restrictions, it has also been a period of increased violence against Indigenous and racialized peoples, as well as collective resistance against such injustices in the form of movements like Black Lives Matter and Idle No More. From the end of May and throughout the month of June, the existence of more than a thousand unmarked residential "school" graves has been confirmed: on May 27, 2021, the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc Nation confirmed the remains of 215 children; on June 4, 104 potential graves were discovered by the Sioux Valley Dakota Nation at Brandon Indian Residential School in Manitoba; on June 24, 2021, it was announced that 751 unmarked graves were located near the former site of Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan, associated with the Cowessess First Nation (O'Neill). And on June 30, 2021, the Lower Kootenay Band located 182 remains near the former St. Eugene's Mission Residential School. As these findings have garnered public attention, Indigenous scholars and critics have

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continued to remind us that the existence of these graves are not new discoveries. Crystal Gail Fraser notes in a Twitter thread that "Indigenous Elders, Nations, and communities have been pointing towards the[m] for decades." These unmarked graves exist by design, as "[n]early all [Indian Residential Schools] had an official graveyard, but many had 'unofficial' graveyards too. This was reflective of the point of the system—to kill our ancestors, our cultures, our sovereignty, and steal land + resources" (@ crystalfraser). Jessica O'Neill also makes this point, noting that the existence of graveyards "is not new information. Residential School survivors have been telling us they're there for generations." If we centre the stories of residential "school" survivors and their family members, it becomes impossible to think of the pandemic as an unprecedented event. Instead, we must consider it within longer histories of struggle, violence, and devastation for Indigenous communities.

The contributions to this special issue offer us a range of ways of reflecting upon pandemics and Canadian cultural productions and contexts. "Race, Visuality, and COVID-19," a forum curated by Danielle Wong, draws together scholars, artists, and curators based in Canada and the US who interrogate the visual cultures of the pandemic. As Wong writes in her introduction to the forum, within such "discourses, the pandemic is made to 'reveal' a lot, namely pre-existing structural inequities and the ongoing conditions of global capitalism produced by Empire. Yet, many of us already know the truth of these realities. What, then, does the pandemic show us about *how* race reveals?" In this forum, Wong and other critics take up the question, "How does COVID-19 engender ways of seeing and not seeing racially?"

The question of how the pandemic is mediated through our bodies and technologies is also taken up by Emilia Nielsen, Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod, and Sadie Barker. Camlot and McLeod's "Pandemic Listening: Critical Annotations on a Podcast Made in Social Isolation" resonates in provocative ways with Wong's forum as Camlot and McLeod investigate how the pandemic has changed how we listen to each other and our environments. Growing out of a podcast by the authors, this article (which is in fact designed to be read while listing to the podcast) offers thoughtful insights into pandemic practices of listening to noise, signals, and voices. Sadie Barker's "'The Quest for Interpretive Agency': Zoomxiety in the

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Realm of Literature" turns our attention to how Zoom has mediated many of our pandemic experiences and produced the pandemic phenomenon of "Zoomxiety." For Barker, Zoom and literature can be used to interrogate each other.

If Wong's forum and Barker's and Camlot and McLeod's articles ask us to reflect upon visual and auditory practices during the pandemic, Nielsen's directs our attention to how chronically ill bodies experience the pandemic, and more specifically, how they experience time. Nielsen's "Chronic Poetics and the Poetry of Chronic Illness (in a Global Pandemic)" weaves together autobiographical reflections with critical readings of poetry in order to "insis[t] that the poetics of chronically ill people be registered in this historical moment where a virus is not just the backdrop of our lives but a reality lived out in each of our daily interactions."

Heidi Tiedemann Darroch's and Quan Zhou's articles turn to other epidemics that preceded our experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Darroch's "The War at Home: Writing Influenza in Alice Munro's 'Carried Away' and Kevin Kerr's *Unity (1918)*" compares Munro's story and Kerr's play for their depictions of the 1918 influenza pandemic. The essay argues that those who perished from influenza were commemorated in radically different ways than those who died during World War I because influenza deaths were a "unique tragedy" whereas combat deaths were "explicable within a framework of public heroism." Quan Zhou's "Disease, Desire, and Devotion: Mobilities and Becoming-(M)other in Jen Sookfong Lee's *The Better Mother*" returns to the AIDS epidemic. Zhou reads Lee's novel for its representations of mobilities and interracial love and caring.

Clint Burnham's "The Plague of Orientalism: Reading Kevin Chong in the Pandemic" offers a Lacanian reading of Chong's *The Plague*, which is a response to Camus' novel of the same title, but set instead in Vancouver in the 2010s. Burnham theorizes the novel, and by extension Vancouver, in terms of its racial unconscious. For Burnham, Chong's *The Plague* is valuable for how it suggests "that white supremacism . . . [is] fundamentally not all that different from liberal (or even radical, abolitionist) multiculturalism." This special issue also contains a short interview of Chong conducted by Burnham. During their conversation, Chong and Burnham discuss (among other things) the rewriting of Camus as an alternate history of Vancouver.

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John Paul Catungal and Ethel Tungohan also examine racial narratives in their dialogue entitled "Asian Racial Narratives on Repeat: Reflections on Collaborative Research on Asian International Students in COVID Times." Catungal and Tungohan discuss their current research on Asian international students' experiences of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic. As the authors note, their intention in undertaking this project is to get "a little bit closer to the lived and embodied quality of researching anti-Asianness in COVID times, not only as scholars, but also as Asian Canadians." Read together, the contributions to this special issue return us to the questions about which subjects are represented, how are they represented, and how we encounter these representations in pandemic times.

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Forum

Race, Visuality, and COVID-19

Pandemic Racial Visions[1]

Danielle Wong

The global pandemic poses a visual problem. Imperceptible to the naked eye and transmitted through small particles and droplets in the air, the SARS-CoV-2 virus is represented in public health, science, and news media via electron microscopic imaging, maps, animal vectors, and other iconography that narrativize "the uncertainty of an invisible threat" (Ostherr 708). These figurations of the invisible pathogen, especially seen in global maps that chart how COVID-19 spread to the Global North from a raced elsewhere, produce what Kirsten Ostherr calls a "narrative logic of causality" that underlies racist and xenophobic discourses of contagion (708, 713). Such racist logics of causality materialize in brutally appropriative ways, seen in the staggering increase of reported anti-Asian violence in Canada[2] and the US, and in the use of these statistics to justify calls for increased policing in communities made most vulnerable under the carceral state.

Journalistic coverage and government messaging around COVID-19 reflect the idea that the virus "does not see race" and only sees our networks, which at once places the onus of public health on the individual and implies that transmission traces the structural. It is increasingly clear that we cannot understand biological contagion outside of the political and the social, as the pandemic's toll continues to fall unevenly across racial and class lines. The Canadian government reports that the rate of COVID-19 cases among First Nations people living on a reserve is 183% higher than the rate for the rest of the population in Canada, and data collected by the City of Toronto, which is

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one of only a few public health units in Canada collecting race-based information, indicates that Black people and other people of colour comprise 83% of reported cases as of July 2020 ("Confirmed Cases"; Cheung). The gaps in data collection are also framed through the (non)metaphor of sight. For instance, a *CBC News* article on the lack of race-based data collection across Canada published at the onset of the outbreak begins with the question: "How do you solve a problem you can't see?" (Nasser).

But the idea that COVID-19's race problem is merely a visual problem assumes that the solution is for the state to *see better*. Not only is augmented vision—seeing the racialized body more clearly—central to logics of state surveillance and biometrics, but it also implies that the numbers emerge neutrally, as if these disparities are not by settler-colonial design. Of course, this debate about race's visual logics is not a new one. Paul Gilroy notes that while the modern idea of race operated on the scale of the anatomical body, the truths produced from seeing racial difference at this scale have been "left behind" with the introduction of microscopic technologies and regimes, which tend to the molecular (193). While Gilroy argues that screenic mediations render race an "after-image," Simone Browne, following Frantz Fanon, complicates such a shift by arguing that biometrics, as a "technology of measuring the living body," entails processes of racialization or "digital epidermalization" that make certain bodies ontologically insecure (134). Race, after all, has historically negotiated the invisible and visible—or, as Wendy Chun puts it, race is *mediation*, "a vehicle for revelation" (14). In COVID-19 discourse, the pandemic is made to "reveal" a lot, namely pre-existing structural inequities and the ongoing conditions of global capitalism produced by Empire. Yet, many of us already know the truth of these realities. What, then, does the pandemic show us about *how* race reveals?

The authors in this forum respond to these tensions of revelation in their critical reflections on emerging COVID-19 visual cultures from perspectives in critical race, migration, gender, public health, and media studies. Written by scholars, an artist, and an art programmer based in Canada and the US, these essays examine the shifting significations and metaphors of the medical face mask, border securitization and visual discourses of bordering, the role of social media in shaping pandemic conditions, and artistic productions and practices that explore the risks and pleasures of mediated racial touch in a

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time of contagion. This forum emerged out of a series of conversations that began as virtual panels in 2020, including a public roundtable, titled "COVID-19 Vulnerabilities: Asian Racialization, Coalition, and Creativity," that brought together community organizers, artists, and scholars located in North America and Asia, as well as artists' conversations and screenings of Seoul-based web art duo YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES' recent artworks, *CHARLIE CHAN AND THE YELLOW PERIL* and *GUNS 'N ASIANS.* With a focus on Asian and Asian North American racialization, cultural production, and migration, this collection of essays moves beyond the question, "How do you solve a problem you can't see?" and instead attends to the inquiry: How does COVID-19 engender ways of seeing and not seeing racially?

NOTES

1 I am grateful for amanda wan's edits on this forum.
2 According to one study, major cities in Canada are seeing a six to seven hundred per cent increase in reported anti-Asian attacks in 2021 from the previous year (Liu).

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Our Masks, Our Selves

Thy Phu

2003 was a turning point nationally and globally, a time when SARS raged in Vancouver, Toronto, and parts of East and Southeast Asia. It was also a personal turning point for me. This was the year I completed my doctorate in California and moved back to Toronto in the waning days of the outbreak. Though panic had dissipated, fear lingered. At my graduation ceremony, friends gave me a medical mask. In the front part covering the mouth, crooked block letters handwritten with a Sharpie spelled out the label: SARS.

My friends' gag gift to mark my passage from Berkeley to Toronto was odd but also fitting. The mask is a boundary technology that separates us from others. I took their joke to mean there was no going back to these friendships or to life as it had been. As I posed for the camera, academic robes flowing, mask dangling by elastic straps, I wondered, what did my friends see?

The SARS outbreak prompted me to reflect on what the mask revealed and concealed about bodies and communities brought together and split apart by disease, suffering, death, and survival. In my first book, I wrote about the mask as "Sino-sign," a racializing discourse of anti-Asian sentiment that seethed beneath the civil veneer of Canadian multiculturalism. Often worn in Asia to filter pollution, the mask became one of the most visible emblems of the SARS crisis. I sought to understand how the mask accrued meaning in excess of its utilitarian function of reducing the spread of contagion. I wanted to make sense of its "stickiness," to invoke Sara Ahmed's term, to grasp why the mask's stigmatizing mark attached to some bodies more than to others.

I was moved to write about the mask for another personal reason. Around the time that I was preparing for my move, Tecla Lin, my husband's mother, died after several months on a ventilator. She was one of two Asian Canadian nurses in Toronto who succumbed to illness after treating SARS patients. In subsequent reports, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario highlighted the increased risk that care workers faced, in part as a result of poorly fitting masks and inadequate personal protective equipment. As numerous critics point out, outbreaks expose systemic inequities, not least

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because people of colour are more likely to work in underpaid and under-resourced service industries and so are exposed to disproportionately greater risk of infection. Dominant narratives about contagion also betray latent and overt Sinophobia, evident in the frequency of attacks—verbal, physical, and political—on Chinese and other Asian bodies as sources and vectors of disease. Aggie J. Yellow Horse, Karen Leong, and Karen Kuo describe this phenomenon as "viral racisms" (316).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the mask has re-emerged as a sign of our times. In this pandemic, Sinophobia is palpable in the moral panic evinced about primitive tastes and backward practices, unhygienic conditions at foreign wet markets, and unseemly appetites for exotic animals. Sinophobia is also the force that animates conspiracy theories, which blame China for concocting the novel coronavirus with the intention of unleashing it upon the world—theories that have gone viral despite efforts to debunk them. Put simply, the latest form of Sinophobia in this pandemic combines classic Yellow Peril yarns with the far-fetched fantasies of techno-orientalism, according to cultural critics Lok Siu and Claire Chun. Because it obscures the face, the mask fits all too easily into Yellow Peril stereotypes about Asian inscrutability. Moreover, the sedimented prejudices of Sinophobia dovetail with classic orientalism. In Quebec, although masks are now, at the time of my writing, mandatory in indoor public spaces and businesses, Bill 21 still stands, and so the province continues to prohibit display of religious symbols (including face coverings like the niqab and burqa) by public sector workers in workspaces. Quebec's inconsistent laws on masking betray paternalistic fears about oriental despotism.

My work on visual culture centres the question of visuality, what becomes knowable and what is concealed when an object or social practice is made visible. The question of visuality is especially fraught when it comes to the SARS outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic, when the very cause of contagion is invisible to the human eye and when social distancing entails that we see, love, and live digitally, through screens. Novel diseases are terrifying in part because of the epistemological uncertainty they provoke. As Black Canadian artist Michèle Pearson Clarke astutely observes, "We can't photograph this virus, which perhaps makes it more threatening for some folks."

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Perhaps to compensate for this threat, media reports are accompanied by artistic renderings of the coronavirus as spiky crimson orbs glowing ominously—rather unlike the unspectacular blobs revealed by electron microscopes. Epistemological uncertainty might also account for why Elaine Whittaker's photographic series *Screened For* (2015) resonates so poignantly. The series features selfies of the Toronto-based artist wearing masks adorned with hand-painted illustrations of the most contagious infectious diseases of our time. While we may not be able to photograph the virus, Whittaker's selfies show glimpses of something else, formless forms that are abstract, strange, and striking. Plains Cree artist Ruth Cuthand grapples with the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous bodies. Her *Surviving: COVID-19* features a mask embellished with elaborate, colourful glass beadwork in the shape of the coronavirus, bringing to the mask's textile surface a history laden with the viral racisms that target Indigenous peoples. Similarly inspired, Métis artists Nathalie Bertin and Lisa Shepherd started a Facebook group, "Breathe," to spotlight, as the site explains, "a collection of traditionally crafted masks demonstrating resiliency through 21st century pandemic" ("Breathe"). The creation of online communities of self-expression, in the form of the selfie and through Facebook groups, provides potent counter-images that oppose viral racisms.

Since I began writing about the mask years ago, I have become more and more struck by the incongruity between its persistent significations and its flexibility as a metaphor. On the one hand, there is the mask's undeniably "sticky" evocation of Yellow Peril stereotypes, its viral racisms. On the other hand, the mask's meanings have become increasingly malleable. Whittaker, Cuthand, Bertin, and Shepherd are just a few of the many artists whose embellished masks seek to make new statements about past and current racism, ongoing precarity, and continued survival, despite these separations.

Artists are not the only ones who wish to see and say something different about masks. When free templates and instructions for making DIY masks began circulating on social media, it was hard not to get swept up in the can-do spirit of enterprise. Although I take contrarian pride in my inability to sew, I admired such resourcefulness, a reminder that anyone could, in the face of the unknown, accomplish, if they wished, at least one task, one stitch at a time. I started receiving homemade masks as gifts from my neighbour's

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kid, from my mother (who is only slightly better than me with needle and thread), and from my husband's stepmother, who delivered dozens and dozens of hand-sewn masks in many varied patterns. These earnest gestures were akin to, but worlds apart from, the ironies of my friends' long-ago goodbye present. At the same time, as cultural critic Minh-Ha T. Pham cautions, celebrations of mask-making as "quarantine feminism" obscure further inequities. Exploited garment workers, who toil in unsafe conditions to ensure the smooth transition—or, in pandemic parlance, pivoting—of the fashion industry, are denied the very masks they labour to produce. By no means invisible, these systems of exploitation are largely overlooked.

In this current pandemic, even more so than during SARS, our masks tell us stories about ourselves, about what we share as we hold fast to hope in the midst of fear. With SARS, masks seemed to ostracize, setting apart their wearers as potential bearers of infection, communities bounded by fear. With COVID-19, a disease with asymptomatic carriers, the mask perhaps conjures a new—if still imperfect—notion of community, bounded by a common desire to protect each other.

Whether we are makers or wearers of masks, or both, many of us seek to shape our own meanings, to see and say something witty, fashionable, beautiful, and uniquely our own through our masks, while for many others the mask marks further exploitation. Even those who refuse to wear masks contribute to this clamour, stridently embracing individual rights over collective responsibility. Because we can see masks—at a time when we cannot, should not, see most of our friends and much of our family—this boundary technology seems an apt emblem of intimate insurmountability, how close and yet how far we are from each other.

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Our Pandemic Conditions

Clare Jen

In 2002, social media platforms and smartphones had yet to ascend as technological mediators in widespread news media consumption. Facebook would not launch until February 2004. Apple would not release its first iPhone until 2007. Instead, print news media served as a central source for circulating visual imagery related to the 2002-2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Published by news media conglomerates, these print images, particularly photographs and data infographics, existed as material objects, capable of being creased, dog-eared, and circulated by readers who could pick up the latest issue from their local pharmacies and newsstands.

In earlier work, I analyzed visual images from the SARS outbreak published in mainstream news media, US government publications, and scientific literature. A trio of human-technology-border figures emerged as principal visual configurations: masked Asian/American women, masked white American citizens, and unmasked white masculine experts (Jen 109). The prevalence of the masked Asian/American woman in photographs and other visual imagery highlighted the extent to which SARS discourse racialized, nationed, gendered, and sexualized the global crisis as an orientalized and feminized threat to the nation's health and security. Photos and accompanying captions also framed this figure as a responsible masked mother who ensures her children, too, are masked and protected from

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infection. Moreover, by masking herself, she responsibly protects the world from her potential contagion. She is produced simultaneously as a risky and responsible subject, epitomizing both Yellow Peril and model minority. Yet, her riskiness and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. In the era of Amy Chua's tiger mom, the responsible Asian mother can easily elide into the stereotypical hyper-responsible Chinese American mother, single-minded in her Confucian-influenced approach to child-raising, an approach criticized by many as being too close to child abuse by Western standards and too academically menacing (Corrigan). For those orientalized as threatening and blameworthy, enduring the first pandemic of the twenty-first century involved surviving not only potential SARS contagion and disease, but also heightened anti-Asian racism.

Now, almost twenty years later, SARS-CoV-2 has emerged as the disease-causing agent behind the current COVID-19 pandemic. Epidemiologically, the COVID-19 pandemic is far outpacing the global SARS outbreak. US officials report over 28.5 million cases with over 510,000 deaths as of February 28, 2021 (CDC). US populations of colour—particularly Latinx, Indigenous, and Black people—experience COVID-19-related hospitalization rates close to four times that of white populations (Rabin). The Canadian government reports 866,503 cases with close to 22,000 deaths as of February 28, 2021 (Public Health Agency of Canada). In Toronto, Black and other people of colour are overrepresented in case numbers (Cheung). Meanwhile, a vocal, increasingly violent contingent rejects public health measures as unfounded incursions on individual liberty and economic freedom. This faction denies the existence of SARS-CoV-2 and its COVID-19 disease, while paradoxically blaming Asians, Asian Canadians, and Asian Americans for the pandemic. I wade through these difficult moments as an opportunity to reflect upon how we can make sense of our current pandemic condition.

A play on Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), our ongoing *pandemic condition* is one of competing narratives and epistemologies made palpable on capacitive touch screens and circulatable via social media. In contrast to the SARS outbreak, content documenting COVID-19 pandemic conditions is not produced solely by global media conglomerates. Everyday people produce COVID-19 visual discourse with iPhones and social media, as well as with smart security cameras; they can record, post, and circulate visual

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imagery for followers to consume, like, and retweet. The spring, summer, and fall of 2020 saw social media circulate user-witnessed videos of overwhelmed hospital intensive care units and macabre morgue trucks, Black Lives Matter (BLM)-led protests against state-sanctioned anti-Black violence, right-wing counterprotests against BLM and local and state government public health mandates, and election rallies during which racist and nativist rhetoric like "kung flu" and "China virus" became normalized. Disturbingly, anti-Asian violence has substantially increased in the US and Canada. A United Nations report notes this increase, as well as the US government's lack of response (Achiume et al.). Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 717% in Vancouver from 2019 to 2020, and 867% in New York City (Zussman; Chen). Surveillance cameras and smartphones capture video evidence of anti-Asian crimes, which serves to raise awareness among certain connected communities and networks as well as on mainstream news. Circulated videos and photos of racialized and gendered crimes—when combined with social media users posting and circulating personal accounts of anti-Asian taunting, harassment, assaults, and murder—present visual evidence and personal accounts of the existence, prevalence, and increased incidences of anti-Asian violence. These contribute to public knowledge that anti-Asian racism exists, is widespread, and can take the form of physical violence. Akin to the #MeToo movement, Asian American survivors of anti-Asian hate started tweeting about their own painful past experiences with racist and sexist violence. Their narratives addressed the shame of silence—about their families not reporting incidents to the police due to language barriers, fears of retribution, fears that they would not be believed, and silence within their own families due to the perceived shame of victimhood. The vividness of these circulating videos, photos, and testimonials serves as compelling evidence, even proof, that these harms are severe, that their felt pain is real and enduring, and that past and current racist conditions are unacceptable. This groundswell of collective consciousness-raising on social media arguably spread into other influential domains. As an example, the US Senate recently approved Senator Mazie Hirono's "COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act" with unusually broad bipartisan support.

Our current pandemic conditions are, in part, shaped and constituted by online forums where emotions and affective epistemologies of the marginalized

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and vulnerable can take form. Users share affective responses, like feelings of fear, outrage, sadness, and disgust, with empathetic understanding prompting expressions of solidarity and support. Adult children express distress when their Asian American elderly parents venture out of the house. Tweets, like "As someone part Korean, my mother has expressed her fear for her 86 year old mother often. So many don't realize the hate build up that is causing people to attack even the elderly and helpless," are in conversation with a widely circulated video of nineteen-year-old Antoine Watson allegedly fatally assaulting eighty-four-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee in San Francisco (@AMomInTheWorld; Fuller). Social media and mobile devices now position the lay public as witness bearers who provide testimonies—their gazes fixed upon fleeting yet intense moments of recorded racialized violence that they then comment upon and retweet. Messages of support, solidarity, and defiance with hashtags like #StopAsianHate, as well as photos and videos from anti-Asian hate protests, additionally shape our pandemic condition.

Compared to the SARS outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic exists in a different political, cultural, and technological milieu. Wielding social media as a narrative tool, the public plays a key role in the production of visual pandemic discourse. Given these differences, along with epidemiological differences between the two global outbreaks, I reflect upon the trio of human-border-technology figures from SARS visual discourse that I examined in my earlier work. For example, in what ways is the masked Asian/American woman still applicable for making sense of our ongoing pandemic condition? In Canadian imagery, Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer, was the target of a Conservative Member of Parliament's Sinophobic tweet: "Dr. Theresa Tam . . . has failed Canadians. Dr. Tam must go! Canada must remain sovereign over decisions. . . . Chinese Communist propaganda must never again have a say over Canada's public health" (@DerekSloanCPC). Social media comments decried Sloan's accusations as sexist and racist (Krause). How do Sloan's accusations reify the *unmasked white masculine expert*, such that when an Asian Canadian woman serves as the nation's top health officer, her medical expertise and allegiances are easily impugned through nativist, racist, and sexist illogic? Do significations of un/masking take on additional symbolic meaning with respect to fears of anti-Asian violence? A Twitter user explains imposed safety measures on their

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parents: "IF they [parents] have to go to a mall for urgent items I gave them a time limit to keep my elderly parents out of sight of any person who might attach [*sic*] them because they're a pair of weak and old Asian couple" (@WWHdotcom). To *mask* is not only to protect oneself and others from viral infection but figuratively and literally to marginalize—to keep oneself and loved ones inside and away from the gaze, anger, and violence of nativist, racist, and misogynist factions.

The surfacing and circulation of social media testimonies was especially significant prior to the March 2021 mass shootings in Atlanta. User-generated social media prior to March 18 consequentially provided a digital springboard for collective support and organizing at both national and local levels against rising anti-Asian violence. On March 18, Robert Aaron Long killed eight people, including six Asian/American women—Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Soon Chung Park, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yue—at Gold Spa, Aromatherapy Spa, and Young's Asian Massage ("Atlanta Spa Shootings"). Public statements made by local law enforcement trivialized the tragedy and, in turn, the value of Asian/American women's lives, when Captain Jay Baker explained that Long was having a "bad day" as he sought to "eliminate" sources of sexual "temptation" (Carmon). Mainstream news media sensationally reported on the suspect's purported sex addition, thus casting the victims as racially and sexually immoral—a manoeuvre that reveals how anti-Asian racism is gendered and sexualized, with such figurations of the sexually immoral Asian woman historically deployed to deny migration and US citizenship rights. Meanwhile, US news media managed to underreport a witness report that the suspect uttered "Kill all Asians" during the shootings (Carmon). Thus, the either-or question of whether the slayings were racially motivated or sexually driven takes ongoing precedence in mainstream news coverage. Framing the situation as an either-or conjecture exacerbates the historic racialization, gendering, and sexualization of Asian/American women as invisible in US race and labour discourses, while they are simultaneously made hypervisible as a perpetually foreign, model-minoritized, sexually submissive, and transnational economic underclass. These duelling questions enable skeptics to deny the humanity of Asian/American people, as well as the harms and violences they endure.

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COVID-19 visual discourse is characterized by the sharing of localized knowledges and expressions of epistemic authority by an array of populations and communities. Critical studies and conspiracy theories have become strange bedfellows, as they destabilize the epistemic authority of dominant institutions, specifically powerful biomedical ones. What have these parallel subversions borne? What conditions are necessary for our populace to survive and thrive during these un/common pandemic times? Could we strategically cohere a narrative that is grounded, at least in part, in the epistemic authority of medical science and public health, in the lived experiences, histories, and activisms of marginalized and vulnerable peoples, and in mandatory examinations of nativist white supremacy, imperialism, and misogyny? Such conditions are necessary for bearing witness to disparities in pandemic survivorship, for decreasing local SARS-CoV-2 transmission in all communities, and for querying the supposed normality of our pre-pandemic conditions.

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Visualizing COVID-19 Emergency in India

Neel Ahuja

The encounter of emergency COVID-19 governance with the consolidation of Hindu nationalist power under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India offers a context ripe for the articulation of nationalism with public health policing. One particular aspect of such a nationalism articulated through visual media emerges in the way that Hindu majoritarianism today unites images of risk and security with visions of medical modernity. This intersection of nationalism with a vision of health as postcolonial development must be distinguished from the more directly anti-science nationalisms articulated by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Donald Trump in the US. Instead, the Indian government highlights its emergence as an economic power as central to the global response to COVID-19. India's significance to the public health response was confirmed by Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, François-Philippe Champagne, who welcomed India's Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, to the Canada-led Ministerial Coordination Group on COVID-19 in November 2020. Champagne emphasized India's "critical role" in vaccine and pharmaceutical production ("Readout").[1]

Despite the public reports of proposed treatments of cow dung, cow urine, and yoga for COVID-19, espoused by Hindu nationalist groups such as the Hindu Mahasabha and accepted by some Bharatiya Janata Party politicians (Varadarajan), the Modi government has invoked high-tech biomedicine combined with lockdown policing aimed at minorities as the dual solution to the outbreak. This confirms the manner in which the Modi government, since its campaign to secure election in 2014, has made a claim to scientific modernity. Invoking Hindu tradition as the basis of a triumphant developmentalism for the new India, contemporary Hindu nationalism invokes science as an element of a vast and triumphant Vedic tradition poised to bring India into a new millennium. The racialized character of this nationalist form is evident not only in the fact that it builds upon an explicit history of the use of racial science to designate Hindu identity in the history

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of right-wing nationalism (Jaffrelot), but also in its configuration of Indian biotechnology as a global solution to what Trump has called the "Chinese virus." Rather than invoking a spiritual/secular binary, this vision of Hinduism as emerging from its deep history to modern triumph incorporates science into the vision of postcolonial development (Subramaniam 50).

Development was the initial promise of the original Modi campaign, taking advantage of popular visual rhetoric that emphasized the corruption of the post-independence state. This positioned Modi as an entrepreneurial leader who could cut through the failures of the existing system—a figure whose heroism emerged in part because it could be articulated against a Muslim male other (Murty). Modi ascended to the presidency in part on the promise of a certain form of sanitary development for the nation—the promise of a toilet for every household in the "Clean India" campaign.[2] Yet after the COVID-19 outbreak, Hindu nationalist biopolitics oscillated between images of emergency threat in the early days of March and April 2020, visions of modern health security that attempted to counter the knowledge of the widespread outbreak that overtook the country by summer, and a vision of India ascending to provide the global solution to the pandemic at the moment of vaccine approval in the fall. In India's pandemic biopolitics that combine medical intervention, minority threat, and surveillance, images of masking and policing have become central to the public imagination of health security.

In this short essay, I excavate some of the key images of the pandemic in international media that depict COVID-19 in India from February 2020 to March 2021 by focusing on the centrality of masking, policing, and ultimately biomedicine to an emergent discourse on India's development as a worldwide biomedical leader. This approach allows me to sketch some of the key themes and shifts in public visions of COVID-19 that occurred in both Indian media and in India's relation to the pandemic in international journalism. While images of outbreak and emergency were central to early representations of the disease in India, visions of the pandemic later highlighted the role of the state and biomedical intervention in attempts to contain it. It is necessary to note that there are regional differences in the images being circulated, and that states like Kerala and West Bengal with a history of leftist governments and expansive commitments to public health have been centred in international

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reporting on the virus. Nonetheless, many of the images from India oscillate between configuring risk around targeted vulnerable groups and investing hope in Indian biomedicine. The visual transitions in COVID media—from risks of threats from targeted groups such as Muslims, Dalits, Chinese, and migrant workers to sanitary and prophylactic technologies like masks, handwashing, and vaccines—suggest that emergent representations of India's relationship to the world amidst the COVID-19 crisis deploy science in ways that confirm nationalist visions of Indian progress and exceptionalism, even amidst spectacular public health failures of the state.

Early images of COVID-19 emergency rule invoke spatial control and militarized quarantine as effects of rapid deployment of state power against viral spread. This coalesced first around the public health roundups of Muslims in New Delhi in the early days of the outbreak. While public health workers were at times lauded for rapid contact tracing, international media also reported on what the *South China Morning Post* reported as the "Islamophobia" of the focus on Muslim viral importation (Fig. 1). Emphasizing that members of the Sunni evangelical group Tablighi Jamaat were targeted on social media before being rounded up for quarantine, the newspaper's photo depicts a line of masked, Taqiya-clad Muslim men awaiting transport to state-mandated quarantine. Bisecting the image with a medical tent, the photo displays a contrast between the state health authority on the left and the line of men awaiting relocation and containment on the right.

Images of the mass exodus of migrant workers from the cities following the sudden March 24, 2020 lockdown order attracted international media attention. The rapid pace of the lockdown—with only fourteen hours advance notice—led millions of workers facing unemployment and hunger to return home. Given the large number of migrant workers who have settled in cities from rural communities, especially in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the lockdown displacements produced confusion and were accompanied by incidents of violence aimed at those returning. The scale of the migration was in the millions, with workers exiting large cities like Mumbai and New Delhi and returning to home communities, first on foot and later through transportation arranged by state governments. As states attempted to contain this movement and prevent migrants from crossing internal borders, media displayed scenes of large numbers of migrants

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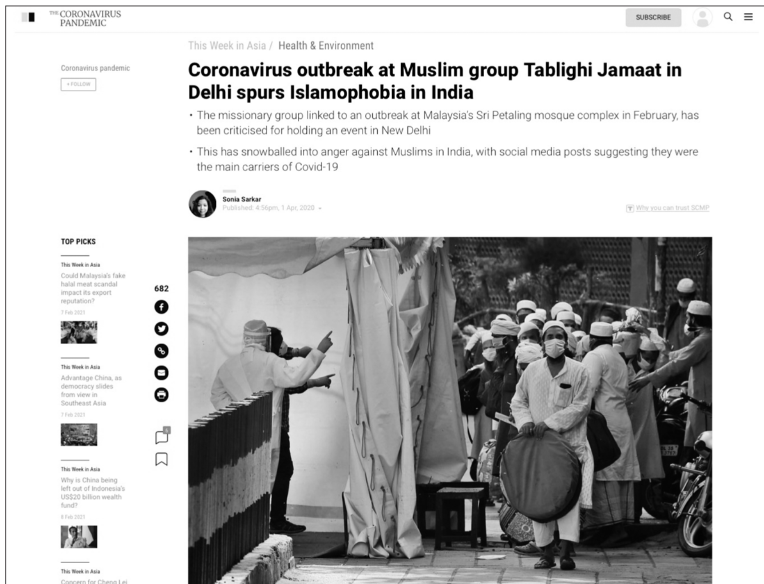

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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Coronavirus pandemic

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Coronavirus outbreak at Muslim group Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi spurs Islamophobia in India

- The missionary group linked to an outbreak at Malaysia's Sri Petaling mosque complex in February, has been criticised for holding an event in New Delhi
- This has snowballed into anger against Muslims in India, with social media posts suggesting they were the main carriers of Covid-19

Sonia Sarkar
Published: 4:56pm, 1 Apr, 2020

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Figure 1. *South China Morning Post* coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak at Tablighi Jamaat and Islamophobia. Screenshot taken by author. (Sonia Sarkar. "Coronavirus Outbreak at Muslim Group Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi Spurs Islamophobia in India." *South China Morning Post*, 1 Apr. 2020, www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3077934/coronavirus-outbreak-muslim-group-tablighi-jamaat.)

lining major roads and forming camps. Amidst this mass exodus, which undoubtedly helped to spread the virus to new areas even as it increased the economic and physical vulnerability of exploited workers, news images reported on the high rate of automobile collisions and a variety of other hardships facing migrants.[3] In this context, the news site *Scroll* displayed an image of hundreds of migrants walking in a long line as they depart New Delhi toward Agra on March 29, 2020 (Fig. 2). Depicting the migrants circling alongside an open road, framed on the left by a line of buses, the image contrasts with the composition of images of the localized spatial controls of urban contact tracing and quarantine depicted above in Fig. 1. Whereas the earlier image combined a depiction of Muslim difference with a vision of spatial containment, the snaking line of migrants that goes beyond the frame on the top and right sides indicates the expansive population

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COVID-19 ALERT

Covid-19: At least 22 migrants die while trying to get home during lockdown

One man suffered a heart attack while walking along the Agra highway. Some others, including children, were killed in road accidents.

Scroll Staff
Mar 29, 2020 · 08:32 am
Updated Mar 29, 2020 · 10:12 pm

Migrant workers walk towards a bus station along a highway with their families on the outskirts of New Delhi, March 29, 2020. | REUTERS/Adnan Abidi

Figure 2. Media coverage of migrants leaving New Delhi during lockdown. Screenshot taken by author. ("Covid-19: At Least 22 Migrants Die While Trying to Get Home during Lockdown," *Scroll*, 29 Mar. 2020, scroll.in/latest/957570/covid-19-lockdown-man-collapses-dies-halfway-while-walking-home-300-km-away-from-delhi.)

affected by the state response, multiplying uncertainty and risk for marginalized people. As such, images of sudden migration following the lockdown demonstrated a broader scale of crisis that could not so easily be pinned to specific groups of minorities or locations of urban contact, presaging the onset of the pandemic as a national phenomenon. Amid wide-ranging criticism of the Modi government's haphazard response, such images threatened to contradict state attempts to demonstrate decisive control. They also reflect common post-independence tropes of overpopulation and inefficiency that reinforce the narrative of a state bureaucracy that is easily

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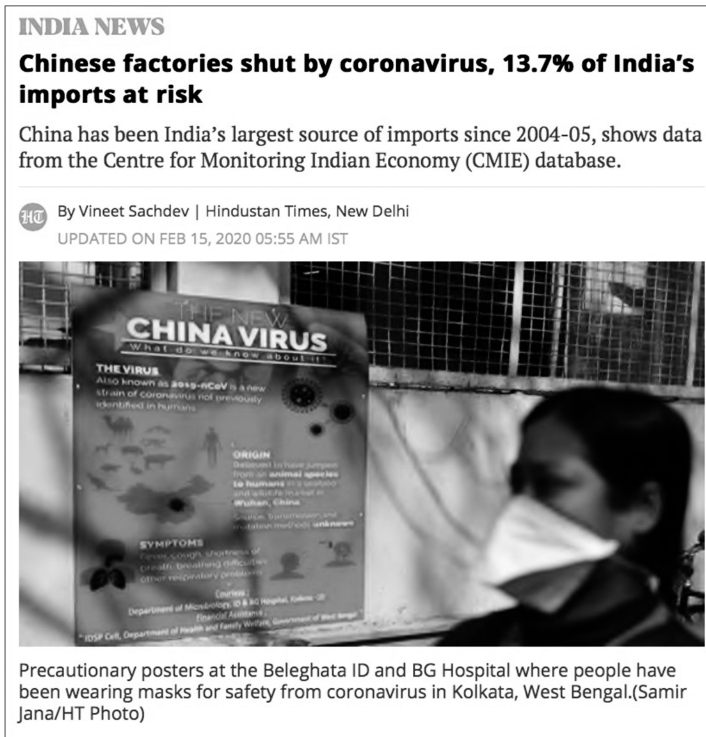

INDIA NEWS

Chinese factories shut by coronavirus, 13.7% of India's imports at risk

China has been India's largest source of imports since 2004-05, shows data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) database.

By Vineet Sachdev | Hindustan Times, New Delhi
UPDATED ON FEB 15, 2020 05:55 AM IST

Precautionary posters at the Beleghata ID and BG Hospital where people have been wearing masks for safety from coronavirus in Kolkata, West Bengal.(Samir Jana/HT Photo)

Figure 3. "China Virus" posters in West Bengal. Screenshot taken by author. (Vineet Sachdev. "Chinese Factories Shut by Coronavirus, 13.7% of India's Imports at Risk." *Hindustan Times*, 15 Feb. 2020, hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-economy-to-take-a-hit-as-china-shuts-down/story-vKhfuW4ARMJfVeHv1lXJJJ.html.)

overwhelmed. While such tropes were earlier deployed by Modi himself, in the context of the lockdown such images were also deployed by critics who argued that the hasty lockdown action reflected not just poor planning but also an authoritarian approach that failed to mobilize expertise appropriately.

In the early days of the outbreak, public health images conventionally included masks and other prophylactic measures such as handwashing, and also indicated China as a source of the disease. Anticipating Trump's attempt to publicly associate the virus with its origin in China, a Kolkata hospital posted public health signs at its entrances titled, "The New China Virus: What Do We Know About It?" (Fig. 3). Displaying a drawing of the map of

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China identifying Wuhan, placed next to illustrations of a variety of animal species that host coronaviruses, the poster focuses on the Chinese origin and possible symptoms, but does not include information about mode of transmission or prevention measures. The poster was displayed in a news image for the *Hindustan Times* in February 2020. A masked person walks in front, with a headline that connects the spread of the virus in factories to potential economic losses for India, presumably due to both the loss of imports and the potential disruption to India's own factories. As the economic transformations of Indian neoliberalism amidst Hindu revival are often narrated in terms of rivalry with China, the image reflects both a xenophobic rendering of Chinese difference and a fear that failures of postcolonial development might allow the dual Chinese vectors of capitalist prowess and viral contagion to threaten India's capacity for industrial growth.

Several public health videos from India went viral in late March 2020, none more popular than a one-and-a-half-minute handwashing demonstration video released by the Kerala state police ("Hand Wash"). Set to the popular 2020 Malayalam-language film song "Kalakkatha," the video features six officers methodically rubbing their hands, fingers interlocking, to the beat of the drums. The video playfully utilizes dance poses to draw attention to the World Health Organization recommendations for long, methodical handwashing. At this early point in the pandemic when surface transmission was believed to be one significant vector of COVID-19, the masked officers combine imagery of sanitation (handwashing), prophylaxis (masks), and state authority (police uniforms) to create a performance that links sovereignty to public health duty. To the extent that policing informs both the state interventions and the imagined mobilization of Indian citizenry against COVID, the video suggests that individual hygiene can be conscripted into collective response to control disease.

In the months to follow, however, the virus would spread widely across India, which eventually became second only to the US in terms of numbers of infections. As numbers skyrocketed in fall and winter 2020, India's growing role as one of the world's largest pharmaceutical manufacturers came into relief as it was a major production site for the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, the first approved vaccine appropriate for global distribution using regular refrigeration. The Modi government eventually also gave early

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Asia / Pacific

India approves two Covid-19 vaccines for emergency use

171 shares

Issued on: 03/01/2021 - 08:27

NEW DELHI, INDIA

SREYA BANERJEE, France 24 Correspondent

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

INDIA APPROVES TWO COVID-19 VACCINES FOR EMERGENCY USE

MORE VIDEOS

0:23 / 1:32

Text by: NEWS WIRES 5 min

India authorized two COVID-19 vaccines on Sunday, paving the way for a huge inoculation program to stem the coronavirus pandemic in the world's second most populous country.

Figure 4. Coverage of workers handling vaccines. Screenshot taken by author. (Sreya Banerjee. "India Approves Two Covid-19 Vaccines for Emergency Use." *France 24*, 3 Jan. 2021, www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210103-india-approves-two-covid-19-vaccines-for-emergency-use.)

authorization to a new vaccine produced locally by the Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech, which would supplement production of the Oxford vaccine, much of which would be distributed outside of India. After two decades in which a neoliberal, Euro-American legal structure protecting pharmaceutical intellectual property came into place to accommodate Indian pharmaceutical production within the international market, COVID-19 gave India a new central role in global public health.[4] Alongside photoshoots of government officials unveiling the vaccine production sites, the enthusiasm over India's role in global vaccine production was expressed in images of workers in full-body coverings loading vials of vaccine in sterile containers (Fig. 4). These complemented a widely publicized mural created in Kolkata around the New Year in 2021, which depicts a variety of types of Indian workers collaborating to bring the vaccine to fight against the global scourge of the virus (Fig. 5).

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Figure 5. Kolkata mural depicting Indian vaccine's global impact on coronavirus. Screenshot taken by author. (Oommen C. Kurian. "India's COVID19 Vaccine: Nationalism, Symbolism, Realism." *Observer Research Foundation*, 5 Jan. 2021, www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-covid19-vaccine-nationalism-symbolism-realism.)

With health workers in PPE in front supported by manual labourers and cleaners in the middle and a policeman in the rear, the group of workers propels an oversized syringe toward the virus, which appears to be strangling an earth inlaid with images of masked humans whose skin tones, hair, and facial features signal planetary diversity of races and ages.

In sum, these images across the first year of COVID-19 representation in India reflect at once the heavy hand of state power in the early response to the outbreak, the normalization of sanitary measures in public efforts to fight the disease, and nationalist discourse concerning India's role in the global vaccination effort. The fact that such images also document the massive toll that COVID-19 has taken on those who fall outside the racialized majoritarian narrative of Hindu ascendancy—Muslims, Dalits, Chinese,

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and migrant workers—reflects the inability of nationalist discourse in public media to erase the highly public nature of disposability revealed in state responses to the virus, even before the recent emergence of the Delta variant in India. The role of the Modi government in exacerbating
both viral spread and pandemic-era inequalities cannot easily be masked by a discourse that imagines the neoliberal rise of Indian biomedicine as reflecting the nation's exceptional role in combating the virus.

NOTES

1 Thanks to Danielle Wong for pointing out this connection.
2 See McCarthy.
3 See Dutta.
4 See Rajan.

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The Minor Key in YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES: *CHARLIE CHAN AND THE YELLOW PERIL*

Melissa Karmen Lee

> "Distance, homelessness, anonymity, and insignificance are all part of the Internet literary voice, and we welcome them."
> —YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, "Distance, Homelessness, Anonymity, and Insignificance"

In November 2020, Danielle Wong and I had the opportunity to commission YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES (YHCHI) to produce two artworks in response to the COVID-19 pandemic relating to themes of Asian racialization, vulnerability, and Canadian migration histories. Formed in 1999 as a Seoul-based web art group consisting of Marc Voge and Young-Hae Chang, their artistic practice is characterized by unique text-based animation synchronized to an original musical score, presented in multiple languages. In the commissioned artwork *CHARLIE CHAN AND THE YELLOW PERIL* (2020), an Italian-dubbed version of the American film *Charlie Chan in Honolulu* (1939) is used as a filmic background—the images reappropriated and decoded so that divergent signifiers and narratives flicker and surface. The reworked film exposes an alternative interpretation of the Italian-dubbed American movie and reimagines Charlie Chan, a historically hackneyed stereotypical character created by Earl Derr Biggers in his novels about a Chinese American detective, for the artists' own contemporary art distribution purposes.

The plot of *CHARLIE CHAN AND THE YELLOW PERIL* follows a young man immigrating to Vancouver, BC, with the goal of finding fortune, marrying a white woman, and procreating mixed-race children. The primary narrative of the artwork takes place on a boat, with the principal story involving a love triangle with two white women seemingly falling in love with Chan's Asianness (humorously represented by his smooth, hairless

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Figure 1. YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, still from *CHARLIE CHAN AND THE YELLOW PERIL*, 2020, original text and music soundtrack, courtesy of the artists.

body) on the boat. This irks the white men who are also on the ship and who ostensibly cannot compete with his defined otherness.

Plucking cultural capital from iconic films, literature, and their own art canon, YHCHI transforms the original *Charlie Chan in Honolulu* filmic sequence into an alternative rhizomatic narrative that can be thought of in terms of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described in Franz Kafka's work as a "castle with multiple entrances" containing "innumerable main doors and side doors that innumerable guards watch over" and "entrances and exits without doors" (3). In this short reflection, I read *CHARLIE CHAN AND THE YELLOW PERIL* as a minoritarian discourse, specifically as a musical counterpoint to the racist and anti-immigrant narratives that have been made more mainstream in Eurocentric colonial societies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the term "minor literature" to theorize the relationship between language and power, and the possibility of subversive forms of enunciation that contest domination. Engaging with Deleuze and Guattari, I suggest that the minor key in *CHARLIE CHAN* becomes a part of a deterritorialized soundscape—one in which references are continually being destabilized or rerouted.[1] Of particular note in all of YHCHI's artworks is the music that accompanies the text. The

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artists have mischievously refused to define the jazz-like harmonic accompaniment to their visuals as music, and instead refer to it as *sounds*, disavowing the claim of being musicians. However, one cannot help but be seduced by the first bass note heard in *CHARLIE CHAN AND THE YELLOW PERIL*—a pure, intense, sonorous material in a minor key vibration that sonically fragments the piece and, through disjuncture, opens up the possibility of new significations.[2] That deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification—a composition, song, words—is sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying, a sounding note in the minor key (Deleuze and Guattari 6). This minor key is the thesis and genesis of YHCHI's artworks that pursue alternative narratives that are hidden in our cultural systems. *CHARLIE CHAN* destabilizes conventional narratives about Chinese migration to North America by portraying the character of Charlie not only as vulnerable and othered, but also as sexually desirable. This figuration reveals how discourses of cultural and physical contagion that are often tied to the figure of the diseased foreigner—narratives that have re-emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic—are part of historical anxieties about miscegenation and cross-racial intimacy.[3]

N. Katherine Hayles reminds us that in electronic literature and on the World Wide Web, digital textuality is not composed of durable, stable marks inscribed on the page, but rather of what she defines as "flickering signifiers" that involve "the fascinating and troubling coupling of language and machine" (35). The relationship between screenic text and computer code in YHCHI's artwork has been discussed by Jessica Pressman as representing a metaphor for the translated acts of compilation and transformation that happen beneath the screen. The flickering signifiers of *CHARLIE CHAN* are found not only in the artists' flashing poetic text set to a rhythmic bass, but also in the medium of digital inscription brought to us on our own personal screens that mediate the message. The artists interrogate the original film and subject matter in the context of a racialized pandemic with a nascent identity refigured through media technologies and filtered in a way such that race and racism are electrically charged through the flashing words onscreen. The mediation between reality and screenic identity has particular significance during COVID-19, as society adapts to more profound isolation under social distancing and is increasingly dependent upon mediated, screenic realities for information, community, and storytelling.

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The contrapuntal story elides onscreen, allowing the trespassing of alternative storylines to emerge from the film's plot. *CHARLIE CHAN* repositions the original film in a contemporary, digital milieu to demand a reassessment of Asian representations in film and, in particular, of the figure of the Asian man, whose masculinity is identified, and also misidentified, in the film. Charlie is motivated by his desire to be flawless in his performance, adopting various identities such as the potential Chinese Canadian husband and the immigrant, who aspires to marry a white Canadian woman in order to put into relief social and national anxieties around Chinese contagion and the future of biracial children in Vancouver. These desires are conveyed in the short story as a vehicle towards "the good life," ultimately playing to the film's denouement in the epilogue and credits that wrap up all of the characters' lives in a speedy coda, yet continue to gesture towards the endless possibilities of additional elongated narratives. The artwork repositions broad themes of stereotypes, masculinity, vulnerability, and aesthetic histories by reminding us that computers, their operations and codes, and the ways in which they are discussed are never separate from but always embedded in human contexts, cultures, and constellations of power.

NOTES

1 Here I am referring to *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, in which Deleuze and Guattari delve into minor literature, not simply as it relates to marginalized literature, but also by playfully referencing the minor key in music.
2 A comparable example might be the rap song "Shook Ones, Pt. II" (1995) by rap duo Mobb Deep, a song about territorial gang warfare and early death. The lyrics in verse one, "Your simple words just don't move me / You're minor, we're major / You're all up in the game and don't deserve to be a player," are accompanied by the harmony shifting from major to minor key.
3 For more on how epidemics are inherently racialized, see Briggs.

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Intimacy as Art Practice

Ivetta Sunyoung Kang

As I think about how the ongoing pandemic has drawn a thick boundary between bodies, I recall a bus ride that I took from Toronto to Montreal last winter. Everyone on the bus inhaled and exhaled the same air that night; it seemed as if the linguistic barriers between us were concealed through silence, and racial distinction was veiled by the darkness. I even imagined that my identity was escaping the dualistic question, am I Korean or Korean Canadian? The dreamlike atmosphere of the bus evoked one particular childhood memory of mine when I played a children's game called "Make Electricity on Hands" with my old friends. This recollection became the inspiration for my piece *Proposition 1: Hands*, which I created in February 2020. This game-like exercise is still commonly played in South Korea, so if I mention it to anyone with cultural roots in South Korea, they know it and recall their own memories related to the exercise. In *Proposition 1: Hands*, which is a participatory installation consisting of a video and a print work separately entitled "Warming Hand Exercise," the game is transformed into a therapeutic exercise that anyone can perform, even without any knowledge about Korean culture. The work's invitation to touch hands and exchange body temperature from one hand to another leads its recipients to the transference of cultural knowledge and affection. The localized, ethnocultural memory related to the Korean game becomes generalized by simplified movements of the in-video performance. The

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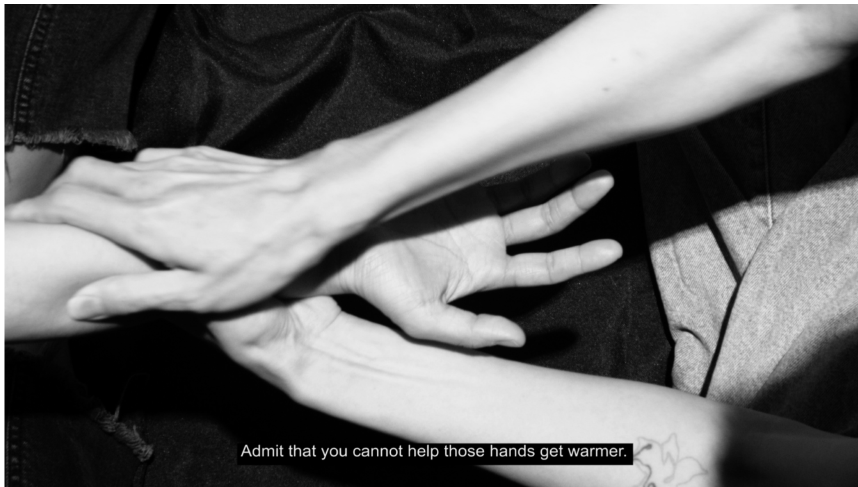

Figure 1. Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, *Proposition 1: Hands*, 2020. Single-channel video, 04:33 min. Performed by Ivetta Sunyoung Kang and Eric Dong Ho You. Courtesy of the artist.

gestures involved in this participatory installation transform viewers into active performers, regardless of their nationality, race, or ethnicity, and enable them to feel connected in the shared moment.

However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this piece cannot be performed in public places. The global tragedy has turned physical contact and potential invisible contact through airborne transmission into a source of anxiety, which directly contradicts the way *Proposition 1: Hands* attempts to alleviate anxiety. This work has had to find new ways of understanding connection and redefining the notion of mutual warmth while depending on intangible interactions.

In *Proposition 1: Hands*, three conceptual narratives are layered on top of one another: the original performance of hands touching, the visual combination of the text and the filmed performance that is captured as digital material, and, lastly, the physicality created by public individuals who may try the performance with their bodies on-site. Because the in-person, participatory aspect of the installation has been put on pause, the piece has instead asked participants to visualize the joy of physical interactions. The afterimage that is evoked by the instructive movements in the piece prompts viewers to recollect when they last held other hands and exchanged saliva on other bodies without

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concerns about the risk of infection. The collective reminiscence of affectionate touch, for now, only exists as memory and within the virtual frame of the video work. Viewing this artwork in the wake of COVID-19 therefore suggests other layers of intimacy; touch emerges through our longing, in the mental image of togetherness, and in revived sentiments based on our memories of such physical communication. This intimacy depicted in the work remains invisible and future-oriented as its physical realization has not yet come to pass. However, this intimacy exists as the invisible air hugs every passenger on the bus and moves across culture and language.

My more recent ongoing project, *Tenderhands*, aims to inscribe four hundred instructions on memo pads. Each of the instructions asks participants/performers to move slowly and stretch out time by re-grounding themselves in their own body and interacting with conventional household items such as a water tap, a bed, or an avocado. I started this project right after the completion of *Proposition 1: Hands* in April 2020. I had only thought of writing lots of instructions that could function both as poems and as therapeutic instructions for our anxious hands. In July 2020, this work was presented in an online group show, *By Proxy*, organized by the Arlington Arts Center, and I live-performed selected instructions of *Tenderhands* on the centre's Instagram account each day, at the exact same time, for two weeks. This experience was bizarre because its liveness somehow erased the digital boundary between my cellphone and the viewers' cellphones. During the Instagram Live performances, we were not together in the same space or time zone, yet we were still in a virtual range drawn by a togetherness engendered by the social media app. Since it was shared on social media platforms, this project has autonomously interacted with more people beyond those who tuned in for the Instagram Live sessions, while generating modes of intimacy that I had not anticipated. Even people I did not know started messaging me, sharing their experiences after trying some of the instructions in *Tenderhands*. The personal intimacy within one's body, which the work at first sought to generate, evolved into a collective virtual intimacy—one in which I have cultivated a wider range of connection with spectators who are dispersed across continents yet connected through the same network of *Tenderhands*.

Since the production of these two works, *Proposition 1: Hands* and *Tenderhands*, I have learned to look at the notion of intimacy in different

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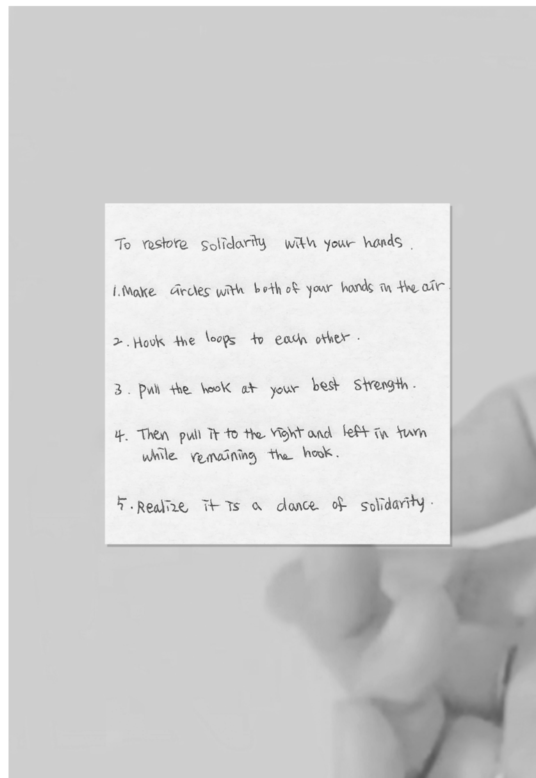

Figure 2. Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, *Tenderhands*, 2020-present. Semi-bleached memo pad of four hundred pages, handwritten instructions, 3.93" X 3.93." Courtesy of the artist.

ways. Indeed, intimacy can be fostered through openness to imagination and alternative modes of communion with others. In *Proposition 1: Hands*, the universalized instructions of the hand exercise stimulate imagined and recalled feelings that emanate from touching others, while the means of disseminating *Tenderhands* on virtual platforms germinates a different angle of intimacy that is revived through virtual communications and sharing. These changes in my two works, impacted by the current strange times with COVID-19, have somehow assured me that we can still feel intimacy despite physical restrictions. This creative process brings me hope that a time of reimagined togetherness—a time in which we learn differently about each other's minds and bodies—is undoubtedly ahead.

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Josh Stewart

During the Pandemic

The streets are filled with the lifeless husks
of empty cars; the price of gas hits terminal
velocity when there's nowhere to go.
The symphony that flaunts our progress,
the crescendo that rises with the sun
and falls with an exhausted crawl home
is silenced in an eerie state
of semi-normalcy.

The news is filled with sleepless politicians
who no longer have to try to dredge up
the concern in their eyes when giving constant
updates on the frailty of the latest policies
and the reasons why the success of our species
is our greatest failing. Asked to work
to the brink of nervous breakdown, we comply
and complain to anyone who'll listen how badly
we need a holiday; asked to sit at home
in our pajamas, and we find ourselves
at a different sort of precipice—leaning over
the ledge to see there is no soft landing
in our quest for immortality.

The kitchen cupboard is filled with rations
for an inert species, weeks of dormant supplies
needed to sustain our inactivity. The undertakings most vital
to our survival were the first to go, our longevity
and will power to fight for scraps

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seen as mere recreation, optional uses of free time
for those who like to experience a less evolved
state of being.

The house is filled with disquiet, holding
its breath in wait for some kind
of catastrophe. I find it hard to focus
without restrictions clotting time,
no page numbers to denote progress and
no speed limits to pace ourselves.
There is guilt in forgetting the reasons why
i am locking all the doors and windows,
as there is fear in hearing the startling
and reassuring sound of a car engine catching,
knowing that even at the threshold
of apocalypse, some people need
a place to go.

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Chronic Poetics and the Poetry of Chronic Illness (in a Global Pandemic)

> Though the length of time over which an experience extends is often the definitional aspect of a "chronic" feature of life, it is a poor descriptor of chronic experience, such as illness, for which the idea of an experiential timeline of onsets and closures is too narrow. Chronicity describes a feature of life that is so persistent that it exceeds conventional markers of time and becomes, along with human sensory capacity more generally, the grounds for one's perception of the world and of "durations."
>
> —Hillary Gravendyk, "Chronic Poetics"

March 15, 2020

Just days after the COVID-19 pandemic was first declared, with the reality that my colleagues and I have sacrificed sleep and regular meals in order to develop an emergency teaching plan so that students can successfully complete our courses online and remotely, I'm already worried about time. To be sure, I do not anticipate having more of it in the coming weeks and months. While these are still early days of the global pandemic, already I read calls for academics to simply hunker down and work as if increased focus and drive might be delivered now—as if we are not living through a public health emergency of a scale previously unimaginable. As if productivity *is the solution for all that ails.*

I began writing this essay on the poetry and poetics of chronic illness in Canadian women's writing when I was still buoyed by the prospect of a newly acquired and promisingly secure tenure-track job, which I believed would facilitate better and more sustained periods of reading, thinking, writing—not just high-volume teaching and service. These activities—reading, thinking, writing—have quietly animated hours, days, weeks, months when nothing else

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could. They sustained me through a long period of chronic illness with its attendant and life-changing medical interventions. These are also activities that I've been able to count on when I've been too sick to count on anything else. But I've come to understand that because I was once chronically ill, having lived through a duration of active autoimmune disease and its medical treatments—and could be called to do so again without warning—I'm not sure that I will ever count myself among the well. In positioning myself as such I've also come to understand that because of chronic illness I have a forever-changed relationship to time, solitude, home, immunity, and care, especially in the context of my scholarly and creative life.

While I worry about conventional notions of time, I'm brought back to considering the profound potential and immense frustrations of working and living in crip time, especially when the university usually enacts anything but. Ellen Samuels writes in "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time" of how, as a sick young woman physically unable to sustain the strictures of a nine-to-five job, she feared for her future all the while holding out hope that returning to academic life in graduate school and later, hopefully, as a professor, she could live and work in crip time full-time: "It was, and still is, the only way I could see to support myself." Having "crossed some invisible and excruciating threshold from being someone with *health problems to* being a problem, *apparently insolvable" (emphasis original), as a twenty-three-year-old with a disabling illness, she was determined to find a solution. This is where the "beautiful and forgiving" nature of crip time was liberatory in Samuels' life. Embracing the notion that time too can be flexible, can bend to meet disabled bodies and minds—rather than the other way round—allowed Samuels to lie on the floors of university classrooms where her fellow graduate students talked and she listened, staring at the scratched undersides of desks. "And I loved it," she says. "I loved the rhythm of reading and writing and thinking and I realized that this time was also my time, even though it was hard, even though other people didn't get it, even though I was alone."*

When I first read those words, I did so in immediate recognition. But now they also stir up complicated feelings. Like Ellen Samuels, I also found myself sick in graduate school, and while acutely aware that it often felt impossible, ridiculous even, to continue with a PhD, I had the privilege of navigating the sudden onset of illness in such a way that there was no question of being

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allowed to continue. I had secured external graduate fellowship funding before getting sick, and would continue to hold it throughout that duration of chronic illness as long as I did not take a medical leave; thus, I could continue if I did not officially declare that I was sick. So I had to work, both at hiding the fact that I was sick and at appearing to be well. (But what is chronic illness if not being healthy and sick at the same time, as Pamela Moss and Isabel Dyck have eloquently argued?) While we should recognize the decidedly gruelling work that can land on our desks as academics, for some this work can also afford possibilities that other occupations disavow and make impossible from the get-go. The key here is: for some. *If I had read a line about academia affording* possibilities *while precariously employed, I would have spat.*

Chronic Poetics

Just before her untimely death after a lengthy illness, poet and scholar Hillary Gravendyk was in the process of finalizing an essay for the *Journal of Modern Literature* for a special issue on "Disability and Generative Form." In this posthumously published essay, Gravendyk undertakes a phenomenological engagement with the late poet Larry Eigner's work, seeking to account for "disability's role in poetic practice" (1). Demonstrating how attention to both disability studies and formalist discourse "can produce a more flexible mode of criticism" (1), she makes an argument for what she terms "chronic poetics": "What I'm calling chronic poetics extends the reach of disability criticism's relevance to all bodies, not the disabled body alone. Chronic poetics is a phenomenological account of perception and artistic practice that allows the shared conditions of embodiment to emerge from the text" (1). Throughout this essay Gravendyk insists that each of us reconsiders what embodiment is and how we make sense of its register, especially in relation to the twinned creative practices of writing poetry and of reading poems. Where poetic production is concerned, she queries what might be shaped by the reality of living in a disabled body and, obliquely, what might be changed by the experience of illness. Yet it is her insistence that the written page should be understood as more than a record of any writer's embodied experience—let alone a chronically ill or disabled poet's experience—that provides an opportunity to think through the complexities of creatively representing the experience of chronic illness. In fact, Gravendyk's phrase

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"chronic poetics" brims with generative potential, especially when focused on the very specific relationship between "chronic illness" and "generative form," for surely the poetry and poetics of chronic illness presents unique insights—not to mention poetic forms—of how to live with uncertainty? When, perhaps for the first time, so many are contending with what it might mean to have one's health rendered precarious, even as others are turning to poetry for comfort and wisdom in these challenging pandemic times, it means something different when a poet writes of her own chronically ill body or mind. In insisting that the poetics of chronically ill people be registered in this historical moment where a virus is not just the backdrop of our lives but a reality lived out in each of our daily interactions, turning to poetry is, from my perspective, essential when considering the relationship between Canadian literature and pandemic.

It is curious that while biomedical research into the management of chronic disease is well established, the experiential knowledge of patients remains undervalued as a means of understanding the impact of living with chronic illnesses. Many chronic illnesses disproportionately affect women, yet an intersectional analysis is too often absent when calculating the societal impact of disease. In response, I am interested in poetry written by women diagnosed and treated or living with a chronic illness in order to better understand the personal challenge the diagnosis of disease presents to quality of life. As such, I am also invested in contributing to further theorizing the unpredictable nature of chronic illness as a "dissonant disability" (Driedger and Owen), something some scholars have sought to do in turning to their own poetry as a means of theorizing. In turning to the poetry and poetics of chronic illness, I wish to more fully explore the ways in which chronic illnesses can be understood as "dissonant disabilities"—to again evoke Diane Driedger and Michelle Owen's generative term—by reading contemporary autobiographical writing by women and published in Canada. Specifically, in this paper I will turn to three collections of poetry—Fionncara MacEoin's *Not the First Thing I've Missed* (Thistledown, 2014), Anna Swanson's *The Nights Also* (Tightrope, 2010), and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Bodymap* (Mawenzi, 2015)—in order to illustrate why chronic illness is a poignant site of living in precarity, but also in "collective affinity" (Kafer 13). The poetry and poetics of chronic illness remains a

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crucial site to explore feminist, queer, and crip experience in giving voice to the intensity of living with mind, body, and/or bodymind unpredictability.

There is also an opportunity to explore how poetry, as a genre, is able to illustrate the dissonant and durational qualities of chronic illness. As such, I am interested in exploring the domestic spaces of chronic illness—the places where those who are chronically ill make home and do work—and wondering what can be produced from a site that is often understood as one of both confinement and comfort. By experimenting with what can be said and what is left unsaid about the disabling effects of disease, a chronic poetics works to attend to the embodied, speculative, and gendered dimensions of chronic illness. As such, the context of this essay's production as well as the argument it makes can also be understood as an example of chronic poetics. Gravendyk was also a chronically ill scholar and poet when she first proposed the term: she wrote a formidable piece of literary criticism while chronically ill and died before seeing her own article in print. And in the poem "Eight days asleep," from her collection *Harm* (Omnidawn, 2011), written in intense bursts after major surgery, she alludes to passing, maybe into a long sleep like the title suggests, but also explores the reality that is death: "She left the body trailing its appetites / like a honeymoon. She left the body / permissionless, dreaming" (20). I keep this knowledge close as I revisit her words. For me, this knowledge—that she continued to work while so very sick, having been diagnosed with an interstitial lung disease in her early twenties and then undergoing a double lung transplant at age thirty—remains vital to any discussion of Gravendyk's legacy as a poet and scholar. While I learned these details through Diana Arterian's lyric essay and moving tribute to her life and work, "On the Harmed Body," I think it best to remember that Gravendyk's death should not overdetermine how we understand chronic poetics. Said another way, under conventional circumstances chronic illness does *not* usually result in premature death; instead, those of us with chronic illnesses may count ourselves among the "unhealthy disabled," rather than the "healthy disabled," to evoke Susan Wendell's important distinction. However, that those of us living with chronic diseases are more susceptible to the deleterious effects of a viral infection—COVID-19 to be sure—and may die from this virus even as we are young and otherwise relatively healthy is a reality that is more palpable

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than perhaps it ever was. While the mention of chronic illness often conjures images of elderly people, I want to begin again by considering what it means to be a young woman navigating the uncharted terrain of chronic illness. Here, it is especially important to turn to the complexities of mental disability, which engenders its own particular iteration of chronic poetics.

June 8, 2020
I'm returning to this essay amidst a raging global pandemic even as most of Canada seems to have successfully flattened the curve. How long will this reality last? On the phone yesterday my youngest sibling reminded me that if anything good can be gleaned right now, it is that many people are at least exploring the possibility of living and working differently. I'm reminded that various and varied forms of disability arts and culture know much about this, and of living aslant to the required norm Robert McRuer has termed "compulsory able-bodiedness." Even if I'm unable to repeat simple messages of positivity, I remain committed to the idea that a close connection to words is meaningful right now. As Arundhati Roy says in a much-shared photo essay that chronicles the global injustices and violence brought in the wake of COVID-19, "the pandemic is a portal." A portal to other possibilities, I hope, where the future of work and life on this interconnected planet is concerned. And if the pandemic is a portal, poetry too is another type of portal. But not because poetry offers simple solace; instead, because it might break you open in exactly the ways you need it to, providing an entry to another way of being.

I know too that those who think thoughtfully about illness, disability, and creative expression have always been at the heart of disability justice movements and have so much to offer right now. Where would we all be without the work of arts and cultural organizations like Sins Invalid with their centring of disabled artists of colour and crip LGBTQ and gender variant folk? In fact, where would we be without a recognition that the disability justice movement has been built by these same bodies? In Sins Invalid's collectively written disability justice primer, Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People, *they write: "Disability justice is a vision and practice of what is yet-to-be, a map that we create with our ancestors and our great-grandchildren onward, in the width and depth of our multiplicities and histories, a movement towards a world in which every body and mind is known as beautiful (26-27)."*

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There is poetry in these words. Poetry is not a discordant voice where disability justice is concerned. In fact, poetry can provide a powerful antidote to the utilitarian, cruel-minded thinking and actions of an ableist society, something we must be on guard against when thinking through the various impacts of COVID-19. I've already heard many times now that the second pandemic will be a mental health crisis; I wonder if we are not already in it?

2. "the next room over"

Fionncara MacEoin is a writer from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Prior to the 2014 publication of her first book of poetry, *Not the First Thing I've Missed*, she collaborated with visual artist Nancy Lowry on a chapbook, *Even the Sky Parts*, published by JackPine Press in 2011. She puts forth a vision of the world that is both tender and absurd, using the short poetic line to deliver biting observances of both. Even when the formal subject of the poem might be best described as a meditation on grief or despair, humour still brims to the surface. Always, there is a speaker at the centre of each poem who is alert and made more than a bit uneasy by all that she observes. MacEoin's long poem "the next room over," the second in her debut collection, begins with an assertion of who is rendered visible and who remains invisible where mental disability is concerned:

> everyone sees the tragic anorexics
> successful manics, the beautiful people
> personality disordered charismatic psychopaths
>
> it's the depressives and schizos
> no one wants[.] (30)

These stanzas assert that while the suffering imparted by mental illness is often glamorized in the popular imagination—especially when embodied in a very particular way—ongoing disability in the form of depressive disorders and schizophrenia is something "no one wants" (30). Here, the speaker of the poem gives voice to the ableist assumption that a life with disability is implicitly a life no one would ever choose and that, if given a choice, each of us would choose a life free of impairments. But it is because of the pervasiveness of this argument that the speaker of the poem says:

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silently, slowly we develop a taste
for our surroundings
the sad soft tone of the elements

and stop imagining a future[.] (30)

Developing a taste for institutional surroundings signals a descent into "dark cellar boring loneliness," where the "stupor of drugs and sad stories" (33) becomes the common element. Grappling with the reality of societal rejection—feeling literally unwanted—the speaker of this poem, "a hard luck story / no one wants to hear" (35), slowly and silently begins to stop imagining her own future. However, in this long poem, as in others that make up MacEoin's collection, interior reflections are paired with observational details. MacEoin's poetics demonstrate a spare blend of short bursts of pedestrian detail situated against deeper contemplation of what reviewer Bill Robertson has termed "anxious vigilance" concerning the "precariousness of mental health." Indeed, MacEoin attends to the daily struggles of maintaining mental health even as the question of futurity remains ever-present for her speaker.

As Alison Kafer has argued, if in the present moment disability is understood as terrible—a fate worse than death—then, on one hand, the future must be oriented to avoid it because in this worldview, absence of disability signals a "good future." On the other hand, the presence of disability signals, in advance, a future no one could or should logically want. In this view, informed by the medical model of disability, impairments are medical problems and "the cure" figures, always, as a desired end goal. I deliberately evoke Kafer's text, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, as a way to think through strategies to challenge the idea that we have arrived at collective agreement about disability—in the present historical moment and, therefore, in the imagined future. This is important to weave into the argument because in MacEoin's poetry, even as the speaker lives with, and struggles against, "a disease you didn't know you had" (46), she resists a pull to stop imagining her own future. In fact, this speaker lives with full knowledge of a world outside the institution, the domestic space of chronicity that is currently available to her. Attention to the natural world outside the hospital presents itself in moments of survival:

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there are the robins
standing
on the rebar
outside your window[.] (31)

Even if this speaker is aware of "walking on some sort of thin ice," she is also aware that it is "not that thin" (31). What she traverses is "crackly" (31)—perceptible and brittle, a surface that separates here from there. For this reason, she decides to instead focus on what is surviving under the ice: "slough / water plants frozen" (31) throughout the winter, plants that have every intention of returning with spring.

In her close engagement with Larry Eigner's work, Gravendyk understands that his poetry, not unlike MacEoin's, "asserts the presence of the body among other bodies, a chronic poetics in which the shared conditions of embodiment emerge" ("Chronic Poetics" 3). Eigner's conceptualization of embodiment "emphasizes not the transfer of energy from poem to reader but the exchange and circulation of energies in the temporal, contingent body of the text" (3). In fact, writes Gravendyk, "Eigner calls upon this shared sense of embodiment in his poetry as he asks us not to register *his* physical situation, but to pay attention to our own" (5, emphasis original). This, for me, begins to articulate what a "chronic poetics" might hope to achieve—not that it codifies or translates the experience of being chronically ill but that, through the distillation of poetic language and the use of form, it asks that the reader consider their own potential and limitations. Gravendyk insists that "[t]his idea of a chronic poetics—one that acknowledges simultaneity, chronicity, duration, and other forms of embodied perception—makes use of phenomenology's experiments with and theories of embodiment and consciousness" (7). Through her reading of Eigner's work we, too, witness how his poetry attends "as much to perceptual capacity" as it does to the world "'outside'" himself when he turns his attention to "'birds, sky and weather'" (7). She insists that "Eigner's work relies on the idea that the external and the internal are necessarily entwined at the site of perception: the body" (7). In the poetry of MacEoin the external and internal are also entwined even as they are also separated by windows and walls, the institutional and the domestic world of home, now situated in an aspirational future.

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July 28, 2020
I remain writing this essay while the reported daily deaths and new cases of COVID-19 rage in the United States, flare in Vietnam, Spain, and Hong Kong, and spark in BC and Alberta. Even as I listen to CBC News I can't seem to retain the daily updates. Are the numbers in Ontario and Quebec staying much the same or improving just a little? The curve, it seems, remains only just flattened; I'm caught between relief and panic.

In the COVID-19-infused nightmares I have had predictably since mid-March, I'm back in Vancouver in my former endocrinologist's office. He kindly tells me that instead of being in remission for autoimmune disease I'm in fact immunocompromised. This jolts me awake. In the reality lived out in my nightmares, I have been released from my doctor's specialized care without knowing how important this distinction is. It occurs to me that in my waking life every precaution I take to keep myself and others safe is the least I can do. No precaution should be framed as an overreaction, especially as the various provincial economies across Canada reopen for business and the consequences have yet to be contended with.

I'm aware of how fortunate I am at present—living in a strange, augmented iteration of crip time—even if the language of gratitude always seems to fall short. Maybe this is because it tells only a truncated version of a much longer and more complicated story. It's as if the language of gratitude can form the words but doesn't fully account for the grammar of loss that any story of academic success lived out in crip time will surely also tell. If this virus is a natural disaster of our own making, many will survive but a great many others will be cast adrift. Isn't it already immanently evident who has been rendered precarious, expendable even, in these still early days of this global pandemic?

3. "Between Sleep and Sleep"

Anna Swanson grew up in Vancouver, BC, and now lives in St. John's, Newfoundland, where she works as a librarian. Her debut collection, *The Nights Also*, won both a Lambda Literary Award and the League of Canadian Poets' Gerald Lampert Memorial Award. It is rightly celebrated for its unflinching ruminations on the necessary, if uncomfortable, shifts in identity brought about because of illness. What to make of a yet undiagnosed disease that seemingly seeks to take everything certain away from the speaker at

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the centre of these poems—school, work, relationships, security? Swanson's response is to engage in a poetics of formal and lyrical variation, never refusing levity nor gravity when it is most called for. Throughout Swanson's section of poems entitled "Between Sleep and Sleep," we find a speaker wake as the eagles call and cry, awake too when a peacock rises with the first slow sun. In the first poem of this section, "Lullaby for small," we get a glimpse into the domestic space of chronic illness. Here, it is a bedroom with "merciful windows," a bed and a bedside table with "a box just large enough for all the doctors' / perfect remedies" (15), remedies that fail, still, to bring about sleep. The windows, while somewhat merciful, function to keep out "whatever weather hits them" (15), and stand as a constant reminder of how limited the speaker's world has become. Curled in her bed, she has been whittled to a fraction of her former self, while her knowledge of the outside world has become reoriented towards the sounds of "falling notes" from the eagles, whose cries are "ripples around a pebble" now "disappeared into dark water" (15). If anger was once a motivating force, she has now "worn out [her] anger" and "there is not much of [her] left" (15). In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker, "small enough to fit in a coat pocket," is taken under by the rippling cries and becomes akin to the pebble with "the dark water closing around it" (15). This lullaby sings of how difficult chronic illness is to live with as a daily practice. It is difficult to keep oneself upright, afloat, attentive to the world outside the window. As Swanson's poems reveal, this can be all the more difficult when an accurate diagnosis and effective treatments remain elusive, while symptoms—fatigue, poor concentration, disordered sleep—remain ever present.

With respect to disabling symptoms of chronic illness, many patients report that fatigue is at the top of their list, followed by poor concentration and disturbed sleep. These material impairments are notoriously difficult to describe even as they are also omnipresent. In writing autobiographically about chronic illness, geographer Pamela Moss describes crushing fatigue: "the kind where your chest hurts and you are so tired that you do not have the energy to breathe" (151). Swanson also uses metaphorical language in her poetry to give voice to this intensity. In "Symptom #1: Fatigue," fatigue takes the speaker down the hall, promising at first some sort of escape only to find the hidden door. Instead of escape, fatigue tosses the speaker in, forcing her

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to spend time with an old mattress. Frustratingly, this room is made only of curling wallpaper, which refuses to stay in place and, instead, steadily smothers the speaker even as she tries to keep the seams of the room, and her life, glued and in place. In this poem, fatigue is a very bad friend; lying and cheating, "she goes out, two stepping / with your future" (17). In "Symptom #6: Poor concentration," the mind attempts to complete tasks even if the speaker is unable to. The mind sits with the morning mail, unable to open the crisp envelopes because instead of being equipped with the needed tools to do the job, what is made available is an "old knife made of porridge" (22). Similarly, the mind takes up carpentry only to end up "pounding nails with / a handful of lint" (22). The mind struggles to knit, even when accompanied by roofing hammers clanging out the pattern of "*knit one, purl two*" (22). In "Symptom #11: Sleep may be disturbed," we enter a reality where there has been no sleep for eighty-nine days. As if provoked—God is also frustrated—the weight of a "cardboard piano box / [filled] with cement" (27) drops and the speaker is flattened. After the drop, and the forced exhalation of the speaker, there is a momentary burst of turbine-like power and then "everything sputters and goes out" (27). Thus, we find the speaker released from a world predetermined by a lack of sleep. Forced through the bed, flat against the floor, she is left "one molecule thick" (27). Now there is "no breath, no terror, no dreams" (27), and this is because sleep finally arrives: "Some would call this sleep, / but you know it's something / holier" (27).

The politics of memory and of memorializing in crip time are also present in Swanson's poems. In "The Argument for remembering," the truth of the speaker's illness experience is revealed through the use of anaphora. Each stanza begins with the word "because" and, as such, becomes the reason to remember. The speaker remembers that while others said "*But you look great*" (25), she lived with the fear that "I might never sleep again" (25). In another encounter, it is a medical doctor at a walk-in clinic who does the misreading, who "told me I was lazy and it would help if I washed more often" (25). The speaker of this poem continues:

> Because, being my mother's daughter, I followed him and repeated what he had said back to him loudly in front of an entire waiting room, and in his couriered letter of apology the doctor said it looked to him as if my hands were dirty, but in retrospect it may just have been the colour of my skin. (25)

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This is a painful, profound moment of remembering. Yet it is doubly important for the speaker to chronicle "[b]ecause everyone asks me what I did, but what I did was nothing" (25). From the interior of this poem—from this life lived out in crip time—where "welfare forms, disability benefits applications, request to withdraw from classes after the drop date forms, doctor's notes, proof of rent forms, bank records, personal statements" (25) threaten to take over each waking hour, what patient has the time—or energy—to respond to each racialized microaggression doled out by the field of biomedicine?

August 19, 2020
Thinking broadly, what might postcriticism offer the study of Canadian literature, even disability studies, a field that is often designated as "critical" in the first place? (In Canada, we can note the various departments and schools that are named not "Disability Studies" but "Critical Disability Studies." I understand the impulse to name or rename a field of study as "critical," and applaud this if it signals that not only critical theory but also scholarly reflexivity will be put into play. But I've also noted that sometimes this is where a truly self-reflexive approach ends rather than begins.)

In The Limits of Critique, *Rita Felski offers an example of what a "postcritical reading" of a text might entail. At the outset, it is not a celebratory form of naive reading that can be dismissed easily. Rather than approaching the text as puzzle in need of decoding, as Felski stresses, "we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (12). This shift in the reading of texts—and also in the writing of literary criticism—is not insignificant. Felski believes that this approach is guided not by "idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text's status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps makes things happen" (12).*

This idea gives me pause—especially right now as nearly all professors are preparing to teach students online and remotely. In planning to teach my program's Honours seminar, I have selected a number of texts I genuinely hope might act as paradoxical guides in this challenging and uncertain time. Because, of course, we are still very much living in the early months of this pandemic. What kinds of new thinking might our students do if released from

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any expectation to either decode or deconstruct the text? Instead of tacitly tasking them to engage in an exercise in fault finding, what if we were to instead ask them to explore the generative possibilities of these texts—through the close connection between reader and writer—as a portal into their lives, not to mention our own?

4. "crip world"

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes in the preface to *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, "Writing (with) a Movement from Bed," that her own crip writing practice is in community rather than isolation. When she moves to Oakland, California, she describes spending hours writing from her "femme of color bed cave" (10), clad in comfortable pyjama pants with a heating pad to take the edge off chronic pain. As she says, "I did so alongside many other sick and disabled writers making culture" (10). Although not celebrated by the mainstream disability rights movement, "[w]riting from bed is a time-honored disabled way of being an activist and cultural worker" (10). And, Piepzna-Samarasinha explains, "[a]s disability justice was giving birth to itself as a movement, I got to be part of it as a cultural worker, often working from bed" (12). Indeed, Piepzna-Samarasinha, in their own words, is a "queer disabled nonbinary femme writer, educator and disability/transformative justice worker of Burgher/Tamil Sri Lankan and Irish/Roma ascent" ("Leah Lakshmi"). They have published nine books as author or co-editor, and *Bodymap* (2015) is their third collection of poetry. Originally from Worcester, Massachusetts, they have called Brooklyn, Oakland, and, significantly, Toronto home.

Throughout *Bodymap*, Piepzna-Samarasinha explicitly writes a crip poetics; in the "crip world" section of the collection, we are situated in the present moment of "Lamaze breathing through pain spikes" (22). The speaker struggles "to stay in the palace of words" as she is reduced to "asking for a Vicodin with a shaking hand" (22). Yet this speaker, while confined to bed for long periods of time, is able to ease pain through masturbation, where an orgasm "is better than any prescription pain med" that she can "steal a script for" (26). To "just jerk off and jerk / off and jerk off" keeps her "free" (26), not from pain but from complete reliance on a biomedical system that fails to recognize not only her chronic pain but her identity as a

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chronically ill woman of colour. This is a speaker who says explicitly "I don't want to date anyone who's not a crip ever again," because she wants "the pleasure of never having to explain"—"sickness, unpredictable tides of fevers and sore hips, microtrembling / butterfly hands and legs" (27), and how these impairments have been shamed, not only by previous partners, but also by friends, family, work, and society at large.

The speaker of these poems reminds us that as chronically ill people we are "like other invalids able to make art" while confined to bed (24). As Kafer has stressed, "collective affinity" (13) can be found in imaginatively joining together as crip people, not because our conditions, symptoms, or diagnoses unite us through essential similarities, but instead because chronic illness and disability can be understood through shared histories of exclusion, isolation, and discrimination in traditional art, literature, and workplaces. Kafer reminds us that because disability should be situated as political, it can also be contested. Disability, then, can be considered a site that is intrinsically contestable. In fact, the call for fixed, stable definitions of disability signals that it remains important to critique the structural forces that decide in advance who is properly disabled and who is not. In the context of chronic illness, this is particularly important because it is not always self-evident who is disabled and who is non-disabled, especially in the context of invisible disabilities. Piepzna-Samarasinha speaks directly to the chronically ill when this poem argues, via its title, that even if "everyone thinks you are so lazy," an appropriate response is: "don't let them" (24). In this poem, productivity—inextricably connected to what are considered legitimate forms of work—is reconceived. A commute is "the daily act of breathing," which is "work as necessary as nine-to-five" (24). As Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, where our work is concerned, "this labour not paid not union" is the work of not only rejecting the slur "lazy" but the work of actively keeping oneself alive. Lazy, then, as a shorthand to describe those who are not considered to be properly productive, stings in exactly the way it is supposed to. Therefore, as disabled people there is a responsibility to not only "make sure you are paid what you are worth" but to pay oneself first (24). At this poem's close, Piepzna-Samarasinha argues: "*our survival is / the opposite of lazy*" (24, emphasis original).

As Kafer rightly argues, a political-relational model of disability—which Kafer frames as "a friendly departure from the more common social model

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of disability" (7)—seeks to pluralize understandings of body, mind, and bodymind instability. Yet such a crip politics also refuses to dismiss the medical model of disability because there are individual situations where pharmaceutical treatments and/or surgical interventions might not only be appropriate and effective, but also sought out and desired. In fact, these forms of medicalization can be life-changing as well as life-affirming for many people with disabilities. Thus, in envisioning a political-relational model of disability where women with chronic illnesses are concerned, the goal is to neither oppose nor valorize the role of medicine in our lives. We can desire to have our symptoms alleviated, our mental health issues well managed, and even to be cured of chronic pain, while continuing to be identified as and allied with disabled people.

In a political-relational model of disability, disability continues to no longer singularly reside in individual minds or bodies but in built environments and social patterns that exclude and marginalize. But the *problem* of disability remains located in inaccessible buildings and discriminatory attitudes. The problem disability presents is solved, then, through social change and political transformation, not simply through accessible spaces, as no manner of ramp has ever been known to cure mental illness or chronic pain. It might be clear, then, how the political-relational model seeks to politicize disability, but let us not forget that it also seeks to articulate how disability is relational, for disability itself exists in relation to notions of normalcy, able-bodiedness, and able-mindedness, thus creating a false binary. In fact, in living with chronic illness we also experience disability through relationships with others. Disability does not occur in isolation from the social world but is brought into being through a hard edge and crackly surface, between here and there, the now and the just-out-of-reach future.

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Erina Harris

UNWARDS, The Printing Press in Hell: Testimony II (Spoken by Hades)

Excerpt from Persephone's Abecedarium: An Alphabet Play (An Ecopoetical Adaptation of the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter")

. . . this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method . . .
which in Hell are salutary and medicinal . . .
displaying the infinite which was hid.

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

I

To not have entered language entered her

One hundred questions is to wish a wish

For tendrils she begins to mean: "Is

A flower is a flower

Is it."

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II

And sending out their tendrils, their last sounds

Flailing-hoofed, beak-hooted, matter-rasping

Especially crying thousands from their carts,

From carts, to which the names are strapped and howl

Themselves; furred epilogues shuttled by nurses

Who push cartfuls, flap in capes of ash

Forgotten daughters cross the After-Garden

Serve silence from dustless cubicles

From cubicles they mulch the last words, unwards

To keep the unwords safe among the dead

Unbird unheard unutters hush unmeaning

From which the next newborn it will resound.

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III

Her heavy tantrum seeded that rehearses
Hearsed, and horses see her tantrum bluing
At the bluish base it flickers tresses
In the Quiet Pantry was the girl
The girl is holding the Narcissus
When is a child and when a flower.
That power is. I, pupil in her eye,
Iris, in my death exits my death.

IV

"Archivist."

"Chicken-shit."

"Who doesn't love the dead best."

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Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod

Pandemic Listening: Critical Annotations on a Podcast Made in Social Isolation

Due to the changes in nearly all modes of communication during the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we no longer sound the same to each other, and we listen to the world differently than we did before. Our sonic environments and our "listening ears" have changed, and continue to change.[1] This article presents a series of reflections upon the implications of this dominant audiovisual environment for how we have been listening to each other and to the world around us, during this pandemic period of 2020-2021. The reflections were first articulated *within* a media production: the podcast episode, "How are we listening, now? Signal, Noise, Silence," as part of *The SpokenWeb Podcast* (Camlot and McLeod).[2] This episode was produced in March and April 2020 during the first months of pandemic restrictions, as an early intervention that aimed to understand the significance of telecommunications during a global pandemic. Our reflections continue now, a year later, in the form of a written article that performs critical annotations on an audiovisual media production that precedes it and of which it is a critical extension. The format invites readers to read while listening to segments of the podcast to which it refers (indicated throughout with timestamps). Our reflections are positioned with degrees of temporal distance from each other (from podcast to article), and from situated moments that represent historically specific effects of the pandemic upon our sensory experience. While social requirements of the pandemic have altered our perception of time, the pandemic period itself now seems

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divisible into sub-periods (early pandemic, first wave, second wave, etc.) determined by shared and individual experience. So our very sense of when "now" has taken place is an effect of pandemic experience. Our reflections in this article are also positioned within the broad disciplinary frame of literary studies, and within the networked shape of pedagogical and literary communities in settler Canada. Our reflections in this article are by necessity speculative, but move towards the thesis that pandemic listening represents an opportunity to identify and transform systemic, habitual listening practices.

The podcast episode explores how our contexts and practices of listening to voice, signals, noise, and silence change during the first weeks of the public health emergency of COVID-19. In the episode, Jason asks graduate students in his literature and sound studies seminar at Concordia (via Zoom teleconferencing) how their listening practices have changed and, meanwhile, Katherine notices that readings are moving online as she updates the listings for *Where Poets Read*, a web resource for poetry events (McLeod). We also notice that our shared experience of social isolation seems to have us craving the comforting sounds of noise around the signal. Three months after making this episode, we organized a virtual event with participants from the podcast—"How are we listening, now? A conversation with SpokenWeb"—through Concordia's 4th SPACE (a public research showcase environment) in order to revisit the question of how we are listening, whether as individuals, as teachers/learners, and/or within literary communities. Much like that online event but in written form, this article revisits questions posed in the podcast episode concerning 1) the implications of our increasingly pervasive Zoom-based methods of communication and 2) the connection between how we are listening and how we are feeling, individually and collectively. In revisiting these discussions as they are transcribed and at a temporal distance from the events themselves (while still being in the pandemic), this article theoretically unpacks the discoveries about signal and noise made performatively within the podcast, expands upon the continued relevance of these discoveries to a characterization of pandemic sound and silence, and theorizes a concept of pandemic listening within literary contexts defined by talking, teaching, and performing.

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Pandemic Listening: Technique, Mode, Condition

Many theorists have approached the question of listening through historical discussions of culturally and professionally informed ways of listening (what Jonathan Sterne has called "audile techniques"), and through the identification of discrete, formal *modes* of listening. Beyond the matter of which audile techniques predominate under the conditions of a pandemic, we ask, Is pandemic listening a "mode" in the vein of Pierre Schaeffer's "Four Listening Modes," or Michel Chion's "Three Listening Modes"?[3] Does the critical project that pursues a modal anatomization of listening capture and explain how we have been listening during this pandemic period? Such critical acts of identifying and naming distinct modes of listening are useful for understanding what may be happening within a situated listening scenario (as in the case of pandemic listening), and are especially useful for defining what we are listening for, and why, and even for proposing listening methods to be deployed for descriptive or critical purposes within specific disciplinary or media contexts. Chion's categories of causal, semantic, and reduced listening, and the idea of the acousmatic in some of its more recent applications (as in Nina Sun Eidsheim's book *The Race of Sound*), are especially useful for describing current listening methods and experiences, and the preconceptions we bring to our encounters with sound and the voices of others. Still, as Tom Rice has observed, "thinking in terms of distinct listening modes may not accurately reflect—and indeed may at times distort—the perception of listening as it occurs within the holistic context of lived experience" (108). We do not wish to propose pandemic listening as a thickly contoured listening mode or style. We are not yet prepared to think about the potential future value of listening "as if" in a pandemic, as a strategic listening mode, although we are not denying the possibility of defining how we have been listening in modal terms. The formalism of the critical gesture seems less relevant than other concerns.

The assertion of something called "pandemic listening" may be neither a technique nor a mode, but rather a condition that can be understood and characterized as a loose historical container for these two other, very useful ways of describing and understanding what listening may be as an action, and as an experience, at a given historical moment. Pandemic listening can involve listening to sounds of the pandemic and to sonic effects produced by

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the pandemic. But pandemic listening is more than this act of listening *to*; rather, pandemic listening is a phenomenological and psychological state of being that is conditioned by the pandemic itself. The idea of a condition may evoke, for some, Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1979), whose object was a critical report on "the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (xxiii).[4] We acknowledge the evocation, but with a far more contingent and plural meaning than is sometimes associated with Lyotard's use of the term. The conditions informing our lives in this global pandemic are extremely diverse depending on geography, and on social, cultural, and political contexts. There is no single pandemic condition, and so, equally, there is no single condition of pandemic listening. We are not describing *La condition d'écoute pandémique*. But our article is a report, of sorts, on the conditions under which we have been listening within pedagogical and literary communities in settler Canada during what we recognize as a conditional period of exceptional social and cultural disruption and arrest. In making this podcast, *we* listen as individual listeners: Jason hears the pandemic through his students' voices and in the sound of the "pivot" to the online classroom; Katherine is encountering the pandemic as a scholar without permanent employment but not without academic community, all of which inform how this collaboration came about. The idea for the podcast began at a SpokenWeb Concordia team meeting held on Zoom after the work-from-home directives were first issued. Our individual voices are audible as distinct in the podcast recording, even as we narrate from the perspective of a shared voice, a "we" that persists even more strongly in the present article due to the levelling of tone and timbre by print. Reflecting back upon our original choice to narrate the podcast with the *we*, we cannot help but notice that, for all this diversity and particularity of experience, at the root of the word pandemic is the idea of something "belonging to the whole people" ("Pandemic"). Anyone can catch it. Everyone is vulnerable. It belongs to all of us, albeit with different local effects and under different local conditions.

Within the specific conditions of our report, pandemic listening is most certainly informed by the telecommunications media technologies that have become a generalized platform informing our protocols of listening, and by the changes in our sonic environments that may require us to rely more

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explicitly on one discernible mode of listening (causal listening, for example) than others, due to the audibility of sounds (say, in urban environments) usually not heard due to greatly reduced circulation and activity of people and machines. It is informed by our need to teach and discuss literary works with students from our homes via cameras, computer screens, microphones, speakers, and headphones, and to "gather" to hear writers read from their work on virtual platforms rather than on material stages. It is informed, in great part, by how we are *feeling* now, as a result of the major social changes we are experiencing, including the pervasive sense of geographical restriction and social isolation, financial precarity, caution and fear of contagion, and a challenged sense of purpose in work, life, and self. So, pandemic listening is informed by a set of geographical, social, cultural, and technological conditions that result in a conditional set of phenomenological experiences of listening that, in turn, enable new kinds of reflections upon *how* we listen.

Pandemic listening is characterized by a phenomenological condition that estranges us from our habituated sensory practices and circuits, and from our assumptions about the sounds of others and the world by which we oriented ourselves, made distinctions and judgments, and generated knowledge, before the new, disruptive conditions arose. The ground of sound has shifted, and so, then, has our experience of listening. The pandemic has altered the global conditions under which we may make phenomenological observations and assertions. Phenomenologist of sound Don Ihde has suggested that "the auditory field"—the constancy against which we come to discern and attribute significance to sound events and provide phenomenological accounts of what we hear—is silence (205). Never a static field, the mercurial nature of silence has become increasingly evident to us in these conditions. Any phenomenology of pandemic listening must recognize that the basic context within which sounds are perceived has changed drastically, and that our descriptions and assertions are, at once, contingent—subject to a unique and historically specific set of conditions—and yet also global in their potential reach and implication. The title of our podcast, "How are we listening, now?" signals the superimposition of historical contingency (the idea that the "now" will change as relief comes in the future) with shared immediacy (the "we" that is listening within this temporally framed set of global conditions).

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Pandemic listening, happening in this historically situated *now*, is characterized by a strange combination of the most basic use of our senses for the purpose of survival, and a disorienting meta-critical disruption within the scenario of panic that allows us to see the shape and seams of our own listening assumptions. Panic, not etymologically linked to pandemic (despite the shared prefix), evokes the sudden sense of fear or alarm triggered by strange, acousmatic sounds. Roland Barthes dramatizes a scene in which such alarming sounds are heard in lonely natural spaces (mountains, woods, and caves), and in retrospect are attributed to the god Pan. *Pan*ic is a sudden wild and unreasoning sense of terror evoked by the sounds of a half-wild, half-human entity. "*Panic* listening"—a Dionysian mode of listening that Barthes refers to following the introduction of his own triad of listening types (listening as "an alert," listening as "a deciphering," and modern/psychoanalytic listening)—figures listening as a form of "playing over unknown spaces" and ultimately, listening as "*release*" (258). But the question is, Release from what? Panic (as once defined by Arthur Kroker in a tone of dystopian glee) is the feeling that "everything now lies in the panicky balance between catastrophe or creation as possible human destinies" (125). Perhaps that is one of the defining oscillations of pandemic listening: the feeling that we are released from our stability of habits, from the comfort of thinking we know how, what, and why we hear, into the fragile, uncomfortable, exhausting, yet potentially creative and critically generative condition of "*listening to how we listen*" (Eidsheim 57-58, emphasis original).

The Pandemic Podcast: Signal, Noise, Silence

00:02:39	Oana Avasilichioaei:	Can you hear me?
00:02:40	Klara du Plessis:	Yes.
00:02:41	Oana Avasilichioaei:	Alright!

At the opening of "How are we listening, now? Signal, Noise, Silence," an audio collage previews many of the voices heard at greater length in the episode, and sonically performs the episode's key themes. This sonic introduction dramatizes movement from signal to silence, as the imperative to be heard (and the disposition to hear) is recurrently disrupted by signal distortion, and increasingly so as the audio collage proceeds. The collage

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opens with poet Oana Avasilichioaei asking if she can be heard—a question commonly asked by a poet speaking into a microphone before a live audience, but in this case, this interrogative tuning of the communications circuit is performed in response to the perceived tenuousness of the telecommunications connection. When fellow poet (and PhD student) Klara du Plessis confirms that Oana can be heard, her response is a near-joyous affirmative declaration, "Alright!" The joy of connection is audible in this most basic, by now familiar opening exchange, an exchange that articulates the gratification of the temporary grounding of a speaking subject and a listening subject, the setting of the table for all manner of future conversation. As it weaves between signal and noise, the collage also mixes the sound of official, public discourse (the voice of the Prime Minister telling the Canadian public, via national airwaves, to stay home), with discursive sounds of interiority, privacy, and domestic intimacy (poet Alexei Perry Cox reading a poem about an absent lover as her infant can be heard "speaking" an intonational recitative in response). It mixes the sound of a listener (poet and student Isabella Wang) pronouncing her love for a poem that she has just heard (virtually) and the sound of the co-host's voice becoming delayed and chopped into fragmented packets of digital audio, thus contrasting the powerful possibilities of reception across a distance with equally plausible failures to send and receive. The opening audio collage establishes the sonic range of the issues pursued in the podcast and dramatizes the relative ground of silence in relation to noises and audible signals as all in tenuous flux.

00:04:14	Jason Camlot:	Thursday, March the 12th: that was the last time that I had an in-person conversation in close proximity with someone other than my wife or two teenage children or one of our two little dogs. . . .
00:06:10	Katherine McLeod:	My own thinking about questions of how we are listening now came from noticing that some of the poetry reading events that had been scheduled for the spring were starting to move online in different ways. . . .
00:07:56	Jason Camlot:	Right, so we're both thinking about how we're listening now under the present circumstances of social distancing and self-isolation, and thinking about our new experiences and practices of listening, especially within a range of literary

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> contexts, including reading literature silently at home, teaching and discussing literature in the classroom, and performing literature on a stage at a poetry reading. . . .

The episode is framed by a disciplinary question about how our listening practices have changed "within a range of literary contexts." That framing question informed the examples and cases around which we developed our discussion of listening at the time. While our thinking about pandemic listening travelled a continuum between quotidian and performative contexts, the literary event (poetry reading) and the literary conversation (literature seminar discussion) were the two main case studies around which our explorations of listening were organized. What are the implications of having used this disciplinary lens, the literary, as the occasion for exploring pandemic listening? That literary studies is often silent on listening is one of the primary issues we have had to encounter and think about in pandemic listening. As a discipline, literary studies can no longer ignore sound, what we hear, how we listen. By forcing us to adapt to doing these activities with new technologies, the pandemic has exposed the structures through which events of teaching and reading literature have been taking place. The poetry reading represents a public event, often (but not always) of an individual before an audience. That individual is often (but not always) presenting formally constructed texts that to some extent communicate their perspective, and perhaps even a representational, vocalized version of their interiority. The poetry reading may be fairly characterized as an "existential practice" (Fredman 182), in which the poet performs affective and reflective utterances that would otherwise be unavailable within a public context. As an event it has cultural protocols in place for the reception of such utterances that would, in most other public contexts, be deemed odd, inappropriate, or even mad. The poetry reading is thus a cultural mode that lends itself to critical reflection upon the relationship between private and public encounter when its more common (yet still quite flexible) material platforms (the stage, the mic, the room of seated listeners) is replaced by digital teleconferencing platforms that reconfigure our relationship to each other's spaces, and consequently to our experience of privacy and publicity. The same can be said of teaching within the space of an established institution of higher

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education, a university seminar room, with its moodless fluorescent tube lighting, its rectangular seminar table with classroom chairs around it (so unlike a dining-room table, despite the similarity in shape and size), its white- or blackboards with marks and traces of the graphs, quotations, and keywords from other classes that have already met in this same space. This is a public, institutionalized space in which discussion of texts about the meaning of life, feeling, and human relations (humanities education) takes place. Again, the seminar room is an institutionalized platform that authorizes and renders public and professional all kinds of discussions about our experience and understanding of literary expression, form, and character.

What happens to literary conversation when it takes place on a new platform—say, a Zoom platform—from each of our home living spaces? The sanction of the public context for the discussion of literature changes, perhaps requiring more control or constraint over discourse of the literary discussion itself, since it no longer has actual institutional space to guarantee its professionalism. Or, maybe it doesn't change all that much (in cases of synchronous teaching) because the conceit of the university seminar room is still present through some kind of tacit consensus, an agreement that *we are in class*, even when, in real time, we are at once in our homes and in a virtual teleconferencing session. The shared understanding that *we are at an event* also happens during literary events such as readings or book launches, raising the question of how this differs from the pre-pandemic understanding of belonging to a literary community and enacting that community in a planned, eventful gathering. But even without seeing each other, the engine of literary production has continued and so has its communities—in real and imagined ways. What the pandemic has shown is that there are structures holding up these communities, literary or otherwise, that go beyond physically gathering in one place. These otherwise largely invisible structures may be more discernible in pandemic conditions.

Beyond the fact that our literary examples in this podcast have, arguably, provided us with sites and cases for analysis that are already actively dramatizing the relationship between private and public identities and modes of communication, this movement between public and private, professional and personal, is further dramatized in our episode by the fact that 1) we move between scripted, high-fi discussions (albeit home-recorded,

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in solitude), and lower-quality Zoom-recorded conversations, and 2) we have presented our ideas in the form of a podcast, a form of (in this case, scholarly) communication that is generically identifiable for its blurring of official and personal perspectives. Podcasting can be a kind of proxy for person-to-person connection precisely because of its ability to combine the public and the private, and due to the media technologies through which it is consumed. As Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry observe,

> [p]odcasting culture thus manages to be both personal and communal, a sensibility that is related to the active choice the listener has to exercise, and the modes of consumption—through headphones, car sound systems, home computers, mobile phones etc.—which imbue a deeply sonorous intimacy. To be a private, silent participant in other people's interests, conversations, lives and experiences, relating to a subject you are passionate about, generates a deep sense of connection. (2)

In the following scene from our podcast, listeners are transported into the private spaces in which this unscripted Zoom conversation took place and they hear the stress and exhaustion in our voices that we would try to mask in more public forms of discourse:

00:08:40	[Sound Effect: Zoom Teleconferencing Chimes]		
00:08:41	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	Hello?
00:08:42	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	Hello, can you hear me?
00:08:44	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	Yeah, hi Katherine.
00:08:46	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	Hi.
00:08:47	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	Wait, let me turn my video on. Where are you, in your kitchen?
00:08:54	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	No, actually I'm in my office-room.
00:09:02	[Zoom audio]	Jason Camlot:	How're you doing?
00:09:04	[Zoom audio]	Katherine McLeod:	I'm good, given the situation. But yeah, today felt definitely more like a challenge to get started. Yeah, just. . . . It took more energy to get going. . . .
00:10:10	[Music: Instrumental Piano]		[. . .]
00:11:01	Katherine McLeod:		We did have a real conversation, though, after this affective, close-listening warm-up. I asked you how your class went.
00:11:10	Jason Camlot:		We had to go back to teach online this week, so I held my seminar again. . . .

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During the recording of the podcast episode in March 2020, we spoke with students, colleagues, friends, writers, and literary event organizers. Their most immediate concerns about how we were listening were related to the changing methods of communication amid social isolation and its impact on our connection to each other and to our communities. When recording the podcast, sounds heard on the news, and our continuous talk about the noticeable changes in our sonic environments, loomed large in our auditory imaginations of what a pandemic sounds like. Sounds of the body in medicalized environments, and of the body breathing, in particular, were part of this audible imaginary—with all that talk of chronic coughing, ventilators, and dyspnea. For the podcast, these sounds remained somewhat removed because we, apart and at home, were hearing only transmissions of pandemic sound from a medical perspective, a perspective from which one was (ideally) distanced. What was present in our lives was the feeling of being disconnected—disconnected pedagogically, disconnected socially, and disconnected from performing art live before others. Our focus on these literary contexts informed the determination of our keywords for the podcast because all three terms—signal, noise, silence—inform the way we process and discern the meanings of sounds through relational auditory practices.

How Are You Listening? Affect, Event, Environment

00:12:14	[Begin Music: Slightly Distorted Techno Instrumental] [. . .]	
00:13:34	Jason Camlot:	As human listeners, we're usually pretty good at hearing the signal at the expense of the noise. . . . So we can speak of noise and silence in our sound environments and their effects on how we feel.

The pandemic has affected our sonic environments and our responses to them. At the start, during the time of making the podcast episode, silence became more noticeable, and noises stood out as a result of this newly perceived silence. Quiet streets and sounds of nature were observed by Jason's students. Then, they also noticed the domestic sounds that stood out amid the quiet: a family dog barking outside, conversations taking place in the next room, or even noticing and being distracted by a partner's breathing in the same room. All of these impressions characterize the listener as

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attending to details within their sonic environments with a sense of awe even when they are mundane sounds: the kinds of sounds that would previously have been blocked out. Affective response to sound changed as time passed and as listeners grew accustomed to the new urban silence. This change was apparent in how participants recalled the early days of the pandemic in the online podcast follow-up event of June 2020. Three months after the lockdown, PhD student Marlene Oeffinger said she found herself "almost craving the social noise," and poet Oana Avasilichioaei gave this account of the change:

> The return of the noise of the kind of city noise has been really comforting actually because it felt very eerie . . . if I'm in a remote place and there are only natural noises that's wonderful but to have that sort of same kind of soundscape in a city is very disturbing actually because there's a deadness to it. So to me the return of the noise was, like I said, somewhat comforting. But I also think I've found myself in these past months becoming more selective to what I choose to listen to. ("How are we listening, now? A conversation with SpokenWeb")

Oeffinger's and Avasilichioaei's observations about their changing relationships to noise and silence register difficult feelings. Avasilichioaei admits that the return of urban noises had been comforting and uses words like "eerie" and "disturbing" to describe a city without noise, yet she also voices a sense of disquiet in finding comfort in the return of these noises. "Disturbing" is a word that Oeffinger also uses to describe the silence of the backyard, without the social noises of her neighbours. This suggests that the sounds we associate with background noise and usually ignore are now being recognized as a comforting din that we miss. Noise is aesthetic, environmental, and social. The assumptions made about noise reveal the implicit structures of ideology; what is considered "noise" is often considered to be disruptive, but noise is also generative: "Noise *is* culture; noise *is* communication; noise *is* music" (Novak 133, emphasis original). Jason's explanation of the signal-to-noise ratio in the podcast reveals that what comes to the foreground (the signal) is heard as becoming interpretable whereas the background (the noise) is heard as uninterpretable (00:12:14). The changing significance of noise during our current pandemic times suggests that we should look to where this change will register in our society. As Jacques Attali puts it, "change is inscribed in noise faster than it

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transforms society" (5), which suggests that listening to the changes in our sonic environment is how to learn the most immediate and accurate news of the pandemic's impact on society.

Noise becomes signal not by being heard but rather by its perceived absence. Mark Fisher defines eeriness as an effect that occurs when there is an unmet expectation regarding presence: "The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present where there should be something" (61). In the case of pandemic listening, the absent noise of the city is most uncannily affecting. The expression of discomfort with silence expressed by Avasilichioaei and Oeffinger seems to come from the fact that the environment itself has been silenced. That is what makes this sonic time of the pandemic more complex. If "[n]oises are the sounds we have learned to ignore" (4), as R. Murray Schafer suggests (and as we quote him in our podcast [00:13:34]), then pandemic listening has us unlearn this noise-filtering process. Pandemic listening conditions have introduced new kinds of agency over what we would normally remove involuntarily from our auditory field. Such novel conditions of listening agency may suggest new ways to "craft a means of empowerment by way of sonic thought" or even new kinds of "listening activism" (Labelle 9). As Avasilichioaei reflects, "I don't think I ever thought about my ability to choose what to listen to" ("How are we listening, now? A conversation with SpokenWeb"). That awareness of the agency of the listener is a powerful lesson that emerges from the unsilencing of noise.

00:19:42	Jason Camlot:	[. . .] John Durham Peters and his description of the uncanniness that surrounded early telephonic communication—talking into telephones—noted the existential anxiety that came from relying on the voice to do it all. That is, to do all the work of communicating one's thoughts, feelings, and presence to another person. . . . And he suggests that the telephone contributed to the modern derangement of dialogue by splitting conversation into two halves that meet only in the cyberspace of the wires.[5]
00:21:38	Audio Recording:	[Audio, Katherine McLeod's voice breaking up during a call, sounding tinny and distorted]
00:21:44	Katherine McLeod:	Why was that happening to my voice there?

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00:21:46	Jason Camlot:	I was wondering about that myself. . . .
00:23:24	Ali Barillaro:	My Internet connection is not the best. . . .
00:24:06	Jason Camlot:	[Audio, from a video call with his class] [. . .] It's frustrating when you feel like you can't have the confidence in the voice continuing. . . . It's kind of existentially traumatic and troubling. It's like that we don't know that we can count on the continuity of the person and the communication that we're engaging in.
00:24:49	Jason Camlot:	Still, we are relying on Zoom and Zoom-like platforms as best we can for the social encounters that we crave. Here, I'd say we're feeling the absence of a different kind of noise that we're also very good at ignoring and not hearing under normal conditions, but the absence of which we notice in a strong way in these dangerous times. We are noticing the absence of social sounds and that absence becomes a distracting kind of silence.

We hear a version of this kind of silence as we read this podcast now transcribed onto the written page. However, despite keenly noticing the sounds that are not there, we also agree that the podcast has a new effect when transformed into written text. It explains where the pieces of sounds come from (e.g. "[Audio, from a video call with his class]") and it structures the arguments in time-stamped sequence. Looking at the transcription while listening to the podcast allows for the comparison of two media formats.

Similar kinds of comparative thinking featured prominently in conversations with students in Jason's class. How many times have you caught yourself comparing a Zoom meeting with a "real" meeting, a FaceTime hangout with a "real" hangout? Particularly in the first phase of the pandemic, this rhetoric of comparison was rampant in our daily thought processes as we constantly measured our communication methods against that which we are, or were, most used to. In Jason's class, students compared the affordances of phone calls to those of text messages, often preferring how the phone call provides a sense of interpersonal proximity.

00:28:08	Klara du Plessis:	I have definitely been phoning a lot more, like every day. . . . So there's definitely this move towards trying to communicate more or to de-distance ourselves, I guess.

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00:28:25	Jason Camlot:	Voice is that medium made up of accent, intonation, and timbre that carries the message but disappears in the process. Usually we don't notice it because we're so focused on the message. In this instance, voice is the noise and the meaning is the signal. It's like what [Mladen] Dolar says about voice and a heavy accent. A heavy accent suddenly makes us aware of the material support of the voice, which we tend, immediately, to discard. Well, now we seem to be craving the accent.[6] I'm speaking metaphorically here using Dolar's account of voice as an ever-disappearing, yet undeniably present entity to help describe what we feel when we try to be together on Zoom or Skype or something like that, and sort of together, but at the same time really aren't together.
00:29:19	Katherine McLeod:	The sounds around the signal, the sounds that add the vibrancy to the social, the sense of a real unique person speaking are what we're listening for. . . .
00:29:37	Jason Camlot:	Because I've been on Twitter a lot more than usual, I read a tweet—this was early April—posted by Gianpiero Petriglieri that suggested we're so exhausted after video calls because we're experiencing "the plausible deniability of each other's absence. Our minds [are] tricked into the idea of actually being together when our bodies feel we're not" actually together.[7] He's suggesting it's the dissonance of being relentlessly in the presence of each other's absence that makes us so tired.

Petriglieri made that observation on Twitter *before* the world had a term for "Zoom fatigue," a point worth remembering now that there is an ever-growing body of criticism on the pandemic such that, at some point in a post-pandemic future, it will be read as a pandemic archive. Back in March 2020, when we were making the podcast, Petriglieri's description of how we were striving to relate with each other immediately felt like a truly accurate insight into what we were experiencing but could not yet describe (lacking adequate language) in our new pandemic work lives. His expertise as a researcher of the psychodynamics of organizational systems, and the

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dynamic relationships between the identity formations of workers, social networks, and workspaces, prepared him well to identify what we desired, but were not getting from our social interactions that had now moved online.[8] Petriglieri is right that being relentlessly in the presence of each other's absence is a demanding scenario for our senses and imaginations and makes us tired during otherwise enlivening social gatherings. Being away from each other is what our bodies notice most, like the background "noise" that suddenly rings clear as the signal in its absence. In relation to the *now* of writing this article, compared to the *then* of making the podcast, Salomé Voegelin writes about how increasing use of AI to "clean up" audio in a Zoom call depletes it of the Barthesian vocal grain: the noise that would otherwise connect us in a "real" conversation: "Online, this grain might be all we have left to touch each other, to leave a trace, and enter into a reciprocal encounter." In making the podcast, we were talking about the absence of noise in our sonic environments while using a platform that would contribute to the (increasingly) global removal of noise and grain from vocal telecommunications.

The filtering of noise in a virtual reading removes much of the sound of audible sociality that contributes to the atmosphere of an in-person reading: gone is the buzz, the sonic interruptions of spontaneity, and the din of being there together, and so gone is the experience of listening to and through a wide spectrum of sound. What constitutes an event has drastically changed with the onset of the pandemic. Virtual events are still events, but the "real" events in our lives can end up being a conversation on a park bench, or a chance encounter while walking down the street, usually accompanied by exclamations about how nice it is to see each other in person rather than on a screen. The scale of what constitutes an event has changed, and pandemic listening registers that shift. What we are listening to under such conditions is not exclusively the scheduled "event" around which there is consensus as formal entity. Rather, we are listening to how otherwise mundane instances of small social interactions now function as events, discernible as such due to a changing scale in our perception of eventfulness, and their affective impact in our daily lives. A socially distanced one-on-one visit can energize us as though we had just attended the most exhilarating concert. Literary events have shifted online and the experience of them as events has inevitably

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changed as a result. One thing we have noticed is that we seem to relish the chance interactions, smiles, and waves we experience across screens as much as the scheduled activities themselves.

00:48:10	Isabella Wang:	What's really changed is the interactive environment. . . . I think part of the literary experience is that interaction, that engagement with poets like before and after they read. . . .
00:58:36	Katherine McLeod:	Back in the first week when everything was changing, I remembered feeling relieved that people like Isabella [Wang] and rob [mclennan] were creating online readings, but I also remember feeling that I didn't have the concentration to sit down and listen. And I remember thinking that when I feel more focused, or really when I feel a bit better, then I look forward to listening. When you don't feel like listening, that says something about how you're feeling. When you ask someone how they are listening and, if that's changed, you're really asking them how they're doing.

Listening back to this part of the podcast recalls those uneasy feelings in March 2020 when we found ourselves trying to adjust both to the pandemic and to the idea that the pandemic would most likely mean unprecedented change. There was an urgency to maintain human connection—to host virtual readings, to organize virtual hangouts, and to constantly read the news (the bedtime doomscroll)—and, at the same time, there was a need to step back, take care, and tune out. While making the podcast during the pandemic, we interviewed two reading series organizers who either moved their series online right away (Isabella Wang's Dead Poets Reading Series) or started an online series (rob mclennan's Virtual Reading Series: Perodicities). We were aware too that we ourselves were producing media content of the podcast episode during a time when listeners may or may not have wanted to engage in introspective reflection on our changed reality. After all, pandemic listening is an uneasy and uncomfortable listening in that it is a listening in and to a time of mass (*pan-*) emotional and mental distress, loss of jobs, and loss of life.

By the time we organized a re-listening event around this podcast episode, it was June 2020 and Black Lives Matter protests against police violence and

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structural anti-Black racism were taking place across North America, which also brought heightened awareness to the fact that the pandemic was having a greater impact on Black lives, even if governments were resisting the collection of race-based data. That sound of protest—from the protesters' voices to the sonic deterrents to protest—has remained an important element of pandemic listening. It is a component of pandemic listening that reminds us that so many of the inequalities exposed by the pandemic were there, waiting to be heard, all along. Once again, the pandemic creates a silence that, unintentionally, allows for something to be heard with an eerie kind of clarity. As Dionne Brand has written of the experience of 2020, "[t]ime in the city is usually taken up running around positioning oneself around this narrative of the normal. But the pandemic situates you in waiting. So much waiting, you gain clarity. You listen more attentively, more anxiously." Pandemic listening is attentive listening, but it is also anxious listening.

What does the podcast offer for pandemic listeners, waiting, who may in fact want to reject "the normal" of the past but cannot yet feel optimism or even imagine what could be ahead? Podcasts may reflect the conflicted state of anxious attention felt by the pandemic listener: "[P]odcasting provides a mechanism by which producer/consumers use the medium to define and enact their own agency within the highly fractured subjectivity of the internet age" (Llinares 125). The intensity for our listeners of listening to a *pandemic* podcast is doubly felt as the audio conveys unsettling sounds within an already intimate form of media production. Stacey Copeland describes the podcast's generic affordance of intimacy through Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economy: "There is an inherent intimacy in voice-driven soundwork that seems to be soaking in affect. The listener puts on her headphones, presses play and becomes immersed in an affective discourse of human experience through listening and connecting" (211-12).[9] One can write about pandemic listening in a print article, as we are now, but the medium of the podcast, with its presentation of voice and soundscape, allows one to hear it, and to feel it.

Because pandemic listening is a distracted form of listening, distracted by the conditions in which we listen, namely the affective conditions, it seems nearly impossible to answer the question: "How are you feeling?" The question, "How are you listening?" allows for a greater possibility of focus

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upon the phenomenological experience that is informing how we feel at the present time. What we are choosing to listen to and how we are choosing to listen are, in their own ways, answers to that question of how we are feeling. Our podcast, pursued by seeking to sound possible answers to this question, represents an equally focused, media-specific way of attempting to understand that feeling.

00:59:33	Jason Camlot:	Hey, let's try that out. Hey Katherine, how are you listening?
00:59:37	Katherine McLeod:	I'm listening . . . fine, thanks. How are you listening, Jason?
00:59:42	Jason Camlot:	I'm listening pretty well. Thanks for asking. But let me ask you this. How are you *really* listening, Katherine?
00:59:50	Katherine McLeod:	Well, Jason, how am I *really* listening? [Audible deep breath, slow exhale, and pause] [. . .] We are listening differently now. Here. Hear. Here.

Pandemic listening is experienced as a combination of anxious, attentive listening *and* (supposedly) analgesic, distracted listening. The fact that we are still in the pandemic (at the time of this writing) means that pandemic listening persists under a condition of awaiting its end. It is a listening in which the body is on high alert for potential distortion, even if we may try our best to pretend otherwise. We, the authors, hear sounds of disruption, distortion, and affective excess prominently when we listen back to the podcast episode over one year later. In March 2020, we did not yet understand the implications of what we were doing in documenting and recording a state of fearful, anxious listening. Listening further under these conditions, and listening back to the sound of how we were listening then (during our historically documented *now* of the early pandemic period), we have come to understand pandemic listening as a condition of estrangement from our habitual modes of knowing what we hear. This condition of pandemic listening is uncomfortable, troubling, and we want it to end. But it may also provide new conditions from which to learn about our ways of listening in some very elementary and elemental ways. It is difficult for us to think our way out of the cultural formations that have trained us to hear, and thus to teach our way out of our perceptual biases of listening. Pandemic listening, among its many other affective and social implications, may be

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providing us with new space to listen against inherited and ingrained sonic assumptions. As Eidsheim suggests, in an encouraging spirit of hope and belief in the powers of pedagogical agency, even the most seemingly natural sounds—the timbral qualities of voices and instruments and the meanings we attribute to them—"may be interrogated" and "can be deconstructed as reflective of ways of listening that reproduce, or return, the listener's historical, cultural, social, political, moral, ethical, academic, or any other positionality" (58). Pandemic listening may be a new, tremulous classroom within which we will come to hear, unlearn, and transform our understandings and practices of listening.

NOTES

1 All senses of Jennifer Stoever's phrase "the listening ear" apply to what has changed in 2020 both for listening practices and for the audibility of race, in that Stoever defines "the listening ear" as "a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line's norms" (7). With the disruptions of the pandemic, accrued listening assumptions and practices become stretched and strained, and the figures of sound they generate and depend upon to construct social norms and our sense of "the normal" have become newly apparent as figures.
2 We encourage readers of this article to listen to the podcast, available here: www.spokenweb.ca/podcast/episodes/how-are-we-listening-now-signal-noise-silence/.
3 Schaeffer's listening modes differentiate between dispositions to listen (*écouter*), to perceive aurally (*ouir*), to hear (*entendre*), and to understand (*comprendre*). In relation to such modal dispositions, silence, thought to be universal, is broken by a sound event, and the event itself divided into objective and subjective categories, the former determined by whatever material knowledge we can purport to glean about the actual sonic phenomena that interrupt silence, and the latter by our experience of that phenomena (84). The act of listening is further divided by Schaeffer into categories that combine subjective and situational qualities, which he refers to as natural, cultural, ordinary, and specialized modes of listening (86-87), as performed by three categories of listeners: ordinary, acousmatic, and instrumentalist listeners (113). Chion streamlined Schaeffer's reflections on listening modes into the three useful categories of causal, semantic, and reduced listening, the first characterized by the attribution of a causal source to acousmatic (unseen) sounds, the second by the inclination to discern meaning in sound, and the third more notional attempt to listen to the nature of the sound itself (25-34).
4 It also evokes David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989).
5 See Peters, pp. 195-99.
6 See Dolar, pp. 20-21.

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7 See @gpetriglieri.
8 For one good example (among many) of Petriglieri's approach to understanding workplace dynamics from a psychosocial and spatial perspective, see Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski.
9 Alternatively, the pandemic may also contribute to an aversion to such immersive listening experiences, and manifest a new trend in tuning out. Even an expert podcast listener such as Andrew Bottomley confesses—on a podcast (*New Aural Cultures*)—that his podcast listening decreased during those first months of the pandemic.

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James Warner

West Coast Noir

for Richard Naster c. 1983

Vancouver, used bookstores,
an art-house cinema or two nearby
and the cheap diners.
Rainy winters the crime.

Some facts emerged, *in situ*.
When I arrived, my room was empty save
for a few shadows
that moved, as I arrived.

It seemed all right, to live
with a change of clothing and a typewriter,
blackening pages
and failing to, when young.

At the Railway Club, where the toy
electric train scooted the long louche bar,
outnumbered, we drank
to the White Goddess. With her,

I questioned if dream was dream.
In her boudoir I crapped in a pot that turned
into a birdcage.
The parrot appeared ok,

and flew off, like art,
wayward, denuded of its schemes. Those days
spent gathering
evidence, at the scene!

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Heidi Tiedemann Darroch

The War at Home: Writing Influenza in Alice Munro's "Carried Away" and Kevin Kerr's *Unity (1918)*

> Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia, lyrics to tooth-ache. But no; with a few exceptions . . . literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind.
>
> —Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill"

As Woolf's observation suggests, while the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic had a devastating toll in illnesses and fatalities, with an unusually high morbidity rate among young adults, literary portrayals of the Spanish flu have appeared in only limited numbers, both in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak and in subsequent decades. This essay considers two post-influenza depictions, a short story and a play. In Alice Munro's "Carried Away," two characters converse in a small town's deserted hotel bar in early 1919 during a final influenza outbreak. Louisa, the town librarian, tells a visiting salesman about her puzzling romantic interlude with a soldier, conducted entirely by letter. In the permissive environment of the pandemic, she and the salesman have a fleeting sexual encounter. During this same last flu spike, the wife of the town's factory owner dies; several years later, he marries the librarian, their relationship initiated, in a complicated way, by the librarian's earlier romantic entanglement with the soldier. These seemingly disparate but ultimately interconnected encounters are used in Munro's episodic story to highlight how happenstance and coincidence shape the protagonist (Fisher 150). Published in *The New Yorker* in 1991 and included in a lightly revised form in her 1995 collection *Open Secrets*, "Carried Away" shares key thematic and structural elements with a later work,[1] Kevin Kerr's

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Governor General's Award-winning play *Unity (1918)*, first produced in the 1999-2000 season. Both texts depict the 1918 influenza pandemic by assessing the interplay of accident, fate, and chance; each includes epistolary elements, features dream and hallucination sequences, and uses gothic and comic elements to highlight the bleak ironies of the Spanish flu period in Canada. Both literary texts even incorporate the specific detail of the grisly decapitation of a young man in a work accident, suggesting that Kerr's work may be deliberately paralleling Munro's story.

But while these surface similarities are intriguing, the central commonality of the two works is their approach to representations of the conjoined histories of World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic. Munro and Kerr, I will argue, point to the ways in which commemoration of the influenza's victims is fundamentally different in character from the formal, institutional memorialization of the war dead. "Carried Away" and *Unity (1918)* emphasize that while the war and pandemic era saw the monumental collision of twin calamities, influenza losses could only be mourned individually, the extinguishment of each life a unique tragedy, but not one explicable within a framework of public heroism. Civilians were called on to make substantial personal sacrifices to care for the sick, and to ensure the ongoing operation of social institutions and connections during the influenza disaster, but their contributions have been largely forgotten.

The story and play consider how the juxtaposition of the war and the virus enable greater agency but also increased obligations for female characters precisely at the historical moment that (some) Canadian women were on the brink of being able to vote federally and as "New Woman" literature questioned the restriction of women to a life as wives and mothers. Munro provides an extended depiction of different forms of paid work, comparing physical labouring, sales and trade, and managerial occupations, while Kerr contrasts agricultural and domestic work with the relatively new professions of telegraph and telephone operator where care work is undertaken in a different form. By pointing to the way that influenza experiences were inflected by labouring status and gender, Kerr and Munro address a point equally salient in our own era: a pandemic's exacerbating effect on existing divides.

The 1918-1919 influenza pandemic had a devastating impact in illnesses and fatalities, further decimating a generation that had experienced

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unprecedented losses during the First World War, including the deaths of soldiers sickened with influenza as the war was drawing to its close. Historically, influenza has "posed a continual threat to global public health since at least as early as the Middle Ages, resulting in an estimated 3-5 million cases of severe illness" and as many as 640,000 deaths worldwide in a typical year (Nickol and Kindrachuk 1). Twentieth-century influenza pandemics broke out in the 1950s and again in the late 1960s, but the 1918-1919 outbreak had by far the greatest impact due to both its high overall death toll and its disproportionate fatalities among young adults, with two-thirds of those who died between the ages of twenty and forty (Honigsbaum 2493). Colloquially termed the Spanish flu because it was widely reported in neutral Spain's news while other European countries had wartime censorship measures in place that limited news coverage, it killed an estimated fifty million people globally. Canada's losses of 55,000 deaths (Fahrni and Jones 4) nearly reached the level of the country's First World War casualties, although it is not uncommon to see claims that they exceeded them (as Kerr's play indicates in its "Notes on Events" preceding the main text of the play).

Much like the coronavirus pandemic, which began to spread in late 2019, influenza symptoms involve respiratory distress accompanied by fever and chills, cough, general weakness and body pains, nausea, and sore throat. With more deadly influenza strains, death results from lung hemorrhages and related pulmonary syndromes, most typically pneumonia. Historian Mary-Ellen Kelm explains that unlike most seasonal flu outbreaks, where the onset of symptoms such as fatigue and body aches is gradual, Spanish influenza developed astonishingly quickly: people struck with the illness "weakened and collapsed suddenly," then began coughing up blood, which also poured through their noses (32). Pneumonia propelled patients into a state of increasing debility with cyanosis (absence of oxygen in the blood) apparent in the state of a sufferer's mouth and tongue, hands, and feet. "Just before death, the afflicted turned blue and became exceedingly cold" from hypoxia as their congested lungs ceased to transport oxygen in their blood throughout their bodies (Kelm 32). Both the dramatic appearance of these symptoms and the short time between onset and life-threatening illness are central to how witnesses recalled the Spanish flu, depictions picked up on by Munro and Kerr, among others.

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But in 1918, as the influenza virus spread across the country, Canada was ill-prepared to confront the influenza pandemic, with only a nascent public health system, a substantial number of doctors stationed overseas, and no national health department to coordinate a response. The key federal effort to contain the virus was to quarantine naval ships carrying infected men, preventing them from disembarking in busy eastern port cities (Humphries, "Limits" 23). Influenza was likely transmitted as troops moved across the country for overseas deployment, yet there was little effective coordination between the military and public health authorities.[2] Fatalities were concentrated in a four-week period in the fall of 1918, with deaths occurring so rapidly during this time that undertakers were unable to keep up. Bodies piled up, awaiting burial, and across rural areas in Saskatchewan "homes were discovered [with] whole families that had been dead for weeks" (Lux 48). With hospitals clustered in larger centres, rural and remote areas were left to rely on overwhelmed doctors and at-home care provided by mostly untrained female caregivers. Government officials urged women to accept caregiving responsibilities, with Ottawa's mayor telling women "they had a 'duty' to volunteer to nurse influenza victims," asking them to "abandon their patriotic knitting of socks for soldiers and 'get into the trenches themselves'" (Quiney 48).

While the Great War has been commemorated extensively in literature, the influenza outbreak has not, at least on the surface. Some critics have argued that the Spanish flu's enormous losses were impossible to comprehend, creating an overwhelming trauma that resisted both historical and literary representation (Branach-Kallas; Davis). Others have posited that, as critic Catherine Belling suggests, the absence of fictional portrayals of influenza can be explained by the fact that "the flu was less remarkable than war at a time when infectious disease was a daily fact of life," making it a "banal trauma" (56). The two recent monographs on influenza and literature take these opposing perspectives. Jane Elizabeth Fisher postulates that the absence of representations in the aftermath of the pandemic was a consequence of collective trauma, suggesting that "[r]elatively few writers had the will or insight to understand the emergent cultural meanings implicit in such a catastrophe" until decades had passed (4). Conversely, in *Viral Modernism* Elizabeth Outka argues that influenza's impact on modernist literature was powerful but has generally not been identified because of the

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opaqueness and indirectness of flu representations, which would have been more legible to readers in the 1920s than to later critics. Outka insists that "[d]espite the pandemic's seeming disappearance, its traces are everywhere in the literature and the culture" (18).

In Canadian literature, influenza appears only a handful of times in fiction before 1990. The earliest depiction I could locate is J. G. Sime's 1921 *Our Little Life: A Novel of To-Day* (Martin); several decades later, the devastating impact of influenza on a small Ontario town is portrayed, albeit off-stage, in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business.*[3] Depictions of Spanish flu are far more prominent in early-twenty-first-century fiction, including Ami McKay's *The Birth House* (2006), Frances Itani's *Deafening* (2003), and Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), the latter set in a Dublin maternity ward for flu sufferers at the height of the epidemic. These contemporary portrayals emphasize female caregiving and self-sacrifice, which are echoed in Kerr's play, as I discuss below, treating the battle against influenza as a home front initiative. Contemporary fiction has not yet explored, however, how Indigenous nations in Canada were acutely vulnerable during the Spanish flu due to dispossession, malnutrition, and overcrowded housing, as well as incarceration in residential schools where contagious diseases were endemic (Kelm 25, 29). Some northern villages were entirely wiped out, with the effect especially devastating in Labrador, where infection spread rapidly as a supply ship made its way along the coast, transmitting the virus (Budgell).[4] Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* is set during a later 1950s Canadian influenza epidemic and features a Salish village devastated by repeated waves of contagious disease, including smallpox and tuberculosis (Leggatt).

As the two most prominent literary works set during the Spanish flu period, Alice Munro's "Carried Away" and Kevin Kerr's *Unity (1918)* take up complex tasks of representation and historical memory, blending personal (fictional) lives with broader events. Kevin Kerr's tragicomic and gothic drama *Unity (1918)* is set in the small town of Unity, Saskatchewan and opens in the fall of 1918 with three young women on stage: Beatrice (Bea) is steadier and more responsible than her impulsive younger sister, Sissy; Mary is Bea's tender-hearted best friend, in love with a soldier who has not yet returned home. Kerr introduces a series of ominous forebodings of looming disaster against a backdrop of tragic farce, as a discharged soldier named Hart arrives

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in town in search of his estranged father and tells the young women of the spread of flu in Halifax and Montreal. While Kerr elects to explore the perspectives of multiple characters, Munro's story initially appears more focused on the romantic life of small-town librarian Louisa. "Carried Away" features four sections, with the first one describing Louisa's tentative epistolary courtship with a soldier hospitalized after an injury occasioned at war. Both texts allude to or include multiple forms of narrative that represent the war and the flu's spread, from town gossip and personal letters to newspaper and historical accounts.

In both Kerr's work and Munro's, influenza's infectious qualities are emphasized in the use of letters, but Kerr follows a more typical approach of associating influenza infection with panic and dread. More specifically, while in *Unity (1918)* letters are feared as a literal source of the spread of a virus, Munro considers how romantic passion is both analogous to the symptoms of influenza and encourages recklessness about the virus. When Mary learns of the death of her fiancé Richard from influenza, she is desperate to read his final letter; in an effort to assist, Rose, who works in the telegraph office, offers to "bake the letter for a bit to kill those nasty buggers," inadvertently setting it on fire and leaving Mary with only ashes, in an inadvertent parody of cremation (54). In "Carried Away," Jack writes to Louisa that his fatalism about the prospect of returning to Carstairs is "*like being sick with a fever,*" enabling him to confess his feelings for her because he does not believe he will ever see her again (11, emphasis original). Louisa, similarly in thrall, elects to keep the library open at the height of the pandemic, fearing she might miss Jack's return. She contracts influenza, requiring a hospital stay, but Jack does not turn up, as far as she is aware (although she learns later in the story, after Jack's death, that in fact he had been a regular—but anonymous—library visitor). Fisher comments that in Munro's story, unlike in other fictional pandemic narratives, "disease is presented as an apparently favorable way in which to be 'carried away'" (151).

Louisa exchanges letters with two suitors, but while these transmit passion rather than illness, both are subtly connected to disease. Letters are a recurring stylistic feature of Munro's fiction, used to "multiply, defer, and condense meaning" (Löschnigg 97), and they also offer an opportunity for dramatic irony, as Munro's readers become privy to information not available

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to the correspondents themselves. At the end of the first section of "Carried Away," readers learn that a young woman named Grace is secretly engaged to Jack, a fact which Louisa does not glean until many months later. While their correspondence enables Jack to conceal his prior romantic commitment from Louisa, it allows her to consciously construct a desirable portrait of herself, an extension of her self-image as a romantic heroine who is also an autonomous working woman. Their class differences are identified by Jack, when he notes that he himself has not completed high school and worked at the town's main industry, Douds' Factory, before the war. He perceives Louisa as a "cut above," the kind of woman who might be engaged to an officer, an elevation of Louisa's status that seems to flatter her. Jack and Louisa's letters, then, serve to enable each writer to shape and distort their own self-presentation.

Munro also makes it clear that even when romantic relationships are not mediated by the epistolary form, her characters continue to respond to one another based on fleeting impressions that rely on incomplete or inaccurate observations. Louisa's two subsequent relationships are also directly connected to influenza. After her disappointment when Jack fails to return to meet her, Louisa has a brief affair with a travelling book salesman, Jim Frarey, an interlude enabled by the influenza's spread, which has left the hotel largely deserted, enabling them to be alone and unobserved. Jim is startled, however, when their sexual relationship is consummated, and it appears that Louisa was previously less sexually experienced than her stories of epistolary courtship had suggested to him. Around the same time, the local factory owner, Arthur Doud, loses his wife, who dies "in 1919, in the last flurry of the Spanish flu, when everyone had got over being frightened" (26), enabling his subsequent receptiveness to Louisa after his efforts to atone for Jack's death in his factory results in him becoming a regular library visitor who, like Jack before him, perceives a unique and superior quality in the librarian. By exploring the Spanish flu's impact on personal relationships and romantic entanglements, Munro points to how the upheaval of this pandemic radically shifted the trajectory of individual lives while also eroding social and sexual mores. The effect for Louisa is greater freedom and social mobility, unexpected benefits in the midst of the profound losses of life and love experienced by other characters in the story. But these twists and turns in Louisa's life are also the consequence of misconceptions. Jim believes her to

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be worldly and sexually sophisticated, while Arthur's perceptions are shaped by his incomplete information about why she asks him about the circumstances of Jack Agnew's death.

As an orphan without siblings and a single woman without children, Louisa is exempt from many of the caregiving responsibilities that mothers, sisters, and neighbours took on during the Spanish flu pandemic, a key topic explored in Kerr's play. As the first efforts to prevent influenza from reaching the town fail, women are tasked with caring for the sick, with even greater urgency after the town's only doctor falls ill. With influenza spreading, it becomes women's duty to wage a different kind of war (Kerr 76, 102-03) and they recruit each other to join the effort. A reluctant Bea, who demurs due to her lack of training and experience, is cajoled by claims that "[w]omen are naturally good at taking care of others. Men, even doctors, are weaker than women"; other women even allege, improbably, "You'll get the flu faster by not helping" (76). The play's concluding song echoes this sentiment, with its lyrics about women's battles: "Women, rise / Take your place among soldiers, then . . . It's everybody's victory" (112). But this apparently celebratory mood is undercut by the accumulating losses in Kerr's drama, and the deaths of several of the major characters, whose deaths from influenza are as much the product of unfortunate location and timing, he implies, as the deaths of young men in World War I's carnage. "Carried Away," conversely, is notable for the absence of Munro's typical depictions of gendered caregiving, a marked feature of her work exemplified by the multiple nurses and nurse surrogates that populate her work. As Amelia DeFalco explains, many of Munro's stories explore the way that "the gendering of caregiving has serious ethical and political implications" (109), from the nurturing responsibilities assigned to mothers (and occasionally abdicated by them) to the resentment Munro's female characters experience when forced to provide prolonged care for elders or the sick. In "Carried Away," however, female nurturing is confined to Louisa's relatively limited gestures of care toward Jack. She asks what he needs, and she attempts to knit him a warm wool muffler. Although Louisa spends time in hospital with influenza, she does not mention the care she received; nor is the nursing of Arthur's sick wife noted. Instead, in "Carried Away" Munro sets aside the care work associated with influenza to focus instead on the complex dynamics of reading and writing, labour and capitalism (Clark; Lecker).

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Influenza's physical manifestations are also not mentioned in Munro's story, while they are highlighted at several points in *Unity (1918)* as characters struggle through fatal or near-fatal bouts of the illness. Mary is seen coughing and convulsing just before her death; Hart, dying of influenza that he may have unwittingly spread throughout the town, asks Bea to tell him what colour his feet are, having heard "a doctor on the train in Montreal say that when the feet turn black there's no hope" (105). The physical vulnerability of bodies is increasingly central to *Unity (1918)* as characters who were convinced they were immune or protected by safety measures fall ill in turn, and Sunna, the undertaker's preternaturally strong teenaged niece and an Icelandic immigrant, struggles to keep up with the necessary burials.

The body's fragility is emphasized in the instances of decapitation that appear in both literary texts, dismemberments that echo the bodies similarly mutilated and disfigured in the war. As historian Joanna Bourke points out, "[t]he First World War led to amputations on a scale never seen before, or since" (33); while limbs were particularly vulnerable, "all parts of the body were at risk: head, shoulder, arm, chest, intestines, buttock, penis, leg, foot," with more than 40,000 men losing limbs and just over 60,000 suffering serious head or eye injuries (33). In the play and the story, freak accidents occasion grisly deaths. In *Unity (1918)* a young farmworker falls in front of a piece of machinery. Sunna carries the young man's body home over one shoulder, his head in a "makeshift satchel" slung over the other (49). Her casual treatment of the body results from her pragmatic familiarity with corpses, at odds with the more formal and ceremonious way that Arthur Doud, encountering his first serious accident in his factory, treats Jack Agnew's body. After quickly taking charge of a bloodily chaotic scene on the factory floor, Arthur carries the head, placing it adjacent to the corpse and adjusting his jacket over top, a respectful gesture honouring Jack's dignity that Louisa will later term "remarkable" when he recounts his memories of that day. In the portrayals of these two accidents, Munro and Kerr contrast the spectacular dismemberment of male bodies with the far less graphic depiction of female sufferers of influenza.

While Kerr's play features only the influenza's first fall outbreak, linking it to the war as soldiers were returning to Canada, Munro's expansive work incorporates subsequent historical events, like the Depression and the Second

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World War. More unexpectedly, it also revives a largely forgotten nineteenth-century historical incident that during the 1930s served the needs of the growing labour movement. At the end of the story's third section, Arthur Doud, who had become an habitué of the library after returning Jack Agnew's library books in the wake of his sudden death, impulsively asks Louisa if they might be married. The final section of the story then jumps forward several decades, and we learn that following their marriage Louisa left her library position to help Arthur run the factory, first through the lean years of the Depression and then through a more prosperous (but fraught) postwar era. Now a widow, Louisa continues to be preoccupied by the factory's challenges, even as her health declines. She travels by bus to London, Ontario to see a heart specialist and in the waiting room reads about a ceremony to take place that afternoon commemorating the Tolpuddle Martyrs, English agricultural workers who had been transported to Australia for taking an oath (in effect, committing themselves to resisting the lowering of their wages), and who are now recognized as early labour rights activists. What jumps out at Louisa is the name of one of the speakers, although she assures herself that Jack Agnew is not an uncommon name, and that it is a mere coincidence. Nonetheless, she is drawn to the ceremony, although she is inclined to deflate its significance: "'*Martyrs*' is laying it on somewhat," Munro describes Louisa thinking. "They were not executed, after all" (42, emphasis mine). In fact, largely forgotten for decades, the men were not dubbed the Tolpuddle Martyrs until the mid-1930s, during centenary commemorations of their exile (Griffiths 62). Historian Clare Griffiths argues that terming the men "martyrs" served a rhetorical purpose at that time that "offered inspiration, transforming the pathos of the men's position into something more akin to strength and agency" and providing a crucial antecedent to contemporary labour struggles (63-64). Munro considers here how the past can be refashioned to become useful in the present, which implicitly acknowledges that failures to commemorate and recall a historical experience, such as the Spanish flu, may involve a lack of Canadian society's present lack of need for it.

Munro's surprising turns and shifts from the opening "Spanish Flu" section to the concluding "Tolpuddle Martyrs" section, the titles assigned to the segments, suggests that in her expansive, sprawling, and lengthy short story she is moving towards the kind of formal innovation that marks the later

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part of her career, where an interest in history and how it is told is a key feature of her writing. In this labour history context, Jack Agnew's surprising posthumous reappearance in the story, first at the ceremony and then to speak to Louisa as she awaits her bus at the station, aligns Jack's own decapitation in the factory accident with a grander narrative of workers' sacrifice to voracious capitalist production. Jack's status as a prominent union leader harkens back to the fact that decades earlier he surreptitiously removed Bertrand Russell's *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* from the Carstairs library and held onto it for a lengthy period (Munro 26-27). Robert Lecker's insightful analysis of "Carried Away" as an assessment of the "postwar, postindustrial fall that is identified with the commodification of all forms of human activity" (103) suggests that Jack's book selection may be influenced by the attribution of Bolshevism to Canadian labour activism in the post-World War I period (114). Lecker contrasts Jack, representative of one of the many workers maimed or killed in industrial accidents in this era, with Louisa's managerial status in the library and then at the factory. While Louisa once imagined her future with a man who read broadly and critically, she ultimately marries a man who views the library with satisfaction as the product of his own family's benevolence. Ultimately, Munro demonstrates that Louisa's life is shaped by both broader historical events and, more intimately, by incidents of chance and accident.

Unity (1918) takes a bleaker approach to the issue of commemoration and historical memory, pointing to the ironic gap between how each individual experiences being alive as a singular and unprecedented event and how each life matters relatively little if a longer historical view is taken. Kerr critiques through dark humour how some deaths are lionized as heroic and worthy of commemoration while others—from accidents, influenza, or childbirth—are rendered ridiculous, trivial, or forgettable. The deaths of non-combatants in the play are conveyed unsentimentally and sometimes with grim humour about the body's status as an inconvenient object that must be disposed of appropriately. The corpse of a woman who died in childbirth is carted in a wheelbarrow by her husband, the body still expelling the pungent flatulence for which she was known. When her body tumbles out of the wheelbarrow, horror is mixed with black comedy. As influenza deaths mount, the play's tone becomes more sombre. The town attempts a quarantine and, when that

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fails, seeks to cast the virus as foreign to Unity. When Michael is among the first to fall ill, his sickness is attributed to him being from outside the community, "as if those germs just flew from the infected towns looking for familiar faces," Bea notes caustically (61-62). But Kerr's depiction of Michael's abrupt collapse from influenza on the farm field can be viewed, Marissa McHugh suggests, as analogous to "a wounded soldier overseas, falling in battle," although he is not celebrated but rather expelled from the town, she acknowledges (57). As Neta Gordon explains, through the depiction of influenza, "Kerr suggests that deaths that cannot be situated within a collective retrospective sacrificial narrative are not deemed significant" (121), a claim that the female characters both endorse (as when Mary insists on a symbolic gravesite for her dead fiancé, lost to influenza rather than the battlefield) and resist (as when Sissy mourns her own sweetheart, abandoned by Unity after he falls ill). But arguably Kerr goes even further, implying that while as a reader or audience member we temporarily empathize with the suffering his work describes, this form of remembering the past is contingent on a response to an invented character and does not create enduring commemoration of the Spanish flu's millions of victims.

Kerr and Munro evaluate how particular deaths are characterized and mourned, with battlefield deaths accorded a status as public events that deaths from influenza are not granted. Wartime propaganda ensured that acts of heroism were valorized both morally and aesthetically: in *Unity (1918)*, Bea rhapsodizes over Hart, who has lost his sight, describing him as "[a] wounded soldier. So beautiful, so horribly beautiful" (23). Later in the play, Hart attempts to disabuse her of her romantic illusions about how soldiers suffer injury and death, mocking the variations on a "stupid story about some stupid guy who's run out of ammunition" yet manages to single-handedly take on the enemy (81). The reality, Hart insists, is "the guy sitting in a trench with his lousy jammed-up standard-issue rifle that has only fired one shot before busting . . . his pants full of his own shit because he's been there for three days," stranded between the decaying corpses of his fellow soldiers (81). With less graphic detail, Jack, writing from the front to Louisa in "Carried Away," recounts how a fellow soldier's death from a heart attack amid war's dangers has become a source of mirth, a loss that served no national purpose. A more complex instance is Jack's death in the factory accident,

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which is viewed as ironic for a different reason: he survived war with a minor injury only to die in a freak factory accident. His death occasions detailed news coverage, with the article "reprinted in the paper a week later" to allow the story to circulate even further (24). His funeral is "very large . . . attended even by people from neighboring towns" who had not known him but "wished to pay tribute to the sensational and tragic manner of his death." Had he died on the battlefield, an equally "sensational and tragic" death would have been his fate, but the news representation would have been sanitized and fictionalized, as Kerr suggests, for public consumption. Conversely, influenza's victims, as Davis argues, could not readily be made part of national mourning: "[S]oldiers died heroically, but the sick just died," with the consequence that "soldiers have been remembered while the sick have been forgotten" (61) and the Spanish flu losses comparatively neglected.

The 1918-1919 pandemic has had a long epidemiological shadow. "Descendants of the 1918 pandemic influenza virus strain have been the cause of almost every seasonal influenza A infection worldwide" since then, including the pandemics of "1957, 1968, and 2009 . . . earning the 1918 viral strain the nickname 'The Mother of all Pandemics'" (Nickol and Kindrachuk 3-4), a peculiarly apt name for an illness so closely associated with women's domestic care for the sick. While female caregivers were endowed with extraordinary responsibilities during the influenza pandemic, the war period also increased the range of permissible activities and occupations for women. Both facets of the gendered nature of influenza are explored in these works: in *Unity (1918)*, where self-sacrificial care is tinged with masochism when a woman elects to deliberately infect herself in the wake of the news that the man she loves is committed to someone else; and in "Carried Away," where the protagonist experiences greater social license because of the war and the pandemic, leading her to a series of somewhat risky liaisons with men before she settles into a marriage that assures her security. Reading the works of Munro and Kerr amid the recent coronavirus outbreak, it is startling to encounter parallel public health measures, including the use of masks, social distancing, and quarantine orders within a cultural climate of pervasive anxiety. In our own pandemic era, conversations about the gendered labour of remote schooling and increased childcare responsibilities have focused on what parents (and especially mothers) have lost in the labour market.

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It remains to be seen whether this influenza-like outbreak will be commemorated in more frequent and enduring ways than the 1918-1919 Spanish influenza, which remains the benchmark—medically and culturally—for understanding a modern pandemic illness as a fatal and not merely inconvenient malady.

NOTES

1 For readers interested in *The New Yorker* version, see the Works Cited page. All citations are from the Vintage edition.
2 The original source of the Spanish flu is still debated, with the US and China identified as the most likely points of origin. In his book *The Last Plague*, which describes Canada's public health response to the influenza pandemic, Humphries observes that "[d]uring 1917 and 1918, 94,000 Chinese workers were shipped across Canada by the British from China" as part of the war effort, a possible means of transmission in this country (78). In "The Site of Origin," John M. Barry postulates that Spanish flu's most likely origin was Haskell County, Kansas, where a doctor documented an influenza epidemic in the early winter of 1918 (2-3). Other theories theorize multiple points of spread on more than one continent, and a spread whose rapidity was heightened by the conditions of deprivation in military camps as the war neared an end.
3 I am grateful to the anonymous reader who reminded me of this example.
4 An anonymous reader brought Budgell's work to my attention.

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D.S. Stymeist

Last Dance at the Museum

The mastodon grins with all the ferocity
of a ballroom dancer. Frankly, the giant's
smile unnerves. It's caught a punch line
that has passed me by, a wise-crack
tongued in a forgotten, lost language.

Ancient Greeks believed these big bones
the cursed remains of titanic *Kyklōps*,
Neptune's unfortunate spawn fallen on ill-luck.
Sub-arctic hunters share even stranger tales
of gigantic mole-like creatures who tunnel
in earth only to croak in open air & sunbeam.

Was this ragged beast the American enigma
that eluded the guns of Lewis and Clark
— two boys sent out West by Jefferson
to bring back this fabled *Incognitum*?[1]

In a future warehouse of the ancient,
our tribe's metallic, electronic spawn
will perhaps come to display our own bones
beside yours. We will join you as spectacle
on the raised scaffold to let others marvel.
Maybe then we will laugh together.

1 Obsessed with mastodons, Thomas Jefferson firmly believed that this "incognitum" still existed, hiding somewhere in the west of the continent. When President Jefferson commissioned Lewis and Clark to find the most navigable passage across the continent, he also tasked the expedition with tracking down this elusive beast.

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Quan Zhou

Disease, Desire, and Devotion: Mobilities and Becoming-(M)other in Jen Sookfong Lee's *The Better Mother*

> [W]riting should produce a becoming-woman as atoms of womanhood capable of crossing and impregnating an entire social field, and of contaminating men, of sweeping them up in that becoming.
>
> —Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Introduction

In "Canadian Literary Representations of HIV/AIDS" (2013), Shoshannah Ganz points out that "to date there are very few Canadian novels that deal to any great extent with people living with or dying from HIV/AIDS" (2). Along with this lack of literary responses to the disease, Ganz goes on to argue, is the resonance of "peacekeeping" metaphors in Canadian cultural responses to AIDS (as opposed to the predominantly military metaphors in the American context), represented in texts which feature "the friend or relative caring for and loving the person with AIDS and watching rather helplessly as the person suffers and eventually dies" (3). While groundbreaking and thought-provoking, Ganz's chapter does not explicitly examine factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and, in particular, interraciality. AIDS, when represented in relation to these issues in literary works by ethnic writers—*The Better Mother* (2012) by Chinese Canadian writer Jen Sookfong Lee, for example—assumes a rather complicated appearance. Characterized by intersectionality, the manner in which *The Better Mother* treats AIDS not only aligns with the convention of its "peaceful" rendering in Canadian

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culture, but also sheds light on the possibility for interracial love and care in times of pandemic.

The Better Mother tells the story of how Danny Lim, a gay Chinese Canadian man, negotiates the tensions between his sexual orientation and his patriarchal family, between his pursuit of art and beauty and the banality and monotony that permeate Vancouver's Chinatown, and between his desire for a glamorous mother and dissatisfaction with his homely and dowdy mother. Interwoven with these dilemmas are Danny's encounters with his white lover, Frank, and with Val, a famous white burlesque dancer, onto whom he projects his fantasies of a "better" mother. While Danny's particular interactions with Val seem central to understanding the title of the novel, in this article I focus on Danny's intricate romantic relationship with Frank, especially when the latter is infected with HIV/AIDS. Partly set in 1982, the year when the first case of AIDS in Canada was reported, *The Better Mother* reframes the disease through Danny and Frank's interracial love. As well as functioning as the historical background for the story, the depictions of AIDS scattered in Parts One, Three, and Five, when pieced together, produce in the reader a sharpened understanding of the novel's key themes of mobilities and interracial crossing. This article will use the lens of mobilities to discuss the physical and mental tensions between mobility and immobility that confront gay men in their favourite leisure spaces during the embryonic stage of what later develops into, and is officially named, the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's innovative philosophical concept of "becoming-woman," this article will further explore the "becoming-(m)other" of Danny, which is consequent upon the embodied micro-mobilities implicated in his devotion to his white, terminally ill ex-lover, Frank.

By virtue of its mobile nature, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming" fits well with, and even expands, what Mimi Sheller and John Urry establish as "the 'new mobilities' paradigm" (208). This new mobilities paradigm, while emergent in the social sciences, also builds, both theoretically and practically, upon a wide range of humanities-based disciplines, including literary studies, and focuses on multifarious mobilities that include the human and non-human, macro and micro, literal and figurative. Peter Merriman, in his call for an expansion of mobility studies

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in "Micro-Mobilities in Lockdown," further draws scholarly attention to embodied micro-mobilities, which are defined as "the myriad bodily movements and mobile embodied practices involved in all manner of actions, events, and systems, from the bodily movements involved in walking, driving, and flying, to the embodied movements involved in virus transmission and infection control" (54). Bringing the frameworks of becoming and embodied micro-mobilities into dialogue as a critical lens through which to address the issue of AIDS in *The Better Mother*, this article argues that interracial and queer forms of care have the potential to mitigate the impact of AIDS upon queer mobilities, both physical and metaphysical, and trouble heteronormativity.

Viral Mobility versus Embodied Micro-(Im)Mobilities

While current "new mobilities" scholarship has extensively examined physical, and thus visible, mobilities of both human and non-human beings, invisible mobilities—viral mobility, for instance—have not received sufficient attention.[1] In her chapter "Viruses" in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, however, Stephanie Lavau suggests that mobility is as central to human beings as it is to viruses (298). In this sense, it is worth exploring the interactions between human mobility and viral mobility, which are best exemplified in diseases and especially pandemics, such as COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS. Focusing on the initial stages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, *The Better Mother* uncovers the nuanced transformation in gay men's embodied micro-mobilities as a response, or lack thereof, to the mysterious mobility of the disease. The text, therefore, makes it possible to examine mobility, sexuality, and interraciality, a connection that is of particular significance at this crucial time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, what threads through and underpins this connection is queer desire. This desire, however, is represented in the novel as not referring simply to gay men's psychic urges for experience, connection, or pleasure, but to an agentic desire, in the innovative sense given to desire by Deleuze and Guattari. Against traditional notions of desire both as irrationality and as a lack, Deleuze and Guattari argue instead that "[d]esire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject" (*Anti-Oedipus* 26, emphasis original). Desire is, in other words, an active and positive reality,

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actualized through practice (Gao 407). In the novel, this agentic sexual desire, together with the physical mobility it induces among gay men, is shown to be in a dynamic relationship with the mysterious mobility of the disease.

"By the end of the 1980s," Paula Treichler observes in her book *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, "the AIDS epidemic had been invested with an abundance of meanings and metaphors" (1). In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag identifies "plague" as "the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood" (44). Implicit in this socio-cultural metaphoric interpretation of the disease is precisely its overwhelming mobility from one human being to another, or rather, its intraspecies mobility. In line with the rejection of military metaphors that Ganz identifies in Canadian literary representations of AIDS, Lee reconfigures the metaphor of "plague" in *The Better Mother* in non-military but still aggressive terms to describe the mobility of HIV/AIDS. In the very beginning of the section entitled "The Plague" in Part One, Danny finds himself caught up in something insidious but unnameable: "There's something creeping through the night, a faceless monster that breathes, damp and quick, on the back of Danny's neck. . . . [T]he feeling that something menacing is following him has been increasing for months . . . and it will not disappear" (102-03). Although Danny cannot tell what exactly it is that bothers him, one striking feature of that omnipresent "something" is its mobility, as shown by the two verbs "creeping" and "following," which is clearly a result of his imagination. The metaphor of the "faceless monster" might easily lend itself to being interpreted as Danny's subconscious apprehension or dread. However, after his Chinese Canadian friend Edwin tells him that their friend Marco has contracted "that gay disease," Danny's confusion about the monster is immediately cleared:

> In a flash, Danny knows what is chasing him, or at least he knows the shape of it. The havoc it creates with a touch of its invisible finger. Their friends are sick, shivering through pneumonia, a mysterious cancer, cold after cold. The monster, nameless and undiscriminating, captures a body and then another, felling each by a different method. (103)

What has been haunting Danny turns out to be the disease that has been stigmatized as "that gay disease," which seems to be both invisible and visible, both absent and present, both physical and moral.

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While this passage features Danny's observation of what is happening to his gay friends, it also presents the mysterious virus as what Lavau calls a "*travel companion*" and "*companion species*" (299, emphasis original). While not motile, viruses, like HIV/AIDS, are mobile, travelling from place to place, and from person to person. In the meantime, they are constantly mutating, being reconstituted through their interactions with their hosts. Viruses, as Lavau argues, "are promiscuous, forming intimate couplings with other viruses, and being intimately touched by hosts" (303). HIV, when intermingling with other viruses, modifies itself and impacts its hosts differently. Consequently, those infected, as Danny has noticed, show different symptoms and suffer from different diseases that result from HIV. Lee's tripartite virus-human-monster configuration of HIV/AIDS makes explicit not only its "ontological transformation" but, more importantly, its unnoticeable yet rapid multiplication within, and movement among, human bodies (Schillmeier 182). Originating in the multiple cross-species transmission of viruses that infect and afflict African primates, HIV/AIDS transgresses the boundaries between nature and culture, non-human and human beings. This boundary-crossing mobility of HIV/AIDS is congealed in Lee's virus-human-monster configuration. With this hybrid imagery, Lee, while adopting the same metaphor of "plague" as Sontag does, makes all the more concrete and dynamic the mobile and destructive nature of HIV/AIDS. Lee anthropomorphizes the disease, thus foregrounding its otherwise imperceptibility.

The fear of the inexplicable mobility of the stigmatizing disease generates in Lee's gay male characters correspondent embodied micro-mobilities in the particular spaces they frequent to seek pleasure. Through the eyes of the wandering Danny, the subtleties of these men's micro-mobilities are brought to light. Walking down Davie Street, Danny "sees that men move with their heads down, not looking up for fear of seeing yet another man newly infected, newly spotted with Kaposi's sarcoma" (Lee 103). Awareness of the infectious disease has enabled Danny to perceive anew the street that used to be familiar to him. Gay men walking along this street are weighed down by the mysterious disease. Their mobility in the street is, therefore, a type of refrained embodied mobility, which can, to some degree, be understood as an externalization of their destabilized psychic well-being. This apparent

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refrained mobility may also imply the mobility of HIV as it moves among them as "an undesirable, unintended and perhaps unsuspected *travel companion*" (Lavau 299, emphasis original). With little knowledge of the infectiousness of the disease and how it moves from one person to the other, gay men entering into sexual relations become unwitting accomplices in accelerating its mobility among the gay community.

In the open space of Davie Street, as in the indoor spaces of the city's nightclubs, gay men respond to the fear of the "gay disease" with their embodied micro-mobilities. In the space of the nightclub, however, Danny observes in these men extremely energized micro-mobilities:

> In the nightclub, the dancing has become feverish, panicked, as if these nights of shaking their asses and arms to New Order could be annihilated mid-song. The night progresses, and the men move sombrely through the crowd, some drinking quickly, some doing lines in the bathroom until their faces reconfigure into a forgetfulness that doesn't obliterate the confounding circumstances, but dulls their feelings, which is second best, but perhaps acceptable for now. (Lee 103-04)

Their highly agitated micro-mobilities gesture towards the same state of mind as is produced by their refrained walking in the street. Afflicted by the uncertainties of the mysterious disease, they seem to have no choice but to abandon themselves to music and dancing in the company of one another. Their micro-mobilities of quick drinking, crazy dancing, and secret drug-taking are meant to help them seek an embodied way, even if temporarily, to combat the anxieties that the life-threatening disease subjects them to. This series of embodied micro-mobilities works for them as the best possible response to the disease, leading them towards forgetfulness or numbness that passes for peace of mind. Confronted with the ignorance and uncertainties regarding the disease, they turn to their bodies for help. Unable to predict or control the outside world, they are entitled, at least, to the manipulation of their physical motile bodies. Their experience of wild, frenzied movements in the nightclubs, as the word "feverish" implies, can be thought of as "going viral" (Lavau 304). They seem to be suffering a spiritual virus, which, as the mysterious AIDS virus does, "moves" and "mutates" within their bodies and among their community. As the virus moves and mutates, so too do its potential hosts.

The fear of the mysteriously mobile disease experienced by men in the novel's gay community is complicated by sexual desire, which in *The Better*

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Mother is pursued primarily in Stanley Park, a natural space within the city, a space of leisure, violence, and surveillance. Cruising in Stanley Park, gay men run the risk of losing their lives or freedom. The novel begins with news of a corpse in the park—a man targeted for murder because he was gay—and mentions the threat of police patrolling when Danny is having sex with a man he encounters (17, 29). In her discussion of queering Asian American masculinity, Crystal Parikh, reading Leo Bersani's provocative argument that male homosexuality represents "a masochism . . . that is endemic to sexual pleasure itself" (870), further contends that "male homosexuality actually enacts the erasure of the ego" (871). While acknowledging Bersani's and Parikh's insights into male homosexuality, I would like to complicate their notion of "shattering" and "destructive" male homosexual sex by situating it within the context of the burgeoning HIV/AIDS pandemic as represented in *The Better Mother*. To this end, I refer to Deleuze and Guattari's view of desire as positive and productive, and argue instead that gay men's sexual desire, as shown in particular in Danny, is endowed with the ability to generate spiritual tranquility.

After several days' absence because of his puzzlement over the disease, Danny returns to Stanley Park again, and notices that everything in it is thirsty for fresh water. The extreme summer heat correspondingly evokes, and then intensifies, the deepest desire of his body to have sex: "The nerve endings in his fingers twitch as he aches for a fast blaze, instant combustion. If he doesn't touch someone soon, he will slowly smoulder" (Lee 104). Sex, therefore, seems to Danny a bodily reaction against both the unbearable summer heat and the threatening disease. As in the case of the nightclub frequenters, Danny's bodily reaction in Stanley Park is also a mobile one that aims to achieve inner peace. The interlinking of sex-induced micro-mobilities and spiritual tranquility is further explicated in Danny's reflections about seeking comfort in sex:

> Sex is a consolation when nothing is certain. Though the men hold each other briefly, it is better than being alone in your apartment, where there is no protection against the shadows that fall across your skin until you are convinced you are dying. Here, in the park, everyone knows everyone else's thoughts. They don't need to be spoken. (104-05)

As well as offering a form of protection for gay men, the silence of the park, along with that of its nocturnal wanderers, forms a sharp contrast to their

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embodied micro-mobilities implicated in their sexual intercourse. Rather than linguistic forms of expression, which are synonymous with human intellectuality and subjectivity, it is these micro-mobilities, produced by and producing the ontological homosexual body of desire, that confer on the subjects involved much more tangible spiritual mooring. More than providing company, the wordless inter-bodily micro-mobilities momentarily sedate gay men's flustered minds. Ironically, however, without scientific knowledge of the infectious disease, sexual interactions become a potential factor that enables the virus to circulate. Consequently, the city's leisure spaces in the novel, such as Davie Street, the nightclubs, and Stanley Park, become for gay men locations associated with both desire and fear, spaces where they escape or combat the mysterious stigmatizing disease through their fine-tuned physical mobilities of wandering and cruising.

AIDS, Racialized Masculinities, and Intensified Anxieties

Danny's experiences in public leisure spaces epitomize how the little-known yet increasingly menacing infectious disease impinges upon gay men's physical and embodied micro-mobilities in their struggle for spiritual tranquility. In highlighting and complicating the profound impact of HIV/AIDS upon this journey towards inner peace, *The Better Mother* further tethers the disease to issues of race and ethnicity, and in particular to the racialized masculinities of Chinese Canadian men. These issues, as we shall see, underlie and shape the (im)mobilities of Chinese Canadian gay men in fundamental ways as they gain increasing "knowledge" of the disease, and especially of its official name, AIDS.

Danny's cognition of the disease's mobility among, and damage to, gay men is mainly through the physical deformation it has wrought upon Frank's body, especially his face. Because of his previous observations and the spread of rumour in the public realm, Danny's perception of the shadowy disease is distant, indirect, and abstract, and his fear of it thus imaginary and groundless. However, seeing in person the decline of Frank, his white ex-lover, materializes his understanding of the disfiguring disease and exacerbates his fear. Three years after their breakup, Frank suddenly calls Danny and arranges for an urgent meeting in a café. Seated with head lowered, Danny brings himself to look up, expecting to see the charming Frank of his memory. Contrary to his

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expectation, however, he sees a frail and fragile Frank, "hunched over a cup of coffee," with collapsed eyebrows, dark red spots and grey stubble on his cheek, and glassy eyes (183). From these changes to Frank's once impeccable face, Danny senses that his ex-lover has been infected with the mysterious disease. While Frank talks about his illness, Danny remains silent almost all of the time; this infuriates Frank, who urges Danny to say something. "All too often such experience of interruption through illness or disability," as James Kyung-Jin Lee observes, "is accompanied by a break not only in communication, but more importantly in communicability, which renders interaction, say, between a wounded person and a healthy (read: not yet wounded) person, into awkward silence or creaky platitude" ("Illness" x). Danny's lack of response also reflects his fear, as a "not yet wounded" person, of contracting the disease and particularly of facing the subsequent unavoidable problem of coming out to his Chinese Canadian parents.

Disease mobilities are, more often than not, symbolic of uneven mobility differentials, which are inflected by, among other categories, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class. In this regard, HIV/AIDS impacts gay men differently, and Chinese Canadian gay men differently. For Danny, as the narrator explains, "[t]he fear has many features—inexplicable scabs, bleeding gums, bowels that leak. But the one he returns to is this: if he gets sick, there will be no hiding it from his parents" (185). This latter concern fully captures Danny's state of being caught in a cobweb—being placed, that is, at the intersection of the mobile disease, his sexual orientation, and, in particular, his Chinese Canadian identity. These factors, as we shall see, conspire to throw him further off balance and render him susceptible to spasms of melancholy and phantasm. Haunted by Frank's illness and his own unbearable fear, Danny calls and meets his sister Cindy for advice. Besides her suggestion that he stop going to the clubs or baths, however, Cindy eventually asks, "What will Mom and Dad say?" (190). Her question immediately reminds Danny that his father once flew into a rage, blaming him for being a "sissy" and "useless" because he did nothing to stop a white boy, younger and smaller than he, from spraying the humiliating words "CHINKS GO HOME" on the front window of their curio shop (192). Cindy's concern, albeit in the form of a question, actually brings to light the issues of Chinese Canadian identity and racialized masculinities that

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inform the subconscious of many Chinese Canadian families, haunting and affecting, in particular, male family members. The formation of identities is, as Christopher Lee points out, "inseparable from the distribution of economic and social resources, from questions of power and domination" (2). In the context of Canada, these processes were initiated with, and thus embodied by, the earliest Chinese male immigrants. With their contributions to the building of the Canadian nation-state unrecognized, and deprived of opportunities for better-paid jobs, they were forced into the service industry, running laundries, restaurants, barbershops, and other businesses that were deemed to be beneath white men. Moreover, dominant discourses have portrayed Asian men as "womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" (Chin et al. xxx).

In *The Better Mother*, it can be deduced that Danny's father, Doug, born and raised in Canada roughly during the period of the humiliating Chinese Exclusion Act (1923-1947), would have experienced the emasculation of Chinese Canadian masculinity, either in person or indirectly in the form of postmemory or collective memory. The feminizing of Chinese Canadian men, in other words, is seared on his subconsciousness, and constantly impacts his emotions and behaviour. As Richard Fung notes, "Specific histories burden the term 'responsibility' for gay men and Chinese men" (296). The humiliating history of Chinese Canadian emasculation, combined with traditional Chinese patriarchy in Vancouver's Chinatown, pressures Chinese Canadian men, here represented by Danny's father, to assume the responsibility of (re)asserting their "heteronormative" masculinity and sexuality. Doug's efforts to do so can be seen even in Danny's childhood. Whenever he saw little Danny admiring department store catalogues that featured beautiful dresses or playing with paper dolls with his younger sister, Doug would lose his temper. Male homosexuality, in his opinion and that of the majority of his Chinese Canadian contemporaries, is an expression of insufficient masculinity and works, for that matter, as a stinging reminder of the history of their emasculation. In the novel's later timeline, when television and newspapers have already begun to report on AIDS in a stigmatizing way, Danny's father may well be no stranger to the disease and its association with gay men. Recalling these unpleasant experiences with his

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sarcastic father, Danny simply answers, or asks, "There's nothing to explain to them, is there?" (Lee 192). This disjunctive question is suggestive of Danny's uncertainty. As the narrator remarks, "Danny wants to laugh at the way this mysterious disease has turned even the words they speak into something shifting and thin" (192). Yet, what really matters to him, as we have seen, is not the slippage of meaning that the disease has given rise to, but rather the possible response of his parents to his homosexuality.

Danny's troubled state of mind is further demonstrated as he learns more about the mysterious disease, culminating in his eventual learning of its authoritative name, AIDS. Stumbling on Davie Street one day, Danny is attracted by a notice taped to the window of a clinic: "New disease affecting gay men and IV drug users now called AIDS. Information inside" (193). Together with the previous depiction of Frank's disfigured body, this straightforward treatment of AIDS in the novel extends far beyond the classic metaphor of "plague," rendering the disease all too visible and concrete rather than a phenomenon unseen and metaphoric. Danny is disappointed, however, when he reads a pamphlet given by the receptionist. Instead of receiving reassuring information on the disease, he encounters a bewildering and frustrating introduction that is characterized by professional uncertainty:

> AIDS attacks the immune system. No one knows why, and no one knows how. Infected people are vulnerable to opportunistic infections and diseases, like Kaposi's sarcoma and pneumocystis pneumonia. Doctors think it's passed through bodily fluids, like semen and blood, but they're not sure. There are only a few cases reported in Canada, but doctors suspect there are many more that have been undiagnosed. (194)

The "scientific" naming of the mysterious disease fails to provide Danny with a sense of mental refuge because the name AIDS itself is essentially "no different . . . from other linguistic constructions that, in the commonsense view of language, are thought to transmit preexisting ideas and represent real-world entities yet in fact do neither" (Treichler 11). The words on the leaflet turn out to be meaningless to Danny, for nobody seems able to prevent the mobility of the disease, which is "[l]ike an advancing tidal wave that you watch coming toward you, knowing it will consume you" (Lee 194). Therefore, Danny's growing knowledge of AIDS immobilizes him physically while also mobilizing him psychologically:

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> The weight of the words and his thoughts seem to have rendered him immobile. What if his parents have already heard of AIDS? Seen it on the news, discussed it with Cindy? And if Edwin dies of a mysterious illness his grandmother never names, what questions will his parents ask then? He holds the back of his hand to his forehead. (195)

Considering the stigmatization of homosexuality in Canadian society at that time, Danny's anxiety can be said to originate less from the mysteriousness and incurability of the disease than from the possible ultimatum, as it were, to come out to his parents. If we take into account, again, the historical formation of Chinese Canadian identity and, particularly, its profound impact upon emasculated Chinese Canadian masculinity, Danny's apprehension in anticipation of his father's furious reaction to his homosexuality can be further interpreted as a product of the high pressure under which Chinese Canadian men strive to make claims on heteronormative manhood.

Danny's fear of AIDS and overwhelming stress operate to the detriment of his mental health. Disillusioned with the official information about AIDS, Danny continues to wander in the street, "feel[ing] worse with every passing pedestrian, every shiny car that speeds down the street" (195). When he makes eye contact with a tottering old woman, Danny sees in her eyes extreme fear, which is actually a reflection of his own, "that blazing fear that others can instantly recognize and be repelled by" (193). When a bus stops, he even has the illusion that people are trying all they can to avoid seeing his face. Danny becomes sensitive here to what used to be quite normal, and thus unnoticed, daily interactions with people. Mobilities that used to appeal to him now become sources of irritation and fear. Consequently, Danny's greater knowledge of the disease does not assuage his previous dread, but contributes to the resurfacing of the pressure that is sedimented in his racialized body as a kind of collective memory. With his intensified anxiety over AIDS, Danny retreats to the silence of his small apartment, which foreshadows his subsequent "quarantine" life of caring for Frank.

Interracial Care and Becoming-(M)other

If, as has been previously analyzed, the mobility/immobility tensions produced by AIDS are made all the more striking for Danny by the fundamental issues of Chinese Canadian identity and racialized masculinity,

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the interracial love and care he offers ill Frank hold the potential, then, to disentangle him from this psychological thicket. Specifically, Danny's retreat into an immobile life from his formerly exhilarating mobile life of cruising is represented as concurrent with his unintended yet silently progressing mobility of identity, or his "becoming-(m)other." Essential to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical thinking, the concept of "becoming" is theorized in their work as not only opposed to being/identity but also as an immanent event without any pre-existing foundation (Colebrook 125). Becoming-woman, in particular, is given paramount importance and regarded as the one becoming that underpins the series of becomings that Deleuze and Guattari theorize. Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-woman does not mean imitating a woman or adopting feminine features or qualities; its aim is rather to decentre man, subjectivity, and majoritarianism.[2] In other words, becoming-woman functions as a conceptual paradigm that aims to deconstruct normativities and fixed identities, to think beyond man as being, and to strive for and affirm a life of differences (Colebrook 140). Following Deleuze and Guattari's avenue of thought, I argue that, as with "becoming-woman," Danny's becoming-(m)other in *The Better Mother* is an ontological becoming; as such, it assumes the status of being "minoritarian" and unsettles essentialist notions of masculinity and heteronormativity in general and Chinese Canadian masculinity in particular.

Danny's becoming-(m)other originates in his love and sympathy for Frank. After Cindy learns about Frank's infection, she reports it to the branch manager of the bank where she and Frank work. Frank is then forced to quit. Furious, he goes to Danny's apartment building and blames him for exposing that he has AIDS. At the sight of an increasingly deteriorating and desperate Frank, Danny takes it upon himself to take care of his ex-lover. This decision works as a turning point in Danny's life—that is, as a prelude to Danny's becoming-(m)other. In the section entitled "The Nurse," the caregiving that Danny repeats every day is delineated in great detail:

> He washes him carefully, scrubbing gently between all the wrinkles, every jutting bone. He dries him with a fluffy towel and rubs baby oil over his skin, over the rashes and Kaposi's sarcoma spots, over the boils that seem to multiply daily. Slowly, Danny buttons up Frank's flannel pyjamas and then they lie in bed together, Danny's head resting on the wall as he reads out loud from the pile of library books on the floor. Frank stares at him, his eyes big in his thin face, chuckling when Danny reads

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> something funny from his favourite comic-strip collection, tearing up a little at the sad parts in an old Russian novel. Eventually, he falls asleep, and Danny pulls the covers up and shuts the bedroom door behind him. (314-15)

This process of caring for Frank forms what David Seamon calls a "body ballet," and the daily repetition of these serial acts, as shown by their description in the present tense, further constitutes a "time-space routine" (54). These micro-mobilities, however, draw attention less to the personal qualities (meticulousness, patience, gentleness) that allow Danny to become a motherly caretaker, than to the ontological becoming that he is experiencing. As Deleuze and Guattari assert, "[a] becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 237). AIDS has destroyed Frank's body and rendered it susceptible to lethal infections. Through his hands and mouth, caressing and soothing Frank's stricken body, Danny reconnects his body to Frank's. Despite the fact that they are no longer lovers, this bodily, emotional, and spiritual reconnection provides him with the inner peace he has been striving for to confront the uncertainties and mental disquiet that AIDS causes:

> In the morning, he can never remember if he's been dreaming or not, and this comforts him. He wakes with no trace of the night clinging to his face or body, and he can be satisfied with the morning and the long list of tasks he knows he will complete. After all, for once in his life he is doing exactly what he's supposed to. (Lee 315)

Danny's spiritual tranquility, however, is born less of the micro-mobilities involved in attending to Frank, than of his determination and courage to come to terms with his queerness. During Danny and Frank's romantic relationship, Frank's parents were supportive, and what Frank used to want was for Danny to come out to his parents and to start a stable family. Danny objected because for him coming out would mean rebelling not only against his father, but also against the heteronormativity and patriarchy often embedded in assertions of Chinese Canadian masculinity—assertions that labour to restore a lost manhood in spaces (like Chinatown) constituted by histories of emasculation. Despite his dissatisfaction with the boring life he experiences in Chinatown, Danny was still unable to separate completely from his family and the larger community. Therefore, he chose to remain

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closeted, which resulted in the couple's breakup. As the last sentence in the quotation above suggests, however, Danny is contented with this settled quasi-family life. "[D]oing exactly what he's supposed to" intimates that he is determined to face his homosexuality and his love for Frank. In other words, he identifies himself as Frank's lover/partner and caring for him as his responsibility. In caring for Frank, Danny is also caring for himself.

By taking on a caretaker role traditionally assigned to women, Danny's transformation is oriented towards a life of differences—that is, towards a repudiation of the essentialist notion of Chinese Canadian masculinity that people like his father re-establish and advocate as a reaction against their own emasculated manhood. In critiquing Frank Chin's efforts to restore Chinese masculinity, Gordon Pon astutely points out that Chin's anti-racism strategy not only suggests homophobia, but also glosses over "Chinese men's contradictory position—oppressed by racism themselves but also oppressing Chinese women" (144). Chin's reassertion of Chinese manhood, as Pon concludes, "leav[es] little room to grapple with how different, particularly heterogeneous, conceptions of Chinese masculinity might be valued and affirmed" (144). In the novel, Danny's father is exemplary of this troubling reassertion of Chinese masculinity, for he maintains absolute authority over his wife and daughter. When, for example, little Cindy asks Danny one morning if they are to help in the family shop, Doug scolds her and tells her to shut up (Lee 57). In a similarly dismissive way, after Danny runs away from home, Doug yells at his wife, Betty, and places all the blame on her (18). In this sense, by dedicating himself to caring for Frank and showing the kind of "domestic efficiency" that is disparaged as effeminate (Cheung 237), Danny is essentially rebelling not only against the traditional patriarchy that lingers in Chinese Canadian families, but also against the heteronormativity through which reclamations of a lost Chinese Canadian manhood are frequently articulated.

The stabilizing effect that Danny's ontological becoming-(m)other brings him is better illustrated through his repressing of the resurfacing desire to cruise in Stanley Park. For all of his love for Frank and all of the responsibility he assumes, Danny sporadically feels overwhelmed by the depressing and confining atmosphere in the apartment. The gloomy domestic space denies him the sensual experiences of an ordinary life. One evening, despite his

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scruples over what may happen to Frank during his absence, Danny impulsively leaves the room, unable to resist the temptation of nighttime in Stanley Park. On his way to the park, however, Danny's newly assumed role as a nurse constantly weighs on his mind. Desirous as he is for mobility and excitement, Danny cannot take his mind off Frank. As he walks towards the park, upon seeing rolling clouds and hearing a boom, Danny "wonders if a thunderstorm is coming, if Frank will wake up, terrified by the crash and the crackling of lightning through the curtained windows" (Lee 318). Danny's paradoxical state of mind is further illustrated by his psychological activities on the most popular trail with gay men in Stanley Park:

> If he finds someone here tonight, what will he bring home to Frank? A wayward, invisible germ on the sleeve of his polo shirt? The smell of another man so tenacious it won't wash off, and be smelled by Frank, who will understand, but whose understanding will make Danny feel smaller? Or will this be the time he catches AIDS through spit or cum or the unknown substances coating his one-night partner's body? (318)

Although he has managed to persuade himself to escape the room into this tantalizing space, responsibility for Frank and the fear of AIDS keep hovering over his head and affect his decision whether to satisfy his sexual desire or not. In this sense, together with the looming yet invisible mobility of HIV/AIDS, Danny's becoming-(m)other makes an alteration to his propensity to cruise and his mobile character in general.

More importantly, given his interactions with Chinese Canadian women, especially his mother, Danny's ontological becoming-(m)other takes on an added dimension. Later on the trail, Danny happens upon Edwin, who tells him about his mother in Chinatown. While they evoke Danny's memory of his mother, Edwin's words almost simultaneously make Danny's mind shift back to Frank, who is "struggling with the twisted blankets, calling for his own mother, hearing only the bounce of his voice off his apartment walls and nothing else" (320). He imagines the situation where a terminally ill child wants a caring and loving mother, who is nonetheless absent, and he is to fill this void. Danny's imagining of Frank's unanswered call for his mother prompts him to leave the park for the apartment. His choice, in spite of himself, is actually to answer Frank's call, which reinforces his process of becoming-mother which is already underway. Danny's mother is a homely

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Chinese Canadian woman who busies herself cooking and cleaning for the family. Her care for Danny is only for the sake of his physical welfare, and, therefore, does not meet his expectations. The type of mother he desires to have is glamorous, affectionate, and loving, as represented by his friend Val, a burlesque dancer. To put it simply, Danny's mother provides care in the way of food, but without making him feel deeply loved. As a result, Danny always dreams of a better mother. By providing perfect motherly care to ill Frank, therefore, Danny has engaged in not just becoming-(m)other but becoming the "better mother" of the novel's title, and better than his own mother.

The last moments that Danny and Frank spend together exemplify and reinforce the abstract mobility of interracial bodily crossing initiated earlier when they fall in love at first sight. With his health further deteriorating, Frank finds it difficult to fall asleep and to keep from shivering. In response, Danny "curl[s] around him, warming him with his own body" (324) and "holds him tighter and puts his feet on Frank's icy ones" (325). What merits noting is that the entangling of their bodies recalls and revises a time when Danny and Frank were in love. Then, it was Frank's body that curled around Danny's, which sheds some light on Danny's feminized identity or status during their intimate relationship. Danny's becoming-(m)other, however, correspondently reverses that bodily posture. Despite its saddening context, the bodily (re)-fusion between Danny and Frank is spiritually comforting and "their breathing in tandem soothes Danny, and he sleeps undisturbed" (325). Despite the lack of romantic or erotic elements in their relationship, their bodily (re)interaction contributes to Danny's transformation from a lover to a caring mother.

Danny's becoming-(m)other, as has been shown, points us beyond a phenomenological shift of identity and towards an ontological change in his understanding of homosexuality, and thus a re-evaluation of his relationship with his parents, especially his father. He eventually musters up the courage to come out to his parents, as is suggested at the close of the novel, when Danny shows them a picture of him and Frank (347). His caring for Frank is an attempt to refuse the roles that patriarchy prescribes for him and his mother and sister; more importantly, it challenges the omnipresent impact of heteronormativity in society. For Danny, therefore, caring for ill Frank and coming out open up opportunities for a life of difference, of rebellion, of interracial love, and of truth.

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Conclusion: Towards a Caring Response to the Pandemic

By representing Danny's psychogeographical experiences in public leisure spaces for gay men at a time when the AIDS pandemic was still in its infancy, Lee shows in *The Better Mother* her insight into how the mobile disease has exerted an (im)mobilizing effect upon this risk group, physically, psychologically, and especially on the micro-bodily level. To achieve mental tranquility and stability, characters in the novel have but to rely on their bodies, either the motile body or the desiring body. Intermingled with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the interracial love and care between Danny and Frank generate the former's "becoming-(m)other," a form of abstract mobility, which is meant to challenge the patriarchy still in his family and heteronormative understandings of masculinity. Also, reading the novel in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic enables us to see how humankind, as a community with a shared future, can cross racial and ethnic boundaries and make joint efforts to face the pandemic, which, with its mutating variants and unforeseen routes of transmission, may co-inhabit the world with us for what seems to be an unpredictable period of time. Danny's volunteering to take care of Frank, dying from HIV/AIDS, can shed light on the current response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada and beyond in terms of an interracial cooperation that promises to break down racial and other social barriers. As the call for papers for this special issue on pandemics reminds us, during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Canada, "much of the labour of caring for the sick, elderly, and other vulnerable populations . . . has come from low-paid, racialized, and/or temporary migrant workers" ("Call for Papers"). This is also a call for international and interracial co-operation during this difficult time. In this sense, Lee's narrative of Danny's devotion to the dying Frank aligns with this contemporary reality. Danny's consistent caring for Frank also suggests the significance of care for dealing with chronic diseases and long-lasting pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and COVID-19. In an interview with Tyrus Miller on the COVID-19 pandemic, James Lee, director of the University of California, Irvine Center for Medical Humanities, expresses his apprehension over the possible extension of the pandemic, and thus invites us to rethink our relationship to the pandemic as we do to chronic illnesses. We should, therefore, use the rhetoric and practice of care, rather than metaphors about

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"fighting," as the pandemic mutates and alters our way of living. In astutely pointing out the falsehood and fragility of the "restitution narrative" that is built into modern biomedicine, James Lee urges us to construct an alternative narrative of bodies. This different story requires "opening into your body's vulnerability, an acknowledgement of that, and a kind of meditation on what meaning comes from this new relationship to one's body" ("Race and Medicine"). We should try, in other words, to care for the chronically ill and to understand chronic illness not as something to be expunged but as that which we must learn to live with. In *The Better Mother*, Lee creates for us such a story that foregrounds interracial love and care as a long-term response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. By avoiding the military metaphors of a "war" to be fought, and substituting those of caring, of adapting, and of interracial cooperation, *The Better Mother*, while joining in the Canadian literary trend to peacefully represent the HIV/AIDS pandemic, offers us an exemplary answer to the question of how people across the world could respond to the COVID-19 pandemic that still refuses to be subdued.

NOTES

1 After the outbreak of COVID-19, a few mobilities scholars began to reflect upon disease mobilities. Borrowing Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concepts, for example, Merriman makes a distinction between "molar" (perceptible) mobilities and "molecular" (imperceptible) mobilities and highlights their mutual "becoming" (50). In doing so, Merriman alerts us to viral mobility, specifically the mobility of COVID-19, as a type of "molecular" mobility; however, he focuses on human embodied micro-mobilities during the pandemic. Likewise, Peter Adey et al., in their recent introduction to pandemic (im)mobilities, also explore the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on human (im)mobilities.

2 For this reason, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming-woman" has been the subject of much debate by feminist and queer theorists, who discuss how the idealistic liberation of dualisms in Deleuzian "becoming" continues to centre "man" by fundamentally aligning woman with alterity. Sara Ahmed, for example, reads "becoming-woman" as "phantastic" and as "operat[ing] in relation to 'the other'" (53). While to some degree, "becoming-woman," as Ahmed argues, depends on the notion of womanhood, I still use this concept to help explain Danny's destabilizing of traditional Chinese Canadian manhood.

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Caroline Misner

Inside the Lazaretto

You get used to it after awhile
with the days unfurling like the feathers
in a peacock fan. At times
the hours seem protracted until
I need to remind myself what day
it is, while tapping my fingers
and looking for something to contribute.

I begin each day startled
that I'm still alive; after a few weeks
we forget why we're still here.
Twice a day I pace the property,
sealed away by an icy stream
and a road that rolls on to eternity,
and the mists that creep across

the surface of the lake.
Even water seems to have more
important things to do.
A pine forest would live here
if I didn't exist, if I gradually melted
into the pine-needle ground, a slow
dissolve like pearls in wine.

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Little miracles still arrive in the mailbox
with loving regularity; unexplained kindness
blooms from the fizzy daydreams
that occupy my days. Should I try yoga
or spinning straw into gold?
I need another jigsaw puzzle
to piece together my fractured mind.

Okay, *Monsieur le Directeur,*
I'm ready for my close up,
I'm ready for my grand reawakening.
I don't know how much more I can take.

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Clint Burnham

The Plague of Orientalism: Reading Kevin Chong in the Pandemic

> The mayor, Rieux believed, had also invoked the history of smallpox in the region gratuitously. He had invoked *au courant* ideology to explain an unprecedented event because he wanted to blame the affluent ones for their disease instead of considering its randomness. (The authors of this chronicle do not necessarily agree with Rieux's interpretation of the mayor's intent.)
>
> —Kevin Chong, *The Plague*

Vancouver: spring 2020, the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The city and province, like much of the country and the world, is in lockdown. Storefronts on Robson Street have had their plate glass windows covered with sheets of plywood, presumably to deter B&Es. Graffiti artists start tagging, and Habitat for Humanity places large stickers requesting that the plywood be donated to their charity after use. More nefarious messages start appearing in March and April: "Beijing lies," "CCP virus," and (Chinese) "Premier Xi Jin Ping criminal." During the same time period, occasional hate crimes are reported; most egregiously, an elderly Asian man is knocked to the ground by a white assailant, the attacker uttering anti-Asian slurs related to COVID ("Elderly Man"). Such instances are not confined to Vancouver (Griffiths), nor to street-level invectives. US President Donald Trump is early on calling the coronavirus or the COVID-19 disease the "Chinese flu" and then the "Kung flu," and a Conservative Party of Canada leadership hopeful criticizes Canada's chief public health officer, Theresa Tam, for being loyal to China (Zimonjic and Cullen). At the same time, as long-term care facilities begin to see patients die of the disease and hospitals reserve beds for COVID-19 patients, other medical procedures

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are postponed and visitors to patients are severely restricted (*Pandemic Experience*). These practices are not uncontroversial, as Laveena Munshi notes in a late 2020 review of the restrictions, making, as the title of her short commentary indicates, "[t]he case for relaxing no-visitor policies in hospitals during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic," and arguing that "it is prudent to consider whether visitor restrictions . . . should be relaxed to mitigate harms to patients and families" (1).

Such social and medical contexts respecting the COVID-19 pandemic may seem too "on the nose," too perfect a fit, for an essay on Kevin Chong's *The Plague* (2018), but a scene in the novel brings them together in a prescient, and also critical, fashion. Before turning to that scene, and outlining my argument, I want to entertain two counterintuitive or even, perhaps to some members of the Canadian literary academe, uncomfortable thoughts. First, that the precision of the graffiti (that is, mentioning the Chinese Communist Party and Premier Xi in particular) suggests that the authors of the slogans may be members of the Chinese diaspora critical of the authoritarian Chinese state (Jung). This is not to deny, I hasten to add, the upswelling in Vancouver of anti-Asian racism early in 2020: of fifteen hate crimes reported to police in April 2020, for instance, eleven were anti-Asian, and whereas there were twelve anti-Asian hate crimes in 2019, there were already twenty in the first four months in 2020 ("Vancouver's Chinese Cultural Centre Defaced"). By May 2021, Vancouver was described by *Bloomberg* as "the anti-Asian hate crime capital of North America" (Pearson). But to ascribe crude messages solely to anti-Asian racists is to marginalize the agency of members of the Chinese diaspora and, furthermore, to view that diaspora as monolithic. Street protests in Vancouver by the Falun Gong religious group have targeted, and continue to target, China as the origin of the virus, while media reports in the Falun Gong-associated *Epoch Times* in May 2020 associated the pandemic with mainland China and the CCP.[1] Second, with respect to hospital and long-term care facility visits, that it is not only that family members may transmit the coronavirus to patients (or the other way around). Some family members may not *want* to visit their aging relatives, who in turn may not want to be burdened with children or grandchildren putting on masks of false sympathy as well as of the N95 variety.

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Jacques Lacan's warning that we not simple-mindedly ascribe sentiments of charity is salutary. Commenting on the legend of Saint Martin of Tours, who cut his cloak in half to give to a beggar, Lacan remarks, "But perhaps over and above that need to be clothed, he was begging for something else, namely, that Saint Martin either kill him or fuck him. In any encounter there's a big difference in meaning between the response of philanthropy and that of love" (*Ethics* 186). Unnecessarily provocative, tone-deaf in the present crisis? Or, I hope, contributing to the argument that, as Slavoj Žižek outlines in *The Plague of Fantasies,* every official act or gesture has its unconscious phantasmic support, its obscene underside. This is not, it should be stressed, to argue that we really want our relatives and neighbours to die from COVID-19. But rather, that our sentimental gestures and self-regard (expressed, for example, in spring and summer 2020 with pot banging "in support" of front-line medical workers) are *necessarily* accompanied by the neglect of those same relatives and neighbours. While Canada will look on at American mishandlings of the pandemic under the latter months of the Trump era in its typically smug way, a harder truth to swallow is that Canada has the worst record in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for proportional COVID-19 deaths in long-term care facilities during the pandemic.[2]

In Chong's *The Plague,* Vancouver is coping with an outbreak of a bubonic-like pestilence sometime in the 2010s. (The trope of "outbreak" to describe the plague in Chong's novel may be misleading—for, like the hermeneutics proposed in this essay, plagues are not spontaneous, but incremental, insidious, slowly detected and confirmed. This parallel between disease and interpretation is developed further in our text.) Beginning around Halloween and continuing until the following spring (the epidemic, we are told, "lasted four months and took over fourteen hundred lives" [Chong 14]), the novel is narrated by a doctor (Bernard Rieux), a journalist (Raymond Siddhu), and a social media influencer (Megan Tso). Soon after the onset, the city is isolated from the rest of British Columbia, with the SkyTrain stopping at the boundary with Burnaby and soldiers in the ports and borders. A secondary character, Romeo Parsons, is a celebrity-like mayor known for his good looks and social liberalism (he is a stand-in for former Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson but also Canadian prime minister Justin

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Trudeau, attractive white men who parlayed their affability into electoral politics). An anti-immigration rally and anti-racism rally are planned concurrently at the Vancouver Art Gallery, protests which become first a riot and then opportunistic looting of the shopping district. After the bifurcated protest-turned-riot, Parsons attempts to assuage citizens' anxieties with a speech that situates the pandemic in the history of settler colonialism as its own virus or plague, drawing on the thesis popularized by Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel.*[3] Parsons' speech is quickly overshadowed by a sex scandal: "a twenty-eight-year-old woman claiming to be Parsons' biological daughter (her existence had been concealed from Parsons by her birth mother, who died when she was a child) described having sexual contact with the mayor earlier that year" (Chong 123). The mayor retreats into silence—he is cancelled?—and only emerges when a vaccine has been announced, seeking to rehabilitate his reputation after said moral lapse by volunteering with a community group; he visits a pandemic ward in a temporary hospital, holding the hand of a dying young child.

In what follows I seek to read a scene of that hospital visit in Chong's novel in three different ways. First, it can be interpreted as a medical allegory, in which a political leader's body comes to represent or exist alongside his power. This allegory has a certain history, extending to medieval Europe (as theorized by Ernst Kantorowicz), but also in a plague text by Daniel Defoe, or a painting depicting Napoleon, or in the present COVID-19 moment and Canada's own prime minister. And this allegory is insistently contradictory: the leader will assert his power by separating his body from the plague, and he will assert his power by associating his body with the plague. Second, the visit is read in the context of racialized pandemic violence, where the singularity of a scandalous politician, and of a plague victim's ethnic hybridity, stand in an uneasy relation (or, to be properly Lacanian, non-relation) to protest politics. Finally, the visit is circumscribed by instances of a novelistic discourse that itself "breaks out" in buboes-like utterances, meta-linguistic speech acts like trigger warnings and land acknowledgements which, external to the novel proper, are akin to how Juliana Chang characterizes the Lacanian unconscious: "a most foreign element, consisting of signifiers from the Other as the Symbolic order" rather than "embodying the subject's innermost truth" (23). The novel's framing of the hospital scene

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introduces what Gabriele Helms, writing on an earlier Chinese Canadian novel (SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*), calls "historical interruptions," textual intrusions like the plague or like the immigrant. Such interruptions, Scott Toguri McFarlane argues in a text drawn on by Helms, "haunt" the liberal Canadian polity. I also consider, as a supplement to the hospital scene's interiority, the dualistic collective political action, which, like the plywood message boards, is also difficult to read politically: a protest in the novel that targets both immigration *and* anti-racism. That riot is situated in the novel again with a land acknowledgement and (yet more) messages on plywood. The plague (as well as *The Plague*), it turns out, is a matter of signifiers: of course, there is more than one novel called *The Plague* and, perhaps, plague should be read as both a noun (a medical event) and a verb (a way of reading).

The title of Chong's book is not the only way in which it mimics Camus' 1947 novel. Both are set in a coastal city that has been visited by a bubonic plague that first becomes apparent with the spectacle of dying rats, and both have, as a central narrator, a doctor named Bernard Rieux. Plot points are both similar and different: Chong's novel's other main characters, for instance—including Siddhu and Tso—are, like Rieux, of multicultural backgrounds (Rieux and Tso are East Asian, Siddhu is South Asian, although all are presented as assimilated into North America). Rather than a pontificating priest (as in Camus), here we have Parsons (a priest-like name), whose Western Buddhist mindfulness is more apropos for the secular, neoliberal "Lululemon" lifestyle that characterizes bourgeois Vancouver. The later novel's relation to Indigenous populations differs as well: while Camus mentions the Arab and Berber populations of Oran only in passing (a journalist is in town to report on "the living conditions of the Arabs" but this topic is then dropped [Camus 11, 65]), Chong embeds a land acknowledgement within the novel's opening lines: "The remarkable events described in this narrative took place in Vancouver (traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations) in 201_ and into the following year" (11).[4]

Plot points in Chong's novel parallel those of Camus'—including the hospital visit—but there are also differences. Whereas in Camus' novel the priest, Paneloux, is already working in the hospital, in our text Parsons is

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drafted to attend a dying child by Rieux, "because," Rieux tells Parsons, "I don't think your idea of suffering is grounded in reality" (Chong 231). The scene is initially narrated with a sneer: describing the doctor and the mayor suiting up into hazmat gear, Parsons "seemed more worried about leaving his handmade Italian shoes in the change area than what he would see next" (232). The pandemic zone of the hospital is then described in a way that juxtaposes frivolity and social ills: "The ward resembled a tent city—or a peculiar art class" (232). Pol and medico sit down beside the bed of a four-year-old girl, Rose Oishi, whom we have already met, and who is dying:

> The mayor agreed not to leave his place at the foot of the girl's bed until she died. He made a call to his assistant to clear his schedule and then turned off his phone. . . . When [Rieux] returned, Parsons was alone with the child, holding her hand as she tossed her head from side to side on the pillow. . . . [After the child dies] Each time Parsons' eyes returned to the dead girl, the more they dimmed. Rieux did not need to tell him that this child was not responsible for her own death. (235, 236, 238)

Here we want to distinguish between three agendas or intentionalities. Rieux's is to force the glib mayor, quick to signal his virtue with anodyne references to social ills, to confront death, and more, the death of a child, evidently an innocent. Chong's is to render Camus' critique of Catholicism relevant for a secular society. This essay's is to seek out the contradictions or political unconscious of that textual apparatus. Some of these contradictions, explored below, include: how the novel figures the relation of the body to the plague (our bodies are and are not carriers of the plague for the simple reason that the plague is not simply a biological agent but an ideology); the metafictional status of the novel's textual irruptions and its ironizing of narratorial knowledge (language and the novel as signifying systems are themselves unreliable indices of knowledge); and a constitutive antagonism revealed in the Canadian body politic (that body "scaled" from the singular individual and family to the public spheres of politics and protest).

We began the essay quoting the novel's presentation of Rieux's agenda and its own uncertainty over that agenda; this pull-quote deserves a bit more attention:

> The mayor, Rieux believed, had also invoked the history of smallpox in the region gratuitously. He had invoked *au courant* ideology to explain an unprecedented event because he wanted to blame the affluent ones for their disease instead of considering

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> its randomness. (The authors of this chronicle do not necessarily agree with Rieux's interpretation of the mayor's intent.) (Chong 232)

Rieux's accusation or supposition is that Parsons has weaponized reconciliation discourses, "gratuitously" serving his own ends—indeed, it betrays the political naïveté all too common to scientists and medical practitioners, all too evident in *our* pandemic, when they show surprise that ordinary citizens do not follow their guidelines for mask-wearing or vaccine-taking. Using what became a keyword of the COVID-19 pandemic—"unprecedented"—suggests an exceptional nature of the plague. Tellingly, it is this *political* motivation on Rieux's part that then leads to recruiting Parsons into a stint in the plague ward (rather, this is not so much political as, perhaps, moral: Rieux seeks to teach the mayor a lesson). The narrative dissensus or irruption that follows Rieux's accusation constitutes a textual motif that is simultaneously postmodern (in the self-conscious sense of reflecting on the narrative, demonstrating that there is no one dominant authorial voice—the same questioning, it should be added, that arguably leads to the contemporary skepticism towards institutions, science, politics, and the academy) and also the retrofitting of that 1970s or 1980s literary trope to a twenty-first-century pandemic.

To better understand this postmodernist reading, consider two other textual irruptions bookending this scene. First, in a gesture akin to the embedded land acknowledgement, we have a trigger warning: "The authors of this piece . . . have, up until now, refrained from describing the deaths of children. They were not consequential to the stories of the figures we've followed. . . . We therefore kindly invite those who might feel most sensitively about this material to either skip the remainder of this chapter or read it at arm's length" (234). Then, on the final page of the chapter, immediately after describing Rose Oishi's death, Rieux reflects on how his not having had children meant a parent's love "was still an abstraction for him. Parsons, by contrast, had children. Rieux already knew that. But he would have known just by looking at Parsons' face then" (238). That is to say, Rieux would *not* be triggered either by the description of a child's death or indeed by an actual death. But here it gets tricky, does it not? I said earlier that Parsons is seeking to rehabilitate his political career after a sex scandal involving a sexual affair

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with his daughter. Perhaps Parsons should have had a trigger warning before meeting that daughter.

I want to come back to what is going on textually (the trigger warnings and metafictional devices) but first I would like to compare this scene with two others from Western culture that offer instances of what we might call the leader's two bodies. First, in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year,* in which he narrates, apropos of the 1665 London plague, that "my Lord Mayor had a low Gallery built on purpose in his Hall, where he stood a little remov'd from the Croud when any Complaint came to be heard, that he might appear with as much Safety as possible" (177). Then, in March 1799, during his Egyptian campaign, Napoleon visited his plague-stricken soldiers in Jaffa, Palestine, going so far, according to some accounts, as to touch some patients' buboes so as to dispel rumours of their infectious nature. This visit was famously captured by Antoine-Jean Gros in his 1804 painting *Bonaparte visitant les pestiférés de Jaffa.* So we have two, or three, examples of leaders distancing (or not) their bodies from those who are or may be suffering from a pestilence. These instances illustrate what has been made famous by the medieval historian Ernst H. Kantorowicz in his book *The King's Two Bodies*: that a ruler may have an actual, corporal body, and also one that is more ineffable, regal, or mayoral. This mixed embodiment is represented by Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, who during the early weeks of the 2020 pandemic, when his wife was infected, gave press conferences with reporters two or more metres distant: one body can still issue diktats and fatherly advice, while the other is potentially viral. This is to argue, then, that by considering this range of bodies and histories, we can detect a constitutive fissure or antagonism in the theory of the leader's two bodies: Napoleon, and Chong's Romeo Parsons, seek to prop up the stature of their *governing* body (albeit Napoleon was only a general at this time) by endangering their *mortal* body, while London's Lord Mayor, and Prime Minister Trudeau, seek to *protect* their mortal body while exercising their mayoral/prime ministerial body. ("Exercising" in the sense of performatively relying on that body to, in the case of the Mayor, listen to complaints from citizens, and, in the case of the PM, issue press statements and take questions.)

Gros' *Bonaparte visitant les pestiférés de Jaffa* holds other interests for the purposes of this essay. Darcy Grigsby points out the irony that while the

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painting is often seen as a visual example of the orientalist gaze made famous by Edward Said, the feminized, voluptuous, half-naked men in the painting are actually French soldiers. The logic here is instructive for the present situation: for just as an orientalist painting can be interpreted as such without the stereotypes of Arab subjects, so too, I argue, the 2020 graffiti in Vancouver can be read as anti-Asian, and racist, *even if the work of Falun Gong sympathizers.* What is germane to Grigsby's analysis are two further points she makes: on the one hand, the importance in contemporary accounts of the juxtaposition of the elegantly clothed Napoleon and his semi-nude men, and on the other hand, the notion of contagion carrying moral, or ideological, values, as well as the biological. Gros' painting establishes ethos with clothing. "Napoleon's integrity is manifested by the discreteness, the very boundedness, of his body," Grigsby tells us, adding that, "[t]ightly encased in his flamboyant but closely fitted French uniform, [Napoleon] stands in startling contrast to the naked and loosely covered plague victims as well as the robed Arabs" (9). In this context, Napoleon's hand touching a half-naked patient is itself almost the only bare skin on his body: the touch cannot help but be erotic.[5] Here we can also think of Mayor Parsons' fussing over his "handmade Italian shoes" before he changes into the drapery of a hazmat suit. That is, Parsons is like Napoleon in his fashion sense, but unlike him in his loose garb. The setting at the patient's bedside is the same and different too. We have already learned how Parsons was holding Rose Oishi's hand, but this is very much a family scene (both parents are present, although they come and go), whereas the Gros painting is rife with homoerotic tension, with no women clearly present.[6]

But let us return to our novel's relevant scene. The dying child whom Parsons and Rieux visit, Rose, is the daughter of Jeffrey Oishi, a judge, and Lisa Randall-Oishi. The characters first of all reproduce a judge and his family in Camus' novel (the Othons) and, significantly, *multiculturalize* the same. In an interview (see "Clint Burnham Interviews Kevin Chong"), Chong used the video-game term "Easter eggs" (elements of a narrative only made legible retroactively or with insider knowledge) to describe some of his novel; an example of this would be an initial description of Rose that both speaks to our discussion of race and turns out to be an inaccurate, and inadequate, prognostication: "The girl had skin the colour of a pecan,

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wide-set Asian eyes, and rippling curls. Tso foresaw a lifetime's worth of conversations for her in which she would have to offer her ethnic pedigree or risk being labelled difficult" (Chong 106). Our retroactive reading of this passage, then, qualifies Tso's dour pronunciation but not in a way that suggests it is wrong to assume a future of microaggressions. And not only because it turns out that Rose will, before the novel's end, die. But also because such a death, read in 2020, is also a racialized death. Finally, the child, as the offspring of miscegenation, offers a crucial further hybridization, in that such a process can be thought of as the patent opposite of the incestuous bond entertained by Mayor Parsons with his daughter. Parsons is thus touching not only a plague-stricken child (Chong combines Gros and Camus, as it were) but one whose very *bios* repudiates his endogamy.

We can also consider this scene of the individual or singular (the mayor) with the novel's rendering of collective political action: simultaneous anti-immigration and anti-racism rallies that descend into violence. Siddhu has left his newspaper job and is covering the event for the "GSSP" blog. The novel prefaces an account of this bifurcated riot with a historical survey of rioting in Vancouver, including the 1907 Anti-Oriental Riots, those from the Depression, the 1971 Gastown riots, and hockey and music concert outbursts: these more recent riots, the narrator concludes, "were the types of riots reserved for a sleepy provincial city in an economically developed country" (116).[7] The novel's riot, in its splitting between "European-Canadian" protestors (who are led by a Proud Boys-like cohort) and a larger, anti-racist contingent, reminds present-day readers that protest is not simply the purview of the left—as has been ably confirmed in 2020 with anti-mask and anti-lockdown protests in the US.[8] The novel's genuinely political protest, however split, then itself hives off into the familiar Vancouver activity of "shopping while rioting." After protestors throw Molotov cocktails and start punching each other,

> [t]he police buffered the two groups, minimizing the violence between them. The crowd of non-protestors seemed to disperse during this confrontation. Siddhu realized that it had merely moved down Robson Street, away from the police detail, and toward the shops. Siddhu was too far away to hear the glass smashing. Cellphone photos posted that day showed people in face masks stuffing their backpacks with electronics and handbags, others carrying stolen clothes by the rackful. For this segment of the crowd, the demonstration was a pretext to steal, a distraction from the spectre of death. (117-18)

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A political reading of such contradictions in the Canadian polity vis-à-vis the ethnic polis has a certain history in our literary criticism. The splitting of the protest is not merely formal, for it also stages a conflict between those who seek to maintain or return to a Eurocentric country and those in favour of a more equitable society. This antagonism can be roughly, if crudely, staged as one based on racialization: between white bodies and brown bodies. McFarlane aptly forecast the past quarter century of debate over race in Canada in his 1995 essay "The Haunt of Race." Drawing on the then-new discourse of Derridean "hauntology," he already saw that liberal attempts to incorporate writers of colour into Canadian institutions (what he calls "revision") were doomed to fail:

> There has been a subtle movement away from a faith in there even being a process of revision in which we can all share equitably. There is too much of the unnameable looming, pressing and the goal of revision continually encounters its other. The spirit of revision is haunted, and the recent shift in anti-racist politics stages this haunting. As a strategy, revision is being supplemented by historical interruption. The question that hangs: If "our" cultural institutions cannot and should not try to represent "the people" through funding and programming that reflects a "Canadian" identity, upon what basis should they operate? (26)

Writing on SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe,* Gabriele Helms references McFarlane's critique, arguing that "dialogic struggles" in the novel contributed to "a fictional oral history that functions as a strategy of revision 'supplemented by historical interruption,'" interruptions which in turn stage the Chinese Canadian subject (64). But McFarlane's hauntology, his conception of the "historical interruption," can also help us understand not only the persistence of racist politics in Vancouver (and Canada), but how Chong's novel narrates a pandemic. First, consider how the bifurcation or splitting of the political continues with Mayor Parsons' conciliatory speech after the riot(s). Parsons mentions that after the riot, "there was a great up-swell in civic pride as people helped repair broken windows. Kind messages were scrawled on the plywood boards that covered up broken shopfront exteriors. The messages all boiled down to this: 'Not all Vancouverites are vandals—not all of us are rioters'" (120). The cleanup and message writing reference, first, the aftermath of Vancouver's 2011 Stanley Cup riot, when citizens descended on the city's downtown the day after the riot, picking up broken glass and writing heartfelt messages on the window hoardings

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(Smith). But, as if to illustrate textbook Freudian ambivalence, the 2020 reader in Vancouver cannot help but be reminded of plywood boards that appeared on Robson Street storefronts in March and April as the city went into lockdown, and which were soon defaced with racist messages blaming the coronavirus on China.

Authorial intrusions, which I earlier compared to buboes that irrupt on a plague patient's body, continue throughout the novel, as signalled in this paper's epigraph discussed above. To such tropes can be added more contemporary trigger warnings and land acknowledgements. In addition to the content warning about the depiction of Rose Oishi's death, we also have trigger warning as a metaphor:

> Siddhu took a car2go to the edge of the Grandview Highway until he reached a set of electronic roadwork signs placed a few blocks before the spotlights, fences, and guard towers. They were typical roadwork signs that warned drivers of a stoppage ahead and asked them to take an alternate route. They were like trigger warnings that cautioned locals who wanted to pretend that nothing had changed to avoid going farther. (155)

Land acknowledgements themselves also metastasize in the novel. In addition to the opening gesture, we have two reported acknowledgements: first, when Romeo Parsons gives his speech after the riot ("'First off, I want to thank the people of our city for their time,' he began after the land acknowledgment" [119]), and later, when Janice Grossman, an arts impresario, begins a theatre event ("'This space was created by a cataclysm,' she said shortly after giving the land acknowledgment" [253]).

This sense of the "plague of *The Plague*," or the notion that "plague" at once constitutes the (metastasizing!) semantic content of the novel and its formal appurtenances, is a necessarily allegorical reading. But here we have to be careful that we do not fall into what Fredric Jameson, commenting in 2019 on Camus' original novel, calls "bad allegory" (*Allegory* 9), or a simplistic, one-to-one correspondence (such as, in Camus, the plague as a stand-in for Nazism). But there is also a tenor-vehicle interchangeability to the postmodern allegory, as Jameson observed three decades earlier in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992), where he spoke of

> the most peculiar indirections characteristic of allegory in general: the laterality with which the levels, like the hollow nutshells of the shell game, must be conveyed. If you

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> want to say something about economics, for example, you do so with political material. . . . On the other hand, if you want to say something about politics . . . it is by way of economic raw material. (67)

This helps us sort out the relation between the textual "irruptions" in Chong's novel, and moves beyond privileging said textuality (which was the category error of the first generation of postmodernist critics in the 1980s, I reckon). For just as we can see the textual devices as figuring the plague, so too the other way around, and the plague in the novel "stands in" for its textual arrival—that is, not so much that the novel begins with the arrival of the plague in Vancouver, but rather that the plague begins with the beginning of a narrative about Vancouver. Indeed, Jameson goes on in the same discussion (of conspiracy films like *Videodrome* and *All the President's Men*) to entertain the possibility of a flattened allegory, or "the squaring of the circle of this allegorical law: a political film that deceptively looks like a political film, a representation that seeks to convey some conception of political relations by way of overtly political material" (67). By this reading, if what the plague in Camus' novel allegorizes is, in fact, a plague or pandemic (which is why so many of us were reading Camus in spring 2020—*not* to learn how societies deal with Nazi invasions), then perhaps, too, the textual irruptions in Chong's novel are not so much allegories for the buboes, but . . . for the vaccine? That is, and let's just stay with land acknowledgements, for they are the most salient gesture in Canadian liberal discourse today, can we not venture the proposition that a land acknowledgement constitutes a kind of vaccine against more meaningful decolonization?[9]

The hospital visitation scene and its framing—including the "trigger warning" and the struggle over interpretation among the authors—signifies the metatextual symptom of the same devices in the social (trigger warnings and land acknowledgements being utterances—vaccines—that often seek to relieve libidinal and colonial anxieties). This is not to argue, I hasten to add, that people suffering from trauma are not triggered, or that land acknowledgements do not have a specific history within Indigenous protocols.[10] But trigger or content warnings are also in danger of becoming little more than anodyne (and wordy) versions of movies' or video games' rating systems. Too, hearing a Mohawk activist acknowledge the territory on which he is speaking in Vancouver (as I did at an anti-pipeline rally

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organized by the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs in 2015) is very different from hearing a non-Indigenous professor or politician mumble through and mispronounce the names of the Squamish (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw), Tsleil-Waututh (səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ), Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm), and Kwikwetlem (kʷikʷəƛ̓əm) First Nations. This is to make the argument that trigger warnings and land acknowledgements are what Lacan and Žižek call "empty gestures" (the canonical example is "your money or your life!"; see Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts* 209-14), which are always accompanied by a "forced choice"—in the first case, that yes, texts have violent content, and in the second, that yes, we live under neo-colonial conditions. And even this extended consideration does not exhaust—nor foreclose—the possibilities and resonances of the role of trigger warnings and land acknowledgements in Chong's novel.

Such textual moments, I have been arguing, exemplify more than the standard postmodern metafictional "questioning stance towards their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology" (Hutcheon 106). But let's not too quickly discard that thirty-year-old characterization, for surely a Chinese Canadian rewrite of an existentialist novel can have some claim for the kind of postmodern pastiche that Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson (1991) were pointing us to in the 1980s. Why, that is, do the authors feel the need to register their disagreement with Rieux's judgmental attitude towards Parsons' motivations—which is to say, why is it necessary for the novel at this point to mobilize such a postmodern trope?

By way of answering that question, which has been haunting this essay, we can read the hospital scene in Chong's novel in a way that reveals the antagonisms in contemporary politics between neoliberal governance and multicultural polity. That is, for all the "successes" of Asian Canadians on Canada's West Coast, political elites remain white supremacist in body and policy,[11] while, in contrast to this ruling monad, "irruptions" consistently plague popular bodies, figured on the one hand as the pandemic (COVID-19 or the novel's plague), and on the other hand through miscegenatory struggles over race (thus Rose). Of course, Chong is neither the first nor the only writer to observe such antagonisms. What then is particularly

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noteworthy about his novel's treatment of neoliberal Vancouver, how the text disentangles white supremacism and libidinal-colonial anxieties, I argue, has to do with how it stages that white supremacism as fundamentally not all that different from liberal (or even radical, abolitionist) multiculturalism. Chong's *The Plague* confirms the Lacanian argument that not only is racism and ethnic hatred predicated on the "theft of enjoyment" but the more dispiriting conclusion that the anti-racist's enjoyment is not all that different from the racist's (see George and Hook). We see this thesis argued in two ways. First, consider the novel's juxtaposition of the two demonstrations, which not only shows that the anti-immigration white nationalists depend for their enjoyment on the spectre of official, liberal multiculturalism, but also that the anti-racist left's enjoyment is similarly predicated on the right winger's malfeasance. The novel indicates that this reading of juxtaposed pleasures is less liberal "false equivalence" than one that is true to Vancouver's histories, which, as noted, include both racist encounters and outbursts after hockey games or during rock concerts (see also Barnholden).

For a second example of complications of racial enjoyment, the reader might consider how real-life Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson's sex scandal, while less egregious than his novelistic avatar's (mere adultery rather than incest), involved his dating an Asian woman. As with my earlier comparison of Rose and Parsons, here, again, the "real-life" scandal was that of a white leader who was unduly exogamous (miscegenatory), whereas the novelistic character was excessively endogamous (incestuous). And the very eroticization of Asians in Vancouver—the queer phenomenon of so-called rice queens, for example—indicates that such predilections, like textual irruptions, do not challenge white supremacy.[12] Rather, such exoticization is arguably accompanied by that legacy, as in Daniel Gawthrop's memoir *The Rice Queen Diaries*, where he delineates his grandfather's role in the internment of Japanese Canadians in the 1940s shortly before descending (ascending?) into erotic details of his encounters with Japanese Canadian lovers, including Yukio, who is alternately "a samurai warrior" wearing "a white bandana with red-and-black calligraphy" and "a fully clothed Tokyo urbanite in a starched white shirt and black tie . . . faithful torchbearer of a workaholic culture" (22).

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But let us bring together these tropes of the sexual and the textual, the racial and the viral, with a diagram that, it is hoped, can help to conceptualize Chong's novel, and its interpretation during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

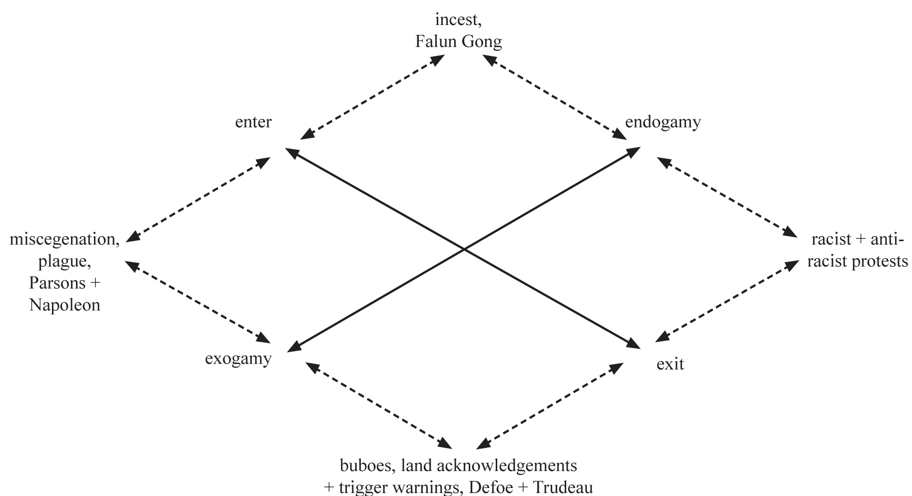

Figure 1. Antinomies in *The Plague*: a semiotic rectangle.

What the novel shows us is that anxieties over plagues and pandemics stage the body as both personal, or singular, and social, or political (reminding us of the interchangeability of levels in Jameson's theory of allegory). The plague enters our body and worries us about its borders—even as we enjoy other forms of being entered (there are some great eating scenes in a hotel dining room in the novel). Then, we worry about/enjoy that which leaves our bodies—from words and slogans at protests to pustules (in the novel) or microdroplets (those new incarnations we have learned about over the past year). What the novel is staging, that is, is a series of antinomies and combinatorial logics that are mapped here with the aid of the well-known semiotic rectangle, devised by Greimas and made famous in the Anglo-American world by Jameson (Greimas vi-xxii). The two terms "enter" and "endogamy" are antinomic or mutually exclusive; then, we have

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their negations or opposites: the exit, and exogamy. In the novel, and its interpretation, such concepts are staged at the level of the body, and the nation, but also metaleptically in the novel's discourse. So at the top of the diagram we have that which combines the entrance and the endogamous: incest (Romeo Parsons' scandal) but also Falun Gong (or the possibility that anti-Chinese graffiti in pandemic Vancouver was an internecine struggle within China). Then, on the left, we have the combination of that which enters, and is exogamous—so enters from the outside. This is signified by the interracial congress of Judge Oishi and his wife Lisa Randall-Oishi (and their child Rose), but also the plague itself *and* the political acts of Parsons and Napoleon in touching the plague victims. For if we circle to the bottom position—that which is neither a matter of entering (but the exit) nor endogamy (so exogamy), we see on the one hand the irruptions, from the body (the buboes) but also the text (land acknowledgements and trigger warnings stage a shift from one level of discourse to another—they are metalinguistic or phatic—with a further possibility of the land acknowledgement as vaccine), and on the other hand that the refusal of Defoe's "Lord Mayor" or Trudeau, via a practice of "the leader's two bodies," to touch their constituents is a matter of "leaving" them alone—they leave, it is an exit. They have two bodies. Finally, on the right side of the diagram, that which is again an exit, but endogamous, is where we entertain the thesis that both racist and anti-racist protestors are simultaneously *leaving* or exiting their neoliberal role as passive citizens (which is so traumatic that they have to return to that role, and go riot-shopping—both in the novel and in Vancouver's "actual" history) and concerned with endogamy, with the social body. This last might seem unduly harsh (or, again, positing a false equivalence), but I think the unfortunate name of an important political group, "No one is illegal," says more than it intends.[13] Even as the organization advocates for immigrants' and refugees' rights, a more radical position might be to say "everyone is illegal"—for "no one is illegal" cedes too much power to the state. In a Lacanian sense, every protestor is a hysteric, asking the master to make things right. At the time of this essay's revision, in March 2021, the *Washington Post* reported that right-wing protestors in the US were demanding to "defund the CDC"—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—appropriating the "defund the police" slogan of Black Lives

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Matter protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Kevin Chong's novel may not have predicted the virulence of vaccine skepticism, but it did predict the entanglement of anti-Asian racism and pandemic paranoia. We should be grateful for this reminder, and we should heed the novel's lessons.

What are those lessons? They are all, I have argued, about a kind of doubling or layering: Chong's novel repeats or pastiches Camus' and can be both read as a commentary on today and reread in light of the 2020 pandemic. Just as protest can take anti-racist and racist turns in the novel, so too responses to COVID-19 both racialize the pandemic and rely on that racism. The theory of the "King's two bodies" is both affirmed and negated by the real world (Trudeau) and the novel (the hospital scene). Chong's novel is a body that erupts in buboes-like land acknowledgements and trigger warnings, helping us to understand those symptoms of present-day political discourse. But the ideological function of literature should not be overestimated; unlike land acknowledgements, the novel is not a vaccine.

NOTES

1 For Falun Gong media see Bellemare et al.; the author of this essay also observed Falun Gong protests alleging CCP pandemic conspiracies in March 2021. In a recent article in *The Atlantic,* "MAGA-Land's Favorite Newspaper: How *The Epoch Times* Became a Pro-Trump Propaganda Machine in an Age of Plague and Insurrection," Simon van Zuylen-Wood has laid out the growth of *The Epoch Times* as a far-right media presence in North America. And it is not only the overseas Chinese who resist easy stereotype; as Shuyu Kong remarks, one should "take care not to treat immigrants from mainland China as a monolithic whole with a single ideology. In fact, many diasporic media firms and media practitioners, including those formerly trained in mainland China, can be highly critical of the Chinese Party-state" (160). Too, the easy alignment of immigrant and plague can also be flipped, as suggested in David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, where a passing comment in Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia* that for Asian Americans, whiteness may be "contagious" ("I wondered if whiteness were contagious," qtd. in Eng and Han 33) supports the argument that "assimilation into mainstream culture may involve not only debilitating personal consequences; ultimately, it also constitutes the foundation for a type of national melancholia, a collective national haunting, with destructive effects" (38). This is to suggest, then, that assimilation qua contagion subvents racial melancholia and other pathologies.

2 See Picard: "As of September 30 [2020], Canada had recorded 9,262 COVID-19 deaths, and of that total, 7,609 were in residential care homes. That's 82 percent—twice the average of the thirty-seven OECD countries" (21).

3 See Chapter 11, "Lethal Gift of Livestock: The Evolution of Germs" (195-214), where Diamond argues that "[t]he importance of lethal microbes in human history is well illustrated by Europeans' conquest and depopulation of the New World. Far more Native

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Americans died in bed from Eurasian germs than on the battlefield from European guns and swords" (210). See Jaschik for a summary of debates on Diamond's work, especially with respect to questions of race.

4 By "within the novel proper," we mean within the novel's narration, as opposed to such paratexts as the acknowledgement page, author's bio, etc. Still early in the book, the narrator comments on the alienation of Vancouver's citizens from each other: "Among the city's Indigenous peoples, its immigrant groups, its sex workers and LGBTQ population, collective traumas were experienced but barely heard by the rest of the city—including the figures in this narrative" (14). This introduces an important cleavage, between the novel's assimilated characters (Tso is a globe-trotting cosmopolitan, Rieux is alienated from his Cantonese heritage, Siddhu is a suburban homebody) and other immigrant groups.

5 A contemporary critic, Grigsby notes, draws our attention to the "single outstretched hand" that has been "made 'nude' by the removal of a glove" (15).

6 It should be noted that Grigsby does not subscribe to Kantorowicz' "two bodies" theory floated earlier, arguing instead that Gros valorizes "Napoleon's rational authority in the face of panicked imaginations," in accordance with Jan Goldstein's account of "contemporary medical models of 'moral' contagion" (39-n23); Grigsby also quotes a reviewer of the Salon in which Gros' painting appeared, who asked, "Sir, are these Egyptians who have the plague? No, they are Frenchmen. Have they taken on the air and character of the country [of Egypt]?" (6). See also Goldstein, whose article "Moral Contagion" begins by quoting Freud during his 1885 visit to Paris, referring to political agitation as a "psychical epidemic" (181). Moral contagion and social epidemics qua tropes were mainstays of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century sociological theorists, including Gabriel Tarde, Gustave Le Bon, and Émile Durkheim. See also Borch, and Cavalletti.

7 As Michael Barnholden's *Reading the Riot Act* documents in its first chapter ("Anti-Asian Riots"), the city's early years included anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese riots in 1887 (against Chinese encampments in Coal Harbour and on Carrall Street) and 1907 (against businesses and rooming houses in Chinatown and Japantown). Interestingly, the immigration of 1,100 Japanese and Chinese workers in July 1907, claims Barnholden, was due to an outbreak of the bubonic plague in Hawaii. See also Ikeda's "A Brief History of Bubonic Plague in Hawaii."

8 Indeed, when I attended an Indigenous rights protest in October 2020, I was asked at first by organizers if I meant to be at an anti-mask protest on the other side of the Vancouver Art Gallery (the perils of being interpellated as a middle-aged white man!). When this essay was in revisions, the Trump-incited march on the US Capitol took place, on January 6, 2021.

9 For a working out of the logic of land acknowledgements, please see my poem "No poems on stolen native land" in *Pound @ Guantánamo* (2-5). I should acknowledge that both reviewers of this article were troubled by this comparison (perhaps for them it was a Jamesonian "bad allegory"). There are two relevant points of dispute, it seems to me. First, that the medical or biological action of a vaccine is not comparable to the performative politics of a land acknowledgement. But consider the two ways in which the COVID vaccines work. The mRNA-style Pfizer or Moderna vaccines and the "adenovirus" vector virus of the AstraZeneca or Janssen vaccines all contribute to the building of a "protein spike"—the vector virus "produces the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein," whereas the mRNA "is essentially a recipe, telling the cells of the body how to make the spike protein"

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("Covid-19 Drugs and Vaccines"). The host body then fights off that protein, thereby developing immunity. Is a land acknowledgement not precisely that "spike protein," a small dose of anti-colonial utterances for which the host body (politic) develops an immunity, no longer thinking it needs to move to more substantial material or symbolic decolonization? Too, as with the need for second (and third?) doses, or annual flu shots, land acknowledgements are needed again and again. The second objection to my metaphor is that while yes, it is true, the land acknowledgements in the novel are scripted *pro forma* utterances by settlers, we should acknowledge that Indigenous protocols of the same do important, and more significant, work. Here I think it is important not to fall into an updated version of the "noble savage" paradigm where Indigenous actors are unproblematically thought to be free of political or other constraints (just as I argued against viewing Asians in Canada monolithically). First, and this is a point that Patricia Barkaskas has made in discussion of land acknowledgements, *even in the most empty gesture of an acknowledgement* by a going-by-the-numbers settler politician or professor, we cannot predict how that utterance will be received by an Indigenous person—it may, indeed, change the context for a given setting. Second, land acknowledgements by Indigenous figures should not be solely read as anti-colonial—rather, they are also a working out of nation-to-nation protocols *between* different First Nations and other Indigenous polities.

10 For a further discussion of land acknowledgements, see Robinson et al., "Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land Acknowledgement"; Linda Roland Danil, in a brief (Lacanian) account of trigger warnings, argues that they function in a similar way to questions of national security—locating threats outside the (national or personal) body.

11 There has only been one Asian or indeed non-white mayor of any of British Columbia's major cities—Vancouver, Victoria, Burnaby, Surrey, Kelowna, Kamloops, or Nanaimo—Peter Wing, mayor of Kamloops for three terms beginning in 1966 (Wing was the first mayor of Chinese descent of a North American city and the first locally born mayor of Kamloops; see "Former Kamloops Mayor Dies at 93"). The one South Asian premier of the province, Ujjal Dosanjh, was drafted into the position after Glen Clark's scandal-plagued NDP government suffered a leadership crisis in 2000. Dosanjh's government lasted only fifteen months.

12 This essay was edited during the aftermath of the shootings in Atlanta, in March 2021, of workers at three spas. The victims at Young's Asian Massage were Delaina Ashley Yaun, age 33; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Xiaojie Tan, 49; and Daoyou Feng, 44. The victims at the Gold Spa were Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Suncha Kim, 69; and Soon Chung Park. The victim at Aromatherapy Spa was Yong Ae Yue, 63. (Hawkins et al.)

13 Please see noii-van.resist.ca/

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Tina Do

& this too

they throw acid on a woman that looks like me
—but *not really*—
outside her home & the newscaster says *Asian*
like the colour of her skin is an invitation
for the violence.
I keep it from my parents, drag clattering bins out
in the morning & pretend the light of day is a refuge

they stab a man that could have been my uncle—but *isn't*—
thirteen times outside a store. the newscaster stumbles
over his name,
a tongue twister of foreignness
& I keep this from my mother—
say *mama* instead of mẹ
trade cảm ơn for *thank you*
tell her to call me *Tina*, not con—
hope no one will hear us mark words
with a foreign tongue and think of it as a violence

the man across the counter stops me mid-drink to say
can you get someone else to finish my latte I—
walk away, hold my tired body like a bruise,
mottled yellow under   white lighting
pretend it's because I haven't mastered frothing milk
instead of—   a girl walks her dog,
hears failed whispers from men
watch out for Ling Ling and her bat—
beware coloured peril—
sometimes
there's a woman that sneers at my face

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with or without a mask
takes two steps back
takes two steps forward
& coughs

xin lỗi mẹ
con chỉ muốn sống
I mean, I've forgotten what it is to feel safe
in my own skin
I mean, maybe if I
fold my body into a prayer for belonging
I will know what it's like to colour inside the lines
& not burn with shame
I want to hold hope in calloused hands
& not think of it as a violence
remember that for every act of hatred
there is a stranger who says *stop* on the bus
to slurring insults
& a neighbour who stands six feet away from you
to hand out smiles & masks like it's the
only currency that matters

& a woman,
eyes glass shards of tenderness, sharp and everlasting
who tucks hope into tired hands
& shares its burden,
helps plant the seed of it in the soil of
a land whose name is a tongue twister of foreignness
& says این نیز بگذرد
& this too shall pass.

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Opinions and Notes

Clint Burnham Interviews Kevin Chong

Clint Burnham

This interview took place following a discussion of Kevin Chong's novel *The Plague* by a group of Simon Fraser University English students and faculty in November 2020. The interview was conducted with Kevin Chong over Zoom for a public audience, primarily students at SFU. Students chose the novel for a pandemic reading group, evidently, for its timeliness but also for its geographic specificity. Appropriately, the interview began with a land acknowledgement, which is embedded in the discussion below. I went on to teach the book in a plague literature course the following spring and was struck by the response of students to the novel's specificity and relevance. Many thanks to Kevin for his time, and to Rawia Inaim for the transcription.

CLINT BURNHAM: So we have in the audience some students who are in a reading group in November 2020 as well. We had a real battle over how Vancouver-specific the book was and whether that mattered.

KEVIN CHONG: I bet. I've seen reactions from people who are outside of the city, and I wonder whether or not I made it a "local novel." I didn't intend to, I just wanted to be specific. There are some references to things that I think only Vancouverites can get, like "Easter eggs,"—most locals would know that the hotel where one character stays is the Sylvia—and then there are some moments that are meant to be more general for readers unfamiliar with the city. Maybe I overdid it with the Vancouver references. Sometimes you just want to try something, and you wait for someone to pull you back. And there were times when I tried things and the editors just let me go, and I was like, "Oh, really?" I was a little surprised.

CB: I feel like the interview has already started, but we'll come back to this. I'd like to welcome our guests and to acknowledge that this interview and this discussion is coming to you from and via servers and other digital infrastructures on unceded and stolen Indigenous territories of Turtle Island, including the traditional ancestral territories of the Coast Salish peoples, the

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Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), the Səl̓ílwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), and the kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem) Nations, especially those on which SFU as an institution exists. Welcome, Kevin Chong, to this venue tonight. And since I began with a land acknowledgement, I guess that's our first interesting thing to talk about and to ask you about your novel, as your novel begins with a land acknowledgement, not on the copyright page, but actually in the narrative; it's embedded, and it's mentioned a couple of other times as well, when characters give a public speech. You mention that they deliver a land acknowledgement. In some ways, and maybe we'll get into this in a bit, it's a very postmodern gesture to imbed performativity within the narrative itself, not outside the novel, or framing the novel, rather it's in the novel. So I wonder—we were talking about the specificity of the novel to Vancouver—if you had some thoughts on this, Kevin?

KC: Yeah. I wanted to frame this book as a public document. I had in my mind that this book-within-a-book had to read as if written by a committee. The disembodied voice is one of those things that I borrowed pretty directly from the original by Albert Camus. I thought about what kind of document would be written to memorialize this sort of tragic time in an alternate Vancouver history. I thought about the kinds of anxieties that would go into writing it, and the kinds of boxes the committee would try to tick off. The committee would need to be conscious of their positionality, as do I, as somebody who's trying to write a book that is a response to the Camus book. The land acknowledgement and other stuff play off the critique that Camus, in the original, writes only about the French Algerians and that he didn't write about Algeria beyond describing the land and the light. In other words, he didn't really write about the Arab and Berber people. And I tried to acknowledge that. While I am not writing from a Eurocentric position, I am writing from an immigrant-settler position, a privileged vantage point, one that's not representative of the entire city. I guess I try to bake in my own anxieties about writing a book in these contemporary times. It's definitely a very self-conscious book; there's that vein of metafiction in a lot of things that I've written.

CB: I do want to get to the pandemic side of things and what it means to write a pandemic novel. But let's talk about the postmodern aspects of the novel. That's a through line in your own work, and you have these multiple narrators, and even the fact that it's a redo. I think in an interview you did on the *I Don't Speak Canadian* podcast, you talked about it as a concept cover album. So you write this pastiche or copy of the Camus classic, and like Camus, you have multiple narrators. Their decision-making is laid bare, so you're making the reader think about, well, should we know about Raymond Siddhu's infidelity, for example? What are the ethics there? So in that great postmodern kind of paradox where by showing the process of telling the story, you make it seem even more realistic because such issues of privacy are only at stake if Siddhu is a real person as opposed to being a character in a novel. You are also very much

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foregrounding the role of print and digital media, the decline of the newspaper, the rise of blogs. I was saying a couple of weeks ago when we were talking about your book in our reading group, that it seemed to have that—I mean Camus has a flat voice, you have that really sort of flat voice which is almost like Michel Houellebecq too. It's as though it's a Wikipedia voice, there is no kind of inflection going on there. So what about postmodernism as a technique or as a strategy appeals to you in this project?

KC: What I enjoyed about using that objective voice is that it allows you to be tongue-in-cheek. It's like borrowing official language—to be able to escape from your own voice and disguise your own hang-ups and to write in a way that allows you to be more honest because you're not writing in your own voice: you're using this committee voice, this public document voice. Camus often said that the aspect of his writing that was most underappreciated was his humour, and if you read the original or some of his other works, you can see these little glimpses of humour. There's the character in the original, Joseph Grand, who keeps writing the first sentence of the novel over and over again, who keeps changing it around. It's interesting that all of Camus has been flattened these days. When you think of Camus, you think of his signature quotes that are emblazoned on Pinterest and t-shirts and things like that, about "the invincible summer," or what-have-you. And I often like to think of my books as trying to speak to those books that I admired in the past. Toni Morrison talked about how Tolstoy never wrote to her, a little Black girl from Ohio, and how she ended up writing books in which she talks to her own people. I've been inspired by other writers who see an opportunity to try to expand the canon or try to write themselves into canonical works. I know that Kamel Daoud, who wrote *The Meursault Investigation*—another riff on Camus—is a big fan of his work, but Daoud saw Camus' inability to write about Arab Berber people as a breach in the towering body of his work—a breach that allowed Daoud to gain an entryway. I think of these works as part homage and part critique, and I come from the perspective of somebody who sees books as being connected to other books and books talking to other books.

CB: In terms of Morrison's notion of audience, you also made these decisions to "multiculturalize" the narrators. You have a South Asian journalist, Siddhu, you maintain the doctor's name, Bernard Rieux, but you have him as an East Asian from Hong Kong, as well, so there's that kind of decision, and also having more female characters involved—Meghan Tso, and Janice Grossman—as main protagonists. But in terms of those decisions, your multiculturalization and gendering of characters, I wonder how that gesture of yours helps us to think about the racism that has accompanied the pandemic, and not only in Vancouver. In your novel there's that sort of overt politics when you stage concurrent anti-immigration and anti-racist riots. Whereas your novel stages a racist event, in Vancouver we had the spectacle, in March and April, during the early first lockdown, of racist slogans appearing on the plywood that

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covered storefronts on Robson Street, a main downtown shopping street. (Of course we also had the xenophobe Trump with his notion of the "Kung Flu.") Locally, on those plywood storefronts, there were all kinds of slogans blaming Premier Xi and the Chinese Communist Party, and of course anti-Asian racism in Vancouver is as old as the city, whether we want to think about its colonial roots or, as you note in your novel, the 1907 Anti-Asian Riots. So I wonder how the racialized question plays out here, in that you're doing the utopian thing à la Morrison, where you're saying I can write a novel that I think is not just for readers who look like me.

KC: First off, it's funny that you mention Donald Trump. I think he was, in some ways, the inspiration for this book because the idea for it came from the spirit of defeat that surrounded people I knew after the US election four years ago. I wanted to think about how people persisted in the face of just hopelessness. My wife was moving books around the house, and there was a copy of the original lying there—the Camus *Plague*—and I just flipped through it. I was thinking about trying to rewrite it, and I obviously wanted to write something from my positionality and my background to make it my own. It's interesting to try to fact-check the book in light of an actual quarantine and an infectious disease. I drive down Main Street, and I'll see people lining up for the liquor store, and I think to myself that I got that right in my book. People in tough times want to really drink! I was too naive or optimistic to think that in a city that is very, very Asian that those kinds of hate crimes would not be as prevalent because there's this strength in numbers, this familiarity with all these Asian faces there. I was disappointed that this wasn't the case. There are some nods to racism in a kind of more oblique way, but there wasn't an actual hate crime in my book. I also speak to some of the privilege the characters have. The bubble that I have as a university professor and the people that I hang out with, and where I am in town, allows me to escape most overt racism. It's interesting to be a writer of colour who tries to write about other characters of colour. I'm reminded of something that Zadie Smith said when she was writing *White Teeth*. I think she had South Asian characters, and she was worried that she would get them wrong. But it provides you with a bit of cover when you are writing about other people who are non-white. You might not get all the details right, but if you're writing as a white person about a non-white culture, you're more liable to incur criticism or maybe get it wrong in a different way. I think about Siddhu: the details of his point of view aren't as specific as the details of the East Asian characters because that's not my lived experience. So I'm banking on the fact I was writing about somebody who, like me, came from a non-white background who was in some ways very "Canadianized." But as for those issues of representation, I ran up to the edges of that. I have all these middle-class characters that have media jobs. There is this doctor, which was a stretch for me. But I wondered, could I really write about drug addiction, could I write about Indigenous characters? I felt that I got to the edge. I couldn't write

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beyond what I wrote in this book. I wish in some ways that I could've but that was the terrain that I could cover.

CB: Or consider what you do with the opera company. There is an opera company that gets trapped in Oran in Camus' novel; then in your novel, you have it as a Cantonese opera. This scene with Rieux and his mother attending the opera becomes much more about the acculturated son. The mother has a stronger attachment to these cultural signifiers than he does, suggesting a kind of depth, a kind of ethnographic thickness that you can bring to it, perhaps as a first generation Chinese Canadian. Although you describe yourself as first *and* fourth generation?

KC: My great-grandfather is buried in Mountain View cemetery; he immigrated at the turn of the twentieth century and he ran a hotel. Another great-grandfather, who was a teacher, died in Toronto in the 1980s. But I was born in Hong Kong because, I think, they both raised their families in China. I have a grandfather I never met who died when my mother was a child and who was the Chinese version of a remittance man. His dad sent him money from Canada and my grandfather was kind of a drunk from what I'm told, and I think he was hit by a bus a few years after the Second World War ended. So, both of my great-grandfathers raised their families in China because of the head tax. As a result, I moved here as a child; I was an immigrant, but I've also got family who were here at the turn of the twentieth century. So the first and fourth generation is my way of describing my very long connection to this city while not being born in it.

CB: That's a great illustration of the complexity of lived lives, Kevin, and how things aren't as simple as people may guess, and how you can't tell by just talking with somebody what their history is in this place. I want to turn back to the pandemic aspects of your book. Camus' novel in some ways is *not* about the pandemic; he wrote it as an allegory for the Nazi occupation of France, for how people could get used to things, what kind of heroism could happen, and what kind of human decency could happen. You presumably did not write this novel thinking about the type of fact-checking you mentioned earlier—"Okay, if there is a novel I want to see which things I got right"—but rather to show how a pandemic brings to light already existing human inequality around class, around ethnicity, and place: the inequalities beneath our overly health-conscious, neoliberal Lululemon lifestyle. What has the pandemic as a historical event, what has it made you think about those inequalities? Or to backtrack, what was your purpose in writing about a pandemic in Vancouver?

KC: Another running theme in my writing is how when you push away a problem, and deny that it exists, it resurfaces. You deny that something exists mentally then it resurfaces physically. I've had that issue with certain kinds of trauma in my life. In this book, I wanted to talk about what would happen with our denial of what's happening with people dying on the streets because of the opioid crisis, because of rampant homelessness. If you keep denying that it

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ever happened, it weakens our society. It's like an illness: you can have some sort of lingering chronic health condition and ignore it, but at some point, it will just kill you. It will paralyze you. The bubonic plague is something that exists to this day but on a small scale. I used it as a metaphor to talk about what would happen if we kept denying that there is an opioid crisis, that there is a homelessness crisis. If you deny a problem, it resurfaces tenfold. I guess in my book, one of the "Easter eggs," one of the in-jokes that I have, is that I have this imagined neighbourhood in the city that I call "the Annex," and it's kind of like a joke for Vancouverites because it's very much a name I gave to the Downtown Eastside. I had this whole speculative backstory that all of the homeless people—all of the addicts—died because the city just let it go totally to seed, and only then did they clean up the Downtown Eastside. They built this sort of yuppy playground, a second Olympic Village, over it. That is something you wouldn't get if you didn't know Vancouver to some extent. You couldn't really write about a metaphoric plague if it didn't in some ways deal with the one that is actually existing in this city. So I had to connect the two. I had to take the opioid crisis and move it offstage to have this fictionalized symbolic crisis, but I had to link them. That was a solution that I engineered while writing this book.

CB: Yeah, we're under two public health crises: the opioid crisis, which has killed over 1,500 people from overdoses since April 2019, I believe, and the COVID-19 crisis. The SparkNotes version of what you're saying is the return of the repressed. I think you show very much in your novel how that functions.

Racial Narratives on Repeat: Reflections on Collaborative Research on Asian International Students in COVID Times

John Paul Catungal and Ethel Tungohan

Introduction

On May 5, 2021, we came together via Zoom to reflect on our ongoing research on Asian international students' experiences and understandings of the COVID-19 crisis. We share our reflections in the form of a dialogue. We narrate how our motivations and plans for the project emerged and shifted in the course of research. We also highlight how various narratives—in the media, by government and universities, and from our research participants—play a central role in shaping the contours of anti-Asian racism in COVID times, especially as lived, felt, and negotiated by Asian international students. Part of what we do in our dialogue is to think historically about racial narratives of Asianness in this current moment and to situate them in the longer arc of Asians' conditional belonging in Canada.

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We do so in response to the discourse of Canadian innocence and exceptionalism that sometimes frames anti-Asian racism in Canada as a recent and aberrant phenomenon perpetrated by individuals. In addition, given our project's focus on racialized students, we reflect on the university itself as a racialized space and institution. Among other things, we note that universities are racially contested sites where Asian subjects are rendered simultaneously desirable and threatening. We note that the intensification of university internationalization strategies, as well as the history of Canadian universities as sites of anti-Asian racism, constitute important contexts for our participants' experiences of anti-Asianness during COVID.[1]

As anti-racist feminist scholars trained respectively in the fields of geography and political science, we came to this research with long-standing interests in migrant and racialized subjects, the institutions and discourses that shape their lives, and the agentive tactics of community organizing and counter-narration that they employ to negotiate their presence, place, and politics in Canada and transnationally. Our current research is an instantiation and extension of our shared commitment to theorizing structures, discourses, and practices of racialization in Canada, focusing particularly on its intersectional manifestations. We employ mixed methods of data collection, combining focus group interviews with Asian international students at UBC and York University, our home institutions, and the compilation and analysis of a corpus of texts comprised of relevant media coverage, governmental policy documents, and institutional (university) statements about COVID-19.

As researchers of Filipinx Canadian descent, we come to our research with our own lived experiences of racialization both as first-generation settler immigrants to Canada and as scholars of colour in the neoliberal university. While the transcript of our dialogue below does not necessarily foreground how our positionalities inform our research, we note here that we and our families are embedded in histories, regimes, structures, and discourses of anti-Asianness that shape what it means to be racialized as Asian during COVID times. Our interest in the racial politics of Asianness is thus not only conceptual but also deeply personal. We hope that the "I" and the "we" in the dialogue below get us at least a little bit closer to the lived and embodied quality of researching anti-Asianness in COVID times, not only as scholars but also as Asian Canadians.

On Origin Stories

JP: I want to begin by recognizing that this is a really exciting and important opportunity for the two of us to come together to engage in a dialogue about our collaborative project on Asian international students in COVID times. We are a year into this project, and we are just over a year into the pandemic. This conversation can be a way to check in on some of the lessons that we have been able to learn from our project and particularly from the stories of our participants. Maybe we can begin by thinking together about the origin story

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of this project. How did we come to enter into this collaboration and why this specific kind of formulation of the project?

ETHEL: It has been more than a year since COVID became an ever-present reality in our lives. I remember approaching you in February 2020. I was thinking at the time that COVID would be similar to SARS and that COVID would lead to a rise in anti-Asian racism. At that point, COVID was being portrayed by the news media as something that happened in China. I remember messaging you and asking you if we should look into this issue and begin a project where we examine how Asian international students are faring, especially with the backlash against COVID as an "Asian disease." It was research unfolding in real time. We soon realized that COVID was worse than SARS, and that it was having a lot of material effects on everyone's lives. And so, we pitched this project in April 2020 with a plan to conduct focus group interviews with Asian international students at York and UBC, and to investigate how they are faring during this political moment. We got SSHRC Explore funding for the project. As we were doing this research, events were unfolding that required us to figure out ways to adapt our research. These included major policy developments such as border restrictions and stay-at-home orders, as well as shifts in everyday practices including mask wearing. This is how I remember this project starting out. I am curious to see if it resonates with what you are thinking.

JP: One way that I've been thinking about the origin story of our project is that we began with a concern with how the origin story of COVID-19 itself was being framed. I see our project as a response to what the media, government, and public discourses around COVID-19 were saying, at the beginning of the pandemic, about the origin and transnational circulation of COVID-19. Part of the impetus for this project was a concern about the public narration of the pandemic as coming from China and from Wuhan in particular. We became interested in the lived effects of the circulation of that narrative. We eventually decided to broaden our focus to Asian international students, but we began with Chinese international students specifically. With the public narrative of China as the origin of the virus, we suspected specific impacts on international students of Chinese descent. However, we were soon challenged by the fact that the ensuing racism was larger in scope. So, we needed to make methodological adjustments for our project. While we began with Chinese and Hong Kong international students, we eventually ended up expanding it to Asian international students.

ETHEL: As our research proceeded, we started being challenged by the people whom we were trying to recruit. We had folks ask, "I'm a Chinese international student from New Zealand. Do I qualify?" We had to amend our project to be more flexible in terms of which narratives to include. While we were attuned to the politics of categories like "Asian" in our research, we also made use of and thus enforced existing categories. Methodologically, we realized we had to open up who could participate in our research and recognize the biases in our forms

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of categorization as well. It's funny that we thought at first that this project should focus on Chinese international students when racists can't tell Asians apart anyway.

JP: My recollection is that our initial decision to restrict who our participants were was, in part, to make the project a little bit more manageable, to give us a sense of what's doable and also because we had a particular kind of funding for this project that only allowed us to do so much. For me, that was partly why it was important to start small and then to expand.

Asian International Students, Bordering Practices, and the Limits of Ethnonationalism

JP: What is it specifically about international students from Asia as opposed to Asians more broadly, including Asian Canadians, that we wanted to focus on?

ETHEL: I remember that we were talking about, well, why not focus on Asian Canadians? I think our thought process at that point was, international students do not have the same support networks as residents of Canada have, that they are especially vulnerable because they are usually living by themselves, within institutions that don't necessarily cater to their well-being, away from more familiar spaces and systems of support. Along with focus groups, another part of this project concerns the institutional narratives created by our respective employers (York and UBC) about COVID but also specifically about international students from Asia.

There's the question of immigration policy as well. As borders were closing, some of our participants were wondering whether they should just go back home because they weren't sure whether borders would reopen. We became attentive to the specific pressures faced by international students as a result.

JP: Another narrative that informs our focus on international students is the different relationship that they have to Canada. Asian Canadians, for example, could and do strategically deploy ethnonationalist frames to make claims to belonging in Canada in ways that are not available to international students (Coloma 581). Asian Canadians might be able to say, "We are Canadian too," however precarious that claim to citizenship might be. International students do not have that kind of toehold to cling to as a strategic narrative to deploy in the face of anti-Asian racism. There is something then to the borderings of Canada as a polity and of Canadian citizenship that shapes the specificity of Asian international students' experiences. These bordering practices shape international students' sense of place in everyday life.

ETHEL: Some of our original questions involved how international students negotiated space and understood themselves as belonging in certain communities and neighbourhoods. The theme of borders kept coming up over and over. Some of our research participants talked about enforcing their

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own internal bordering practices. The issue is not just border policies as set by nation states but also internal bordering practices that students create for themselves to ensure their own safety in navigating different parts of Toronto or Vancouver. The spectre of anti-Asian racism affects the way they navigate the city as well.

JP: Our participants talked about the mind maps that they use to navigate the city. They identify as part of their mind maps spaces of relative safety, including, for example, stores in Chinatown where there might be strength in numbers. Examples like this testify to the impact of racialized discourses and forces on Asian international students and their everyday lives. They also highlight these students' capacity to deploy their own tactics in order to be able to live in and survive and negotiate the racial dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their daily lives.

International Student Narratives as Critiques of Institutional Diversity Narratives and the Model Minority Myth

JP: Let's chat more about the possibilities enabled by our methods. We have done focus groups with Asian international students, along with media and institutional discourse analysis. These kinds of qualitative methods open up space for our research participants to surface narratives about COVID that are not necessarily present or visible if we only stick to more formalized narratives that come from the university, the media, or the Canadian nation-state. For me, part of what is powerful about the project is its capacity to solicit a different side to the story than what is publicly available.

ETHEL: Why don't we talk a little bit about these different narratives? One thing I noticed is that there were differences in university responses to COVID-19, and that there were silences regarding the specific pressures Asian international students were facing. In general, York and UBC did not really publicly address issues of belonging. Instead, they were fixated on managing this moment through, for example, lots of emails concerning online learning, remote learning. For international students, some of the messages concerned whether you could still live in residence. I think what was interesting is that, with cases of anti-Asian violence, international students weren't just concerned about remote learning or border closures or about being able to live in residence. They were also afraid of the risks involved in navigating the city. These fears were not really addressed in institutional narratives, which focused more on technical fixes and how we get on with the normal functioning of the university.

JP: One way that this was made visible, this kind of silence around racial violence, was the constant reiteration by institutions of commitments to diversity. I'm thinking here with Sara Ahmed (2012) on diversity initiatives in universities

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as "non-performatives" (17): this constant talking up of one's commitment doesn't actually produce change on the ground. To a certain degree, the kind of publicized narratives about universities being committed to diversity rang hollow in the face of everything that was happening, and they didn't translate into the kinds of support practices that would have been useful to Asian international students. Cynically, part of me was thinking that the constant invocation of a commitment to diversity was directly related to the university's neoliberal commitments to internationalization as a revenue-generation tactic.[2] In this sense, one way to understand this constant reiteration is to read it alongside the neoliberal desire to ensure that current and future international students do not jump ship.

ETHEL: Despite proliferating incidents of anti-Asian harassment in Vancouver and Toronto and, more recently, the targeted violence directed at Asian-operated massage parlours in Atlanta, my institution did not write a statement naming and responding to these issues, at least not immediately. It took prodding from me and other faculty of Asian descent to get the university to respond. Is there something specific to Asianness that shapes institutional responses to these kinds of violence?

JP: One way that I understand this is through the notion of comparative racialization, which gets us back to narratives about Asian international students. I think part of what we are seeing is a certain kind of narration about Asians as a model minority, as always already being privileged, which translates to "they can fend for themselves and they don't need any support. They can manage and do quite a lot with what few resources they have available." There is a long history of instructive writing around model minoritization as a tactic of white supremacy. This narrative of Asian international students and Asians more broadly as model minorities is plugged into a tactic of divide and conquer. This idea of Asians as closer in proximity to whiteness and to automatic class privilege gets weaponized against other racialized groups including and especially Black folks. It is thus a profoundly anti-Black narrative.

This simplified narrative of Asian privilege is also present in other realms of social life and politics in the Canadian context. We see it in public discourses on the housing affordability crisis in Toronto and Vancouver, for example, with Asians being blamed, often through their equation with "foreign buyers." This is a relatively new iteration of an older construction of Asianness as threat to Canadian ways of life (Kojima et al.). That's how I'm making sense of those kinds of institutional silences about the specificity of Asian racialization in the current context. It calls up that history for me.

ETHEL: Absolutely, the model minority myth is something that has affected Asians in Canada, including Asian international students. The most dominant media representation of international students as singularly and always already privileged, which sometimes get reiterated in institutional responses to racism, taps into and reproduces model minority discourse. Basically,

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this representation goes as follows: all international students are rich; they come here with a lot of money; they can afford exorbitant international student tuition fees; they don't really need much support; they can cope and manage. These seem to be the predominant frameworks. What COVID has brought to the fore for me is how, once again, Asians and Asian international students are only conditionally included. On the one hand, you've got all of these university initiatives trying to recruit Asian international students into our universities because they bring in the money, yet there's also resentment when Asian international students do come to our institutions for being too numerous. Hence, the *Maclean's* article noting that our universities are becoming "too Asian."[3] What's interesting to me is to consider this history alongside the narratives that the international students in our study have shared. So one question is, how do the students that we interviewed contradict these hegemonic narratives? How do we make sense of how these hegemonic narratives exist alongside these counter-narratives? Well, a lot of them debunk this myth that they don't need support. In fact, a lot of them were trying to get more support from an institution that doesn't seem receptive to their concerns. There was a lot of anxiety expressed in our interviews. Many of the students also said that they were not rich, that they and their parents have had to make tremendous financial sacrifices for them to study at York or UBC.

History Repeats Itself: Temporal and Discursive Circulations of Anti-Asian Narratives, and the Political Work of Counter-Narratives

JP: I think it is really worth reiterating that what we are seeing relatively frequently in the media these days, but also in our participants' narratives, is a continuation of a long history of Yellow Peril discourses that treat Asia writ large as a threat to the vitality of Canadian society. The idea that Asian international students are taking over, making things unaffordable and displacing people by their presence, has direct parallels to narratives in the late 1800s and 1900s about Chinese workers taking over jobs from white workers (Kojima et al. 72). As racialized categories, the Asian international student and the Asian foreign investor are tightly linked, conceptually and politically. These are not new discourses either. They are genealogically linked to the *Maclean's* "Too Asian" article from 2010, as well as to the 1979 CTV *W5* "Campus Giveaway" episode; both narrate Canadian universities as being overrun by Asians to the point of inaccessibility, by which they mean to white students (Ho). White entitlement to universities and to Canada more broadly thus comes to be taken for granted. What Helen Ngo refers to as "white ontological expansiveness" (121) is thus foundational to the making of universities as anti-Asian and more broadly racialized spaces.

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ETHEL: I also wanted to touch on this notion of Asian international students taking up too much space. It seems to me that this notion gets applied not just to postsecondary education but also to other issues, such as overheated housing markets. The idea of Asians simultaneously being interlopers and also being desired keeps coming up.

How history is repeating itself is clearly evident in some of the accounts shared with us by the international students, but a lot of the stigma that they express is different. One thing that folks have mentioned is the rise of social media, that there are Reddit forums and other such spaces where the idea of Asian international students as sources of contagion has been circulating. The widespread circulation of this idea on social media has also amplified a lot of their anxiety. At the same time, social media has also allowed them to feel more connected to families back home.

JP: What is insidious about these narratives and why it is important to pay attention to their circulation is that they have embodied, felt consequences, as our research participants remind us. Our participants courageously name how these narratives have shaped their lives and what they have had to do to negotiate what it means to be an Asian international student during the COVID crisis. The circulation of these narratives is important to attend to because these narratives do things in the world. At the same time, our participants' counter-narratives chip away at the truth status of these circulating narratives.

ETHEL: Absolutely. And I think what's fascinating about some of these counter-narratives is that they add nuance to dominant public discourses about Asian international students, which tend to reproduce stereotypical portrayals, such as those found in the book and the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. Our participants note, "We're really not crazy. We're not rich." I also think what's interesting is hearing from students about how they are starting to rethink their understanding of Canada and its mythical status as a benevolent nation-state because the COVID moment, along with their experiences of microaggressions and, in some cases, physical aggression, have contributed to them reconsidering their idea of Canada.

JP: Our participants' experiences surface the limitations of the idea of Canada as a multicultural, welcoming nation-state. During the COVID-19 crisis, I've seen narratives that claim that anti-Asian racism is out of place in Canada, that rising incidents of violence against Asians do not accurately reflect Canada's identity. As a type of comparative or negative nationalism, this claim relies on the narrative of Canada as innocent, as unlike the US. But as Kojima et al. point out, anti-Asian racism has a long history in Canada (71-73). The presence and persistence of violence against Asians—spectacular violence but also institutional kinds of violence (including violence against Asian international students)—that we are seeing during COVID is actually part of a much longer history of anti-Asianness in Canada.

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ETHEL: What this moment has also revealed to our research participants is how the Canadian state is very extractive when it comes to the labour of Asian international students. In the past, there were restrictions for international students in terms of only being allowed to work at most twenty hours per week, but because of the care crisis during COVID, this restriction was lifted, and different industries, such as care homes, have recruited international students because of labour shortages. Some of the people we interviewed have noticed how extractive the nation-state is: it extracts their money for tuition, and it extracts their labour in order to meet labour shortages. This is another way that Asian international students question the narrative of benevolent, multicultural Canada.

NOTES

1 In their respective works, Kim (2016), Ho (2015), and Coloma (2013) cogently point out how the figure of the "Asian student" is rendered foreign through media discourses that assume and reproduce whiteness as default in Canadian universities. We build on their insights on anti-Asian racism in the *Maclean's* "Too Asian" article by highlighting its continuation during COVID and its specific impacts on Asian international students at UBC and York University.

2 Kim and Sondhi (2019) identify revenue generation as one of the top reasons that universities use to explain internationalization strategies, along with purported commitments to global citizenship and intercultural understanding.

3 Gilmour et al.'s anthology *"Too Asian?": Race, Privilege and Post-Secondary Education* offers an important set of analyses of the publication of the 2010 *Maclean's* article, originally titled "Too Asian" (Findlay and Köhler). Various contributors to the anthology point to the assumed whiteness of Canada and its institutions as a prerequisite for the discursive production of Asians as racially out of place in Canadian universities.

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The Quest for Interpretive Agency: Zoomxiety in the Realm of Literature

Sadie Barker

In a 2013 special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* on "Cultural Techniques," Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp critiqued what they deemed the "textualist bias of traditional cultural theory" (20). The metaphor of text emerging after the linguistic turn, they asserted, had transformed "the world of culture into a world of discursive signs and referents" (21). And yet, they posited, was it not odd "that the historical semantics of 'culture'" refer back to its material tactility and tangible making and doing—its "prosaic origins" lying *not* in the symbolic but in "agrarian methods and operations" and "hand-based crafts" (21). Culture, they deduced, was and is "first and foremost the [ordinary] work with things . . . that surround us on a daily basis," and as these working things "recede further . . . into the background" of the cultural imagination, the study of culture "'forgets' its genesis" (21).

Krämer and Bredekamp's assertions, and their invocation of "the literary"—its touting of semiotic modes, particularly—provoke our contemporary circumstances. If symbolic affinities threaten to occlude culture's everyday "working of things" then the stakes of such occlusion resound today, as the material conditions of front-line and public service work under COVID-19 tell us, in amplified ways, about the structural precarity of the present. And yet, the material stakes of the literary are, too, seemingly amplified. Poetry readings, book clubs, and English Literature and Cultural Studies seminars have become explicitly contingent on Wi-Fi signals and virtual interfaces; on how close one sits to the camera, the speaker, or the router; on log-in passwords and system settings. The hegemony of Zoom thus emphasizes not only how the power of safety is distributed across cultural production and occupation (as Naomi Klein has asserted, Zoom and other big tech are sold as the "only possible way to pandemic-proof our lives"), but how literary culture, circulated largely through Zoom, contends with its place within what Lauren Berlant deems our "crisis ordinariness": the "traumas of the social that . . . transform the sensorium to a heightened perceptiveness about the unfolding of the historical, and sometimes historic, moment" ("Thinking" 5). Amidst the COVID crisis, Zoom has emphasized

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the positioning of literary culture and yielded introspection about its value(s). As Zoë Brigley suggests, the Zoom poetry reading, connecting viewers with each other across the world—building community, delivering the arts in a time of isolation—has also rendered other literary values notably absent, and hence, apparent. In an online meeting room of "cropped heads and shoulders in their tiny boxes" and "pixelated simulacra," the notion of intimacy feels impossible to cultivate: "How much intimacy can there be with the face talking back to us, blurry as ectoplasm, and sticking from time to time in looped internet glitches?"

If Krämer and Bredekamp's emphasis on everyday material operations invokes Raymond Williams' 1958 assertion that "culture is ordinary," Brigley's analysis emphasizes the particular stakes of virtual "ordinariness" when it feels at odds with a sense of literary cultural value. Indeed, it's difficult to know how Williams—an anti-bourgeois Marxist advocate of ordinariness, but also a literary scholar and novelist, elucidating ordinary cultural production through the pastoral rhythms of his hometown, newspaper presses, and the din of a tea stop—would feel about today's "pixilated simulacra." As George Snedeker has argued, "Williams' humanism is the untheorized articulation of cultural production" in his work (104). Brigley's expression of what has been called "Zoomxiety"—the ever-popular neologism for the interface's anxiety-inducing affects—thus provokes questions about Literature that are uniquely of today, and uniquely situated to think about (as Williams advocated) how literary culture relates to Culture itself. If literary culture is premised on ambient feelings of intimacy, absent in today's necessarily virtual modes of cultural exchange, then what do we make of the feelings of anxiety and alienation so entangled with today's current techno-material conditions and connective affordances? What might they tell us about our state of ordinariness, about the nature of work, cultural production and literary cultural production, but also about the ways in which "ordinariness" is itself a polyvalent ideal, cast through disciplinary prisms of ideological investment? That is, what does Zoom tell us about Literature, and what might Literature tell us of Zoom?

Despite Krämer and Bredekamp's assertions about the limits of semiotic analysis, it is worth noting that such methods seem nonetheless well suited to the moment. Susan Blum's assertion that "videoconferencing is *nearly* a replication of face-to-face interaction but not quite" (emphasis original) suggests that Zoom is both an interface and a symbol, reminding us of what once was and that to which we hope to soon return—a simulacra, invoking and threatening to colonize the real. And yet, such interpretive modes must contend with the material work of things on which they are premised. The rise of Zoom stocks by 370% in the past two years amidst an economic crisis reminds us of the ways in which today's virtual ordinariness—modes of looking, seeing, engaging, and speaking—are commodified under late surveillance capitalism. Perhaps more than questions of materiality and the symbolic is then the question of methodological utility: What does the symbolic register offer to our understandings of Zoom, as an emblem of the present's networked machinery? And how does investment in its "working things" expand and benefit literature's investments in subtext?

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These inquiries point to the newfound *work of literature*. In an op-ed for the *New Yorker*, professor Rick Moody opined the virtual transition as one profoundly at odds with the literary arts. Literature, he argued, exceeds "dispensing information": it is "about a human in the room feeling something, expressing it, and the other humans listening . . . bearing witness, grappling with the complexities of another." As a "humanist form," literature is different from economics or astrophysics in that it "can't be converted into data points" and, therefore, is starkly incompatible with the seemingly depersonalized ethos of online learning. Zoom, Moody writes of his own teaching experiences, thus engendered anxiety about the interface, but particularly about the modes of exchange it facilitated, giving rise to "anxiety about the [literary] product itself" that "was . . . [being sold] to the students, a product that was hard to believe would not be inferior." If Brigley's Zoomxiety mourned the loss of intimacy, emphasizing the networked yet alienating virtual poetry reading, Moody's sentiments betray anxiety about the question of value itself—literary value, stripped of its dialogic intimacies and atmospheric potentials, becoming commodified content, produced and circulated by the neoliberal university and consumed within a bleak humanities job market.

Moody's Zoomxiety—anxiety about literature's virtual non-translatability—is both of and beyond this moment. John Greig's 1930 assertion that "[w]e *need* literature" (emphasis original) during the Great Depression, which posited its "enlargement of our experience" as a necessity amidst the realities of economic disenfranchisement, suggested too that Literature's plane of value is irreducible to quantifiable worth (420). Richard Poirier's 1982 assertions took a less instructive approach, observing the vexed relations between Literature and Technology as expletive of differing systems of value within the cultural evolution of the West. With radio and television, Poirier noted, "Technology has brought to thousands of people the delights of high culture they would not otherwise have had . . . threaten[ing] the condition of relative inaccessibility on which the vitality of high culture, and especially of Literature, depends" (65). Technology and Literature occupied different spheres of the cultural imaginary and kept its constitution lively. Before technology "struck back" with its 1980s dexterity and allure, it was literature's "whipping boy"—a symbolization of a posthuman (or then, perhaps, anti-human) efficiency, at odds with the discipline's humanist ideals (66). "[F]rom some of its earliest and now classic instances," Poirier writes, literature "seems *always* to have been nostalgic for something that has been lost"—an expressive tendency betraying anxiety about the exponential technologization of the future (66, emphasis original). Here, Poirier draws on Spenser's 1589 *The Fairie Queene*, focusing on Sir Guyon's encounter at the Cave of Mammon, the treasure house of the god of wealth. The Cave, a technology of sorts in that it is a "perversion of nature in the interests of financial and industrial progress," "filled with currency that reproduces its own value without in the process contributing to the growth of anything other than money," sees Sir Guyon "so appalled" (or perhaps, Poirier notes, so tempted) he flees to knight errantry in pursuit of a life of quixotic heroism (66).

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Poirier's examination of Literature and Technology was written prior to iPhones and videoconferencing, when the option of rendering Technology an abstract monolith was perhaps more viable. As Jonathan Sterne has emphasized, technology is not a thing unto itself to be studied as an entity but upholds the very conditions of our habitus. Sterne's assertions indicate how frameworks relying on literary and technological binarism threaten to occlude their entanglement (for example the technological production of literary material culture to literature itself as a technology of cultural dissemination). And yet, despite this significant caveat, Poirier's analysis is helpful in not only situating Moody's expression of Zoomxiety in relation to literature's affective economies and genealogies but in emphasizing the particular relations between technology and value that it seems to anxiously apprehend. More than reservations about technology itself, Guyon's encounter suggests anxiety about an ethos: the cave's unimaginative reproductions of value—a kind of limitless ATM—threatening, in its lucrative obviousness, the value less explicit. As Antony Easthope has surmised, while the question of "literary value" across the Western tradition yields emphasis on mimetic, expressive, and formalist forms, all three notably render value in terms of "not presence but an effect of presence": a matter of "functional polysemy . . . of the reader/text relation" (386). Perhaps more notable than Guyon's outward repel, then, is Poirier's sense that he waivers—that his repel is not repel so much as a principled act of errant investment when faced with overt untethered profit. Guyon's retreat to the halcyon world of knight errantry thus suggests a literary technique of distinguishing between systems of value that cannot be reducibly distinguished; an investment in art and morality, whose value is affirmed and whose value we trust because of Guyon's principled choice.

And yet, to read Guyon's retreat as simply allegorical to art's transcendental or polysemous value tells us little about Zoomxiety other than its sedimentations of sentiment. In a more generative reading, Guyon's repel might be a very early account of what Sianne Ngai deems "ugly feelings": the suspended agencies, "affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity in literature" (1). More than what ugly feelings are, Ngai's interest is in what they do. Surveying texts bearing a shared sense of felt ugliness—from Bartleby's depressive reluctance in Melville's *Wall Street*, to Scottie's disorientations in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*—Ngai posits the presence of ugly feelings as allegorical deposits of "autonomous or bourgeois art's increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its *own* relationship to political action" (3, emphasis original). At the core of ugly feelings, she asserts, is thus "a very old predicament—the question of relevance—that has often haunted the discipline of literary and cultural criticism," a predicament whose "urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in an increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society" (3).

Ngai's pre-COVID assertions are undeniably anticipatory and yet retrospectively useful. Guyon's repel is likely more complex. As Brent Dawson argues, the economies of the Cave, and Mammon's assertion that its wealth can "kings create," hinted at the

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beginnings of mercantilist ideology—capitalism's nascent form—and thus to the transitions from capital as a question of "ethics to a natural system that can be studied empirically" (178). Under mercantilism wealth was no longer a reflection of the world, but of its very source of production—"Wealth becomes a science, a mechanics of accumulation, exchange, and power" (178). The Cave thus arguably provokes in Guyon (a literary agent very *much* of the project of "reflecting the world") not distaste so much as full-blown existential crisis.

Ngai's corpus similarly points us to the discomfited sense of being produced by the world. Bartleby's and Scottie's anxious feelings, and the anxious tone in Melville's and Hitchcock's work more generally, are suggestive of contingent, cultural configurations: "anxiety, distraction, and cynicism," Ngai notes, are "perversely integrated, from the factory to the office"—capitalism's "classic affects of disaffectation . . . are neatly reabsorbed by the wage system and reconfigured into professional ideals" (4). If Hitchcock's *Vertigo* performs anxiety as an "anticipatory structure" linked to the subject's "quest for interpretive agency" in a disorienting world, it is because of Scottie's anxious and acrophobic encounters with the film's own aesthetics: the many thrown projections of people, doubles, and great heights (215). But it is too because of the material conditions of the film's very production—conditions it anxiously cannot seem to transcend. As Ngai suggests, in *Vertigo*'s imagery of heights, falling, and doubles, it is as if "the film were deliberately evoking cinema's dependency on images projected onto a screen" (221). Indeed, *Vertigo's* affective-aesthetic sense *of* vertigo relied on the new affordances of the dolly zoom, and on Hitchcock being the first to utilize them. "Ugly feelings," Ngai suggests, tell us about art's own sense of limits, but in that, they "expand the project of criticism and theory" (8).

In distinguishing art's values of autonomy and negotiations of contingency under late capitalism, Ngai gestures towards an impasse pertinent to Zoomxiety in the realm of literature. Like Bartleby, sapped by Wall Street, or Guyon, at the precipice of mercantilism, Zoom presents a threshold where agency is suspended and called to question; where notions of art's autonomy come in conflict with the contingency of art, and subjectivity, itself. If techniques of managing Zoom's chat, hand raise, or self-view functions in poetry readings or book clubs offer means of negotiating Zoomxiety in newly virtualized spaces, such techniques only affirm Zoom's bearing on behavioural modes of articulating, interpreting, performing, and discussing. Indeed, if, for Ngai literary manifestations of anxiety work to articulate art's broader grappling with contingent agency, then the sense of anxiety incurred by the institutionalization of Zoom and other platforms' proctoring affordances surely amplifies such concerns within the realm of individual behaviour. Zoom has become a feature of the everyday, signalling the "links between human and non-human agencies" bearing the "material practices that sustain and enable 'culture'" (Parikka 147, 150). As Maha Abdelrahman argues, as Zoomxiety and "Zoom fatigue" threaten productivity, the rise of apps such as Spatial, which allow users to adopt an avatar to decrease cognitive load, do not relieve burnout but managerially produce new techniques of optimized production. The notion of the "indefatigable worker" has

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haunted labour optimization efforts since the early twentieth century. Capitalism, Abdelrahman reminds us, "does not like to let a good crisis go to waste" (10).

Zoomxiety thus might tell about the reflexively anxious experience of being produced as a subject, and particularly of being produced as subject in a world bent on optimization. And yet, simultaneously, Zoomxiety returns us to the agential body—its reflexive, adaptive, and reactive impulses—and in that, the fleeting acts of interpretation that link feeling to the world's broad configurations. If, as Berlant suggests, the endlessly labour-inducing promise of "the good life" perpetually masks the precarity and fragility of the present, then Zoomxiety offers an encounter with what the collapsing of public and private, work and leisure, and the encroachments of surveillance feel like, granting opportunity to be "reflexive about a contemporary historicity as one lives it" (*Cruel Optimism* 5). As Jussi Parikka argues, "[b]esides analysis of capitalism," tending to material techniques yields the errant and wilding possibilities of everyday embodiment; the "histories of counter-techniques" that have always persisted might too come to the fore (157). Indeed, Zoom has both inscribed and engendered. As UCLA instructor Jacquelyn Ardam tweeted in March: "I started off one of my classes by asking students to share in the chat what they'd do if they had an extra hour in their lives & then I cancelled the rest of class & told them to go do that thing" (@jaxwendy). Online responses were varied: some commenters found inspiration in Ardam's reimagining of Zoom's expectations, some criticized Ardam's shirking of professorial labour, and many were interested in what the students said. Many students, Ardam relayed, wanted to sit out in the sun.

Around the same time this March in Montreal's Mile End, Welch's bookstore entered what was described as a David-and-Goliath faceoff with one of the city's most prominent real-estate agents, Shiller-Lavy Realties (Kelly). Faced with a rent increase of $3,000 come August, the outcome looked bleak for the independent bookstore in a gentrifying neighbourhood. In an interview with the *Montreal Gazette*, owner Stephen Welch recounted his plea: "'The argument I've made to them is that my business attracts people to the street. . . . So there's an intangible thing that my business does . . . [it creates an] ambience.'" Of the product itself, he noted, "'I'm offering an alternative. . . . A book is an art object. It's a physical tangible memory of history and a good read potentially.'" Danny Lavy, of Shiller-Lavy Realties, rebutted to the *Gazette* that "there's a limit to how much of a break they can give": "'The guy's selling antique books,' said Lavy. 'You have to ask yourself: Does anybody buy books today?'" (Kelly). The statement, of course, went viral, resulting in public pressure to which Lavy eventually conceded. Regardless, on March 13 people staged a "read-in," lining the streets holding books—many talking to their friends, staring into space, or texting, but holding books nonetheless. If Welch's bookstore, an emblem of a lost art, still endures, it is because hundreds took to Twitter. Where the symbolic begins and ends is here ambiguous, and yet its bearing on public assembly and economic shift is clear.

The Welch's read-in, arguably a prime example of "literary culture," testifies as well to the politics of slower, personalized, and principled leisure. About more than reading, the moment was the staging of sitting on St-Viateur on a sunny day, the

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techniques of milling and talking that produce the ambience of the street—ambience that Welch knew, more than the books themselves (which could be good, could be bad), to be his contribution. The next day, no doubt, pictures were posted by those who had stood in solidarity with the antique bookstore's "memory of history." Many, surely, wished they had gone.

Figure 1 and 2. Reporters and read-in participants gather outside Welch's bookstore (Montreal) on March 13, 2021.

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Figure 3. A screen-printing shop in the neighbourhood sells Welch's bookstore shirts in solidarity.

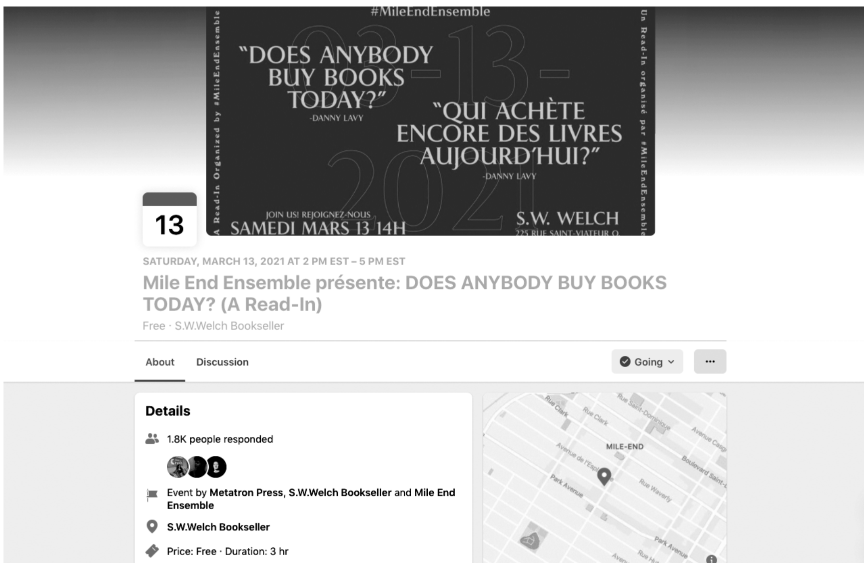

Figure 4. The event page on Facebook for the Welch's "read-in," "Does Anybody Buy Books Today? (A Read-In)".

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Sharon Engbrecht

Verse Forward: A *Canadian Literature* Poetry Reading Series

Verse Forward is *Canadian Literature*'s new poetry reading series, imagined and curated by our poetry editor, Phinder Dulai. Launched on November 25, 2020, the series brings together Canadian poets from communities across our vast landscape to discuss their experience as authors and share their work with an international audience.

Our first iteration of Verse Forward: Poetry on the Front Lines welcomed Fred Wah, Kevin Spenst, Isabella Wang, and Jillian Christmas. Original poems from this event were featured in Issue 242, *Emerging Scholars, Redux*. For our second Verse Forward event, held on May 25, 2021, we invited Larissa Lai, Liz Howard, and Canisia Lubrin, all award-winning poets, to discuss their process. You can read their poems in this issue. Each brought a unique perspective and energy to their readings as they answered questions from emcee Phinder Dulai and the audience.

The event was created, in part, as a response to the global pandemic. As COVID-19 shut down in-person venues and cultural hubs, Verse Forward became *Canadian Literature*'s way of sustaining communities and offering a reprieve from the isolation and unease brought on by the disruptions of our regular lives. As our event details read,

> [f]or more than six decades, the value of creative voices and publishing original poetry have been central to the journal's critical discourse and deep commitment to Canadian writing. In the context of a global pandemic in which our various publics are at once physically distanced and virtually linked, the separation of our familiar literary

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communities prompts alternative connectivities and new ways of speaking creatively and critically together. What part can poetry play in articulating the complexities of our conditions in a world that appears to be transforming both too much and not enough? The Verse Forward reading series seeks to sustain literary community by amplifying Canadian poetry's ongoing vitality on the front lines as we interrogate and imagine anew the conditions and locations we inhabit.

This poetry reading series is part of an ongoing *CanLit Poets* project that seeks to publish original Canadian poetry. In 2007, Matthew S. Gruman envisioned putting together a book-length collection of poetry that had only appeared within *Canadian Literature*'s pages. The project was meant to use our diverse poetry archive and connection to authors to show high school students a different side of writing and reading poetry, one that included poets' motivations, writing techniques, and histories. The result was a short chapbook, *CanLit Poetry*, which included snippets of poems from between 1977 and 2007. Later, when we launched the *CanLit Guides* in September of 2012, *CanLit Poets* became part of our "open access and flexible learning resource that helps students critically engage with Canadian literature while encouraging and promoting independent study" ("About *CanLit Guides*"). In 2015, under the editorial guidance of Margery Fee, *Canadian Literature* produced another short poetry collection containing a "brief sample collection of poems, with questions answered by the poets about their writing process and experiences with poetry" (Fee). Since then, *Canadian Literature* has regularly featured author Q&As on our website to complement the poems published in the print journal.

Although *Canadian Literature*'s promotion of Canadian poetry reaches back to its first issue, it was not until 1975 that we began to feature poetry as a permanent part of the journal's content. Early issues of *Canadian Literature* included reviews, articles, and editorials on poetry. However, Malcolm Lowry's poetry was the first to appear in the journal (in our Spring 1961 issue, dedicated to Lowry's work). In fits and starts, from poets such as A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, and Rina Lasnier, poems were featured in issues throughout the 1960s. Some of Canada's most well-known poets, including Al Purdy, Dorothy Livesay, and P. K. Page, have published original work in *Canadian Literature*. As technology broadens our access to resources and materials, the Verse Forward poetry reading series has taken these conversations from the page and placed them in a live-event format, where poets have the opportunity

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to answer questions organically and to build on each other's critical and insightful reflections.

In the second iteration of Verse Forward, Liz Howard evoked Dionne Brand's wisdom about the multiplicity of meaning, in that "writing is a kind of negotiation between what is written and what is withheld, and . . . what is withheld multiplies" (Brand).[1] Meaning is generated in manifold ways, in each time we read a poem, hear it, and even write about it. The meaning can change, too, as authors reflect on their process and inspiration for the poem, which makes poetry readings especially rich sites for context and implication—for what is withheld. The pitch, rise, and fall of the voice, or even the underlying emotion in an author's reading of a poem, can shift how the images and ideas contained within words collide within an audience's imagination. When Jillian Christmas reached for her classical guitar, "Marshmallow," to complement a poem from her poetry collection *The Gospel of Breaking*, the melody in a minor key emphasized and conveyed the unsettling urgency of her spoken words. Each poet's reading, through their voice, expression, or content, expressed an aspect of the collective experiences and the complexities of our current conditions.

Our inaugural Verse Forward poetry event began with Kevin Spenst reading from "The Geology of a Moment," a title that captures the evening's conversation. A sense of relationality and social justice bridged both events as the poets picked up on the themes of race, access, privilege, and community formation. On the one hand, the virtual fails to capture the experience of bodies present in and moving through a physical space, as an author holds a book or sways back and forth during a reading or where we hear the quite murmur of the crowd responding. On the other hand, we can see gestures emphasizing a poem's imagery, hear the emotional tones in a poet's voice, and witness up close a poet's facial expressions (a raised eyebrow or the twitch of their lips during a pause): layers of withheld meaning captured within words as utterances.

While online events tend to mute our physical experiences of social events—meeting friends, feeling an electric excitement in the air, or even our Canadian seasons—they have given us the opportunity to hear from authors from across Canada and to invite visitors from around the world to join us in the virtual realm, what Jillian Christmas jokingly referred to as the "digital

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airwaves." Communing on Zoom gives us a sense of "geographic collapse" and the chance to experience a different kind of transnational proximity.

Verse Forward is also a response to the disconnection generated by a global pandemic, an event that both disrupted the status quo and demonstrated the need for improved forms of social connection. While we may miss in-person gatherings, digital platforms, from Facebook to Twitter to Zoom, have allowed individuals and communities from diverse backgrounds to access events that would otherwise be financially prohibitive or difficult to attend in person due to geographic or time restrictions. It has also given voices from marginalized or underrepresented communities the opportunity to be heard in multiple ways, as social media platforms expand how we consume, and are exposed to, news stories and current events. What disability advocates have long been petitioning for has now become a cultural norm, where we have the opportunity to envision "alternative connectivities and new ways of speaking creatively and critically together." As we look towards the future, as provincial governments move to lift restrictions, we wonder if we should hold on to online events given that they enable us to bring poets into conversation from across Canada, in a more accessible and affordable way.

When asked about the role of the poet in social justice work, and specifically how words might create change and influence audiences, Fred Wah spoke about language as a tool for change. Language is able to make realities "a-new" because it is "organic and rife and active and contradictory." The affective dimensions of language are also important as we feel reassured by the spoken and written word: "It feels comfortable to be *in* language," Fred Wah told his fellow poets and audience (present visually as a list of names and comments in the Zoom chat).

The power of the poet, then, resides in the language they have access to and how it is used. Echoing Kevin Spenst's poem's title and the sediment of experiences over time collected in an abstract geology of digital space, Jillian Christmas noted how poetry is a way to mark moments, as a way of "marking history so we do have a measure" of both where we have been and where we hope to go. "We have some voice from the people," Jillian Christmas commented, "to speak to what the conditions are, what they could be, imagining beyond, and also reflecting on what injustice has happened and is

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happening." Her words recall the ways in which the pandemic has brought to the forefront the injustice experienced by marginalized groups, as Black Lives Matter protests and calls for Indigenous sovereignties have become an important element of the fight for justice during the pandemic. Systemic inequality has been exacerbated by the loss of privilege in wider, already privileged communities. With the online shift, many people who have never experienced accessibility concerns suddenly feel at a loss because they are unable to interact socially and physically in ways they may be used to: no in-person conferences, limited business hours, curfews and lockdowns, restricted travel, and even limited employment opportunities. Yet, many of these restrictions mimic and indicate the prohibitive ways in which society's infrastructures are not designed to accommodate restricted mobility, the visually impaired, those with aural limitations, individuals who find large gatherings or appearing in public intimidating because of mental health concerns, or racial prejudice, or fear of religious discrimination, and even compromised immune systems. Recognizing, recording, and then disseminating work that confronts systemic injustice is part of what Jillian Christmas sees as "the engine that moves us forward as a society." We cannot be complacent.

In response, Isabella Wang discussed what she calls "critical poetry," creative work that examines and critiques, as a non-violent form of resistance. She took up the question of what role poets play in social justice work by speaking to the process of creation, and of finding the right words to articulate our ideas. Acknowledging that "perfect ideas are the worst," because they are harder to place and overshadow other elements in her work, she elaborated how instead she looks for ideas that trouble her as they allow her to respond. The other poets in the session agreed with the challenge Isabella Wang finds in "perfect ideas" and also with poetry's potential to critique and unsettle. Kevin Spenst considered poetry as a tool for reflection; it allows us to pause and think. It gives us space to consider different perspectives and to challenge ingrained narratives. Responding to how poetry uses language to capture and create memory, Fred Wah pondered "the whole notion of how to look, when you don't know what to look for." Jillian Christmas described how it is the poems that feel a little troubling or difficult, or with which we have a longer journey, that may end up being the

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most emotional or profound. Those troubling passages have the potential to create sites of identification and spaces where we have the opportunity, as Jillian Christmas stated, to "learn a little bit more."

During Verse Forward 2, the conversation focused on community and the significance of poetry as a potential mechanism for social change. Responding to a question about how multiplicity is built into every word and line of her poetry, Larissa Lai stressed the importance of polyvocality as the organic, rife, active, contradictory, and ambivalent nature of language, central to how it offers us a tool for change. The potential of poetry lies in the "possibilities for multiple meanings," she argued, "and the more meanings falling out of the hat at the same time, the more entertained I am, or disturbed. . . . It's very generative." Later, Canisia Lubrin addressed an implicit "we" in the work being done by marginalized and underrepresented communities that are fighting for social justice and rights. Her words recalled Larissa Lai's point that poetry is capable of capturing multiple realities, experiences, and meanings, and bridging gaps between cultural and social understandings of long-entrenched ideas. These are some of the ways that poetry permits readers to learn and grow intellectually.

During the conversation, Canisia Lubrin's comments addressed the awkwardness that resides in the moments when we experiment with language—where the "velocity of meaning" in language "makes its deepest wells of sense or un-sense" and when we have to "find different ways to contort through the difficulty of having to inhabit the 'I.'" Responding to the multiplicity of the "I" in *The Dyzgraphxst*, she admitted, "it's never just a single voice. Even when . . . what can be seen or construed as a single voice arrives, it does so through a collective." Such moments question the limitations of definitions of identity: how do we inhabit our inherited identities while we attempt to discover the uniqueness of what makes us ourselves? During the conversation, she expressed a desire to challenge the ways in which we are conditioned to accept certain identities without any criticality. Building on this, Larissa Lai asserted that, in writing, there is an "opaque space of the self as a site where kinships get built." The pronouns in poetry represent a collective embedded into the grammar of the sentence, where the "I" and "we" of the poet merges with the "I" and "we" of the speaker, the narrator, and the readers with their imagined and real "I" and

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"we" communities. Canisia Lubrin's "we" seemed to be a skeptical "we," a "we" wary of tokenization and the burden of labour often embedded in social justice work. The "we" often ends up being the individuals who have personally felt, and live with, the discrimination and disadvantages produced by systemic inequality. In slight contrast, Larissa Lai's "we" evoked the potential "opaque space of the self" as a place where the "we" fighting for equality and equity can meet and form new bonds of strength and resistance, a place where the self is malleable and defies stereotypes. Both authors' perspectives united around the contention that there is opportunity in this uncomfortable, sometimes un-sensical, place of identity to create change. As Canisia Lubrin noted, it is an endless process of revision. And this work of revision is crucial to the social justice work discussed during the second Verse Forward event.

In the work of becoming and being an ally, then, it is important to consider what it means to be a part of a community and to seek out alternative connectivities. When we do, we inevitably must address questions of inclusivity and accessibility. Whereas our earlier group of poets spoke on the ways in which language offers the possibility to make "a-new" and to creatively invite change, Larissa Lai cautioned against naive optimism since "the structure of [Canada] still remains profoundly colonial." Although she is referring to settler colonialism more broadly, her comment brings to mind the discovery of unmarked graves at Indian Residential School sites across Canada and the at times apathetic settler and colonialist responses to these atrocities, which only demonstrate how the fight for justice for Indigenous peoples must continue. The work of the poet is to give voice to these histories, acknowledge the profound work that needs to be done, and embody previously prohibited space. When asked about the attempts of the publishing industry to be inclusive, Larissa Lai hesitated: "I'm not sure that we're in a place where we are actually excluded. I think the difficulty in the present moment is not so much exclusion as perhaps a measure of fetishization. We have places, but I worry that these are tokenized places." While there are certainly earnest editors and publishers out there, she sees the industry as "invested in specific kinds of stories and language and racialized people and not others."

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Her comment returns us to the first Verse Forward reading and to Jillian Christmas' thoughts about how poetry can have an impact on the world. Liz Howard also articulated a belief in poetry's ability to imagine beyond, when she asked, "What is it that we can do or need to do? It's the main conversation . . . that needs to be changed." We are in what she calls a "see-change" moment, where "former marginalized writers are coming into the fore" at the same time as there is a new audience that is interested in listening to, and learning about, these diverse perspectives.

In addition to writing poetry and holding conversations about it, the poets noted the need for structural changes to systems of publishing and book culture. This also requires structural changes to how books are picked up and taught. Recognizing the importance of a postsecondary classroom taking up an author's work, Liz Howard acknowledged how having her work taught and become part of the literary conversation has changed her experience as an author. In part, changing how authors are published and recognized is also about review culture, as Larissa Lai noted. It is about how books are read by editors and passed into the world. It is also about finding reviewers that understand the significance of diverse and complicated voices represented in non-traditional texts—texts that often challenge the authority and inherent coloniality of English as a language of oppression. Even as English, as a language, remains malleable and polysemic, it also hosts a history of inequality. Shifting the tone slightly, Canisia Lubrin carefully navigated the "we" in the call for change. Her response seemed to question the burden of responsibility that has fallen to this collective "we" evoked in social justice work—the "we" being performed by the poets at this reading, all from perceived, culturally diverse backgrounds: "speaking about the specific context, about what the main discourse *is*: there's an implied 'we' in that, when we say, 'how can *we* change those prevailing systems that keep marginalized voices out.'" She evokes different communities of "we" here, of canonical authors and publishers that are easily recognized and disseminated as the "main discourse," and the "we" of the voices that come to us from "outside," from the margins, in often unexpected and unconventional ways. The "we" here implicates different communities of both solidarity and exclusion, where the force of systemic change seems to be moving at a glacial pace, especially when the gatekeepers appear to represent a small, elite, privileged portion of our society.

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Even though barriers exist and are very real for many authors, these authors too find potential in the power of poetry to create change, to produce the "see-change" moment of now. We are "positioned in," as Canisia Lubrin noted, "this radical arena where anything is possible." Even as the gap between potential and "having resources" means that it is still a struggle for many individuals to have their story heard, the authors seemed to agree that promise remains in the multiplicity of meaning contained within poetry as a vehicle for creative change. Evoking the image of an "ever-shifting labyrinth," Liz Howard championed the intellectual pleasure of poetry that challenges us to consider new perspectives. If language and poetry are an ever-shifting labyrinth, she argued, "you are always arriving somewhere, but how you get there is always different."

In our technological age, how we arrive at alternative connectivities and the platforms available for speaking creatively and critically have shifted. While the pandemic is, at once, a site of social and cultural trauma, it has also allowed us to consider different ways of navigating the "somewhere" at which we are always arriving. Poetry is a large part of our literary heritage, whether we are Canadian or not. And in response to what the future holds, we can only hope we will continue to look for the multiplicity of meaning in every moment and event that has the potential to tear us apart but also bring us together in new and unexpected ways.

NOTES

1 Authorial quotations are from both the Verse Forward and the Verse Forward 2 poetry readings. Some have been edited and condensed for clarity. Both poetry readings can be viewed at canlit.ca/resources/events/verse-forward-poetry-on-the-front-lines/.

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Larissa Lai

Dear Eat

Dear Eat, dear gather, dear hoard, I'm gored by the world as it is, all the space it makes for waste. She stashes, I stash, spill cash to hold off the crash. What are you saving all this stuff for? Do you think another world is coming? I'm summing, filling forms with data so the man can track me, hack me, crack me like any old egg instead. I made my bed. I dread lead in water, the pig to slaughter, the daughter I might have had in the toast of the social, if my spatial relations had rolled another way. That's so gay, said my student when. The classroom's just the half of it, a whole state sits in the six feet between my desk and the first row. Crows gather for their evening flight to the power station at the city's other end. I mend with slip stitch and flower knot, a bit of thread to hold it all together for now. How do we get there from here? Right wing Buddhist asks Shirley's Maliseet greet to accept that the white man won. When all the boys try the doors of those who fear, we wall and stall to push back against the winners. I'm stunned, blunder my buss, fuss in my truss, because I don't know what to say. To call them by their bodies into the room as it is makes a whole other clay. I don't have the broom to sweep this much dust. I crust, I bust, tongue lolls another call of the wild. What child? Only dice to roll another play.

Bird on telephone
  Cable cries to stall
Thought   caw   caw   caw

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Canisia Lubrin

All We Still Carry

for Austin Clarke

by evening we arrive with your alphabets
a hurricane through these neatly pressed
and arranged things
here is a voice, a handkerchief
splitting the road, a government house

here and there you call the dark ones
who mask their storms with hours of work
away from the yard into old airmail envelopes
send and meet them with leathered hands
and what will carry us beyond the sea
ceaseless with what is left to song

left, too, like lances were left, to endlessly break
the silence
of dirt, courtyards and parliaments and places we left,
though we seldom knew the point of leaving, with all,
all the lost habits of remembering our worldlong dead ahead of us

I walk into midnight parting the rootless streets
and corners and rooms filled
with the hard people in those sentences
you sent, still in the brilliant costumes
of your visions,
I appear by the morning

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a break, some brimming antiphonies
I would be tempted to say this is
sidelong to history but

you are here and we, too, such irrefutable evidence
now cover our chests with rubber
and repeat, repeat the speeches that haul us into
a peasant's story with a touch of luxury, or *more*,
how outside can go inside as the weeds go
with wildness more than anything else wherever they must
and all the electric things stay loving us

sometimes to curse, sometimes to carry
the sea and sun porous behind you
all of the swollen passages unfurl,
as I haul them into midafternoon, one by one,
to speak as though you had delivered me here in the flesh,

in a year like this the thick-thick anguish and sprung-sprung things
adding up . . . like the red in your tie, soft
and throwing doors open again and again,
the loud, bloody bell of your pen
scraping miles through the streets,
as though all that can be said has been said

because all of your letters mark the sand
and the spirits and papers, and the hand measuring years
and words cleave hard line to soft brow
—these exact lingos of the new

disturbing all of the disorders with a music
this, like your portrait here, surprises no one

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how these motions make their own weather,
and light up your face on this wall in ink as large and frenzied
as a mother's sound, as what speaking does to the thing that hears it

is it fitting to make a noise for you that will ring
something bright and something jagged and there
is always *more* where flightless birds walk into a cloud
as inland sea to rupturing shoal

and if I look upon you, still with questions
it is for a haunting not sainthood
so, I ask you

is my scrutiny a predictable stone
thrown in the old waterways?
Do my own eyes drown me
in an elemental love out here?
Must I want anything of the beaten shrines that know to hold
our dreaming heads wherever you've gone?

Forgive the questions. Someone is here with a notebook.
Someone says let's begin.
Someone follows whoever is waiting at the door. Could be you. Or is it true
you still hold the city wide open to our 'memberings?

What more can I, a poet of problems, say?
Whatever real thing is here
I hold to my dim pulse
at your likeness up on this wall,
you, left to the wisdoms of paint
you with no knowledge of me; or that I would come
decades into your future wresting something of you
away from a diminishing gumshoe

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all the simple things run out of metal here and realign,
where a dirt road is no weapon,
no abstract name for belonging;
here is agony but also dancing
taxing our shoes down to a hot powder

where I put a stone on every book you ever wrote,
their heaps something of the world's heavy anchor,
the way they convince me to find a coast
and let a wind lift all that we still carry

with the argument of your absence,

I toss the luck that brings me here.

So, Austin: what you doing here in this ole town,
wearing this ole suit, and this ole shoe, singing this ole tune,
welding this old alphabet, in this place full of storm
threatening hurricane, in this ole house,
in this state of finest paint,
in this hurricane:

there's a gravelly way you'd say some of us are still alive
when others of us die
and now is when to celebrate all we still carry

That is not death

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Liz Howard

JEANETTE BRAIDS HER HAIR INTO MINE

The sky is a grey lilac of starling advisors

Crowchild, crowchild
A brain-tanned hide

I said no, the river's silt it all pyrite
And just for show

The gilt edge of the shield
Or what it takes to remember her face

Jeannette, the shore jumped over my life
I left early but arrived late

In the days of the fur trade

All this honest work is what it's worth
To hold your tongue and bide your time

Here with these words that are your chambermaids
The river overshot its original banks

A photo of you in braids holding a blade of sweet grass
Between praying hands
No more than seven
Barefoot in soiled linen
Behind you a stand of birch

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And behind the birch a lake
And behind the lake a waterway
Reaching towards the mouth
Of James Bay.

In my dream,
Grandmother
We are sitting on the same rock
And you braid your hair into mine

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Contributors

Articles

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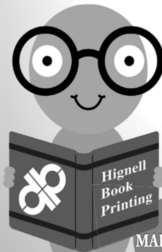

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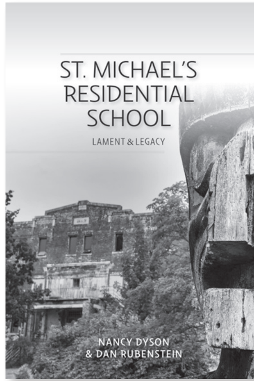

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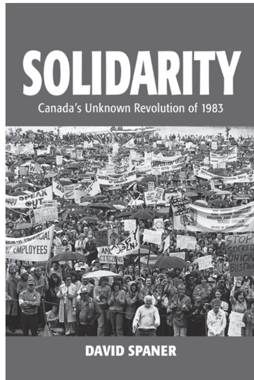

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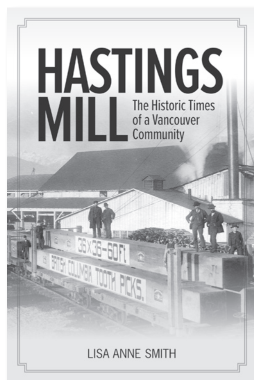

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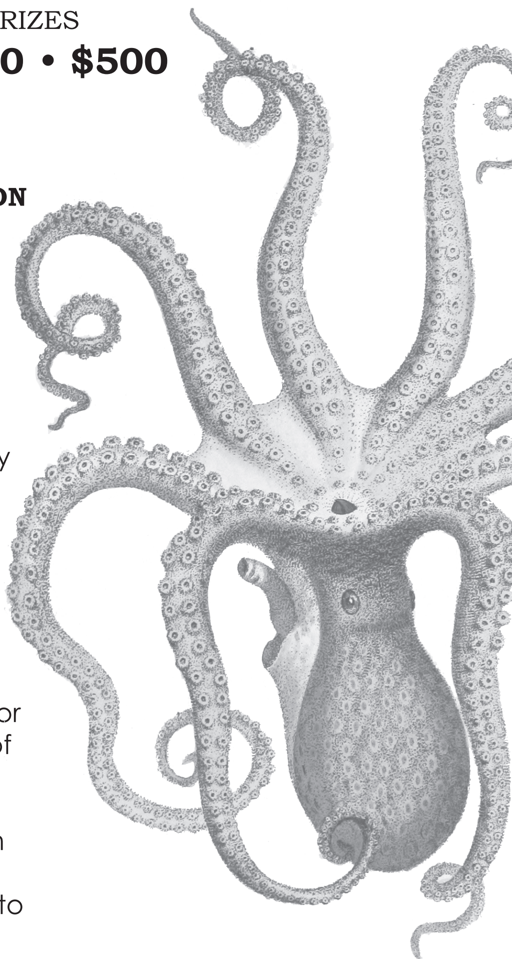

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