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cl.manager@ubc.ca
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Editorial

Imagining Endemic Times

Christine Kim

How might we begin imagining a utopia from our present moment of overwhelming challenges? The first essay in this issue of *Canadian Literature*, Pamela Bedore's "The Aesthetics of Utopian Imaginings in Louise Penny's *A Trick of the Light*," opens with this provocative question. In addition to the pandemic, Bedore lists climate change and deep inequality as concerns that have preoccupied the first decades of the twenty-first century. How then can we conceive of a future that is utopic for all, given that we are living in times that seem to hold "a contempt for joy that makes utopia seem not only impossible but perhaps also undesirable" (Bedore 1)? Imagining a utopia, one that is collectively desired, is a project that seems out of sync with the prevailing pandemic atmosphere of isolation, uncertainty, and division. Indeed, as many people have commented in casual conversation, these are times that feel like they have come out of the pages of dystopian or even speculative fiction. Not only do such fleeting insights respond to the bleakness of the past few years, but they also draw attention to the seemingly shifting relations between fact and fiction as our realities become more surreal and our memories fuzzier. In a panel discussion about the pandemic hosted by *Spoken Web* on December 10, 2020, Kevin Chong made a related observation when he noted the pandemic felt like it was fact-checking his novel. Published in 2018, Chong's *The Plague* imagines Vancouver in terms that eerily anticipate the COVID-19 pandemic and, as Clint Burnham writes, the novel almost feels like "too perfect a fit" (129).

Utopias, dystopias, fictionalized plagues, real pandemics—read together, they prompt us to examine the terms in which we write, imagine, and understand our world and its alternatives.

Central to this project of reflecting upon how we write in and about the contemporary moment are questions about genre and style. I want to draw attention to the formal dimensions of how the everyday is represented in order to examine the intertwining of our roles as literary and cultural critics and, moreover, to grasp how the ability to close read literature can be used to navigate the everyday. In emphasizing the movement between literary and cultural realms, I follow the work of literary critics who have argued that formal dimensions such as genre, by shaping "knowledge production and ethics," work to "organize *and* direct—our actions and our understanding of the world" (Huang 2-3). Part of the work of imagining ourselves as part of the idealized or unlivable worlds of utopias or dystopias is to narrate our perceptions of the present or imaginings of the future along the lines of utopic or dystopian generic conventions. At the same time, as Betsy Huang reminds us in her study of genre and Asian American literature, we need not adhere rigidly to generic conventions:

> Writing Asian American identities according to or against generic constructs is a self-reflexive and self-conscious performative act that engenders, through repetition, the possibilities of variation and transformation. To trouble the waters of a body of literature or an established critical ideology, then, is to problematize the knowledge it produces *and* stabilizes through its conventions about the world and the people it portrays. (7, emphasis original)

Experimenting with cultural representations and generic conventions can lead to new forms of knowledge and social and political expectations regarding what constitutes an ideal world as well as how we must respond to unlivable ones. In this way, the genres of utopia and dystopia can blur into that of speculative fiction. Christopher Patterson argues, "In its critiques of 'the real,' speculative fiction focuses not so much on 'what it was' but 'how it remains so,' and the feelings and procedures that emanate from one's positionality in relation to the whole" (179). To bring genres such as utopia, dystopia, and speculative fiction together, then, is to undertake a project of interrogating past and present violences or, in other words, not just "'what happened' historically but 'how it continues to happen'" (Patterson 179).

To return to Pamela Bedore's essay, "The Aesthetics of Utopian Imaginings in Louise Penny's *A Trick of the Light*" uses Louise Penny's Inspector Armand Gamache series to draw our attention to matters of genre, and more specifically how Penny's novels bring together the genres of utopian and detective fiction even though typically the former works to imagine a better future and the latter to understand a past wrong (3). Bedore argues that by setting murder cases within the utopian village of Three Pines, these novels creatively direct our attention towards the potential of utopian literature to create social change. She builds on the work of scholars who understand utopian literature to be a transgressive genre that critiques the present as it imagines more radical alternatives.

Erin Goheen Glanville's contribution to this issue also centres on genre fiction. In "Discomforted Readers and the Cultural Politics of Genre in Lawrence Hill's *The Illegal*," Glanville performs a reading of Lawrence Hill's *The Illegal* to examine the limits of Canada's humanitarianism. Noting the different receptions of refugees from Syria, Southeast Asia, and East Africa since the 1960s, Glanville argues for the importance of examining how the refugee figure is imagined within Canada. The article observes that while the topic of Hill's novel has permitted it to be taken up as part of conversations about humanitarianism, readers have been "discomforted" (3) when it comes to *The Illegal*'s formal dimensions—namely, how it brings together the genres of political thriller, speculative fiction, and satire—despite the fact that these genres reach large numbers of readers and offer an opportunity for "public pedagogy" (Glanville 3). Glanville reflects on Hill's novel and suggests, "It may be that *The Illegal* produces resistance because its genre throws into question the terms of humanitarian reading practices that make refugee suffering a socially acceptable literary commodity" (5).

Neo-liberalism lurks behind many of the literary and cultural critiques of our present moment, and the writers discussed in this issue remind us in different ways, across different genres, that language and literature are necessary to reimagining and reinventing human relations. As I write this editorial at the beginning of 2022, one form that hope takes at this moment is that the pandemic could become endemic, moving us from a condition of crisis to one of chronic existence. Rather than imagining an end to COVID-19 as we did in 2020, we are beginning to hope for a way of living

with the virus. While terms like "endemic" and "chronic" are new additions to the vocabulary of dominant, or perhaps more accurately able-bodied, Canada, they are familiar to critical disability studies scholars. The question of what these turns mean for dominant understandings of livability and normalcy are taken up by Eric Cazdyn when he pinpoints the relation "between bearability and the status quo" (5). Writing in pre-pandemic times, he observes that as a society, we are now in what he calls

> a new chronic mode, a mode of time that cares little for terminality or acuteness, but more for an undying present that remains forever sick, without the danger of sudden death. The maintenance of the status quo becomes, if not quite our ultimate goal, what we will settle for, and even fight for. If the system cannot be reformed (the cancer eradicated, the ocean cleaned, the corruption expunged), then the new chronic mode insists on maintaining the system and perpetually managing its constitutive crises, rather than confronting even a hint of the terminal, the system's (the body's, the planet's, capitalism's) own death. (5)

The management of crises is, of course, not a new phenomenon and here Cazdyn echoes feminist and BIPOC scholars who have made similar critiques of state and capitalist power. He puts forward an important critique of the chronic mode as a new cultural logic when he observes that it "effectively colonizes the future by naturalizing and eternalizing the brutal logic of the present . . . To remove the possibility of death and settle for the new chronic is to choose the known limits of the present over the unknown freedom of the future" (6).

Other critics have put forth different understandings of what it might mean to live with chronic illness and how it offers new insights into temporalities. Emilia Nielsen, for instance, turns to the poetry of chronic illness in order to explore the condition of living with uncertainty (given that illness can always reoccur), but also "to explore feminist, queer, and crip experience in giving voice to the intensity of living with mind, body, and/or bodymind unpredictability" (51). By reading disability in political-relational terms, Neilson contests the falsely binaristic positioning of disability "in relation to notions of normalcy, able-bodiedness, and able-mindedness" (62) and demands that we note the relations that produce disability as a problem. In advocating that the status quo be transformed, Neilson calls to mind the words written by Audre Lorde as she struggled with breast cancer. Writing in her journal about the pain of her cancer and her frustrations with medical

staff who berated her for not wearing a prosthetic breast post-mastectomy, Lorde sought to reclaim her body from cancer and cultural norms. While living in various states of illness, she used her words and energy to challenge the status quo:

> I have found that battling despair does not mean closing my eyes to the enormity of the tasks of effecting change, nor ignoring the strength and the barbarity of the forces aligned against us. It means teaching, surviving and fighting with the most important resource I have, myself, and taking joy in that battle. It means, for me, recognizing the enemy outside and the enemy within, and knowing that my work is part of a continuum of women's work, of reclaiming this earth and our power, and knowing that this work did not begin with my birth nor will it end with my death. And it means knowing that within this continuum, my life and my love and my work has particular power and meaning relative to others. (Lorde 10)

In their refusal to let it "remain so," the work of these feminist thinkers and critical disabilities scholars acts as sources of inspiration as we critique the status quo and rethink what everyday utopias might look like.

Evangeline Holtz-Schramek's essay also critiques the confluence of "what it was" and "how it remains so" through a reading of Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars* that examines Indigenous and Black peoples in terms of a "shared nexus of grief" (3). Identifying Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit" as an intertext for *From the Poplars,* Holtz-Schramek argues for a reading of Nicholson's poem as a "political ballad [that] signals new and radical futures for Black and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island" (5). "'Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees': Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars*" also notes that *From the Poplars* appropriates legal documents and colonial records in order to write a poetic critique of property and settler colonialism. The essay draws attention to the state injustices inflicted upon Indigenous and Black peoples, as well as to the erasure of these injustices from public record, in order to remind us of the multiple forms of violence that took place on Poplar Island.

That poetry can counter the violence of erasure is a topic taken up in Toyah Webb's essay on Erín Moure's *The Unmemntioable*, a work of poetry that explores intergenerational traumas of the Holocaust. Webb reworks the concept of "blood memory" by noting that in *The Unmemntioable* it is ashes, specifically the ashes of the poet's mother, that connect the poet to her ancestral heritage. The essay interrogates the limits of representation by querying the absence of some subjects from dominant historical narratives

and also by questioning the ability of language to adequately represent trauma. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's *Cinders* for its notion of language as "both endless and un-burnable" (8), Webb notes that language is thus the ideal vehicle for cultural memory. And while this writing or "ash-memory" remains, Webb reminds us that the power of these words becomes precarious when the authors are gone and no one is left to verify these testimonies (9). The essay investigates the relations between poetry and cultural memory, and asks how the poet is able to testify:

> The effects of trauma upon language have already been evidenced within *The Unmemntioable*: after a traumatic event, the language that remains to testify is broken and the symbolic order ruptured. It is a paradox, yet the book exists. How then does Moure's book access this "remaining," burning language? Where does it sign its own ashes? (9)

The final essay in this issue is Carl Watts' analysis of Catriona Wright's poetry collection *Table Manners.* Focusing on the consumption of food and alcohol in these poems, "'a dungeon every night and every day': The Zany Neoliberal Subject, Alcohol, and Poetic Agency in Catriona Wright's *Table Manners*" examines how work and non-work fail to remain separate in the neoliberal subject. Watts uses Sianne Ngai's concept of zaniness to consider "the frenetic activity of the labouring neoliberal subject who is forced to adapt to ever-changing tasks and demands" within the context of Wright's poems (107). The essay also contributes to a critique of the status quo by arguing that *Table Manners* writes about how "the totality of work-life is overwhelmingly oppressive and yet also in a process of being normalized" (107).

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Elana Wolff

Vestigial

The billboard by the exit ramp read:
Ready Yourself to Meet Your Maker
Call Jim
I looked to that sign whenever we passed it,

never thinking to call. Jim is likely
with his Maker now. I was nine or ten;
Odette, six or seven. Our father
was driving the car and he's long gone.

We want the poem to circle home
like road trips into the city, like summer-
love, and sun. Here we are in quarantine
and just like that I'm casting back:

Odette and I in the Karmann Ghia,
knees against our parents' backs,
snug in the world—at least for a while.
We played 'I spy with my little eye':

I spy something on a sign, I dangled meanly
at Odette, after Dad had passed it, so
the answer could not be guessed. The game
soon lost its gloss. But being in the car felt futuristic.

Big buildings, fast traffic, people
facing forward—up-to-the-minute in the streets.
Odette and I in vectored memory.
Hard flat glare of sensing something coming—

Outsize buildings, outsize lies and men
projecting shadows of their own
implosion before them. Sisters window-
gazing from a blue vestigial seat.

Pamela Bedore

The Aesthetics of Utopian Imaginings in Louise Penny's *A Trick of the Light*

> "This murder is about contrasts," said Gamache, his voice low, soft. "About sober and drunk. About appearances and reality. About change for the better, or for the worse. The play of light and dark."
>
> —Louise Penny, *A Trick of the Light*

The cultural zeitgeist of twenty-first-century North America would seem a much richer breeding ground for detective fiction than for utopian literature. After all, how does one even imagine utopia in a cultural context shot through with cynicism, neoliberalism, postmodernism, and a deeply interconnected global community unable to agree on strategies for dealing with the major challenges of our time, which include such exigent threats as climate change, pandemic, and rampant inequities? Utopia is, by its very nature, an impossible genre. As encapsulated by the homonymic wordplay that Sir Thomas More gave his island, Utopia—*u-topos* (good or perfect place) and *eu-topos* (no place)—the genre is defined by its paradoxes. Ursula K. Le Guin's metafictional short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973), dramatizes the paradoxes of utopia, revealing several important points about the genre. First, the twentieth century, with its jaded worldview—a worldview no doubt equally relevant to the young twenty-first century—has a contempt for joy that makes utopia seem not only impossible but perhaps also undesirable. Second, one of our strengths, as humans, is our diversity—of talents, abilities, and even desires; therefore, one person's utopia is likely to be another person's dystopia. Third, human cognition and perception function largely through contrasts, which means that it would

be difficult to recognize let alone appreciate happiness or pleasure without sadness or pain. What Le Guin only hints at but that becomes clear when one compares utopia to its dark double, dystopia, is that a perfectly functioning society would eventually become boring, which would lead to another paradox: without suffering, guilt, and longing, there can be no meaningful art, and, for many of us, a society without art is, by its very nature, far from a perfect place. Given the difficulties of conceptualizing and sustaining a utopian vision, especially against the fraught socio-political backdrop of the early-twenty-first century, it is no surprise that utopian literature is hardly a dominant genre at the moment.

Detective fiction, on the other hand, is a thriving genre, as it might well be. By directly addressing the most abhorrent deviant behaviours in a society, detective fiction provides an exaggerated and yet familiar perspective on our contemporary world, one that contains none of the inherent contradictions that Le Guin and others identify in the genre of utopia. Certainly, the detective genre is not vulnerable to accusations of uncritically celebrating joy or of ignoring the cost of suffering. Indeed, detective fiction has long been understood as a genre that examines suffering and guilt in a complex way since, as W. H. Auden argues, "the crime of murder provides a special case of suffering, since society must stand in for the murder victim and either demand restitution or grant forgiveness" (149). Although it was long understood as a genre committed to restoring social order after the disruption of crime (Grella 47-48), such simplistic notions of justice and power are now regularly interrogated by scholars who locate the pleasures of the genre in a variety of spaces. Robert Rushing, for example, argues that "there is no hermeneutic component to the detective novel," suggesting that the reader's enjoyment is in the repeated misrecognition of clues (161). Charles Rzepka, on the other hand, argues that readers of detective fiction find pleasure in inventing a series of "imaginative, backward-looking arrays" of meaning alongside the detective (27). Whether the reader is actively or passively interacting with detective fiction's deep ethical and epistemological investments, the genre regularly engages with questions of aesthetics. Arthur Conan Doyle, for example, made art integral to the imagination of the detective through Sherlock Holmes' frequent forays into melancholy bouts of violin playing as well as visits to museums and theatres, which explicitly

helped him to work over a problem by coming at a mystery from a different perspective. More contemporary detectives whose investigative acumen is enhanced by their love of art include established characters like P. D. James' Adam Dalgliesh, as well as more recent creations like Ausma Zehanat Khan's Esa Khattak.

Utopia and detective fiction appear to have entirely different, almost opposing rhetorical projects, since utopia tries to imagine a better future while detective fiction tries to understand a past wrong. As Elena Gomel notes in her study of ontological detective narratives, these impulses are not necessarily incoherent; detective conventions such as clue-gathering, interrogations, red herrings, and reveal scenes can be found in both utopian and apocalyptic narratives. I would argue that the ethical and socio-political consonances between detective fiction and speculative fiction have laid the groundwork for a utopian detective series located in the imaginary village of Three Pines, Quebec, and conceived by former CBC broadcaster and now mystery writer Louise Penny. Penny's critically acclaimed Inspector Armand Gamache series is wildly popular in Canada, as well as in the much larger market of the United States. That popularity, I believe, is a result of Penny's use of detective fiction to present a wonderfully hopeful vision that both acknowledges and transcends the paradoxes of the utopian genre. Penny draws upon the conventions of two contrasting subgenres of detective fiction: the cozy, which provides comfort and is generally set in a small town and keeps violence offstage, and the police procedure, which emphasizes that crime occurs every day by foregrounding violence, usually in a metropolitan setting. By repeatedly bringing murder to her utopian village, Penny provides the contrast required by a very disparate group of citizens so they can recognize their happiness, and even their joy. Further, she creates a context in which art is not only possible but also necessary to her utopian community. By casting a wide net on aesthetics—representing traditional paintings and classical poetry alongside new media products like *YouTube* videos—Penny repeatedly explores the potential of art not only to perform a critique of contemporary society but also to imagine a better future, thus demonstrating that twenty-first-century detective fiction can capably house one of the most vibrant utopian projects of our time.

The Theoretical Underpinnings of Twenty-First-Century Utopia: The Art of Walking Away

The twenty-first-century utopian studies that help us understand Penny's project focus on the genre's potential to generate social change. Led by Fredric Jameson, utopian scholars of the late-twentieth century have turned away from the classic Marxist analysis of utopia as a force that may divert attention from real revolution, arguing instead that utopia provides an "imperative" to imagine "radical alternatives" (Jameson 416). In considering how utopian literature can lead to real-world change, Peter Fitting traces the move from traditional utopias that engage readers intellectually to more challenging and ambiguous utopias that invite readers to identify emotionally with the characters. These new utopias tend to resist narrative closure, thus attempting to "break out of the passivity and illusionism of the traditional reading experience in an effort to push the reader to work for change" (29). Lucy Sargisson speaks to this promise even more explicitly when she explores the transgressive potential of utopia as "profoundly pragmatic" (3), as well as critical, subversive, transgressive, and creative (12). Utopias, for Sargisson, "provoke us to think differently about the world. Hence, utopianism has a transformative function" (12). But how does utopia create transformations? For Tom Moylan, utopia as a concept offers possibilities for transcending postmodern cynicism. It does this by analyzing the past, critiquing the present, and providing hope for the future. Lyman Tower Sargent gives us the term "critical utopia" to emphasize the rhetorical purpose of constructing a fictional utopian community as a contrasting society whose true function is to reveal critiques of contemporary culture. Margaret Atwood goes even further in complicating the relationship between imagination and critique when she introduces the term "ustopia," arguing that utopia and dystopia cannot be fully separated given how deeply they support, define, and intertwine with each other.

The visions of these scholars, which inflect Penny's Three Pines novels, owe much of their insight to Ursula K. Le Guin. In fact, I believe that the most valuable philosophical take on utopia in our time is not a work of criticism but a work of fiction: Le Guin's groundbreaking short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Drawing upon the paradoxes and philosophical complexities of nearly five centuries of utopian writing since Thomas More's

genre-defining text, *Utopia* (1516), Le Guin addresses the impossibilities of utopia. Her second-person narrator acknowledges immediately that a perfect society will mean different things for different people, and thus invites readers to imagine their own details, going so far as to suggest that if Omelas seems too "goody-goody," then "please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate" (279). The key to a utopian city for Le Guin is contrast. The details of perfection are explicitly vague, but the price is perfectly clear, for in the basement of a beautiful public building in Omelas, there lives a hungry, lonely, frightened, naked child that makes possible whatever utopian vision one prefers. The chilling depiction of the child in the basement evokes the contrasts of utopia—the contrast between different utopian visions, between the joyous citizens and the suffering child, and between the lifelong citizens of Omelas (who choose happiness) and the eponymous ones who walk away (and who, presumably, accept guilt). What does it mean to walk away from Omelas? In reflecting upon those who walk away, the narrator says, "The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist" (284). The indescribable and uncertain existence of the destination speaks to the aesthetics of "Omelas." On the one hand, if the good people of Omelas have only two reactions to the child in the basement—acceptance or avoidance—powerful art is both unnecessary and impossible. On the other hand, the most interesting people in Omelas are the ones who walk away, and the narrator asserts that their story exceeds the possibilities of description, suggesting the need for an art that can transcend the limits of the plain language through which "Omelas" is told.

How does one conceptualize, compose, and communicate a genuine utopian vision that features true joy after Le Guin's devastating metafictional analysis of the genre? Louise Penny takes up this challenge by focusing on aesthetics—on the possibility but also the need for aesthetic communication—in her Inspector Armand Gamache detective series (2005-present). Drawing as much upon P. D. James' cultured Detective Dalgliesh as upon Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and her village of St. Mary Meade, Penny deliberately describes her charming, murder-plagued, and utterly impossible village of Three Pines as not appearing on any map despite its existence in the Townships of south central Quebec. Penny draws together the generic investments of utopia and of two

disparate subgenres of detective fiction—the cozy and the police procedural—to produce an unexpected but deeply successful blend that suits the terrain of twenty-first-century Canadian genre fiction. The series arc develops a utopian vision while each novel provides an episodic murder mystery that interacts with—sometimes supporting and sometimes complicating—that larger project. Penny focuses on the utopian concepts most difficult to describe in words—happiness, suffering, guilt, and joy—as she articulates the importance of art. Through an analysis of the seventh novel of the series, *A Trick of the Light*, the novel that includes the most wide-ranging collection of aesthetic explorations—we can see how a series of multi-faceted, vibrant, sometimes joyful and sometimes viral aesthetic works can articulate and make visible the possibility of utopian change in the twenty-first century.

Classic Ekphrasis: Clara's Painting of the Acerbic Poet and the Angry Madonna

Throughout her series, Penny regularly interweaves stories of crime and of aesthetics, repeatedly demonstrating the rhetorical and analytical power of art. In the utopian world of Three Pines, art makes arguments, art illuminates. Penny's main detective character, Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, is a clear literary descendant of P. D. James' Adam Dalgliesh, a great lover of visual, aural, and literary arts. Indeed, many of Penny's novels include ekphrastic descriptions of poems, songs, and paintings—usually Canadian, but sometimes Commonwealth—that cast light upon the dynamics underlying a murder investigation. In this way, Penny points to the power of art to speak both to the darkest, most-difficult-to-articulate complexities of the human experience and to the possibility of joy. Her detective series is shot through with exactly the aesthetic contrasts needed to imagine a twenty-first-century utopian space.

A Trick of the Light foregrounds contrast as it describes in detail a thick tapestry of paintings and poems that act as backdrop, commentary, and motive for yet another murder in the otherwise idyllic village of Three Pines. This murder is set against the Montreal art scene. Art critic and recovering alcoholic Lilian Dyson has attended the solo art show of painter Clara Morrow and is later murdered in Clara's garden in Three Pines. Clara's painting of the elderly, acerbic poet Ruth Zardo (whose poems are quoted in the novels, and

are actually penned by Canadian writers including Margaret Atwood) gives the novel its title and serves as a complex figure for Penny's utopian project. Ruth is a delightfully contradictory character, at once bitter and hopeful. She regularly performs an almost flamboyant misanthropy even as she provides helpful insights to her friends, including detectives Gamache and Beauvoir. Clara's portrait of Ruth, introduced in earlier novels, now hangs on the wall of the Musée d'art contemporain, where it is finally available to speak to the world outside of Three Pines. It can be read, whimsically, as one who walked away from Omelas, as a representation of utopia—with all its complexities—in the bustling Montreal art scene, providing an oddly hopeful vision of female wisdom and possibility, but only if one pauses to look carefully.

Clara's painting captures the complex relationship of religious, aesthetic, and utopian impulses in a postmodern world. Initially described by its surface features, the portrait shows "the head and scrawny shoulders of a very old woman. A veined and arthritic hand clutched a rough blue shawl to her throat" (17). The narrator then moves into an explanatory mode, attributing emotion to the woman in the portrait: "She was angry. Filled with contempt. Hating what she heard and saw. The happiness all around her. The laughter. Hating the world that had left her behind. Left her alone on this wall. To see, to watch and to never be included" (18). This description tracks with Ruth, whose most common utterance is "fuck off" and who, in one of her finest books of poetry, describes herself—and perhaps, by extension, her culture—as FINE (fucked-up, insecure, neurotic, and egotistical). At the same time, Ruth is not simply "an angry old woman. [Clara had] in fact painted the Virgin Mary. Elderly. Abandoned by a world weary and wary of miracles. A world too busy to notice a stone rolled back. It had moved on to other wonders. This was Mary in the final years. Forgotten. Alone" (24). The notion of an abandoned Virgin Mary left behind by a postmodern world speaks to the theme of vexed religious emotion and practice that pervades the series and that is especially notable in Quebec, once the centre of Canadian Catholicism and now a visibly more secular place. The Ruth/Madonna of the painting represents the anger, contempt, and loneliness of an abandoned elderly woman whose work—as mother of Christ or as creator of brilliant poetry—is mostly ignored in the twenty-first century.

Clara's aesthetic project does not ignore the hope of an earlier, probably imaginary but possibly more joyous time—a time that believed in the sanctity of Christ and the power of art. Indeed, Clara's painting represents Ruth/Madonna's loneliness and anger in order to highlight her joy. The importance of Clara's optimistic—even utopian—vision is confirmed by Thérèse Brunel, once the chief curator at the Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal and now a senior officer in the Sûreté du Québec. From her perspective as an expert on both art and crime, Brunel describes Clara's art as "quite joyous" (269). "How lovely if that's where art's heading," she muses. "Because it might mean that's where the human spirit's heading. Out of a period of darkness" (269). This comment, by a highly respected colleague of Gamache's, evokes Le Guin's contemplations about joy in a postmodern world. As the narrator of "Omelas" asserts, "We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy" (278). Indeed, Le Guin uses the word "joy" to introduce the turn of the story from utopian description to the child in the basement: "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing" (280). This articulation of the suffering child suggests that the only way we can believe in joy is if we believe that it has been purchased by suffering.

The suffering in Three Pines is seen in the frequent murders that interrupt daily life in the idyllic village, but it is also linked to art—the process of creating it as well as of sharing it, as evidenced by a conversation between Clara and Ruth:

> "Do you remember all your reviews?" asked Clara.
> "Only the bad ones."
> "Why?"
> Ruth turned to look at her directly. Her eyes weren't angry or cold, not filled with malice. They were filled with wonder.
> "I don't know. Perhaps that's the price of poetry. And, apparently, art."
> "What d'you mean?"
> "We get hurt into it. No pain, no product." (106)

Ruth here posits the artist as a kind of child in the basement, as a figure whose suffering makes possible utopia. In this moment, as an elderly poet tells a middle-aged painter that artists "get hurt into it," the focus is on Ruth's eyes, often angry or even malicious, but "filled with wonder" as she speaks of the artist's role. It is in the eye of the Ruth/Madonna painting that we

get the titular "trick of the light," what art dealer François Marois reflects is the painting's greatest power: "But how remarkable is that? For Clara Morrow to, in essence, capture the human experience? One person's hope is another person's cruelty. Is it light, or a false promise?" (101). Indeed, it is this ephemeral but sublime insight that leads to the solution to the murder.

The portrait of Ruth can be interpreted as a realistic representation of an old woman, or it can be understood as a transcendent aesthetic piece that finds the perfect balance of light and dark in merging a living poet with the mother of Christ to capture a twenty-first-century world in which notions of joy and divinity are paradoxically possible and impossible, thinkable and unthinkable. The novel ends in the perspective of Armand Gamache watching Ruth, who earlier rescued two abandoned duck eggs and nursed one of the baby ducks to adulthood; the duck has now flown south with her flock. As Gamache observes the utopian village of Three Pines, he sees Ruth, at her usual spot, waiting for her duck to return. In a reversal of an earlier moment in which Three Pines looks like a painting rather than a three-dimensional village (104), Clara's painting now comes to life as Gamache hears a duck's cry and sees Ruth, whose "veined and bony hand at her throat clutch[ed] the blue cardigan" and who looks into the sky as "in her weary eyes there was a tiny dot. A glint, a gleam" (339). In this final line of the novel, Ruth is posed exactly as she was in Clara's portrait, with the exact dot of light in her eye that marks her as both poet and Madonna. But here, in her real life in the utopian space of Three Pines, she has transcended her role as "embittered old poet," and in a move that echoes the Virgin Mary awaiting the return of Christ, Ruth is filled with hope as she searches the skies looking for her duck.

The iconography of the Virgin Mary—and Clara's decision to merge it with a depiction of the poet—serves as a complex representation of the utopian themes that pervade the series. Traditionally, the Virgin Mary represents the impossibly perfect mother—the blessed mother whose immaculate conception is achieved without the taint of sex, a woman who sacrifices for her child, and who eventually intercedes on behalf of those who pray to her. Importantly, she is the mother of Christ, the sacrificial lamb who offers up His death and suffering to save all of humanity. Within the utopian frame of "Omelas," Christ can be seen as a version of the child in the

basement whose sacrifice buys the possibility of utopia for everyone else. Clara's portrait reminds us that the child in the basement has a mother. In Le Guin's story, that mother is mentioned only once, in the description of the people who visit the child: "The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks" (281). The mother, however, does not speak in Le Guin's story, any more than the Virgin Mary speaks in Christ's story. But in Clara's painting, speech transcends medium, and the visual representation does provide a voice for the mother, who is simultaneously angry and hopeful in a world in which her story is mostly sidelined, in a world in which most people ignore the child in the basement, the price paid by others for their own happiness. By moving this painting from the solitary studio of middle-aged Clara Morrow to the walls of a prominent gallery, Penny suggests that art can provide an articulation of and resolution to paradox. By showing two contradictory notions in tension and balance, art may be the key to imagining a utopian future.

Intertextual Aesthetics: Stevie Smith, Humpty Dumpty, and the Serenity Prayer

Alongside the fictional aesthetic products described and interpreted within the novels, Penny also explores the intertextual power of existing art, most potently in her analysis of a well-known poem, an anonymous prayer, and a nursery rhyme. In *A Trick of the Light*, Clara's fictional painting of Ruth is repeatedly considered in conversation with Stevie Smith's poignant short poem, "Not Waving but Drowning" (1957). Smith's poem acts as a leitmotif that evokes the figure of the child in the basement while providing an interpretive puzzle to the mystery reader. The very first words of the novel are taken from Smith's poem:

> *Oh, no, no, no*, thought Clara Morrow as she walked toward the closed doors.
>
> She could see shadows, shapes, like wraiths moving back and forth, back and forth across the frosted glass. Appearing and disappearing. Distorted, but still human.
>
> *Still the dead one lay moaning.*
>
> The words had been going through her head all day, appearing and disappearing. A poem, half remembered. Words floating to the surface, then going under. The body of the poem beyond her grasp. (1)

Clara here is at her vernissage, the preview night before the opening of her first solo art show at one of Montreal's most prestigious galleries. This sequence articulates Clara's anxiety at putting her almost excruciatingly joyful paintings on display, allowing others to see that her vision of the postmodern world is inflected by hope. As Le Guin's narrator opines in "Omelas," "The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting" (278). The shapes that Clara perceives "like wraiths moving back and forth . . . across the frosted glass" are in fact the bodies of her friends and critics, come to the gallery to support—and judge—her art. As she perceives her audience through an almost prismatic surface, she imagines the partially forgotten poem as a possibly drowning body, speaking to the existential angst that makes possible the joy in her paintings.

As Smith's lines slide through Clara's anxiety-riddled mind, she eventually lands on the final stanza, revealing or reminding the reader of the heartbreaking closing lines:

> *Oh, no no no,* thought Clara. *Still the dead one lay moaning.*
> *I was much too far out all my life*
> *And not waving but drowning.* (5)

The framing image of Smith's poem—a man whose friends think he is waving while he is actually drowning—is often associated with suicide and the temptation for blithe onlookers to turn away from a person in need. When Clara quotes the final lines, starting with the chilling echo of "*Oh, no no no*" that opens the novel, she omits an important phrase from the poem: "it was too cold always." The omission ties back to the onlooker's comment that the dead man always loved larking, and that the water must have been too cold for him on the day he drowned. "Oh, no no no," any utopian writer will tell us—Louise Penny here just as forcefully as Ursula K. Le Guin in "Omelas"—"it was too cold always." The circumstances leading to the man's death, *and* to the onlooker's ignoring and/or misinterpreting the warning signs, were present long before the fateful day. The drowning man's death could have been avoided but for the common human flaw of looking away from suffering, of recasting suffering as something that does not require our

attention or intervention, of assuming there is nothing we can do for the child in the basement.

Smith's poem recurs throughout the novel, inviting the reader of detective fiction to engage in interpretation and to ask the obvious question: Who appears to be waving while actually drowning in this story? Or, framed in utopian terms, who is the child in the basement? As "Not Waving but Drowning" arises, unbidden, in Clara's mind, she associates the drowning man with two people: her husband (an easy fit) and eventually herself (a more complex psychological move). Peter Morrow has always been a far more commercially successful painter than his wife, repeatedly and masterfully crafting gorgeous paintings based on extreme close-up perspectives of everyday objects from nature and commerce. His works are perfect fare for elegant office building decor. The reader knows—although Clara initially does not—that Peter has long been jealous of his wife's more uneven, less successful, but sometimes transcendent artistic endeavours. The Stevie Smith poem recurs in Clara's mind when she and her husband toast her success: "[O]ver the flute [Clara] was staring at Peter, who suddenly looked less substantial. A little hollow. A little like a bubble himself. Floating away. *I was much too far out all my life,* she thought as she drank. *And not waving, but drowning*" (124). Clara initially berates herself for not noticing that her recent success as an artist has been difficult for her husband. Eventually, however, she does the type of gender analysis facilitated by feminist utopias of the 1970s and 1980s, realizing that she has supported him emotionally throughout their twenty-five-year marriage in a way he has never returned.

Clara's new insights occur at the intersection of detective fiction, utopia, and art. In the final reveal scene typical of classical detective fiction, Gamache invites all of the murder suspects to the Three Pines bistro, frequently marked as the utopian centre of the village. Instead of reciting the timeline or forensic details of the murder, as one might expect in such a scene, Gamache expounds upon the various interpretations of Clara's poet/Madonna painting:

> "Was it real, or just a trick of the light? Hope offered, then denied. A particular cruelty."
>
> He looked around the gathering. "That's what this crime, this murder was about. The question of just how genuine the light actually was. Was the person really happy, or just pretending to be?"

> "*Not waving but drowning*," said Clara . . .
>
> But this time, as Clara recited the poem, Peter didn't come to mind. This time Clara thought of someone else.
>
> Herself. Pretending, for a lifetime. Looking on the bright side, but not always feeling it. (314-15)

It is not through the act of creating her painting that Clara recognizes her own vulnerability, but through her own suffering. It is through the act of hearing interpretation—importantly from an expert on murder rather than on art—that she gains crucial insight into her role. By visually representing hope and joy alongside the poet/Madonna's anger and loneliness, Clara places herself as an artist in the role of both the drowning man and the bystander, of the suffering child and the joyous citizen of Omelas.

The metaphor of the man who is drowning and not waving can also be applied to a person with a substance abuse problem who appears to be enjoying life ("larking," as Stevie Smith calls it) while actually engaging in serious self-harm. *A Trick of the Light* delves deeply into questions around alcoholism and recovery, once again rewriting a common utopian trope. In the late-nineteenth century, when utopian fiction and communities flourished in Europe and North America, utopian writers often provided detailed blueprints of their imagined worlds that addressed outliers to their perfect societies, including criminals and alcoholics; alcoholism was generally viewed through the lens of illness, since there would be no vice in a true utopian society. In her novel, Penny depicts alcoholism through the lenses of aesthetics and community. In some sense, she shows, the alcoholic is both the child in the basement (the drowning man) *and* the joyful citizen of Omelas oblivious to the suffering that makes possible a pleasurable lifestyle (the bystander who assumes the man is waving). In the final analysis, Gamache carefully reads both the Serenity Prayer that serves as a cornerstone of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) process and a potent fairy tale symbol—Humpty Dumpty, the metafictional egg—to imagine how change is possible, and even necessary, in a utopian society.

The Serenity Prayer has a dual function within the novel. It is first introduced as a clue at the murder scene, since it is engraved on the back of an AA beginner's chip (a token to help members mark milestones of sobriety) found near the body of recovering alcoholic and murder victim,

Lilian Dyson. The prayer is simple: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." The investigation into Lilian's death leads Gamache into readings and conversations about Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization that draws upon the theological rather than the medical or the juridical. As Gamache learns more about alcoholism and recovery, he peruses the AA book that the murdered woman had been reading before her death in order to retrace her final thoughts, but also to familiarize himself with the philosophical landscape of a key organization for dealing with the problem of addiction. Gamache reads the book as an aesthetic object, "losing himself in the archaic but beautiful language of this book that so gently described the descent into hell and the long climb back out" (244). This quest metaphor appears to be in contrast to another from the book: "*The alcoholic is like a tornado, roaring his way through the lives of others*" (220). The AA book, like Penny's novel, demonstrates the duality of addiction—the fact that the addict can be at once victim and victimizer, can both descend into hell and act as a natural disaster causing enormous harm to self and others.

The Serenity Prayer's attention to understanding what can and cannot be changed addresses a fundamental problem of utopia: without change or conflict, a perfect society would be boring, thus leading to an absence of powerful art. In the philosophy of AA, not everything can be changed, so the focus is on discernment rather than on potentially stagnant stability. As a prayer, the Serenity Prayer takes as foundational some kind of higher power—whether a denominationally associated notion of God or something more personal—that acts as an assurance that the addict is not alone in facing change. When Gamache attends an AA meeting, he encounters Thierry Pineault, the Chief Justice of the Quebec Supreme Court. In describing the therapeutic benefits of the organization and its meeting structure, Thierry reaches for the metaphor of light that pervades the novel: "But they [the alcoholic's demons] have far less power, if they're in the light. That's what this is about, Inspector. Bringing all the terrible stuff up from where it's hiding" (171). This is the same move that is made in "Omelas," where every person must visit the child in the basement and try to understand the scapegoat as well as they can when they return to the light of day. The alcoholic willing to face what they have done, willing to bring the

demons to the light, is akin to those who walk away from Omelas, from what is known, comfortable, and ultimately unethical. The Serenity Prayer, with its elegant simplicity, and the large philosophical tome entitled simply *Alcoholics Anonymous*, provide an aesthetic lens that allows for a full communication of this nuanced, complex idea.

The literary nuance of the AA materials is paired with a far older and more potent figure from English fairy tale, Humpty Dumpty. The famous fictional egg has a dual function in Lewis Carroll's *Through a Looking Glass*: he is both a literary critic who interprets the nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" for Alice and a disquieting figure who creates a metafictional paradox for the little girl when he assures her that he will be perfectly fine perched on his wall even though she is familiar with the nursery rhyme and knows the egg's fate. When Gamache interviews Suzanne Coates, the murder victim's AA sponsor, the witness brings up Humpty Dumpty, explaining that some alcoholics are too damaged to find helpful the difficult and painstaking work laid out in the twelve steps of AA. At the same time, Suzanne notes, some—like Lilian, the murder victim—are spiteful, and are as likely to push someone else off of the wall as to fall themselves. Having internalized the different metaphors used in conceptualizing the alcoholic's experience, Gamache realizes that Lilian was caught between two versions of herself when she died: "But what a world between the two," he muses. "In one Lilian was sober and healthy, and in the other she was cruel, unchanged, unrepentant. Was she one of the King's men, or had she come to Three Pines to push someone else off the wall?" (220). As he thinks through the metaphor, Gamache compares the alcoholic to the fictional egg: "Maybe, [Gamache] thought, that was the point of Humpty Dumpty. He wasn't meant to be put together again. He was meant to be different. After all, an egg on a wall would always be in peril" (245). Indeed, an active alcoholic, whether they have committed a shameful act or not, is always perched on the edge of disaster, just one drink away from a fall. And yet, the insight of the alcoholic's experience, like that of the person who mistakes a drowning man for a falling one, may set the stage for a more hopeful future.

In her description of Clara's gorgeous and provocative painting, with its conception in the utopian space of Three Pines and its various interpretations by characters ranging from art critics to detectives, Penny presents a fictional

work of art that forwards the utopian project of critiquing the present and imagining a better future. In the most resonant intertextual references of *A Trick of the Light*—to the Stevie Smith poem, the Serenity Prayer, and the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme—Penny presents well-known real-world works of art that accomplish much the same rhetorical goals. We see Clara gain insight into not only her art but also her relationship with her husband through an extended engagement with Stevie Smith's poem. We see Gamache, initially unfamiliar with the practices of AA, learn about the process of addition recovery and the place of a much simpler poem—the Serenity Prayer—in helping people imagine a different future for themselves and their loved ones. And finally, we see Gamache connect a very familiar text—the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme—with a concept captured in Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" and in a work of new media that rounds out Penny's exploration of the utopian potential of several different aesthetic forms.

The Strength of Broken Things: The *YouTube* Video and Leonard Cohen

A Trick of the Light introduces a work of new media that has a large footprint across the Armand Gamache series: an anonymously created and posted *YouTube* video that functions very differently from the other aesthetic works Penny includes. The video spans four novels of the series: *Bury Your Dead*, *A Trick of the Light*, *How the Light Gets In*, and *A Better Man* (the sixth, seventh, ninth, and fifteenth novels, respectively). It is an imaginary work of ekphrasis—an audiovisual aesthetic product described in words. Unlike Clara's painting or the intertextual pieces already discussed, the *YouTube* video does not provide clues to Gamache, who is usually shown as an impressive art critic. The detectives here misinterpret the video, and yet their continued grappling with its potential meanings highlights the insight of another intertextual piece central to the series and its utopian project: Leonard Cohen's iconic song "Anthem," whose chorus—"There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in"—recurs frequently and even gives a title to the ninth novel of the series.

Following Le Guin's articulation in "Omelas" that the utopian genre cannot maintain narrative momentum by simply providing a blueprint of a perfect society, Fredric Jameson argues that utopia asserts the possibility of an

alternative "by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break" (232). In the Armand Gamache series, the "break itself" occurs in *Bury Your Dead*, the novel preceding *A Trick of the Light*, when Gamache is faced with a domestic terrorist plot to blow up an enormous Quebec dam which would cause devastating power outages in Maritime Canada as well as in the much more populated Eastern Seaboard of the United States. After substantial conflict with his superiors at Sûreté Headquarters, Gamache ends up leading a police raid in which both he and his mentee and future son-in-law Jean-Guy Beauvoir are shot, and four young Sûreté agents are killed. Although the police succeed in preventing the plot, Gamache is wracked by guilt and sorrow caused by the loss of his officers and by the near death of Beauvoir. He is physically and psychically scarred by the raid, and his suffering is emphasized by the innovative narrative structure of *Bury Your Dead*, which juxtaposes Gamache's current investigation (while on a busman's holiday) with a series of fragmentary, trauma-laden, out-of-order memories of the raid. The *YouTube* video, which splices together unreleased police-cam footage and public media reports, provides the first coherent narrative of events to the reader.

The *YouTube* video, like all the works of art engaged by *A Trick of the Light*, is subject to multiple interpretations. For Beauvoir, Gamache's right-hand man, the video highlights some of the dangers of aesthetic representation. Beauvoir is not a fan of art. Early in the novel, he is relieved to be at a murder scene after spending the evening at the art gallery showing Clara's work: "Art scared him. But pin a dead body to the wall and he was fine . . . There was nothing subjective about it. No question of good and bad. It wasn't an issue of perspective or nuance. No shading. Nothing to understand. It just was. Collect the facts. Put them in the right order. Find the killer" (39). When faced with an aestheticized representation of police work, released without his knowledge or consent, Beauvoir experiences extreme vulnerability that separates him from his techniques for reading a crime scene. He sees himself differently, but he also imagines how the gazes of others are impacted by the video. "Something had changed," Beauvoir reflects in *Bury Your Dead*. "It was the way people looked at him. It was as though they'd seen him naked, as though they'd seem him in a position so vulnerable, so exposed it was all

they could see now. Not the man he really was. An edited man" (317). Beauvoir, who has never felt comfortable around art, now finds himself "edited," revised, altered not only by the event of the police raid but also by its representation. He becomes obsessed with the video, watching the scenes in which he and Gamache are shot again and again, eventually developing an opiate addiction that threatens his career and even his life.

Gamache, long established as a superior art critic across aesthetic modes, also struggles to effectively interpret the video. The assemblage of footage presents a positive picture of the police, shown as heroically risking their lives while fighting terrorists in armed conflict in order to protect the people of Quebec. For Gamache, though, this is a dissonant interpretation of events. Although the terrorist plot was foiled, the police action feels like a failure to Gamache, who blames himself for the loss of several officers. His interpretation of the video is deeply flawed, a fact that is revealed over six novels as he pursues a secret investigation into the video's creation and distribution. Gamache reads the video as an especially sinister product. He describes his investigation into the video in almost melodramatic terms, reflecting that he and the Brunels (friends who help with the investigation) "had one other, outstanding, qualification. They were nearer the end than the beginning. As was he. The end of all their careers. The end of all their lives. If they lost either now, they'd still have lived fully" (271). Gamache reads the video as an indictment of his poor police work, when it turns out it was created out of guilt by an agent who gave Gamache poor intelligence.

Beauvoir's and Gamache's initial failures of interpretation vis-à-vis the *YouTube* video do not ultimately result in failures of detection. Gamache's investigation into the video's authorship allows him to discover and ultimately prevent a second terrorist plot in a later novel. Beauvoir's mental health and addiction challenges lead him to move past his early arrogance and approach life and detection with more insight and humility in later novels. The *YouTube* video is not celebrated as a work of art in the same way as other pieces, but it is nonetheless crucial in examining both guilt and trauma in the utopian project. In "Omelas," the narrator states that a utopian world surely contains no guilt even as the story's focus on the ones who walk away suggests that guilt is essential for an ethical life. In Penny's novel, guilt is emphasized in the complex interpretive work performed around the

YouTube video's creation and consumption. Guilt prompts the video's creation, guilt pushes Gamache to investigate its roots, and guilt is later evoked when the investigation leads to the discovery of a horrifying plot in a later novel. Suffering is equally salient. Although Jameson argues that utopia focuses on the break itself rather than on the society created by the break, Penny's series is able to do both, partly because detective fiction always provides another break in a future novel. In developing a long series in which her main characters are broken by reality but recover in part through their interactions with art, Penny often evokes the iconic voice of Leonard Cohen, whose "Anthem" gives voice to the possibility of finding hope even after trauma. In *A Trick of the Light*, it is Myrna Landers, retired psychiatrist and now bookstore owner in Three Pines, who articulates to Beauvoir the hopeful vision of the series: "Things are strongest where they're broken" (227).

Conclusion

In the end, "Omelas" suggests—and the Armand Gamache detective series shows again and again—that art is not only possible in utopia. It is necessary for utopian imaginings. The main conceptual stumbling blocks of utopia reside at the limits of language. Joy. Happiness. Guilt. Suffering. Philosophers, theologians, and utopian thinkers of various stripes have and will continue to articulate complex ideas around these vital, slippery terms. Understanding the relationship between these concepts is at the centre of the utopian project: does an absence of guilt necessarily lead to happiness? Is joy always tied to suffering? And if so, one's own or someone else's? These complex concepts and the ways they fit together cannot, of course, be described only in words. As Penny demonstrates in her foray through many art forms—from traditional to new media—in *A Trick of the Light*, utopia is not only written. It is seen in the contrast between light and dark in a powerful painting, felt in the half-remembered lines of a poem, etched onto a cheap coin that takes on enormous value as a shared symbol of achievement, and even glimpsed in the painful documentation of a traumatic event in a *YouTube* video. Three Pines, like Omelas, does not exist on any map. But the idea of Three Pines put forward by Louise Penny's multi-faceted art—the utopian longing and the possibilities encapsulated therein—exists in its ekphrastic ability to imagine.

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Paddy McCallum

Greater Things

Down a country road from Buchenwald
Dietrich Bonhoeffer is writing a hymn.
I can hear him write and sing
and sing again and again until
he gets it right. He has so little time.
He has this journey of costly grace
the all-embracing sound
of greater things …
to save one life
is sufficient to the end of time
to end with, I mean, the scaffold's
truth at Flossenburg. He stepped up
and dropped, they hung him again
and again confused about sufficiency.

He could be anywhere along this road
grey today as a bowl of fog
the door at which we have to know
singing at his threshold of the real
to the music of silence onward,
unbounded, to greater things.

Erin Goheen Glanville

Discomforted Readers and the Cultural Politics of Genre in Lawrence Hill's *The Illegal*

Introduction

Since 2015, Canada's practice of "refugee welcome" has been increasingly visible in both global and national politics. Internationally Canada is seen as a beacon of light for refugee claimants in an otherwise hostile environment, and the widely publicized resettlement of over 25,000 Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2017 received significant attention. Building on that success, in 2020 the government announced it will target the highest levels of immigration in the nation's history, including up to 180,000 refugees and protected persons over the next three years ("Notice"). For many years, state humanitarianism has been "the mirror in which the nation seeks a reflection of its beneficence" (Dauvergne 4), and since the 1960s refugee resettlement is the primary marker of its success as a humanitarian nation (Madokoro 149). Yet recent high-profile cases related to migrant detention or deportation (e.g., those of Abdilahi Elmi or Ebrahim Toure) reflect a different image. In these and other cases, the language of illegality or criminality has been used to limit and even undermine the practice of refugee welcome. Significantly, the outliers to popularized humanitarian representations of migrants from the Middle East (e.g., Syrian refugee crisis) or Asia (e.g., Vietnam boat people), have been illegalized young Black men. Scholars in diverse disciplines have documented Canada's history of xenophobia, its strategically selective refugee reception (Walia), its export of the border ("Problems"), its use of detention, and the violence of its peacekeeping missions in East Africa

(Razak). Determining what role Canada desires and/or plays on the world stage is hotly contested with high stakes. The debate takes place amid global politics that are currently characterized by protectionist policies, an eroding commitment to asylum rights, and restrictive border policies in response to COVID-19.

Such realities lend urgency to the scholarship of cultural refugee studies, which in part seeks to understand the relationship of refugee literature to contested imaginaries of the refugee figure, illegality, and the nation as global citizen. This article examines the case study of Lawrence Hill's novel *The Illegal* (2015) to understand that relationship and the book's intervention. My analysis highlights the gap between a generic reading of the book as political thriller and its reception as a Canadian humanitarian text and asks what scholars of refugee literature in Canada can learn from this gap.

The Illegal tells the story of an illegalized migrant who, at the book's climax, receives refugee status in an imaginary nation-state with clear resemblances to Canada. It was published shortly before Justin Trudeau's Liberal party won Canada's federal election on an ambitious refugee settlement platform. Furthermore, it was released one week after the photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned while seeking asylum, circulated on social media alongside claims that his Canadian aunt had attempted to sponsor his family but had been denied. The novel therefore arrived in a moment of widespread political discomfort, when news of asylum seekers trying to reach Europe dominated the media and debates about Canada's global responsibilities were live.

Accessible and timely, *The Illegal* was poised for commercial success. The novel won the Governor General's History Award for Popular Media and was named book of the year by the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC). Amnesty International Book Club chose the book to commemorate International Refugee Day, and the novel's film rights were sold to Conquering Lion Pictures before publication. When it won CBC's *Canada Reads* in 2016, humanitarian and Olympic runner Clara Hughes defended it by bringing together the nationalist concerns of *Canada Reads* with her own humanitarian interests. Notably, this was the eighth time in as many years that a book about refugee experiences had been featured in the annual debate about what book all Canadians should read.

My curiosity about *The Illegal*'s reception surfaced when I observed celebrity debaters express hesitation when the literary value of the novel was raised, sharing uncomfortable laughter with the audience about their disorientation. Articulations of discomfort are also found in reviews and two "shared reading events"—described by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo as "book reading pursued and promoted as a social practice through the vehicle of reading events that operate on a citywide, regional, or national scale" (3). I use the term "discomforted readers" to describe a pattern produced by a range of self-conscious and embodied hesitations and ask where readers' resistance originates. Based on empirical research, Fuller and Sedo argue that "[g]enre fiction generally does not work well in [mass reading events]" because it is "viewed as being too formulaic and repetitive" and so is perceived as a less useful "tool for learning" than literary fiction (105). Yet, they cite studies showing that "'the mystery, suspense, detective, spy, adventure genre' is the most popular genre for Canadian readers."[1] In other words, popular genres are widely influential as public pedagogy in Canada, even though in celebrations of Canadian literature they are less recognized than literary fiction for their educational use. What is lost when the public pedagogy of books such as *The Illegal* is overlooked? This article highlights the critical value of popular fiction by considering the generative contribution of *The Illegal* to complex conversations about Canada's global identity regarding forced migration.

Because of its publication year, overlapping genres, and curious reception, *The Illegal* opens up a valuable conversation about the relationship between refugee cultural production and public debates about state humanitarianism. As I will show, Hill's mixing of popular culture genres, including speculative, satirical, and political thriller conventions, with the serious social theme of forced displacement and a main character coded Black and African, produces an appropriation and reworking of the cultural figure of the refugee in Canadian literary cultures. I trace the book's ambivalence towards state humanitarianism by exploring how traditional literary elements playfully satirize contemporary global community as a hostile environment.[2] Tellingly, the book's treatment of state humanitarianism has not featured in public conversations about its intervention; neither has its genre or questions of racialization. In fact, it is celebrated on various platforms as Canadian

humanitarian fiction and framed using the very discourses it critiques: nationalism and humanitarianism. The nature of this interpretive gap, as well as the reasons why this gap has formed, propel the following analysis.

I begin by locating my discussion within scholarship on Canadian refugee literature. Next, I offer a generic interpretation of *The Illegal* against which its reception can be read. Specifically, I argue that Hill's unusual choice of popular genres displaces humanitarian practices that focus on individual refugee suffering, illuminating instead a hostile global community and holding in tension Canada's contested role within that community. Finally, I produce a crosscutting analysis of the book's reception by examining *Goodreads* reviews, newspaper reviews, the 2016 *Canada Reads*, and Amnesty International Book Club materials. Surfacing in celebrations and critiques alike, readers' discomfort often links to the book's unusual pairing of theme and genre. It may be that *The Illegal* produces resistance because its genre throws into question the terms of humanitarian reading practices that make refugee suffering a socially acceptable literary commodity.

Refugee Writing in Canada

Written largely in literary rather than popular genres, Canadian refugee fiction from the last two decades has been described by reviewers in strikingly similar ways. Critically acclaimed publications have tended to write stories of displacement lyrically, elusively, the narrations poetically resistant to touching the wounds of refugee trauma with rough prose, leaving space for the unknown.[3] Reviews and critical readings of Kim Thúy's *Ru* (2009)—arguably the best-known Canadian refugee narrative—illustrate this point, as they frequently praise its "haunting and incantatory writing style . . . [and] poetical cadence" (Syms) and the way it "bears witness" to "ghostly fragments" (Kurmann and Do 219-20).[4] Vinh Nguyen's careful reading of the intersubjectivity at work in *Ru* reclaims the agency of its "forgetting," reading the "elliptical spaces" in the novel as erasure that deliberately mimics "everyday storytelling and memory" (26). Canadian scholarship on refugee literature consistently articulates the possibilities of these narratives by referencing "productive failures and silences" (MacGregor), "the anti-confessional impulse in recent refugee writing" (Dawson), deliberate illegibility, and refusal. This analytical pattern raises a question about

whether absence has become a marker—as both style and theme—for Canadian refugee literature to be considered worthy of critical reflection.

The recurrent focus on refusal in refugee narratives is posited as an interruption to what Smaro Kamboureli has named the "humanitarian pact," where reader and author exchange compassion via an (erased) suffering subject, that is the refugee character ("Writing" 98). Critiquing the "ideology of intimacy" in humanitarian reading practices, Kamboureli weaves together the analysis of several Canadian literary scholars to suggest: "Ultimately, the foreign is as much about distance as it is about proximity or kinship" ("Writing" 96). In other words, refusal, distance, and illegibility in refugee literature produce a necessary interruption to humanitarian cultures. I will return to the term "humanitarianism" in the last section of this article, but for now I define humanitarianism along with Kamboureli as "a belief in universal human rights and the moral imperative to respond . . . in the name of human compassion, dignity, and responsibility" (110). Critical humanitarian scholarship has thoroughly investigated the issues underlying this virtuous discourse. For example, Lilie Chouliaraki critiques humanitarian narratives for relying on "grand emotions about suffering" to produce pity, echoing Hannah Arendt's observation that such narratives displace "the long-term concern with establishing structures of justice with the urgent concern for doing something for those who suffer" (108). Education scholar Michalinos Zembylas argues that "the assumption that empathy enables transformative affective connections can (re)produce dominant hierarchies and exclusions," in part because "empathy is conceptualized primarily as a capacity of the privileged" (411). Zembylas unpacks how "affective appropriations of noble values such as empathy" risk reproducing hierarchies, even within critical pedagogy (417). So, how does the *potential* for refugee literary fiction to interrupt the humanitarian pact relate to its popular reception? Does it succeed or does literary style become a new i ndex of access to interiority and trauma? Kamboureli notes that while "humanitarian narratives can take different forms . . . they invite us to see them as a distinct category" (122). She attributes this to "their abiding concern with exposing humanitarian issues and stirring the reader into political and ethical action." It seems that the potential of textual refusal to distance readers and reclaim refugee subjectivity is lost when readers

approach literary genres as generic invitations to witness suffering. The problem of the interchangeability of humanitarian literatures prompts Kamboureli to propose a rhizomatic analysis, which maps narratives in relation to one another to see connections and gaps.

Reading *The Illegal* in relation to scholarship on Canadian refugee fiction provides a first clue for why readers may be discomforted and for how it contributes to that conversation. *The Illegal* is neither humanitarian nor literary; neither earnest invitation nor critical refusal.[5] Described on its back cover as a satirical political thriller and infused with humorous melodrama, Hill's novel presents an unusual aesthetic representation of refugee life: a playful critique of state humanitarianism in a popular culture genre. Katja Sarkowsky is one of very few scholars to publish on this book to date. In a chapter on citizenship in Anglophone Canadian fiction, Sarkowsky finds value in *The Illegal*'s representation of the racialization of citizenship and of the way "notions of the normative citizen" turn citizenship into "a repressive instrument" (199). However, she questions the book's ability to offer fresh reflections on refugee representation precisely because of its thematic complexities, genre, and plot resolution (198). As I will show, "unrealistic" resolution is a common critique in online reviews of Hill's novel as well. Critiques like this raise a curious set of questions: Why might a book billed as a satirical political thriller be appraised according to realist conventions? Why did readers expect to feel they were reading about real people? Why does a happy ending feel wrong for refugee fiction? Under what circumstances does speculative fiction become a disappointment for being speculative fiction?

To address these questions, we must move beyond theorizing the aesthetic intervention of a text in political context, to consider how a book's intervention is received. Scholarship on Canadian reading cultures provides helpful tools for moving in this direction. For example, Fuller and Sedo's research on the reading industry traces the way reading has continued to be perceived as "socially transformative and civilizing" even as books are popularized and mediated by digital platforms and mass reading events such as *Canada Reads* or national book clubs (19). Less interested in any given book's intended literary intervention, Fuller and Sedo's work tracks the "ideological

investments" that readers give to reading as "a social and moral good" (146). Fuller and Sedo's "bottom-up critique" and Kamboureli's "top-down approach" to understanding the significance of Canadian literature (Zanchi 570) are brought together in our present discussion of *The Illegal*: the next two sections weave together a generic close reading of the book's aesthetic intervention with assessment of the book's reception.

Genre in *The Illegal*

As popular genre fiction, *The Illegal* casts a broad invitation for readers to inhabit the imaginary world of Keita Ali. Keita (meaning "gift" in Swahili) finds himself stateless between two corrupt, colluding states. He runs marathons to earn ransom money for his sister, Charity, who has been imprisoned for the dissidence of their recently murdered journalist father. In the imaginary nation of Freedom State that Keita navigates, belonging is precarious, and institutions that steward law, education, health, borders, and business all co-operate to optimize profits from refugees. Citizenship, wealth, and whiteness coincide so often that one is frequently mistaken for another. Freedom State can be interpreted as a composite of refugee-receiving nations but bears a strong resemblance to Canada. Its reputation for fairness is belied by its colonial history, deportation of temporary workers, selective refugee reception, and export of the border. Tim Hortons makes several appearances and white women carry bear spray to protect themselves. The characterization of Lula DiStefano, humanitarian Queen of AfricTown (based on Africville, a Black Canadian community demolished in the 1960s) is central in unmasking state humanitarianism as illegality and racist corruption. The book's popular form is an unusual contribution to Canadian literary culture, which more commonly narrates Asian or Middle Eastern refugee experience as literary fiction or memoir. The following sections consider the political thriller conventions in *The Illegal* to show how its clear delineation of good and evil, its unwitting hero, its lack of reflective prose, its use of chance encounters to propel the plot forward, and its climactic scene satirize the interlocking discourses of humanitarianism and nationalism, effectively revising the cultural figure of the refugee and discomforting readers.

As Political Thriller

The Illegal makes use of conventions from several overlapping popular genres, including satire, speculative fiction, and, most notably, the political thriller. It illustrates the mutability of genre, depending on the writing situation. The personal situation that produced this multi-genre book was described by Lawrence Hill in a virtual classroom visit as anxiety about the direction of global asylum practices and a desire to explore that fear in an imaginary, playful space. The political thriller genre is well-suited for that purpose, emerging as a subgenre of thriller films during the Cold War to provide space to explore generalized fear about being vulnerable to unknown powers. Pablo Castrillo and Pablo Echart's narrative analysis of the American political thriller finds that it gives precedence "to the visceral over the sensitive," as threatened protagonists navigate a "world threatening to collapse into chaos" but ultimately restored to order (112). Inherent to the idea of a political thriller is the role of politics as "the criminal source of conflict that creates the dramatic premise" (113). As political thriller, *The Illegal* taps into a tradition of entertainment as a visceral exploration of vulnerability.

Political thrillers entertain through suspense and intense clarity, entering the world of powerful corruption that exists underneath the lives of ordinary people. They "thrive on the melodrama of global political struggle, especially the subterranean world of espionage, assassination, and dirty tricks" and "purposely lack all moral shading" (Dickstein 89). In *The Illegal* this renders the nation-state subterranean, racist securitization a dirty trick, and banal violence as global struggle. The plot subverts the image of benevolent humanitarian nations, populating them with greedy scoundrels, vicious covert operatives, and devious conspiracies. For every political dissident that is returned to Zantoroland, Freedom State may turn back a certain number of boats carrying asylum seekers. The trade is made—refugee lives for refugee lives—and the profits are pocketed by a handful of greedy people. The Minister of Immigration, Rocco Calder, attempts to build a neutral political career and ignore controversy but his office becomes the site of the novel's violent climax. More gently but still critically, Hill takes on humanitarianism's attempts to make up for the violence that its partner in crime, the state, is committing. For instance, Lula, who runs charitable initiatives for undocumented people, ends up sacrificing the life of Yvette,

a young sex worker in her employment, to save her own humanitarian empire. Disingenuous attempts at neutrality end up corrupted by power and greed, and characters rise and fall with the evil to which they attach themselves. It would seem *The Illegal* is less helpfully framed by "the plight of refugees" than it is by the dramatic violence of a global hostile environment. Hill's subject choice explores the capabilities of this popular genre to satirize both utopian and dystopian narratives of the humanitarian nation as global citizen.

Unwitting Hero

The characterization of Keita as a marathon runner and ordinary protagonist rewrites the humanitarian trope of the "extraordinary refugee," the literary trope of the "traumatized refugee," and the negative media portrayal of refugees as "illegals." Commonly, political thrillers centre on an ordinary protagonist who becomes the unwitting key for unravelling corruption, accidentally scaling up in social influence from the individual to the global (Willems 78). At the centre of corruption, Keita focuses on winning races and remains unaware of the suspense he creates by not responding to crucial emails and phone calls. He ignores the plot that revolves around him yet contributes to its resolution. Hill describes this characterization as an explicit choice: "I didn't want to have a really colourful survivor of genocide and have him cross the seas, and be all lively like most protagonists have to be" ("On Refugees" 14). As the climactic scene ends, Keita tells Candace he did not win his race. His casual phrase "[s]econd [is] good enough" replaces corrupt self-interest with disinterested ordinariness (*The Illegal* 376). Here, the narrative subverts refugee exceptionalism, giving Keita unlikely mobility and agency alongside unremarkable achievements.

The trope of the "traumatized refugee" who can be healed by telling their story is also revised insofar as Keita's characterization lacks self-reflection or complex emotions about suffering. When Keita's traumatic past appears, he often uses it as motivation for action. For instance, while racing he remembers a nightmare about his father's torture, but the narrator's internal focalization reveals only Keita's determination to win the race. He thinks, "he would rather die of a heart attack than not spend every ounce of energy winning this race for [ransom money for his sister]" (368). Rather than soothing suffering with

personal testimony, Keita rewrites refugee trauma as incentive towards systemic change and represents the Black refugee figure as elite athlete, not suffering spectacle. In fact, Keita is entirely absent from the final chapter, having received his happy ending during the penultimate chapter before.

Finally, this novel repositions "the illegal" as refused gift, not social burden. Guided by his responsibilities and determination to survive, Keita becomes a global kinkeeper. Running allows Keita to "run into" people with varying levels of precarity. They become his chance web of relations. Humanitarian amelioration of suffering becomes irrelevant as it is replaced by webs of makeshift kin formed through happenstance and civil disobedience in the shadow of the nation. Each person's serendipitous encounter with Keita grows into loyal bonds of kinship as they recognize their shared precarity and need of one another for survival. Ivernia Beech, an elderly white woman, is one example. When Ivernia has a car accident, Keita, a complete stranger, shows up and rests his "fingertips on her shoulder . . . 'Everything is going to be okay,'" he tells the frightened woman (81). In political thrillers, chance encounters "may strike readers as too conveniently serviceable to the narrative, [but] perform an important referential function" (Davies 130). They authenticate the hero's resourcefulness and "situate the narrative of the thriller in a wider ideological space," where "character-types and their positions within the textual hierarchy are changing continually in small but significant ways" (130-31). Keita's chance encounters provide him with the opportunity to adjust the social hierarchy: he fulfills the needs of citizens. The unlikelihood of precarious subjects garnering political power through chance encounters in the real world turns the novel into a satirical treatment of the systems that migrants navigate. Keita's pragmatic, reciprocal kindness challenges representations of refugees as social burdens, as witnesses to trauma, and as extraordinarily resilient.

Climax and Closure

Many reviewers of the book mention the unreality of its ending. *The Illegal* certainly provides the exciting climax and resolution of a political thriller. But its restoration of order is not straightforward or earnest. The climactic scene, which brings all the key players into one room to unravel the political intrigue of the plot, is a disturbingly funny scene. It functions critically in the plot to expose

political hypocrisy, but its cinematic, action-packed climax is uncomfortably cathartic. Short, choppy sentences and quick repartee underscore the focus on action rather than reflection. One intense paragraph narrates in the barest of styles: "Hamm charged. Saunders took aim. Hamm dived . . . Blood flew everywhere" (373). As one might expect, this scene offers little in the way of reflective prose or complex characterization, and the dialogue verbs reveal very little emotion. Across seven pages, "said" appears over fifty times. The variations are "gasped" and "shouted," which describe two rare lines from Keita, who sits observing the violence unfold. His only inner thoughts are brief considerations of action, such as, could he survive jumping out the window?

Ultimately, what saves the day is a combination of violence growing so large it unearths itself and happenstance kin protecting one another. Faced with the decision of whether to free two detainees, the Minister hesitates. "'Yes, *now*,' Keita shouted. 'Minister! You can save their lives.' 'Do it!' Candace said. 'You're the minister of immigration, and this asshole'—she pointed at the prime minister—'is going down. Make the call!'" (375-76). After 370 pages of anxiety about political corruption and hidden violence, the scene offers humorous relief. Racialized immigrants yell "Do it!" at the white politician, and he obeys. Reading closure in political thrillers as the re-establishment of order to assuage generalized fear, we see a divergence from Kamboureli's observations about humanitarian literary tropes, which "tell a story that resists narrative closure" ("Writing" 117). Readers of humanitarian literature "are not merely expected to imagine a survivor's plight or how a refugee has become a rescued subject; they are also encouraged to further inform or educate themselves, donate funds, or help the narrative's particular humanitarian cause otherwise" (117). A literary refugee narrative left open-ended with the intent of refusal, may be interpreted through humanitarian reading practices as space for the reader's contribution to an ongoing global crisis. *The Illegal*'s climax is discomforting in part because it breaks from the conventions that condition reading publics to expect an invitation to provide closure for characters through their own actions.

Readers have criticized the climax for resolving too neatly, but in the novel's denouement, gaps in the closure *are* discovered—just not the expected gaps. Despite Keita's refugee status, his sister's release, and the political demise of corrupt officials, Viola Hill, the news reporter, "wasn't entirely satisfied"

(380). The ending offers her—and the reader—space to reflect on that dissatisfaction. Returning to the problem of state humanitarianism, the novel finishes with Viola's interview of Lula, humanitarian queen and the former lover of the prime minister. Viola's description of Lula in the final interview is of a woman who "looked like she owned the world" (383). When asked about her complicity in the murder of Yvette, Lula turns away and looks out the window, deliberately shifting the focus. "I did that," she offers as an answer, pointing to the two hundred water taps and one thousand new portable toilets and describing her hot lunch program and employment of marginalized people (385). For that, she says, she deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. Explaining her partnership with the state, Lula says to Viola, "Go ahead . . . Tell the world. But just make sure you put in about the water taps, the lunch program and the sewers. Make sure you tell the whole story" (386). "The whole story," we are led to infer, is that humanitarian action may require the illegal sacrifice of a few for the survival of many.

A paragraph break leaves the reader wondering what story Viola will tell. "Three weeks later," we read, "Viola published an article" that was "tight and nuanced" (386-87). But Viola's article exposes Lula's vulnerability, that is her undocumented legal status. The final lines of the novel inform the reader that Lula disappears and is never found. Viola's ambitions for justice bring the novel to a morally ambivalent close, producing an ending that is neither open-ended nor happily-ever-after, but rather "tight and nuanced." The disappearance of Lula underscores that there is nothing for the reader to do. Most characters have already received their happy ending, and Lula's absence refuses readers the opportunity to pass judgment on her. Furthermore, for current readers, the story's setting in the near "future" of 2018 speeds up the passing of its speculative future into a missed opportunity. What remains is the awkward inadequacy of a citizen reading refugee fiction for entertainment, the enjoyment of a refugee fantasy without the possibility of recreating such fantastic closure in real life, reading without even the hint of a noble affective encounter.

The Illegal in Shared Reading Events

In light of the novel's generic identity as a political thriller, its celebrated status in nationalist and humanitarian organisations is curious. Though

offering a critical depiction of state humanitarianism, *The Illegal* has been interpreted as an inspiration for Canadian humanitarianism. In the following section, I turn to public interpretations in online reviews as well as two shared reading events hosted by institutions with nationalist and humanitarian mandates to ask what we may learn from this gap. Are the interventions of the novel that I have outlined legible within the parameters of these remediations?

Reading Reviews

Two extremes can be found in online reviews of *The Illegal*. While glowing reviews about the novel's humanitarian subject skip over its genre, negative reactions to the novel's craft deplore its lack of realism. "I'm sooo disappointed!" writes one characteristic *Goodreads* reviewer. "The story is so relevant . . . I can't quite put my finger on what I didn't like . . . I never once felt like I was actually in a real country, reading about real people. And the ending . . . just wrapped up a bit too neatly" (Colleen). Early newspaper reviewers similarly describe the book as "urgently topical" but also as squandering opportunities to provide "intimate access to a character's sensibility" and "a setting that one recognizes as real and historically complex" (Birrell; Peterman; Cole). Positive reviews rarely reference *The Illegal*'s genre, but they frequently describe the novel in ways that try to re-establish the nobility of Kamboureli's "humanitarian pact." Descriptors such as "timely" and "relevant" show up repeatedly, linking the book to current events and reader compassion, rather than literary craft. As one *Goodreads* reviewer describes it, Hill's book is "full of heart," and "it will definitely give you even more perspective on the international news of late" (Chelsey). Implicit in these responses are the beliefs that the frame of "real life" can help readers to ascertain whether fiction is being responsible to refugees and that a book's ability to conjure a common humanity serves as proof of its literary value.

Monica Ali's *New York Times* review offers a clear articulation of the relationship between literary and humanitarian readings, with its argument that the novel is a "two-dimensional set" for a morally complex issue. About crude violence in the prologue, Ali writes, "This is the novel in a nutshell. It doesn't get any subtler than that." Ali is hoping for literary subtlety, but she is

also reading for humanitarian themes. According to Ali, a major problem with the book is its "bloodless summary" that "fails to make the countries come alive." She describes the reader as "grind[ing] her teeth as Hill grinds out the facts," a narrative approach that painfully keeps her from "experiencing the fear of the young boy." "One reads on," Ali continues, "in the hope of gleaning some fresh insight either into the plights of migrants, or the fears of those rail against them" but this knowledge is not forthcoming. Ali does not offer reflections on the meaning of her reading experience, but similar expressions of frustration are repeated in television, radio, and social media reviews and discussions of Hill's novel.

Both "negative" and "positive" experiences of reading Hill's novel contain a kernel of the same problematic. That is, while readers come to the book to read about refugee experience, the relatively empty signifier of a strategically boring main character and a thrilling climax with unrealistic closure—recurring flashpoints—suggest that the novel is narrating global intrigue and structural power, not human plight. In short, these generic features suggest that the novel is in fact not about refugees, though the prospect of reading about refugees is what has gathered readers. To return to the language of our earlier discussion, *The Illegal*'s genre produces resistance because it throws into question the terms of both literary and humanitarian reading practices, which might make refugee suffering a socially acceptable commodity in Canadian reading cultures.

Nationalism: *Canada Reads*

This article's attempt to understand reader reception must also account for the institutions disseminating and remediating literature. So I turn now to consider two shared reading events. One of the places *The Illegal* has been celebrated as a book about Canada's identity is the 2016 *Canada Reads* competition. After four days of debate by a panel of famous Canadians over what book all Canadians should read, one champion book is crowned the winner. Follow-up online events with panelists extend public interest, turning winning books "into bestsellers" (Day 4). Scholars have noted *Canada Reads*' production of cultural nationalism through reading. Laura Moss argues that the program makes novels into "pawns in a game. With the watered-down aestheticism of the readings, most often it has been

the politics of the novels that is lost in the commentary on the texts" (8). Summarizing extant criticisms, Zanchi writes wryly, "To be fair, the ideological implications of and political motives behind a state funded and nationwide book program are not particularly subtle" (565). Instead, Zanchi highlights *Canada Reads* pedagogical role, suggesting that it "facilitates public mindedness and nurtures a social consciousness by cultivating public spirit through books-talk." Zanchi's approach builds on the work of Fuller and Rak, who describe "the ideological work" of *Canada Reads* as demonstrating "that reading and sharing books by Canadians are inherently transformative and nationally reparative acts" (26). A satirical political thriller about refugees fits this social situation uncomfortably.

During the 2016 competition, when the novel's commercial form is mentioned, it becomes a source of discomfort. Celebrities are debating what book Canadians need to learn from but are dealing with a book that reads like entertainment and thus is not expected to educate.[6] For instance, on Day Two Adam Copeland suggests *The Illegal* feels like a 90s Will Smith action movie ("Canada Reads" Day Two). The audience laughs and the panelists hear the comment as a critique. Later Copeland revises his comment, trying to convince fellow panelists, he "didn't mean it as a [derogatory thing]. I truly think that's its strength" ("Canada Reads" Finale 36:50). That same day Vinay Virmani, another participant, says that what he likes most about *The Illegal* is that it is entertaining and enjoyable. The host laughs and reads the subtext by saying, "he said with a little hesitation" (35:40). Occasionally, Clara Hughes, who champions Hill's book, breaks out of her role as contestant to narrate the debate itself, arguing for compassion and embodying the role of humanitarianism as a moral arbiter in Canadian disagreements around national identity. Fellow contestant Bruce Poon Tip calls her the "Canadian Bambi"—vulnerable and unassailably good—and expresses reluctance to disagree with her.

The embodied hesitations of these panelists match reviewers' discomfort with a refugee novel as entertaining mainstream fiction in a conversation about how books shape collective identity. Together they point to the persistence of humanitarian reading cultures in limiting the political interventions of Canadian refugee fiction. Hughes' defence of *The Illegal* reveals an earnest belief in reading as educational social practice and

admirable commitment to human rights. It also erases genre as an interpretive clue to what social consciousness the book advocates. Hughes reiterates Canada's "need" as a multicultural nation to welcome refugees and then moves quickly to the novel's power in "showing us how far empathy can go—a helping hand, a smile . . . it brings us to a state of empathy" ("Canada Reads" Finale 40:10). She offers *The Illegal* as a way of helping "us imagine the plight of millions of displaced people" ("Canada Reads" Day One 12:10) and urges Canadians to give "voices to the faceless" (37:00). In her defence of the narrative's value to an aspirational vision of Canada, Hughes produces a mash-up of familiar metaphors reflecting state humanitarianism (the nation's need to welcome, and the voiceless needing a face, the humanization of migrants). The implications of the novel's aesthetics are of less interest to her. The gap between *The Illegal*'s political intervention and its reception is produced as Canadians disown the thrill of refugee fiction as entertainment and reclaim it for inspirational education. This gap results in a missed opportunity for the novel to revise the cultural figure of the refugee in a particular moment of shared reading and to reorient readers toward refugee fiction as political intervention rather than humanitarian ethnography. More pointedly, those who read this refugee narrative after seeing it pressed through the meat grinder of aspirational national significance must now work even harder to reconstruct and inhabit the book's world on its own terms.

Hughes' remarks confirm the power of humanitarianism in pacifying anxiety about Canada's identity; her slippage regarding what or who needs humanizing inadvertently voices the specific significance of refugee narratives within national literary culture as recuperative for citizen readers.[7] *Canada Reads*' predilection for debates about refugee literature correlates to Canada's need for refugees as markers of state humanitarianism's goodness. Refugee literature is used, regardless of genre, to revise a racist history of asylum seeker rejection into a hagiography of global humanitarianism. The embodied hesitations signal discomfort with this humanitarian reading pact, and they are prompted by the discomfort of a celebrated Canadian author turning to a popular genre to satirically explore Canada's role in a global crisis. This brings us to another shared reading event, Amnesty International's annual Book Club (AIBC).

Humanitarianism: Amnesty International Book Club

Although mentioned four times in *The Illegal*, Amnesty International's only role in the novel is to host a website that lists the dead and to monitor a hotline that does not, in the end, save lives. Still, in 2016 AIBC chose *The Illegal* for its book club event. Established in 2014, the AIBC uses shared reading to educate citizens on global issues. Their purpose is threefold: promoting "excellent literature," "great discussion," and opportunities for human rights "action" ("Join"). AIBC's mandate points to the symbolic capital of reading literature, the social good of shared reading, and the traditions of the humanitarian reading industry. Specifically, their humanitarian mandate evaluates humanitarian narratives according to how they inspire viewers to act together to alleviate suffering. The three elements of AIBC's discussion guide reflect its threefold mandate: a description of the book, discussion questions, and suggested actions. Together they produce the interpretive gap this article has been exploring.

AIBC's discussion guide to *The Illegal* begins by referencing the Syrian refugee crisis, presumably to bridge the citizen-reader's general interest in refugees with this particular story. In a surprising rhetorical turn, it then overlays Hill's story with the rhetoric of news media on Syrian refugees: "For the past six months we've heard almost daily reports of the Syrian refugee crisis: gripping accounts of human tragedy, shocking reports of human cruelty, and hopeful tales of human compassion" ("Amnesty" 2). Eliding the boundary between reality and fiction altogether, the guide continues in the following manner:

> The reader immediately tumbles into *the crisis as it is being lived by Keita Ali,* one of the millions fleeing persecution by their country. Swept up in the fear and instability of his life on the run, we learn gradually of the grave human rights violations that spurred his flight. At the same time, we are touched by the dignity and ingenuity with which this man approaches his ordeal. (emphasis added)

The description demonstrates the interchangeability of refugee narratives: interlaced with struggling dignity and selfless compassion, we first encounter tragedy, then cruelty, and finally hope. By applying a humanitarian formula for narrating Syrian Convention refugees to the description of an experimentally playful novel about a non-status African migrant on a fictionalized continent, the guide provides an example of the humanitarian

pact as institutional strategy. Individual trauma and ingenuity is generated to mobilize shared emotions toward action.

The guide also offers two sets of discussion questions to guide the shared reading process. One invites humanitarian reading practices and the other guides readers toward a literary analysis. The first set of questions depends on familiar binaries (citizen/refugee, gift/burden) that *The Illegal* dismantles. It asks readers to assess the level of foolishness in Keita's risk-taking and invites them to say whether they "agree that refugees have a right to seek asylum" (5). The second set of questions included in the discussion guide are written by author Tracey Lindberg and invite readers to explore the book's aesthetic intervention, for instance asking about the organizing metaphors of the book. In this way, AIBC caters to readers with either a literary or humanitarian interest in the book. Polling book clubs about which set of questions they used could clarify the preferred mode for humanitarian reading publics.

The discussion guide's call to action is yet another humanitarian appropriation of *The Illegal*. The last page of the guide features a DIY doorknob hanger in Amnesty International's yellow and black colours. "Cut this circle out," the instructions insist. "Put on your front door, your office door, anywhere!" ("Amnesty" 11). The energy of Hill's paradigm-shifting book dissipates as it is funnelled into a personal, symbolic action of charity—that of hanging the metaphorical words "My door is open for refugees" on an office doorknob (11).

A humanitarian reading of refugee literature invites non-refugee readers to ask what it is like to be a refugee and then, quickly after, to ask how they can help. Reading *The Illegal* as a political thriller, however, invites a different set of ethical questions from curious readers: Who or what is responsible for creating the systems of entrapment that migrants must navigate? What are the mechanisms and institutions that support that system? How do subversive collusions form in the midst of racist ethnonationalism? Where is the latitude for radical action within restrictive spaces? To whom am I responsible in a system that refuses me rights?

Conclusion

Shared reading events are culturally and socially formative gatherings where readers negotiate the political implications of narratives. Refugee literature features often in these spaces and is valued by Canadian literary

cultures for its transformative potential. However, the interchangeability of refugee narratives presents a legibility issue for literary and "generic" refugee narratives alike. Each can challenge Canada's aspirations to a global humanitarian identity and also be reinscribed as humanitarian by readers' responses. In the case of *The Illegal*, remediations of the text frame the narrative as impetus for learning about and enacting Canadian humanitarianism, even as readers express discomfort about its literary value. I read that discomfort as an opportunity to reconsider the nobility of the humanitarian exchange between readers and refugee fiction. What I have tried to show with this case study of *The Illegal* is that a potentially productive discomfort is found precisely in the tension produced by reading refugee fiction as an entertaining commodity. *The Illegal* has not been sufficiently recognized for its critical contribution to cultural conversations, ironically because it discomforts readers who are seeking the more familiar discomfort of literary prose. For cultural refugee studies this may offer direction for future research: first, to attend to the reception of popular cultural forms; second, to consider how generic fiction supports humanitarian reading publics in unpacking the experience of consuming refugee cultural production and in fully facing the self-interest of humanitarian desire. My close reading of *The Illegal* highlights its nuanced critique of state humanitarianism vis-à-vis the illegalization of Black migrants, and its powerful reinvention of the cultural figure of the refugee by means of the popular genre of the political thriller. Taking these kinds of contributions seriously offer scholars in cultural refugee studies the opportunity to shape the powerful public pedagogy of popular refugee fiction in critical directions and to interrogate how literary hierarchies may function in harmony with humanitarian reading publics.

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NOTES

1 For the empirical studies upon which Fuller and Sedo draw for these claims, see Créatec, *Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure*.
2 The phrase "hostile environment" was famously used by Theresa May to describe the goals of her immigration policy in 2012. She said: "The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants" (Hill "Hostile Environment").
3 Consider the work of Dionne Brand, Madeleine Thien, Souvankham Thammavongsa, and Francisco-Fernando Granados, as well as Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared*, Kyo Maclear's *The Letter Opener*, Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*, and Michael Helm's *Cities of Refuge*. A notable exception is Randy Boyagoda's less critically acclaimed satire *Governor of the Northern Province*.
4 *Ru* won Canada's Governor General's Award, is published in twenty countries, and is used widely in English courses.
5 A significant number of *Canada Reads* books are memoir. Fuller and Rak assess memoir as having "discursive properties that direct reading away from considerations of literary merit and reader affect and toward ethical considerations about content and the author" (29).
6 Karen Steigman argues that political thrillers are written as if the writing "doesn't conceal anything," and so are read as entertainment and "not literary objects" (13).
7 Yến Lê Espiritu argues similarly regarding Vietnamese refugees in America. See Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study."

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IX—Jones/Baraka

"Internal exile—
Hell (Dante's device;
Malcolm X indites)—
All white beings hostile
(Pink things, grey brains fried),
This smegma quagmire;
Is *Black Being* proscribed.
Psychoanalyze
AmeriKKKan *Vice*;
Try to reconcile
Black folks sacrificed
To white misguided
(Self-) Hatred. My tribe
Deploys diatribe—
Soul Power—mobilized,
Smashes white confines.
Blackness, unrevised,
Africans unites!
Decriminalize
Black beings! Legalize
Black folks! Griots, scribes!"

Evangeline Holtz-Schramek

"Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees": Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars*

Introduction: "a strange and bitter crop"

Cecily Nicholson's 2014 documentary long poem *From the Poplars* takes up the history of Poplar Island, a small island in the Fraser River delta off the shore of the City of New Westminster,[1] which over the last 160 years has been subject to various permutations as regulated by colonial governments: federal, provincial, and municipal. Since contact, the territory known as Poplar Island has been cast as reserve land for its original stewards, the Qayqayt peoples; as a smallpox quarantine for Indigenous peoples from across the Lower Mainland; as a shipyard for munition building during the First World War; and as a commercial logging and milling site in the mid-twentieth century (Wilkinson). It currently sits as a protected park through the colonial legal instrument of Crown land designation.[2] This brief, procedural account of the 160-year history of this small island offers a microcosm of relations between Canadian colonial settlers and Indigenous peoples. This outline of events is front-facing and stamped by this nation's colonial governments, which have altered Poplar Island's purpose to suit the state's own economic needs with disregard for Turtle Island's original inhabitants and their connections with its natural environment. The metonymic promise of colonial legal writing makes it "lawful for the Corporation of the City" (Nicholson 47) to rule over every inch of New Westminster; however, as this paper will argue, Nicholson's *From the Poplars* stares down this authoritative stance by launching an unsettling critique

of the impetus behind the "terms" of the Canadian project—terms buoyed by racist underpinnings of a presumptive past, and yet which continue to demarcate the movements of certain people in physical space into the present. In looking out onto this island in its present state, adorned with second-growth poplar trees, the poet-speaker is aware of the spectres veiled by the mirage of this now uninhabited park. The island is currently being marketed to real-estate investors of the Lower Mainland as providing a serene vista for a rapidly gentrifying shoreline (Stern 300); however, Nicholson's poet-speaker asks readers to look deeper.

One of the primary arguments of Nicholson's text is that Poplar Island has been in the wrong hands for over 160 years. Nicholson's arguments are in line with claims for the restitution of Indigenous lands. For example, the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) calls for a "fundamental reallocation of lands and resources" (Canada 2); however, its authors also state that "Aboriginal people do not expect to obtain full restitution: they do not want to push non-Aboriginal Canadians into the sea or to deprive them of their backyards, as the recent history of land claims settlements makes clear" (2). Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred extends RCAP's findings into the present: "The need to restore our lands to our nations was true in 1996 and it continues to be true today. A notion of reconciliation that rearranges political orders, reforms legalities and promotes economics is still colonial unless and until it centres our relationship to the land" ("It's All about The Land" 13). Mi'kmaw legal scholar Pamela Palmater similarly argues that the return of Crown land to its rightful stewards—regional Indigenous populations across this nation-state—would provide the necessary restitution of land without requiring full-scale irredentism. However, irredentism is favoured by some more radical groups, such as the LANDBACK movement, which serves to activate citizens of broader Turtle Island towards a future "where Black reparation and Indigenous LANDBACK co-exist . . . where collective liberation is at the core" ("LANDBACK"). *From the Poplars* upholds that the Crown land of Poplar Island should be returned to the Qayqayt peoples. The text's onus on "collective liberation" hearkens to radical coalition building, which could eventually lead to more extensive reparations.

Another spectre resides in this text. The Canadian colonial project has caused unimaginable suffering, dispossession, genocide, and violence towards Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, through both the sword (i.e., conflict and disease) and the pen (i.e., the weaponization of inscribed law and policy to force spatial dislocation and divide families). The harrowing effects of colonization for Indigenous peoples of Canada/Turtle Island are ongoing. As a self-described "mixed, light-skinned black Canadian citizen" (Nicholson, "In Dialogue" 71), Nicholson is part of an identity group that has also experienced racism, trauma, murder, and both structural and physical violence under Canadian law and policy for over four hundred years. As Audre Lorde famously writes, "There is no hierarchy of oppression" (220). In *From the Poplars*, there is no hierarchy of suffering wrought by the condition of perpetual "second-class citizen status" (Thornhill 324) bestowed upon certain bodies in the Canadian state. Nicholson's text draws together the long-standing pain and abjection of two of Canada's historically marginalized groups—Indigenous and Black peoples—through a shared nexus of grief (Nicholson et al. 75).[3] Recent scholarship in Turtle Island seeks to find relational affiliations between these historically separated groups.[4] This work is urgent but remains complicated due to differential and particular historical events (McCall 57) and their ensuing social and psychological effects. Nicholson's text signals to such an impasse as expressed by Tiffany Lethabo King: "What happens when Blackness docks, gets twisted, and entangled in genocide and, encounters the Native/Indigenous subject? What grows, takes shape, and emerges at this place?" (207). *From the Poplars* does not profess to answer all of these pressing questions; however, it draws attention to the shared grief of these two groups by way of providing a textual space through which to spark the building of an "affective public" (Papacharissi) between them and thus to ignite the radical potential of their connectivity. In a recent conversation with Aisha Sasha John and David Chariandy, Nicholson states, "I will spend the rest of my life catching up on grieving. Grieving we know is necessary. That's something, unfortunately, that Black and Indigenous communities share" ("Conversations" 75).

While Nicholson's appropriation of the legal documents that have functioned to dispossess Indigenous peoples comprises the bulk of the appropriated text in *From the Poplars*, another text, while cited less

frequently, performs a crucial sleight of hand as part of Nicholson's intervention into the Canadian state's unwillingness to admit and atone for its anti-Black racism. Ultimately, the key intertext for analyzing *From the Poplars* through the intersections of Blackness, settler colonialism, and Indigenous solidarity is American blues singer Billie Holiday's version of the song "Strange Fruit" (first recorded in 1939). I read the sparse and coded citings of "Strange Fruit" in the text as echoing Robyn Maynard's critique of the paucity of literature addressing state violence, which she describes as harms caused by government or government-funded institutions and policies that include the criminal justice system, social services, and immigration (6-7). Such laws and policies culminate in the "global devaluation of the Black body" (Maynard 17). Black people living in Canada, according to Wayde Compton, have experienced "ad hoc racism" (89). That is, while Indigenous peoples, for instance, have been subject to overt official segregation policies, Black people have experienced unevenness with respect to prejudice being encoded in official laws and policies.[5] Yet, scholars of Black Canadian histories and futures assert that anti-Black racism as exercised through social, legal, and extra-legal measures has persisted since the arrival of Black people in the territories known as Canada and continues to this day.

This essay will argue that the Poplar Island represented in *From the Poplars* symbolizes the shared grief of Black and Indigenous peoples in the territory known as British Columbia due to their unjust and violent treatment at the hands of the white supremacist Canadian state. The island's currently perceived emptiness of Black and Indigenous presences is actually an "optical illusion" (Compton 105)—*From the Poplars* brings these "strange fruits" into view. Just as Holiday's "Strange Fruit" instigated waves of protest and stoked anti-segregation movements in the United States,[6] *From the Poplars* as political ballad signals new and radical futures for Black and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. *From the Poplars* thus diasporizes the space of Poplar Island by recasting the text as an affective public that serves as a site for "remembering and perceiving . . . the networks of exchange that have developed between . . . diasporized black communities . . . [and] Indigenous peoples" (Vernon, *Black Prairie* 8). The text looks to a shared future "based on Black and Indigenous freedom, self-determination, and one that

continually generates Black and Indigenous life" (Simpson 77), a future whose novel "undisciplined" grammars are still being written (Sharpe 13), but whose promise is evident in Nicholson's poet-speaker's deconstruction of the colonial language that previously controlled, dismissed, and violated Black and Indigenous presences across Canadian/Turtle Island geographies, both diminutive and vast. Nicholson's poetic methodology builds upon Sarah Dowling's analysis of appropriation as "bound up with the logics of property undergirding settler colonialism" (104). By crafting a text based on records of the colonial appropriation of the lands of New Westminster, with a focus on Poplar Island, Nicholson's form and subject seamlessly align. However, Nicholson's appropriation serves to *repossess* rather than *dispossess*, by activating readers towards reconciliatory and anti-racist political action. The following will offer an intertextual analysis of *From the Poplars* and "Strange Fruit" through both political and formal lenses.

I come to this work as a settler scholar. I was born on the territories of the Qayqayt peoples, currently called New Westminster. This place is, in the words of Eugenia Zuroski, as inspired by Minelle Mahtani and Katherine McKittrick, "where I know from," where my knowing begins. I looked out onto Poplar Island from the New West Quay as a child: I watched the log booms snaking up and down the Fraser, but failed to see the racism and violence that was all around me due to my family's own challenges coupled with my early education in white supremacist Canadian institutions. *Knowing from* expands into another of Zuroski's provocations: "What is your intellectual work for?" I sit here writing these words now in Toronto, Ontario—another Canadian space haunted by racist, colonial histories and presents. My intellectual and social justice work is fuelled by my commitment to allyship and to naming and attempting to correct injustices when I see them, and to striving to excavate the white supremacy within me (Wngz).

Politics: "Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck"

> Being a witness has other responsibilities to it . . . I think about that these days as an uninvited guest on these territories. I don't just want to thank people. I don't just want to name who I am and what I think I'm up to . . . I feel that way foremost embodying black and femme experience, realizing violences of state and border, I want to be relevant.
>
> —Cecily Nicholson, "In Dialogue with Michael Nardone"

Nicholson's commitments are located "in the urban, in defense of land, based in community" (Nicholson "Conversations" 72)—a community comprised of different social actors with unique identities and causes. Nicholson's commitments to people and place illuminate Winfried Siemerling's claim that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we're positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (13).[7] In *From the Poplars*, the poet-speaker is figured as someone curious about Poplar Island's legal and social histories: this speaker provides narrativized accounts of their visits to planning and heritage offices in their efforts to find out the "history that no one / holds" (24) and, predominantly, to uncover and critique the racist ideologies of the Canadian project that propelled the Qayqayts' displacement from their land. Nicholson's poet-speaker wants to understand the displaced histories: "a place (built over) at the southern end of Agnes Street // burial grounds (built over) of the present high school" (11). The poet-speaker's commitment to the Qayqayt peoples attends to both past and present: their removal from their land more than 160 years ago, and their continued fight to retain their land base. In a 2014 interview, Nicholson states, "*From the Poplars*, in breaking down the colonial settlement and the devastation wrought by industry on Poplar Island, and how that underpins New Westminster as a municipality now, requires connective threads in the work to necessarily stretch through the concrete and into the earth itself" ("Call and Response").

The poet-speaker's research uncovers the legal and policy documents that justify the dispossession of the Qayqayt peoples of current-day New Westminster and Poplar Island. Again and again, as evidenced in the volume of appropriated lines from these documents included in *From the Poplars*, legal and policy decisions were made without evidence or consultation. Their overwhelming aim was to foster a colony of white British settlers in the area. The basis for such vindications can be traced to unfounded, racist ideologies about Indigenous peoples' inability to make the land commercially viable, their mismanagement of land and resources, and their supposed propensity to criminality and sloth. Just as New Westminster continues to hold up the banner of "The Royal City"—thereby cementing its history to Britain and white colonial supremacy—nineteenth-century policy architects, too, believed in a social Darwinism that deemed certain settlers as superior in

mental and commercial acuity to the Indigenous inhabitants of the lands they colonized.

One such supremacist, Joseph Trutch,[8] became Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works in 1864. In Trutch's correspondences with the Prime Minister and other high-ranking officials, he called Indigenous peoples "utter Savages living along the coast, frequently committing murder and robbery amongst themselves . . . and on white people who go amongst them for the purpose of trade" (qtd. in Fisher 5). For Trutch, "[t]he Indians really have no right to the lands they claim, nor are they of any actual value or utility to them" (qtd. in Fisher 3). Trutch made it one of his primary mandates to discredit the policies of his predecessor, Governor Sir James Douglas, who sought to provide Indigenous peoples with reserve lands they chose themselves. Trutch ceased such reforms in order to achieve his goal of minimizing the quality and quantity of reserve lands so as to maximize white settlement and economic returns from public lands (Abbott). Nicholson's poet-speaker addresses the Qayqayt peoples—a "band landless" (31)—and invokes a series of deconstructions regarding the just stewardship of this land through the concept of a colony. Nicholson's speaker questions the "future" of those who inhabited the space of Poplar Island prior to the arrival of those with the hegemonic imperative to lay the "band of steel that completes the union" (22), those for whom resource extraction—"an economy of fur-bearing animals" (77)—was the name of the game.

Nicholson's poetics destabilize the supposedly logical and legal frameworks upon which a certain "colony" was guaranteed to prosper at the hands of another community's disavowal, frameworks with tautological re-combinations of legalese such as "doubts have arisen whether the said Act is effectual to vest the said lands in the said Corporation in the manner contemplated by the said Act" (*From the Poplars* 62). The opacity of such terms of service formed the status quo—for Nicholson's poet-speaker, the unreasonableness of such acts necessitates a contemporary reckoning. Nicholson's poet-speaker writes, "The City sold the island for $20,000 to Rayonier Canada / Forestry // for years the trees grew back tall and thin . . . the colony // had grown a sense of permanence" (45). After the island was sold by the provincial government to Rayonier Forestry in 1948, the entire old-growth forest was clear-cut. That these new anthropomorphized trees conceived that they were becoming a

colony, and that this experience offered only a "sense" of permanence (in the past tense) de-familiarizes seemingly straightforward concepts. For example, what does a sense of permanence mean in a place that is always subject to being re-constructed?

One of the justifications constantly weaponized to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their homes and prevent them from belonging to the new colony in nineteenth-century British Columbia was Trutch's sentiment that Indigenous peoples could not be of "any actual value or utility." One lens through which to analyze "Strange Fruit" and *From the Poplars* is that of the colonial correlations between an individual's ability to labour on the land and their subsequent recognition of full personhood or citizenship by the state. In "Land as Life: Unsettling the Logics of Containment," Mishuana Goeman defines "property," as a distinctly "European notion that locks together . . . labor, land, and conquest" (qtd. in King 23). As Tiffany Lethabo King elaborates in her foundational text *The Black Shoals*, "[w]ithin this Lockean formulation, Indigenous subjects who do not labor across the land fail to turn the land into property and thus fail to turn themselves into proper human subjects" (23).[9] In *On Property*, Rinaldo Walcott writes of a "different relationship to property" for Black people (12). According to Walcott, "the enslaved Black person literally had no autonomy or control over either their body or biological kin"—a fact that "has informed Black people's relationship to property ever since" (17). Building upon the Rastafarian tradition, and ignited by calls for abolishing the police in the wake of George Floyd's murder, Walcott argues that "Black people will not be fully able to breathe—a word I do not use lightly—until property itself is abolished" (11). Thus, while Black settlers to Canada have, too, been subject to the Lockean ideology of working the land as a sign of rationality and therefore personhood, their existence under conditions of what Christina Sharpe calls "the afterlife of property" (8) deepens intractable tensions between Lockean understandings of labour-citizenship and non-proprietary Indigenous and Black traditions of land stewardship and communality.

In her work on early twentieth-century Canadian immigration law, Esmerelda M. A. Thornhill analyzes how "Section 38(c) of the 1910 Act Respecting Immigration prohibited the landing in Canada of immigrants belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of

Canada" (329). Thornhill explains how "[t]he ensuing effect of this euphemistic invocation of 'climatic unsuitability' was that de facto, 'race was now legally designated as an immigration category'" (329).[10] At the 2017 Mikinaakominis/TransCanadas conference, Karina Vernon spoke to the premise and promise of Black pioneers' land rights in Canada as tied to their ability to farm the land grants on offer ("Making Things"). And yet, Vernon also points to the anxieties faced by Black people settling upon these lands: she writes of Black writers grappling with "difficult questions about what it means for black people to have territorialized in Indigenous nations on Turtle Island, and about how to make things right in the present" (*Black Prairie* 30-31). Thus, for Black people arriving in the lands currently called Canada—ones who were able to migrate as a result of specific legal and policy initiatives that occurred either before or after the 1910 Act, as an example—not only was their arrival fraught, but once here, they also faced additional waves of anxiety and grief: the former as a result of the discomfort arising from the displacement of First Nations peoples in Canada/Turtle Island, and the latter due to their own treatment by the Canadian state, in the forms of both institutionalized—for example, a segregated school operating in Nova Scotia until 1964 (Thornhill 328)—and ad hoc racism. Non-institutionalized and surreptitious racist acts include, for example, disproportionate evictions by way of urban renewal projects (Blomley), such as the erasure of a historically Black neighbourhood in Vancouver, Hogan's Alley,[11] as well as ongoing instances of racial profiling,[12] and heightened rates of incarceration and structural poverty. Statistics speak volumes here: Akwatu Khenti finds that between 2010-2011, "Black inmates accounted for 9% of the federal prison population although Black Canadians only comprise 2.5% of the overall population," a figure that "represents a 52% increase" in a single decade (190). Comparing the grief and suffering of two of Canada's most historically oppressed groups, Khenti's data shows similarly horrifying findings for the Aboriginal people of Canada, who "comprise 3.8% of the national population but 21.5% of the incarcerated population" (191).[13]

The longest quotation from "Strange Fruit" in *From the Poplars* occurs in the section on pages 68-69. Nicholson's poet-speaker cites three lines from the song—the three lines before the song's last line: "*for the wind to suck, for the sun to rot, for the tree to drop*" (69, emphasis original). In the opening

lines of this section, the poet-speaker states, "this intersection / hold this" (68), before enacting a critique of capitalist labour through such lines as follow:

> refrain from the fuck and hoard
> or sale and clunky big block glare
> of nothing that matters
> . . . . . .
> what is work, what is a living
>
> unarchival ones all labour
> in cycles immaterial
> this material is meaning what is said[.]

The poet-speaker also speaks of the writing of history in this section: of "apophenia" and a "whole history out loud" (69). Nicholson's poet-speaker's dense lines bring forth a critique of the labour required for colonial belonging and its promise of having one's history revered, known, seen, and heard. I read this section as Nicholson's effort to unite the differential grievances of Black and Indigenous peoples of Canada—through the microcosm of a small island in British Columbia—in a textual space that can foster a broader "affective public," which Zizi Papacharissi describes as a "formation that is textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread" (133), while "amplify[ing] the awareness of a particular feeling, the intensity with which it is felt" (118).

In *From the Poplars*, the "intersection" between Indigenous and Black grief is associated with the notion of "hold." One of the key conceptual frames for Christina Sharpe's groundbreaking *In the Wake*, the hold carries multiple meanings. Literally, it is the location in transatlantic slave ships where African bodies were held as they were transported across the Middle Passage. Sharpe signals the word's other reverberations as well: "continue to follow (a particular course); keep or detain (someone); a fortress" (*OED* qtd. in Sharpe 68). Sharpe's text poignantly argues that, while chattel slavery has officially ended, Black being continues to inhabit "the afterlives of that brutality that is not in the past" (99) and to "survive (and more) the afterlife of property" (18)—this is what it means to be *in the wake*. Thus, the original hold of the ship, which coded Black bodies as property, continues to propel such bodies in this particular course, and continues to detain (and brutalize) them under duress. Building on Sharpe, Tavleen Purewal mobilizes the

concept of the "hold" to express kinship relations between Black and Indigenous figures in Canadian/Turtle Island literatures, calling it "a spatial and epistemological condition for relations between Indigenous and diasporic subjects" (95). In my reading of *From the Poplars* as Sharpian "wake work" (Sharpe 17), Nicholson's poetics seeks to find new "form for this work" (Sharpe 19), through which she grapples with the ongoing violences towards Black and Indigenous people in this nation-state, by this nation-state. Nicholson enacts Sharpe's hopeful transmogrifying of "hold" to "beholden": "to hold by some tie of duty or obligation, to retain as a client or person in duty bound" (*OED* qtd. in Sharpe 100-01). *From the Poplars* therefore exemplifies Nicholson's working through of Sharpe's question: "In what ways might we enact a beholden-ness to each other, laterally?" (100).

Nicholson's poet-speaker infuses the particular "hold" of Poplar Island as one of shared emotional suffering as a result of being denied full-personhood status. Why labour, asks Nicholson's poet-speaker, since it achieves "nothing that matters" (68)—neither legal, social, status, psychological, cultural, or cathartic gains? Those who have written the extant official histories are compelled by selective apophenia. While Trutch's racism is overt, Stephen Harper's myopic notion that this nation has "no history of colonialism" (qtd. in Ljunggren) belies Canada's unwillingness to look at its past. What the poet-speaker *can* do is labour on the creation of a counter-history: in the text's epigraph, Nicholson's poet-speaker states, "I am writing a book of poetry. A minor purchase of property." This line is empowering in one light due to its insistence on taking back some space from the colony that has denied full entrance to certain aforementioned groups. However, its dual meaning also suggests Nicholson's poet-speaker's own anxieties about the writing of this text, anxieties that gesture to Vernon's stated aims with respect to trying to "make things right." In the writing of *From the Poplars*, the author makes a claim to a different reading of history, space, and social actors in the Canadian state—a claim that could be read as another act of violence or erasure.

Nicholson's poet-speaker cites the haunting lines from Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," which conjure a vision of both human and ecological loss: smallpox epidemics causing Qayqayt mass burial sites, the maw of deforestation. And yet, for Nicholson's poet-speaker precisely, when such

sights are encountered by diasporic "Blackness," what "emerges at this place?" (King 207). While landmark land claim cases such as Calder (1973), Delgamuukw (1997), and Haida (2001) have been won at the Supreme Court of Canada, the people of the Qayqayt First Nation continue to lack a land base, despite the tireless efforts of Chief Rhonda Larrabee, whose work has already restored fishing and status rights to her people ("Reclaiming Roots").

Black people in Canada face different forms of injustice in the Canadian state. Compton writes of conversations that he has with people he meets in his city: "There are no black people in Vancouver, people often say," to which he responds, "Twenty thousand-plus people are here and there—somehow unseen. This is a good place to begin . . . a subjective exploration of how and why this history matters" (105). Yvonne Brown similarly writes of feeling like a "ghost made flesh" (382) who is charged with reminding folks who fail to see Black presence and pain in Canada. Such an "optical illusion" (Compton 105) arises because "the realities of Black life in contemporary Canada remain shrouded behind a carefully curated national mythology of racial equality" (Maynard 50). Black abolitionist scholars, artists, and activists seek to educate the broader Canadian public that "[t]here can be no realization of the scale of the infliction of White pain on Black bodies without a sense of both the historical and contemporary displacement and dispossession of African bodies from their homelands in Africa" (Brown 379), as well as a sense of how this dispossession via transatlantic colonial capitalism leads to social effects such as structural poverty, the disproportionate incarceration and criminalization of Black subjects, and the "chronic psychological stress" and "humiliation associated with racial profiling" (Khenti 193), among other harmful effects. Canadian colonial leaders feel vindicated in perpetuating a myth of Canada's supposed moral superiority to its southern neighbour, but this myth is predicated upon their denial of slavery in this nation.

Revolutionary Forms: Protest Songs

Billie Holiday's version of "Strange Fruit" has been called "the first great protest song" (Lynsky). Nicholson's *From the Poplars* follows in this legacy. Abel Meeropol, who published under the pen name Lewis Allan, was a son of Russian Jewish immigrants. He composed his poem "Bitter Fruit" in 1930 after "seeing a photo depicting the lynching of two Black teens in Indiana"

(Fields). After publishing the poem in both education and Marxist political journals, he set it to music. Billie Holiday first heard of the song during her years performing at New York's first integrated nightclub, Café Society in Greenwich Village. Angela Davis writes of how "Strange Fruit" stood out among Holiday's repertoire of mostly love songs since it was a "song with urgent and far-reaching social implications" (210), a song that "almost singlehandedly changed the politics of American popular culture and put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture" (212). The song depicts Black bodies being lynched; however, for Holiday the song also spoke to the "daily routines of discrimination" (Davis 221) under which her own father passed (he died of pneumonia in a segregated hospital ward). Janelle Hobson writes that Holiday "link[ed] the lynching scene to her father's experience of racism, which literally killed him and which shaped her own struggles as a woman and an artist" (447).

"Strange Fruit" functioned as an "affective public" by creating communities of people and propelling them to action through the dissemination of passionate emotions.[14] *Time* magazine named it the "Song of the Century" in 1999 (Fields), likely due to its effect upon altering social consensus (Davis 224). *From the Poplars*' referencing of "Strange Fruit" indicates the linkages between the two works in terms of their abilities to call out social injustice and spark revolutionary action. The Canadian state has attempted to differentiate itself from the US through such notions as that it is not culpable for racist, demoralizing acts like lynchings and slavery. Yet, as Nicholson's collection unveils, in the territories known as Canada, racially motivated acts of genocide, violence, dispossession, and "daily routines of discrimination" (Davis 221) against Indigenous and Black peoples (as well as other historically oppressed groups) have occurred since the arrival of the colonizers and continue through to this day. The revolution on Turtle Island is only gathering momentum as Black and Indigenous artists, activists, and thinkers come together to stand against injustice.

Working within the broader context of the long documentary poem, *From the Poplars* calls upon poetic techniques of erasure, appropriation, and the "found" text. The use of appropriation is exceedingly apt in Nicholson's text in that appropriation formed the basis of core legal doctrines (e.g., the Doctrine of Discovery) that enabled the Canadian colonial government to

usurp control over the lands of Turtle Island (Dowling 104). Nicholson's text cuts up and reconfigures official records in order to highlight the absurdity of their claims and to demonstrate the racism embedded within the majority of legal, civic, and policy decisions made in the territories currently called Canada. Nicholson invokes the histories of Poplar Island through her intensive research in the New Westminster Archives, and also via conversations with locals and city employees. In her acknowledgements, she explains how "*From the Poplars* is influenced by a number of texts and many more conversations. The conversations were not documented and I have not quoted from them . . . The views presented herein are my own" (94). As opposed to the prejudicial history presented in the New Westminster Archives, Nicholson is not attempting to write *the* story of Poplar Island, but to demonstrate her author/speaker's own reconfiguring of this space through listening to oral histories alongside analyzing government records.

Nicholson's fusion of official records such as policy documents, correspondence from government officials, bills, and charters alongside her poetic speaker's own lyric lines underscores the author's genealogical debt to BC poet and activist Dorothy Livesay who, in her landmark essay "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre" (1969), asserts that such writing "creates a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" (267). Despite it being hailed here as a Canadian genre, this method functions to critique the underlying colonial sources and records of the Canadian state and therefore to uphold acts of revisionist history, as called for by postcolonial and decolonial scholars across Turtle Island such as Keith Thor Carlson. Carlson argues that non-Western sources, especially Indigenous sources, need to be taken seriously, "even if, as in the case of the myth-like stories, they cannot be corroborated by archival documents or western science" (199). For Carlson, such an approach "not only leads to scholarship that is inclusive and meaningful to indigenous peoples, it also helps us create and hopefully make more accurate histories" (199-200). In *From the Poplars*, Nicholson does not cite the oral sources from which she learns of Poplar Island's unofficial histories, focusing instead on privileging the "views presented herein [as] my own." This is not to say that oralities and non-Western sources are not of great import, but more so that the poet-speaker is self-reflexively engaging with the complexities of writing the

past as per the subjective stance of documentary poetry, as well as navigating her own potential complicity in terms of how to "make things right" without errantly erasing or misattributing another's version of events. As "wake work" (Sharpe 17), Nicholson's project faces an additional impasse: "How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?" (Sharpe 20).

As is the case with poetic forms, taxonomy is often at issue. Appropriation as a poetic tactic is most notably found within conceptual poetry; however, as Sarah Dowling points out, "it is just as common in documentary poetry, essay poems, and pastiches . . . The technique thus crosses with seeming ease between apparently opposed styles and schools" (98). Holding up *From the Poplars* as a documentary poem that deploys the techniques of appropriation, this essay aims to insert this text into a canon of post- and decolonial poetic texts by authors such as Jordan Abel, Layli Long Soldier, Rachel Zolf, Sonnet L'Abbé, Shane Rhodes, and M. NourbeSe Philip. Who does the appropriating—and how—has always been a contentious issue in studies of literary intertextuality (Hutcheon). Such debates have risen to a fever pitch in the wake of criticisms of acts of appropriative poetics such as the likes of Kenneth Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown" (2015).

From the Poplars is situated within debates in the poetic schools of the avant-garde—the "found," erasure, appropriation, and documentary poetry—due to its marked commitment to dissent and social activism via literary work. For instance, unlike Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown," Nicholson's *From the Poplars* does not replicate what Cathy Hong Park decries as "the delusion of whiteness" in avant-garde conceptual writing: wherein a poet can assert themselves as "post-identity," pick and choose from a seemingly endless array of source texts, and discount the identities and subjectivities for whom those source texts caused actual violence, potentially including harassment, surveillance, profiling, deportation, dislocation, biological warfare, and genocide. *From the Poplars*, instead, enacts an appropriative poetics that promotes shared grieving through the development of an "affective public" between Black and Indigenous peoples of Canada/Turtle Island. Nicholson achieves this feat, I argue, by building what Sonnet L'Abbé calls "contexts of anti-oppression" around the poetry (219).

Nicholson creates such anti-oppressive contexts through commitment to her poetry's ethical aims, as opposed to militancy to a particular form or

school of conceptual writing. Recently, writers from historically oppressed groups have questioned the need for labels and manifestos in conceptual writing—calling instead for the work's revolutionary qualities to be centred, as opposed to the poet's own purist and egoic tendencies. Park, for instance, critiques the avant-garde manifesto for "its tone of masculinist and expansionist militancy" and its enforcement of "an aggressive divide-and-conquer framework." Shane Rhodes, too, in his own anti-manifesto, deconstructs the obsession towards classification in conceptual writing with his practical assertion that "found poetry should probably be seen more as a technique with varying levels of application than a poetic sub-genre." As Rhodes conceptualizes it, found poetry exists along an expansive "axis that ranges from non-interventionist at one extreme . . . to the other end where the found text is doctored, and 'poeticized,' and, perhaps, included within a larger unfound structure." For Rhodes, then, what matters is not the codification of the level of the "doctoring," but rather the text's commitment to "dissent": "Today's found poetry thrives in counter-discourse—not just finding texts but speaking back to them with, and within, their own worlds." For example, Goldsmith's infamous appropriative act fails to contextualize Brown's autopsy report within its political and historical complexities and specificity. Although Goldsmith has since defended himself as an ally of the Black Lives Matter movement (Sandhu), his inability to reflexively self-position himself as a white, American male poet of privilege within the text of "The Body of Michael Brown" means that this act of appropriation primarily serves to "reiterat[e] hate speech" (L'Abbé 219). Conversely, Nicholson's poet-speaker is a figure in the text—one who questions, queries, reflects, and responds to the histories of Poplar Island. Moreover, this poet-speaker is someone familiar with the perpetual grieving (Nicholson, "Conversations" 75) of being a "second-class citizen" (Thornhill 324) of the Canadian nation-state and so can speak from the position of experiential affective embodiment.

Nicholson's speaker's *talking back* is crucial to the revolutionary potential of this work. Jordan Abel, whose conceptual writings represent some of the most impressive of Canadian twenty-first century poetics, writes, "Conceptual/literary appropriation . . . allows me to comment not only on the destructive mechanisms and outcomes of appropriation, but also allows

me to begin to explore pathways back through/out of appropriation" (292). Michael Nardone, in his essay "On Settler Conceptualism," also troubles the colonial imperative to name and quantify techniques at the expense of their functionality: "I am less dedicated to a taxonomical title, and more concerned with the compositional tactics they share." Nardone calls for conceptual writing that "confront[s] the various collective assemblages of enunciation that address particular structures of power . . . a poetics that document[s] the institutional voices of settler-colonial empire—its texts, processes, and performances."

Nicholson's *From the Poplars* enacts modes of dissent advocated by writers like Abel, Rhodes, Park, and Nardone. In a December 28, 1912 letter from gas plant executive John A. Lee to Premier of BC Richard McBride (1903-15), Lee describes his plan to remove a "Westminster Indian" woman, Mary Agnes Vianin, from her reserve land by offering her $2,500 (48). Nicholson appropriates and cites Lee's epistle in the following manner: "I might say, we are very anxious to get this little piece of ~~right of way~~ the reserve, as we propose to erect our Gas Plant (Municipal) and give the C.N. Rly. Co. a right-of-way through it" (48). Nicholson's addition of "~~right of way~~," with the strikethrough, fills in the assumptions about who will best monetize the land. The repetition of the phrase with a difference also pulls it out of context and encourages readers to consider it as colonial doublespeak: Who in the Colony is entitled to the right-of-way? In the schema of the Canadian state, railways take precedence over human life.

Because appropriation "refers to legalized processes of taking, and to the sovereign power to do so," Sarah Dowling reminds scholars of poetics, "it is inextricably bound up with the logics of property undergirding settler colonialism" (104). Nicholson's speaker employs this process of deconstructing the colonial language that justifies land theft and human dislocation: "displacement: talking about what is not present in space / and time // recursive language about language / productivity: use of language to create language // capacity / for displacement recursively, and productivity in language" (75). Nicholson's appropriative poetics displace the diction of the master's language, wresting it from the contexts in which it supposedly *made sense*, and determining the illogical, racist premises upon which it was based. Indigenous peoples were written out of their land through the use of a

weaponized English whose power was not apparent to them; Black people in Canada face continued second-class citizen status in a nation that consistently congratulates itself for its supposed lack of anti-Black racism.

In a section that speaks expressly to the suffering inflicted upon Black and Indigenous peoples in the Canadian state, *From the Poplars* cites the song indirectly with the lines "each crooked strange fruit / every stoop (we had) / we were used to / *domination and death*" (82, emphasis original). Debates in intertextuality studies during the heyday of postmodernism often revolve around Julia Kristeva's two axes of intertextuality: Hutcheon interprets Kristeva's axis as "a horizontal one of the dialogue of the author with his/her potential reader, and a vertical one between the text itself and other texts" (Hutcheon 231). However, for Linda Hutcheon, developing upon Michael Riffaterre, intertextuality necessarily depends upon "the reader and his/her memory of other texts" (231), which means that it is "only the reader who can activate the 'intertext'" (Hutcheon 232).

Conclusion: Activation

In arguing that both "Strange Fruit" and *From the Poplars* constitute and produce "affective publics," I claim that these works activate readers towards political action. As Davis writes of "Strange Fruit," "Holiday's gift of aesthetic communication did not consist simply in her ability to render in song the profound emotions underlying her private woes . . . she also achieved a mode of expression that forged community even as it remained deeply personal" (222). Growing protest movements in Canada/Turtle Island, including Black Lives Matter and LANDBACK movements such as Idle No More and those in support of the Wet'suwet'en peoples, demonstrate publics activated by rage, grief, and compassion. The horrors of lynching are often portrayed as acts that happened *in the past* and *not in this nation.* However, by interweaving the intertextual references to "Strange Fruit" in *From the Poplars*, Nicholson's poet-speaker attempts to activate her readers to see not only that violent and murderous injustices towards oppressed and racialized groups are ongoing in the Canadian state, but also that their lack of representation in the public-facing accounts of Canada's imagined community[15] represents a further act of injustice. Deconstructing one of the core tenets of Anderson's concept, Lucia Lorenzi asks, "*How far are we willing—or forced—to go in order to defend it or*

suffer for [the "imagined community" of Canada]?" (80, emphasis original). At a recent event, Syrus Marcus Ware spoke of the new and urgent waves of protest beginning in 2020-2021. Rinaldo Walcott writes that "abolition has ignited imaginations in a manner that is essential for real change" (13). For many, it seems, the time is up.

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NOTES

1 The city of New Westminster, part of the Metro Vancouver Regional District, is home to approximately 70,000 inhabitants, four per cent of whom self-identify as Indigenous (Stern 305). New Westminster was named by Queen Victoria, and thus nicknamed "The Royal City"; the city was thought to become the capital of British Columbia, but it lost this title to the city of Victoria, located on the southernmost tip of Vancouver Island. The city's location on the Fraser River delta offered the ideal conditions for the transport of goods northwards up the British Columbia coast, as well as southwards to the United States, and across the Pacific Ocean to ports in Asia.

2 When the province of British Columbia wedded itself to the Dominion of Canada in 1871, section 92 (5) of the Constitution Act deemed that public lands–i.e., "land not legally transferred to individual owners or for reserves" (Barman 4)—fell under the control of the province.

3 Also see note 13 below.

4 See, for example, Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence, "Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada," and Pamela Edmonds, "Artefact: Landscapes of Forgetting," as well as many of the texts that I cite throughout and that appear in the works cited.

5 Esmerelda M. A. Thornhill's article provides a comprehensive overview of the legal and social treatment of Black Canadians in the land currently called Canada. For instance, she writes of how, in the interwar period, Black people were not protected by discrimination policies: "In taverns, restaurants, music halls, theatres, cinemas, and even in cemeteries, across Canada, Blacks were denied admittance and service. Law's clear priority was to protect the comfort level and interests of racially prejudiced White Canadians" (330). Thornhill points to evidence of the Canadian state enforcing "Jim Crow Policy during World War I by setting up the No. 2 Construction Battalion" (329-30), purportedly due to pressure from white soldiers. When the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP) appealed Viola Desmond's case, the judge concurred that the charge was a "'surreptitious endeavour' to enforce Jim Crow rule by misuse of a public statute" (Thornhill 332).

6 See especially Angela Davis' chapter "Strange Fruit: Music and Social Consciousness," in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

7 I owe this citation to Karina Vernon's essay "Beyond National Time." Vernon also remarks on the significant influence of Stuart Hall on Siemerling's thinking about identity.

8 In July of 2021, Vancouver City Council passed a motion to rename the Kitsilano street currently bearing Trutch's name with a Musqueam name (Dickson).

9 Brian Egan argues that the modern treaty process in British Columbia has served, in many instances, to entrench dominant colonial forms of property through continued disregard for Indigenous conceptualizations of land and ownership (33).

10 Here Thornhill is also citing from James W. St. G. Walker's *The Black Loyalists*.

11 Wayde Compton explains how Black people in the city called Vancouver were quasi-segregated in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood of Hogan's Alley. Black porters working on the Canadian Pacific Railway began to hang out and rent rooms in this neighbourhood. A white city planner [the "city planner" is Leonard C. Marsh, and he is not advocating this lack of welcome but—despite the problematic nature of his "plan"—describing it, as Compton makes clear] is quoted as saying that "many of [the Black people] could afford to live elsewhere, but it is too obvious that they would be unwelcome" (qtd. in Compton 89). In 1931, the area was re-zoned as industrial, which made it difficult for Black families living there to attain mortgages or loans for home improvements (Compton 90). By 1939, City Council began to pressure landlords in the neighbourhood to evict families under the guise of clearing the neighbourhood as a site of "squalor, immorality, and crime" (Stepler qtd. in Compton 91), but in reality the city wanted to build the Georgia Viaduct through the neighbourhood by way of connecting Vancouver's downtown with highway infrastructure to the suburbs.

12 Scot Wortley and Julian Tanner argue that, because the Canadian Black community is subject to much greater surveillance, they are also much more likely to be caught when they break the law than white people who engage in the same forms of criminal activity (200). Further, Canadian policing systems fail to racially disaggregate stop-and-search data, which prevents any meaningful change of these policies (200).

13 Khenti's respective sources for this data are Scot Wortley and Akwasi Owusu-Bempah, "The Usual Suspects" and Canada, Office of the Correctional Examiner, "Spirit Matters."

14 Angela Davis explains that, while public sentiment was beginning to shift during the Great Depression, lynchings were still occurring, despite there being fewer victims (215). First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt joined the NAACP in 1934 and began working on an anti-lynching law, which her husband subsequently refused to pass. Notably, lynching was criminalized as a hate crime by the US Senate only in 2018 (Viebeck).

15 In her contemporary update of the long-standing metaphor of the "imagined community" of the nation-state, Lucia Lorenzi points to a controversial tenet of Anderson's concept—namely, that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (qtd. in Lorenzi 80). Writing on the UBC Accountable letter and its ensuing fallout, Lorenzi questions the ramifications for the imagined community that is CanLit: "*What are the actual inequalities and exploitations that prevail within it? How is this 'deep, horizontal comradeship' constructed and upheld, and by whom? How far are we willing—or forced—to go in order to defend it or suffer for it*?"

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Tolu Oloruntoba

Carduelis: Behavioral Interview

Describe your interaction with a difficult
headwind, your rise against it: pinions
the heart valves of a reluctant death,
trashing in a drown of blue blood;

your method of staying aloft,
palm of a heavy sky on your brow, how you swam,
cycled, climbed drafts that were flash flood,
then viscid wax, avalanche then mudslide.

Tell me: of the time you had to rely
on intermittent, and maneuvering flight;
a time you faced conflict while
stargazing, twirling, flying poor,

a contradiction of plumbing bobs.
Describe that time. You struggled to build
a burrow—to vole, through tracts of sky,
a tunnel that wouldn't collapse.

Discuss your mnemotaxis. If earth
were a pond with landmarks, lily pads
that brought you here, for the way back, how did you bank,
twirling bags of drag in locomotion?

What was memorable on your trips
from one cage stack, and cul-de-sac, to the next?
We all make mistakes we wish we could take back.
Having leached your bony calcium for eggshells,

do you wish you'd held some back?
Describe a time you showed leadership
of your flagging apparatus, motivating your team
of body and will into volant assembly.

You saw a problem, you took the initiative
to consist, cohere.
Tell me about a time you failed.
What lessons did you learn

about the transactional conviviality
of captive flocks? How did you learn
not to mistake the dancing, the undulating flight
of your flock for a party, a family?

They parted for predators and you fell,
in ornithopter rain, to earth.
In a time you were under a lot of pressure,
tell me about a time you set a goal for yourself,

how you achieved it.
What I really want you to tell me is
how you took your red mask again,
to renew your fight against the fall.

Note: *italicized portions quote or modified from L. Zhang. (21 April 2015). 30 Common Behavioral Interview Questions. Accessed 8 June 2019, from https://www.themuse.com/advice/30-behavioral-interview-questions-you-should-be-ready-to-answer Additional reference made to BW Tobalske. "Biomechanics of bird flight."* Journal of Experimental Biology *2007 210: 3135-3146, doi: 10.1242/jeb.000273; The Birdcare Company. (n.d.). Neck twisting and poor flying. Accessed 9 June 2019, from https://birdcareco-shop.com/neck-twisting-and-poor-flying/; and G. Ellison (13 June 2018). Nature Journal: Goldfinches soar with the grace of ballet dancers. Retrieved June 9, 2019, from https://www.citizen-times.com/story/life/2018/06/13/nature-journal-goldfinches-soar-grace-ballet-dancers/676830002/.*

Toyah Webb

Ash-Memory, (M)other Tongues, and Spectral Poetics in Erín Moure's *The Unmemntioable*

Born in Canada, Erín Moure is a multilingual poet and translator of French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Galician. Moure's work is often meta-poetic, exploring themes of identity (*O Resplandor*), embodiment (*O Cidadán*), and memory (*Kapusta*). The lingering presence of the Holocaust also dominates much of Moure's work; while Moure's father was born in Canada, her maternal family emigrated from western Ukraine in 1929, with the threat that became the Shoah. Natalie Harkin, the Narungga poet and theorist, has proposed the term "blood memory" as a concept that fosters a link between the collective present and ancestral heritage (6). However, in Moure's poetry it is ash—not blood—that forms this link. Moure's thirteenth book, *The Unmemntioable* (2012), brings ashes to historical ashes. A personal, poetic, and genre-bending text, *The Unmemntioable* investigates the limits of language in the face of illness, death, and loss. Moure moves between multiple languages to invoke the Ukraine's troubled history, subsequently drawing attention to the overwhelming absence of certain voices in dominant historical narratives. *The Unmemntioable* seeks to re-people history, asking whether it is possible to embody the language of one's forebears. Is poetry a means of processing and preserving cultural memory? If so, how does the poet testify?

The Unmemntioable is a book that begins with the remainder. At its centre stands the present-absent body of Moure's mother, a ghost who haunts the text. Her spectre makes the book possible, just as the poet's words make her

presence possible; chronologically, the book can only exist after she is gone—a work of memory, mourning, and remnants. In the opening pages of *The Unmemntioable*, the poet (E.M.) returns to the Ukraine to bury her mother's ashes in her ancestral homeland, "in the grove where once a latin church stood" (14). By evoking history's palimpsestic traces, Moure brings the present into a dialogue with the past, where "[o]pening the earth" becomes an act of remembering, crossing the line from passive memory to evocation (Moure 14). The village, Velyki Hlibovychi (Великі Глібовичі), is situated in the Lviv Oblast of western Ukraine. As part of the disputed borderlands between Poland and the Ukraine, Velyki Hlibovychi lies in an area of historically shifting borders (Brown 1). Already a place of demographic upheaval and lingual fluidity, the first half of the twentieth century saw these borderlands transition into a zone of war and destruction: World War I, famine, collectivization, deportation, the "Eastern Front," and the Holocaust. During the multiple occupations of World War II, entire communities in western Ukraine were murdered, often on "the basis of an / accent" (Moure 7). This reading thus grows from theories of intergenerational and historical trauma. The term "intergenerational trauma" first appeared in the 1960s, after the Canadian psychologist Vivian M. Rakoff and his colleagues documented psychological distress among many children of Holocaust survivors. Similarly, the research of psychoanalyst Dori Laub has shown how traumatic events may affect an entire generation. As *The Unmemntioable* confronts the past, a polyphony of voices emerges: other tongues and mother tongues return to haunt the present.

The Unmemntioable is made possible by the absent presence of the poet's mother. It is no surprise then that the first poetic shape of the book begins with an absent referent:

> Like the cataclysm's first name.
> Like chagrin's first companion, error.
> Dreamed all night of _ _ _ _ _.
>
> Held out the crevasse of my hands for water. (3)

These two anaphoric instances of "like" immediately signal similitude—a linguistic event that deflects signification by gesturing elsewhere. In a simple simile, the vehicle points back to what it is compared with and the poetic

formula forms a closed loop (*x* is like *x*). Theoretically, there is nothing to stop similitude from forming a never-ending chain, just as the *trace* performs the process of endless deferral within language. Yet the instances of "like" that appear in this poetic shape are neither a closed loop of similitude nor a chain. Instead, the function of "like" is subverted by the absence of an antecedent. If there is a chain, every other link is absent: the lines are rendered incomplete and the simile becomes opaque. However, perhaps similitude is not subverted at all but rather gestures to something that is unrepresentable in language; the similes may also lead forward to the third line, to the dream's absent referent. Represented by five underscores, this untethered likeness performs its own absence—in this case, the absent name or word. The absent referent becomes a marker of absence itself.

The subjects of each line are compared with an ontology of absence: "The cataclysm's first name" is "like" absence, as is "chagrin's first companion, error" (3). However, meaning is still opaque. Cataclysm's first name is not given, nor is it clear how error is the first companion of chagrin. The nouns deflect designation, while the lack of verbs lingually deprives them of any agentive potency. This lack of verbal action also causes the two lines to exist statically yet suddenly, an effect emphasized by the sharpness of the *k* in "like," as well as by the finality of the periods that enclose each line. In fact, the similes seem to come from out of nowhere: a cataclysm. The word "cataclysm" can refer to a sudden event either in the natural world or in the political order, but it always implies violence. A cataclysm shocks the existing state of things and changes them irrevocably. However, here "the cataclysm's first name"—the specific ruptural event—remains undefined, and the antecedent that describes it is absent (or *is* absence). The cataclysm thus prevents itself from being delineated, mimicking the effects of trauma upon language. In his book *After the End*, James Berger writes that "[t]rauma is what returns . . . The traumatic event is always reconstructed in retrospect; when it occurs, it is only a silent or screaming gap, wound, or void" (79). By eliciting gaps, trauma disrupts the representational surface of language. It is a remnant—the trace of an original referent. In *The Unmemntioable,* "the cataclysm" functions in the same way; it gestures to a specific traumatic event in the past, yet lingers as its effect in the present. "Cataclysm" is both sign and index of the event.

When the verb "dreamed" appears two lines below the cataclysm, it indexes a subject's private interior. However, the body itself is occluded, as is the object of the verb. Language is displaced from the body and, without an object, the verb has nowhere to settle. Where the syntactic object would conventionally appear are five underscores (an orthographic character originally found in a printer's drawer). Typographical features are often used unconventionally in Moure's book, highlighting the artifice of their presence. Italicized words give the impression that they are from elsewhere, while semi-transparent text imitates a palimpsest; the writing inside a curved bracket marks its difference from that contained by an angle bracket; Latin graphemes twist into Cyrillic. In *The Unmemntioable,* typographical markings serve as reading directions, mapping tonal shifts and moments of dissonance where the spectral voices of the book's transhistorical, translingual, and transgeographical ghosts interrupt and rub up against one another. This spectral poetics requires an engagement with differential reading forms, to elucidate the other voices afloat in each sign.

Each underscore on page three calls attention to a gap, as a site of polyvocal possibility. Like learning to read a corrupted manuscript (the lacunae of Greek papyri or the fissures in a Roman epigraph), the reader is prompted to pause and imagine a single sign in each typographically marked space. Each underscore (and thus gap) marks something singular, shown yet not shown, present yet absent—a coded singularity. In this cipher, a secret is sheltered, simultaneously readable and unreadable, like the unspeakable memory of a violent event: could _ _ _ _ _ mark the place of "a s h e s"? As an index of absence, these underscores require decoding. Here is what *is* and is not a remainder—ash. This typographically ashen ontology echoes the lingual indeterminacy of the previous lines, where the metonymic cataclysm gestures backward to its absent antecedent. By evoking the ruptural nature of trauma, the cataclysm is entangled with the poet's grief, and the underscores become despairing dashes of speechlessness.

Below the five underscores, there is a blank space, that takes up roughly half of the codical surface. It is as though language has dissolved entirely, transitioning from a marked absence to the complete departure of graphemes. However, this empty space is interrupted by a single line, in the bottom third of the page: "Held out the crevasse of my hands for water" (3). This is also the

first time a personal pronoun appears in the poetic material of *The Unmemntioable*. The proximity of "my" to "hands" reattaches a disappeared body back to language; where previously there were only agentive traces, the hands metonymize a body—yet one that remains textually absent. Although what occurs between "dreamed" and "held" is not articulated, there is a sudden shift in representation (opacity to transparency, in a metonymically activated body). The act of using one's hands to scoop up or catch water also implies containment, but the line trails off into empty space once more. When two hands are used as a vessel for water, there is always some liquid that escapes through the crack in the two palms. Here, language performs its meaning graphically: the body's hands cannot contain the water, just as the poet cannot contain the unrepresentable non-language of trauma, which seeps through the barrier of normative syntax. Moreover, this fluid non-language gestures back to the cataclysm—a word etymologically derived from the Greek *katakluzein*, "to wash away, to overwhelm." The cataclysm is metonymically indexed by "water," which simultaneously represents the very absence of representation. Speech turns to simile and simile to metonymy, but metonymy still points to absence, all the way down.

On page 5 of *The Unmemntioable*, the past seeps to the codical surface as a broken, testimonial voice:

> They burned those Polish houses, and drove them away.
>
> Who this them was. This they. They/this/them.
> (rain)
> (silence of rain)
> (we walk behind the woman who is not speaking)[.] (5)

Although the first instances of "they" and "them" are indeterminate, a division is clearly disclosed between two groups of people. The plural pronouns also occlude the singular person, and this lack of grammatical specificity creates an ambiguity—bodies are absented, but whose exactly? Who is the object of this violence? Who are "they?" Where is "them?" A multiplicity of absences looms. While it is ultimately violence that erases the singularity of the individual, the edge of each body is also blurred over time, dissolving into the language of testimony. Giorgio Agamben has pointed out the difference between the two Latin terms for "witness:"

testis and *superstes*. The former refers to a third-person witness, who stands outside the immediate experience of an event, whereas the latter refers to the witness who has lived through the experience (149). Here, there is a *testis.* Testimonial language is also signalled by the presence of a verb in the past tense: "was" makes it clear that the burning has already occurred. However, after an interlinear pause, the testimony becomes scrambled. The relative pronoun "who" at the start of the line indicates a question, yet the punctuation swerves into statement. The line then continues in fragments, punctuated by three periods. None of these fragments are full clauses; language gets stuck on the deixis and never reveals its referent. Eventually the space between words disappears altogether, a hyper-attenuation scored by the violence of three slashes. Something haunts this moment of remembering—a spectral presence shifting in the staccato of "they/this/them." Testimony ceases where the parentheses begin, yet the silences that linger on the page hum with polyvalence.

Thus, in its opening pages, *The Unmemntioable* signals its key poetic concerns, namely the complexity of representation after a traumatic event. How does language represent trauma, when the symbolic order is ruptured? How does one *read* ashes? In Moure's book, ashes carry the memory of the people and landscape that felt the barbarism of the twentieth century most keenly. By representing the remnants of the mother, a church, and houses "made of wood" alongside other textually present-absent bodies, the ashes in *The Unmemntioable* remember multiple fires (8). This ashy polyvalence also points to the presence of what is noticeably absent in the book's pages: the Holocaust. The Shoah stands as a dark shadow behind the text—the ultimate absent antecedent and the "limit case of representation in general" (Berger 62). Velyki Hlibovychi lies only seven kilometres to the southwest of Bíbrka, home to the Bíbrka ghetto, from which Jewish people were sent to the gas chambers at Bełzec; bones rattle under the Ukrainian soil. Geographically and historically, the Holocaust is necessarily lurking in *The Unmemntioable*'s textual ashes. As Jacques Derrida writes, "[ash is] what remains without remaining from the Holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration" (*Cinders* 43). But ashes are also what remain *by* remaining—a ghostly presence, an ongoing echo, both index and sign. By recalling the fire of history, *The Unmemntioable* signs its ash-memory.[1]

In 1982, Jacques Derrida published his short work *Feu la cendre*, which appeared in a bilingual French and English edition in 1991 as *Cinders*. It is a haunting and poetic work, concerned with what language carries within itself. Derrida theorizes that—like the endless deferral of the *trace*—the glowing heart of a word keeps burning and so can never be burned. This conception of language as both endless and un-burnable makes it the ideal means for the transmission of cultural memory. Yet Derrida's theory is immediately complicated in *The Unmemntioable*'s twentieth-century Eastern European context, where entire communities were ostracized, exiled, and murdered. Accompanied by this physical violence were regimes focused on the erasure of tradition and language through cultural amnesia. Nevertheless, when asked what remained of "her pre-exile European identity," the philosopher Hannah Arendt replied, "What remains? The language remains" (Weissman 142). Arendt was Jewish, yet retained her native German through years of exile in Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, France, and Portugal, before eventually settling in the United States. Arendt was by no means unique. Numerous exiled writers continued to write in the language of their homeland, even when "home" no longer existed. For some, this language was the same tongue of those who displaced them; for others, it was the language of a loved one's killer. For many, their writings are all that remain—ash-memory, lingering in language.

However, as time goes on, the tenuous threads that connect the past and the present begin to vanish. As those who survived the war grow old and die, their language is lost. What darker silence comes after their voices are gone? Is it possible to testify on their behalf? These questions are highlighted on page 13 of *The Unmemntioable*, which elucidates the problems underlying writing, memory, and record:

> Relationships written down instead of remembered, cuts the tie.
>
> When the relationship burns so does memory as this was passed to writing and the content of a writing burned can no longer be handed back to memory, for writing abolishes memory and as what was written can no longer be passed down, it has no Author in the old sense: no ability to *act as proxy to, to verify on behalf of*. (13)

Once memory is written down, it gives itself over to record and becomes volatile: "writing abolishes memory." In other words, inscribing memory in an external location invites the possibility of deferred remembering. If both

memory and record perish, the ashes that remain will be authorless and indecipherable. Without "the content of a writing burned," there is nothing to verify the truth of testimony, and without an author there is no testimony to verify the event. Ash-memory vanishes. And yet, writing does exist—this book, *The Unmemntioable*, remains "*to verify on behalf of*." However, testimony is complicated by Giorgio Agamben, who asks, "What is language as a remnant? How can a language survive the subjects and even the people that speak it? And what does it mean to speak in a remaining language?" (159). While this question properly refers to *a* language (such as Arendt's German), it also implicates Moure's testimonial poetics. The effects of trauma upon language have already been evidenced within *The Unmemntioable*: after a traumatic event, the language that remains to testify is broken and the symbolic order ruptured. It is a paradox, yet the book exists. How then does Moure's book access this "remaining," burning language? Where does it sign its own ashes?

Circling back to page five, there is a clue: "To *enfant* book and word. The word that can be lost and burned. The word that cannot <shibboleth>. The very birth of language" (5). What cannot "be lost and burned" is a *shibboleth*—a polysemous, enciphered sign. The word *shibboleth* derives from the Hebrew word *shibbólet*, which literally means an ear of grain, or less commonly, a river, stream, or flood. (Encased in its multiplicity of meanings, *shibboleth* already contains an echo of "the cataclysm.") However, in the Hebrew bible *shibboleth* also transformed into a password, both in meaning and effect. Derrida recounts this biblical story in his book *Sovereignties in Question:*

> [*Shibboleth*] was used during or after war, at the crossing of a border under watch. The meaning of the word was less important than the way in which it was pronounced . . . Now the Ephraimites were known for their inability to pronounce correctly the *shi* of *shibboleth*, which became for them, in consequence, an *unpronounceable name*. They said *sibboleth*, and, at the invisible border between *shi* and *si*, betrayed themselves to the sentinel at the risk of their life. They betrayed their difference by showing themselves indifferent to the diacritical difference between *shi* and *si*; they marked themselves with their inability to re-mark a mark thus coded. (22-23)

This usage has carried over into semiotics to describe the non-linguistic aspects of a culture. A *shibboleth* is a word, but also a silent mark of belonging or alterity, like an ichthys etched in the sand. "The word that cannot" (5) be burned is a flood, a password, a code, and a mark that permits

entry from the non-linguistic to the linguistic. Enclosed in its angle brackets and italics, *The Unmemntioable* signs and simultaneously performs its *shibboleth*, permitting entry into the "remnant language." As a sign situated inside *superstes* testimony, yet simultaneously outside experience, the *shibboleth* lies on an impossible threshold. "<shibboleth>" thus carries the poet over the "invisible border," into the voice of those already depa(o)rted—those silenced by time and war. Testimonial language is allowed passage from the void of trauma back into the symbolic order. Speak, ash-memory.

Yet there is also the geo-historical context of *The Unmemntioable* to consider, where language is doubled, tripled, and ripped apart—the "invisible border" itself criss-crossed by shifting thresholds. Part of the Lviv Oblast in the Ukraine, the village of Velyki Hlibovychi (Великі Глібовичі) was subject to the turbulent politics of the area, where even the names of places were burned, buried, and resurrected. Founded in the mid-thirteenth century, Lviv was the administrative centre of the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia, which lies within what is now western Ukraine. Polish control was established in 1349 (when the city's name was changed to Lwów), before it was invaded by the Cossacks in 1648, followed by Sweden in 1704. In the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Galicia became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the city was renamed with its German appellation, Lemberg. From 1873 Galicia became an autonomous province of Austria-Hungary, during which time Lemberg was an important cultural centre for Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish people. Yet not long after the beginning of World War I, Lemberg was occupied by Russia (1914-1915) and Lviv was resurrected. Lviv then became the governmental centre of the West Ukrainian National Republic, until Poland regained control in 1923 following the Polish-Ukrainian war. Galicia was formally recognized as part of the Polish state: Lviv to Lwów. Then in 1939, the Soviet Union invaded, and Lwów became the capital of the Lviv Oblast in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Germany occupied Lviv (Lemberg) in 1941, but the Soviet Union re-established power in 1944, after which it annexed the Ukraine.

Lviv, Lwów, Lemberg—a city of many names.[2] As names changed and borders shifted, so did language, which roamed everywhere. However, during the mass deportation of national minorities from the Soviet Union, deportees were identified based on a set of artificial definitions, predominantly language. This resulted in difficulties. As one Soviet inspector

tasked with identifying national minorities in the Ukraine recorded, "Ukrainians and Poles hardly differ from one another in their material existence beyond their conversational language—however, language too is problematic because the local Polish sounds very much like the local Ukrainian" (Brown 32-33). The inspectors discovered that much of the population was also bilingual due to the requirements of social life and trade. In *A Biography of No Place,* historian Kate Brown points out that "[w]hen asked to state their nationality, many peasants replied simply 'Catholic' . . . Other peasants said they spoke *po-chlopski,* 'in the peasant way,' or 'in the simple way' (*po-prostomu*), or 'the language of here' (*tutai'shi*)" (39).

Moure explores the implications of this lingual complexity when she writes,

> In the fields where people were once murdered on the basis of an accent. By asking locals the names for food, *pyrohy* or *pirogy*, they knew which language led at home, which is to say, at the table.
> . . . . . .
> Yet there was another name for the people of this place.
> тутещні. *Tuteshni. Tutejszy*. "The ones who live here." Local. (7)

Physical violence is immediately linked to language, as an accent becomes the difference between life and death. Once again, language functions as a *shibboleth*, yet now phonetic values are used to distinguish two groups by a third group, for violent purposes. However, this is resisted in line six, by two words that simultaneously bind to and separate themselves from the other: *Tuteshni* and *Tutejszy*, both of which mean "local" (in Ukrainian and Polish, respectively).[3] On the one hand, each word signals the negative implications of being "local" (necessarily excluding those who are not); on the other hand, the two words evoke the peasants' responses to the Soviet inspector when asked to state their ethnicity, revealing their understanding of belonging-together, regardless of dialectal difference. As locals, they speak "the language of here" (Brown 39). People do not come from Poland, the Ukraine, or Galicia, but from a place determined by a subjective reference—language is linked to place and place to identity. "When asked who they were," Brown elaborates, "villagers answered in a way that incorporated the complexities of the hybrid culture in which they lived. For them, identities were local, rooted in the soil of a particular river bed, forest, or valley" (40).

To deport someone from "here" dislocates all referents, which pivot around a central deictic marker. Without "here," there is no identity and thus no "I" to testify. The relationship between numerator (a village name, a personal name, language) and denominator (place body, person body, tongue) is cleaved. Stripped of language, the "I" vanishes, becomes spectral. Where then, is the *shibboleth*? Where is the "language of here"?

In *The Writing of History,* scholar Michel de Certeau summons the absent figure of history—the "forever silent" dead who have themselves lost the ability to speak (2). Certeau writes that this absent figure is necessarily a mute presence, a phantasm continually indexed by the historian for whom they are a subject: "[D]ead souls resurge, within the work whose postulate was their disappearance and the possibility of analyzing them as an object of investigation" (36-37). The writing of history, as Certeau states, is a "representative labor that places both absence and production in the same area" (5). Historical narrative favours round figures, which systematically erase the individual—the absent figure becomes ontologically multiple and risks being subsumed *by* history, its face rubbed blank by time. In other words, history is studded with gaps. Yet for Certeau, the absent figure is also a voice —an *Infans* that does not, strictly speaking, speak (2). "This is the sound that arises from the lacuna," an impossibly loud murmur that cannot be captured with dates or names, nor platformed in the official discourses of history (Agamben 38). Instead, the voice comes from the place of "non-language" behind the text, beyond the mediation of a human tongue.

The Unmemntioable problematizes this notion of a historical narrative grounded in erasure, and instead lingers in the gaps. The book demonstrates that where the historian does not listen, the poet does. But *where* exactly does the poet listen? And what does she listen for? Where does language go when displaced from the bodies that speak it? Realising that her connection with the mother tongue ends at the mother, E.M.'s unsettled poetics pivot away from her ashy outline to seek out the other absent figures who haunt the text. These are the figures who mix with the mother in the black earth of Velyki Hlibovychi—spectres with their own tongues. The *shibboleth* (without which the poet cannot collapse testimonial positions, cannot correct the historical record) does not end with the mother, but can be traced back to these historically absented others. Following Certeau, the absent figure is

voice, is tongue, is *shibboleth*—a chain of ghostly metonymy for the poet to follow. Mute, the absent figure calls out from the lacuna:

> Marked by that foreign word, marked too by imperial consequence
> and time, peeled from the mud of labour, s_rr_w too harvested of v_wels
> f_r tr_ut[.] (Moure 9)

As in the first poetic shape of the book, gaps are marked by underscores, which index a missing sign. However, in this instance the skeleton of each perforated word is present and thus still able to be read following the insertion of a single vowel: "s*o*rr*o*w," "v*o*wels," "f*o*r" and "tr*o*ut." *O* rises slowly to the surface of hearing. The letter *O* is a presence that circles its own absence, which it swaddles and draws attention to, a haunted form that—like a spectre—always gestures elsewhere. *O*, a letter that is a number. A shape that is a mouth. A silence that is a sound. *O*, the site of "elsewhere" or the genealogical "here." As a figure of absence, it is only natural that the absent figure be glimpsed within *O*'s frame. What then, does the poet do with the displaced *O*—this moving centre of silence?

While *O* is mute, it also attempts to carry the sound of "Oh" off the page. *O* performs vocality, a "strange androgynous intonation" that the gaps make present (Derrida, *Cinders* 18). Where there was previously an opaque barrier between the poet and the non-language behind the text, there is suddenly an opening from which affect spills out. With a polysemous cry, a ghostly body is inscribed into literate space, in the ricocheting "Oh!" that reacts to physical and emotional stimuli, or in the "O(h)" of a direct address. "Oh!" is a sound the body makes involuntarily, interrupting the flow of breath. It is an utterance that conveys affect, rather than "meaning," and might signify surprise, anger, pleasure, shock, or pain. Affect is drawn from its source and into the space of sound, thus fastening a bodily subject to language (*O* is a letter that looks like a body part). "Oh!" cries out to communicate a violence done to the body, a body "harvested of v[o]wels"—that is, silenced (Moure 9). The repetition of this stolen "Oh!" also creates a staccato that punctures the surrounding text, a silent pulse highlighting the absence of an audible one. Breath stops and the heart stutters, so that death is the language of the body.

The *O* of apostrophe ("Oh" as opposed to "Oh!") announces a direct address. This "Oh" calls out *to* someone, extending beyond the boundaries of the body. Although "Oh" remains bodily in its source (the mouth), the intention of the utterance is to pass beyond—to escape—the body of the speaking subject. After the "Oh!" comes the "Oh," which spreads out from the affective centre. A narrative of suffering begins to materialize, lattice-like, inserted into the skeletal words that have been "harvested of v[o]wels." The absent figure cries out for help again and again, five times—five circular stamps of desperation. But the cry goes no further: no one responds to the address, which halts at the edge of *O* and is left unresolved. This is reminiscent of the dying body of the poet's mother, where language transforms into sound: "I remember the last sound my own mother called out in the city of my birth, in Calgary. A sigh, an interpellation that refused to articulate its word" (Moure 45).

The sigh that refuses to articulate evokes the breathy *O* of an address that does not settle, a final bodily sound. Death is the language of the body and death speaks. It is not uncommon to hear death—a "death rattle" that may manifest as a soft moan, splutter, or gurgle. In *Autobiography of Death,* the Korean poet Kim Hyesoon instructs her interlocutor (fellow poet and translator Don Mee Choi) to "listen to the body's speech—you hear the hiccups, coughs, phlegm bubbling up" (100). Vowels are the grammar of the body and the grammar of dying, which death eventually censors. In the excerpt above, E.M. also draws attention to Calgary—her place of birth, but not her mother's—to rearticulate the tenuous link between language and place. Here, the body is doubly harvested of vowels, both in death and displacement. Visible in *The Unmemntioable*'s gaps, *O* performs as a multiple link between the humanimal body and the lingual. When language is wounded, so is the humanimal and vice versa. *O* reconnects the body to language, delineating the lingual as the difference between life and death; there are no vowels without a body, no *shibboleth* without a tongue. In five *O*s, *The Unmemntioable* entangles rupture, affect, muteness, and the body to represent the indefinite threshold that troubles the line between silence and testimony.

Without stable ground, language becomes genealogical, a matter of blood. The first language a child learns to speak is often that of the mother, rather than the one spoken by the wider community. While identity is linked to place, this can be as local as home, as the table around which a family speaks. A sense of lingual belonging can thus be traced through the mother, to her

own sense of "here." The importance of the mother, as the wellspring of language, is foregrounded in one of *The Unmemntioable*'s ghostly epigraphs:

> What would it be, Mother: wellspring or wound
> if I too sank in the snowdrifts of Ukraine?
>
> Was wär es, Mutter: Wachstum oder Wunde-
> versänk ich mit im Schneewehn der Ukraine? (73)

This is the second epigraph taken from the work of Paul Celan, who flits in and out of Moure's oeuvre; he appears as a character in the translation mystery *O Resplandor*, the subject of a poem in *Expeditions of a Chimaera,* and the reference inscribed on a train ticket stuck to a sock monkey's hat in the poem-play *Kapusta*. Born in Romania to German-speaking parents, Celan immediately indexes the violence of the twentieth century. Like Moure's own work, his poetry addresses both the émigré experience and the complicated status of his mother tongue. By writing primarily in German (his mother tongue), Celan attempted to speak the unspeakable with the language of his mother's killers. Here, Celan's mother tongue follows the translation like an echo—mother and mother tongue repeatedly stamped on the codical surface. Moure and Celan pull the mother into their orbit, as the absent presence that makes their language possible. Historical and poetic looping also takes place; Celan's mother was murdered in the Ukraine during World War II after being forced to leave her home, while E.M.'s mother is returned to western Ukraine as ash, after her family left their homeland for Canada to escape the rising threat that became the Holocaust. In this epigraph, the two mothers are resituated in death—displaced from "here," back to "here," but never quite sure where "here" is.

When E.M.'s mother does speak, her inability (or refusal) to name this genealogical "here" becomes apparent:

> Everyone comes from somewhere, Mom.
> No, донечко, not everyone. Some people come from nowhere.
>
> You came with a passport, мати, long before; you came from somewhere.
>
> When there was no one left, it became nowhere. There were no more letters after the w[.] (76)

In this excerpt, E.M.'s mother underscores the tenuous relationship between community, language, and place. The past is erased as "here" becomes a matter of now: now, here—nowhere. Moreover, as *The Unmemntioable* makes clear from its beginning, the mother tongue—the tongue of the mother—is *already* ash. What is a mother tongue when mother comes from "nowhere" (Moure 76)? What is a mother tongue when mother is ash? Phonetic articulation depends on the tongue, which is the most important of the seven articulators in the human oral cavity. Without the tongue, spoken language cannot take place. Yet a tongue is also metonymic, pointing back to the body of which it is a part. When the word "tongue" is prefixed by "mother" it performs a double metonymy. As the organ of speech and speech itself, "mother tongue" signs both the body which produces language, as well as the language which depends on it: language is a piece of the body.

In *The Unmemntioable*, this double metonymy links language to the site of a *specific* body—a tongue which has already been silenced (the cataclysm has already occurred, the referent is already absent). Death grips the body:

> Shibboleth? [can't hear you.]
> Ear of corn? [can't make out the word.]
>
> She coughs. The body's own water pools in the crevice of her clavicle.
> The wind ripples the lake so shallow now that no fish can winter there. (47)

The word "crevice" signs back (while chronologically signing forward) to where it appears on page 37, as E.M. remembers burying her mother's ashes: "I should have stayed in Ukraine, in the wound or crevice where I found myself, in the grove at Великі Глібовичі, a spoon of ashes, river" (37). There is a layering of metonymic bodies, with "crevice" homophonically echoing the hand-crevasse on page 3; the living body is superimposed over the landscape to which it will soon return. This lexical layering, pointing forward to the body's transmutation into ash, causes the same body to become spectral—both present, yet already absent. The body indexes the future event of its own death. Even when the body of the mother (and thus the mother tongue) is textually resurrected, language seems to halt at its edges. The body may still be present, but it has begun to lose what makes it an individual—its language, with which it signs its "I" and "here."

The square brackets function as a typographical barrier between speaking and hearing, or the space between two languaged bodies. The two questions that precede each pair of brackets evoke the polyvalence of the word *shibboleth* ("ear of corn" being one of its dictionary definitions). However, it is also worth noting that the word appears unitalicized. This typographical choice signals *shibboleth*'s change in status, which is also performed by the two questions. Listing "ear of corn" after *shibboleth* negates the latter's performative-password status. The mother tongue is the gatekeeper of the *shibboleth*—the marker of an invisible, yet audible, difference between one lingual community and another ("shi" depends on the position of the tongue). Therefore, *shibboleth* is a metonymy test; with the tongue is produced the consequence of one's identity, that is, the difference between murder and survival. But when the mother-tongue (a hyphenated form to represent the doubleness of the sign's metonymy) is mute, there is no conversation and the bodily link to a larger lingual community is severed. Without the tongue, the body loses its connection to the site of a singular *shibboleth.*

Muteness is gestured to by the title of the book itself: *The Unmemntioable.* This title is given to a poem embedded within the seventh section of the book, which also carries the same title. The seventh section concludes,

> i sew the alphabet shut too
> a to b, facing
> ab to cd, facing
> o to a, facing
> i to u, o, un
> faced
>
> e
> the unmemntioable (98)

Sewing necessarily begins with the body; however, the act of sewing described here seems to distort the body by twisting its vowel sounds into one patchwork. An imagined needle forces vowels to merge and consonants to jam, until the mouth is bent around the force of the unspeakable and sewn shut. The word "unmemntioable" requires the mouth of an English speaker to form unconventional sounds; the consonant cluster "mnt" is not normally permitted in English phonology, while "oable" causes the mouth to slide from a closed to an open-vowel sound. It is also difficult to

look past the visual and oral similarities between "unmemntioable" and the word "unmentionable," which are rooted in their shared prefix and adjacent bilabial *m* (in fact the word "unmentionable" does appear below "unmemntioable" earlier in the poem, on page 93). By indexing a phantom word within itself, "unmemntioable" trips the tongue of an English speaker: "unmentionable" is invoked, not only in form, but also as an adjective to describe "unmemntioable." Furthermore, the word "unmemntioable" retains the "un-able" affixes, which stopper both its own edges and those of its phantom double. Where other letters are scrambled, the affixes remain stable, subsequently underscoring the notion of inability.

But there are other phonetic shadows lurking within "unmemntioable." When the alphabet is sewn shut, it becomes denser: vowels are layered over other vowels, words lodged inside other words. For example, "memory" can be glimpsed in "mem," which is subsequently transformed into "unmemory" by the "un" prefix. This neologism signs "unmemorable," yet also the "un*re*memorable" of troubled testimony. Furthermore, in "mem" there is also a version of "Mom"—of being "un-momed." Unremembering only deepens this state of unmomness. The "ti" sound in the middle of "unmemntioable" also supplies the whisper of a "shh," which glides into an *o* and *a*: Shoa(h). The phonetic polyvalence of "tioa" secretes the historical context that haunts *The Unmemntioable,* so that even the book's title is a performance of the spectral presence-absence that permeates its pages. "Tioa" condenses ghosts, history, place, and violence into two ashy syllables. Finally, embedded in the middle of "unmemntioable" is E.M.: undone, unEMable. When all that remains of memory is the presence of its absence, and when the testimonial mother tongue that connects self to place and place to history is severed, E.M.'s identity enters a state of un-ness. Un-em, un-me. In the sewn layers of its letters, "unmemntioable" thus signs traces that point elsewhere, forming a tenuous genealogical link to the harvested vowels of history. As E.M.'s un-ness and unmomness are linked to the unmemory of unspeakable violence, "unmemntioable" becomes a palimpsest of signatures.[4]

The imprint of the poem on page 98 is also slightly fainter than the text on the preceding pages, hovering at a mid-point between printed text and blank page—a textual whisper, rather than a fully inked articulation. This textual ghostliness draws attention to the relationship between the page surface and

processes of printing. For example, if the text were printed in reverse on the recto side of the codex with wet ink and then the two sides of the codex were pressed together, the imprinted text that appeared on the verso side would be slightly fainter, a ghostly reflection of the original text. "Ghostly" is a fitting adjective, as the traces of this process inscribe transferral and repetition in the text, just as a ghost is only an echo of what it was when alive. Representation turns spectral, ashy. This method of printing would also "sew the alphabet shut" (68) by pressing the two pages together, causing the graphemes to repeat themselves. Wet ink, doubled marks, an alphabet stuck stubbornly in the oral cavity: the mother tongue haunts the mouth.

In its stylistic figurings, *The Unmemntioable* thus discloses a spectral thread, linking E.M. to her mother, her maternal village, and to the language required to testify. Typographical markings underscore moments of dissonance where disembodied voices rub up against one another, while semi-transparent ink performs the book's ghostliness. Gaps, polyvalence, and representational opacity also reveal the limits of language in the face of the unspeakable—the trauma that encircles the forced emigration and death of the poet's mother, as well as the disembodiment experienced when severed from one's lingual community. The scholar Karen Grumberg has written extensively about "the poetics of exile," emphasizing the *unheimlich* nature of being displaced from one's home (383). Yet, it is also the *unheimlich* (the uncanny and spectral traces of the past) that connect body to place and place to language—the unique signature of a specific tongue. Through its maternal narrative of exile and ghosts, a memory of home returns to haunt *The Unmemntioable*.

The image of a white shirt is evoked three times in Moure's book. Lifeless, it hangs without an occupant, on the wall near the back of a church (36). Later, this church wall is transformed into "the museum wall: the vertical field where sky and earth touch so deeply" (41); later still, in the final pages of the book, the poet reconciles this incongruity: "In the room that protects the wooden church, I seek out the shirt. It's spread on the wall now in an elaborate cross with the neck rounded stiffly" (104). As the book progresses, the image becomes clearer: the church is housed in (and sheltered by) the museum. As earth and sky intersect along the wall's vertical axis, so do the past and present. The museum frames the church, which in turn frames the white shirt. Unpeopled, it is all that remains of the church's congregation:

a ghostly figure, or a body without blood. By displaying this phantasmal garment in the formation of a cross, History remakes the shirt as a symbol of sacrifice, simultaneously eliding the individual in the universal. Yet the poet asks us to look beyond the shirt's iconicity, to the person who wore it—a single body, a lingering absence.

NOTES

1 In Moure's bilingual work *Kapusta* (2015)—a self-described "play-poem-ash, a cabaret"—ashes are also used to represent the people who were murdered in their villages during the Holocaust. Two particularly chilling lines read, "I'm simply skin and ash / ash of a charred house" and "[w]e moved into the air as ashes of our houses!" (54, 63).

2 Erín Moure (sometimes Erin Mouré, other times E.M., Eirin Moure, Elisa Sampedrin) has altered the spelling of her own name several times, as she searches for her name's "proper" form. The city's polynyms thus evoke those of the writing subject and another body mapped onto the historical landscape.

3 Moure has also written about the implications of this term in her essay "Tuteshni," originally published in *Unbound: Ukrainian Canadians Writing Home* (2016). In this essay, the subjective (now)here of her mother becomes a name she "can pronounce out loud" (91). More of Moure's critical writings on language and citizenship can be found in *My Beloved Wager: Essays from a Writing Practice* (2009). See especially "*Re*-çiting the Citizen Body" (217-21).

4 The link between muteness, language, and violence threads its way through Moure's oeuvre. While such themes are present in her citizen trilogy (for example, the violence of borders upon the languaged body in *O Cidadán*), they culminate in *Kapusta* (2015), another book full of ghosts and silent figures. In fact, nine of the twelve listed cast members in the "play" are inanimate or mute objects, among them a marionette mother, a sock monkey, a plush lion, and four figurants. Even MIM (the mother and mother tongue) refuses to testify. Instead it is the figurants who speak—a symbolic inversion of muteness that emphasizes the inevitable lacuna in Holocaust testimony. In *Remnants of Auschwitz,* Agamben points out that in the Nazi death camps "naked corpses piled in common graves" were unable to be referred to as such by the SS; "under no circumstances were they to be called 'corpses' or 'cadavers,' but rather simply *Figuren*, 'figures,' 'dolls'" (50-51). *Kapusta*'s figurants etymologically recall *Figuren* but complicate and invert this allusion. In act 2, four figurants enter carrying Malenka Dotchka (the sock monkey) and the other plush animals. The figurants then "give voice to their creatures" (33) in no particular order, spitting out phrases in "a cabaret of fitful language" (35):

> ANY: "But the bush firing trenches"
> "It was necessary to put an end to consciousness."
> A monument of cement in the forest."
> "the grave robbers!" (35)

Thus, the figurants who evoke *Figuren* give voice to the plush animals, who are (quite literally) *Figuren*. In this figurative doubling, the historically absent are given a chance to testify.

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Brian Bartlett

From "Spring 2020"

Dangling from the mesh
of a sidewalk hockey-net,
two surgical gloves

Community garden—
a laid-off dishwasher
plants rows all morning

Neighborhood quiet
increases goldfinches'
rings and jinglings

On a balcony
a fiddler, surprised
by a distant trumpeter

Cold in the dark,
she eyes thick coats through
Army Surplus windows

Growing so weary
of herself in the mirror—
the ballerina

At long last, time
to read *A Brief History*
of the Universe

Wide-eyed infant
in a stroller, pushed past
a death-filled seniors' home

The earth so spacious—
friends at a distance make
latitudes, longitudes
(found poem from a letter by H. D. Thoreau, May 22 1843)

She scrubs her skin
to be freed from
a hand-sanitizer's smell

Shut-down gallery—
an ant marches across
a white sculpture's ridges

In a parking lot—
calling, "Sorry, but you
dropped your mask"

Carl Watts

"a dungeon every night and every day": The Zany Neo-liberal Subject, Alcohol, and Poetic Agency in Catriona Wright's *Table Manners*

Cultural critics ranging from Shawn Micallef to Timothy Taylor to Byung-Chul Han have written of the progressively blurring lines between work time and leisure time and the way this process affects even the most quotidian of social practices.[1] This phenomenon has been regarded as a symptom of neo-liberalism, or what Sianne Ngai understands as the condition caused by the shift from state-organized to disorganized capitalism, or from Fordist standardization to post-Fordist small-batch production, and the performance or service-based tasks that go with it (201). Ngai argues that these shifts produce a state of frenzied activity associated with the aesthetic category of the zany. With the zany defining our daily work-play social activities, including the act of consuming, it makes sense that Micallef and Taylor, as well as many recent Canadian poetry collections, engage with the social rituals accompanying the consumption of food and drink.[2] One such collection, however, does particularly important work in unpacking these distinct trends and their relationship to one another: Catriona Wright's *Table Manners* (2017). A poetry debut that features a sensory overload of culinary descriptors and accompanying social practices, Wright's book is comprised of lyric poems that ring with repetitive formal techniques that reinforce the collection's consistent subject matter and the exhaustion of its speakers. "Garnish," the book's second poem, is representative, referring as it does to

neighbours loaded

with gifts wrapped in cream paper and secured with curly
pastel ribbons, plump, gleaming bouquets accompanied

by heart-shaped cards, casseroles and warm oatmeal cookies
in vintage tins with daisy trims. (13)

I want to suggest that Wright's depictions of this culture of consumption explore the dissolution of boundaries between work and non-work as well as the effects of this process on the neo-liberal subject. I also want to make the case that Wright's engagement with these topics, in which formal limitations exist in tension with the book's culinary abundance and the frenetic activity of its zany subjects, is uniquely illustrative of both the totality of neo-liberal containment and the agency that might nevertheless inhere in representing this dynamic poetically.

To make this argument, I first unpack the neo-liberal fusion of social and work lives. Sianne Ngai's conception of zaniness, or the frenetic activity of the labouring neo-liberal subject who is forced to adapt to ever-changing tasks and demands (11), is especially useful here given this subject's internal contradictions. As I will outline shortly, Ngai's zany worker exists in the confused and frenzied moment before this system becomes normalized, with Wright's formally consistent lyric vignettes of such activity capturing this moment in a way that recalls what Han identifies as the spiritual deadness of the neo-liberal subject and the maintenance of this lifestyle by a regime of intoxicating substances (a type of containment that Taylor and Micallef too have remarked in the culinary world). Accordingly, Wright depicts an at once frantic, grotesque, and cartoonish state of unliving that can be made livable only with the use of intoxicants—specifically, alcohol. Her poems register and preserve the moment just before this manic activity becomes systematized as the normal mode of production; they do so by illustrating the tension between frenetic activity and dispirited drudgery, with their speakers' use of alcohol facilitating this regime.

The second aspect of my argument is that, in registering formally the desperate, often intoxicated activity of the zany neo-liberal subject, Wright's poems signal the possibility of reclaiming agency within this regime. They do so by reworking the example of 1980s author Daniel Jones, in whose poetry

alcohol consumption unsustainably overlaps with traditionally defined work hours in a way that resembles the beset, zany working subject. An important difference is that alcohol consumption as it is depicted in *Table Manners*—countless of Wright's subjects are "silly drunk on sweet fermented plums" ("Origin Story" 35), "gulp Malbec and reminisce" ("Date Night #2" 39), or find themselves surrounded by "themed fun and spiked punch" ("Parties: A Selection" 41)—is not an aberration but something that sustains participation in a social world defined by the dissolution of boundaries between work and non-work. Wright's poems render as nearly commonplace the depictions of intoxication and the tedium of insignificant or repetitive tasks that in Jones' work appear so jarring; her repetitious, consciously traditionalist, almost automatized poetics thus foreclose the possibility of vocational fulfillment that is central to sociologist Richard Sennett's conception of the skill and human impulse called craftsmanship (a concept that is similar to Han's ideas about personal fulfillment resulting from the overcoming of negativity, as will be discussed). And yet, in demonstrating this multiform containment using a recognizably craft-conscious poetics, *Table Manners* paradoxically demonstrates a kind of poetic agency: that is to say, its poetic representation of neo-liberal containment's peculiar totality—and of the moment at which its effects had yet to be normalized—itself indicates the possibility of finding fulfilling work even amid the frivolous activities associated with a regime of relentless competitive consumption.

Wright's preoccupation with several aspects of the neo-liberal condition is evident from the book's opening poem. "Gastronaut" presents competitive consumption as an indication of work-life fusion. Its opening lines, "I would cut off my own thumb for the perfect thimbleful / of wood-ear mushroom and bamboo shoot soup" (11), invoke the bodily as well as Orientalist images of torture and hardship that connect sophisticated, ironized taste with an almost animalistic depiction of life in the rainforest. The exoticized excess of the dishes described ("singed pigs' feet, pearly cartilage and crisp skin") gives way to images of a dehumanized, unending exhaustion: evidence (shared via social media) of a rival's having consumed barbecued tarantulas drives the speaker to "days and days of foraging / for edible moss just to calm myself enough to sleep"; after eating a durian, "I didn't brush my teeth for a week"; later, the speaker is "rancid with resentment, // my body a kingdom of rot."

The fusion of work and leisure culminates not only in sleeplessness but in non-life rendered in images of decaying flesh. In "How to Throw a Dinner Party, or, A Guide to Avant-Garde Table Manners," guests appear in a more realistically corporeal although equally grotesque rendering, being "cordially invited to sit at the dinner table / and shit. They eat escargot and éclairs in the water closet, / crouched by the emerald-encrusted bidet" (29).

The totalizing system is first rendered as interchangeable with more anodyne lifestyle interests and therefore a way of life that is manageable: the speaker of "Gastronaut" declares, "I just chose to care about this instead of something else" (11). When the possibility of life's end does come up, however, the cuisine departs from plausible exoticism and enters into the fantastic: "My death row meal is a no-brainer: slow-roasted unicorn haunch / and deep-fried fairy wings with chipotle mayo dipping sauce" (12). The received text "no-brainer" continues the conceit of the unliving working subject, subsequent phrases combining the animalistically corporeal (haunches, wings) with the unreality of the named fauna. The poem includes within itself the persistence of this regime beyond its speaker's death, the undead eater entering communion with an embodied, killed, cooked, and consumed fantasy feast. Divisions between leisure time and time devoted to the work of competitive consumption dissolve further, to the extent that life and death are combined into an endless present of culinary desire.

It is alcohol—absent from "Gastronaut"—that comes to animate and sustain Wright's speakers' unceasing participation in this universe of competitive consumption by rendering it comprehensible within quotidian patterns and habits as opposed to sequestering it in the fantastic. "Mukbang," which provides a fairly straightforward picture of alcohol dependence, employs the trope of the alcoholic husband "enjoying / the Tuesday night special: beer / after beer after whisky after beer" (18). But alcohol consumption for the sake of intoxication is restricted to three lines, separated from the content of a poem whose title, as per Wright's note, refers to "popular live-streaming webcasts in South Korea in which hosts enthusiastically consume enormous meals while the audience provides feedback via chat" (85). The extreme commitment to fashionable consumption—one of the hosts is a "size minus ten," but the speaker signs in "to see her eat garlic chicken / with such gusto it lifts loneliness off / your shoulders, loosens your anus" (18)—is intact but is here contained

in the isolation of an exaggerated and exoticized Internet-era loneliness. The poem synthesizes the intoxication of the husband with the sensationalist extremes of "Mukbang," in the process establishing the collection's depiction of a ceaseless commitment to establishing one's curatorial brand.

And yet there's something notable about Wright's relentless treatment of these tightly linked issues. *Table Manners* has not received much critical attention beyond reviews, but, taken together, these reviews help shed light on the larger dynamic of hope and hopelessness at work in the book. Gillian Sze's piece in the *Montreal Review of Books*, for instance, states that Wright's poems reveal the way that food "defines culture, lifestyle, and class difference." Natalie Boldt's remark that Wright crosses the boundary "from appreciation to obsession, creativity to absurdity" (147), acknowledges that Wright's poetry is far from an earnest, unproblematized treatment of food culture and the habits surrounding it. Most saliently, Julie Mannell claims that *Table Manners* investigates "how the self reacts when constrained by the obligatory digestion of cultural signifiers and the sometimes unpalatable imperative to perform socially" (73). Mannell regards Wright's poems as using the body to register the totality of the neo-liberal condition, or a situation in which "the body is one with the world but the world makes the body sick" (75). This image of ostensible unity evokes the way in which Wright's poems register both the levelling of divisions between work, leisure, and sociality and the consuming individual's fraught experience of this moment.

This pervasiveness of the neo-liberal regime and the multiple ways in which our very bodies and sustenance are shaped by it has been remarked in the realm of food and drink by a variety of Canadian cultural critics, including Taylor and Micallef.[3] Both explore the way in which the ostensible novelty and abundance around which food culture revolves in fact produce forms of exhaustion. Taylor's *The Cranky Connoisseur* (2010) regards the foodie's quest to experience gustatory excellence as a manifestation of Jacques Lacan's and René Girard's ideas about our desires being influenced by what our peers desire. Taylor refers briefly to Lacan's general argument that desire is bound up with the desire of the Other, arguing that our desire for the food-fashionable is bound up with timeless experiences of rivalry (16).[4] Micallef's *The Trouble with Brunch: Work, Class and the Pursuit of Leisure* (2014) illustrates how Toronto's arts and culture workers are no strangers to

this reality. Micallef's look at the collapsing distinctions between leisure time and time on the clock (9-10)—which unpacks brunch as a social phenomenon that masquerades as a leveller of hierarchies while in fact reinforcing class inequality and inhibiting solidarity among different categories of worker (51)—resonates with Wright's registering of a culture in which advocation of the curatorial self plays out in an environment of competitive consumption. Wright's poems hold these separate analyses together by presenting ironized versions of the constantly curating and consuming self that structures the work of North American poets born in the mid-1980s; in so doing, they also show us the effects of this regime on the consuming subject and offer an unexpected assertion of poetic agency.

Furthermore, the tonal uniformity that exists across the seventy-odd pages of poetry that make up *Table Manners* may register as cloying, or even jarring. The one criticism in Mannell's review of *Table Manners* is that, by confining itself to "the language of the culinarian in the world beyond the kitchen"—what Mannell calls both a metaphor and a constraint—Wright's book produces a repetitious element that makes readers feel "as if they are being hit over the head with the theme" (75).[5] There is certainly a lack of variation, not only in terms of content but also in the format of the poems. Almost all of those in the book's first two sections feature enjambed free verse that, despite its lineation, usually takes the shape of syntactically complete prosaic sentences.[6] With only a few exceptions ("Magpie," "Dumpster," "Instinct"), they are arranged in stanzas of two to four lines, while many in the book's third and final section feature longer stanzas of similar free verse.

Consistent as well are the book's references to alcoholic beverages, which function not as a minor addition to the poems' range of consumables but in fact as a central component of *Table Manners*' formal inscription of irony. It's no coincidence that alcohol consumption comes up in Micallef's look at brunch, such as when he looks at the strain that this dynamic puts on friendships and asks, "What happens if you owe somebody overdue work, but you're overworked and need to blow off some steam with friends, but the person you owe the work to is out with your friends?" (39). His answer—"That's when you drink alone at home"—draws a line between the predominantly social and the hours that are spent in front of a screen.

Nevertheless, Micallef's example, with its secluded workstation setting, is modern rather than neo-liberal in that it maintains spatial and temporal boundaries between the workday and time off. Wright's poems never quite reproduce this distinction. Instead, a poem like "Job Satisfaction" begins, "Stylist to star fruit and frozen daiquiris, I understand the right lighting / can detonate salivary glands, expose latent cravings // for mama's ribs or depraved carb binges" (21). Even when a discrete workplace is depicted as outside the work of socializing and consuming, it is rendered as something apart from and yet expected to coexist with the work of one's self-advocacy as both consumer and tastemaker. "BBQ" makes this clear when it refers to a regular occupation as something that might either "suffocate or inspire" (31). All of which is to say that the poems register the dynamic of blurring social and professional interactions in the service of establishing one's curatorial profile, and presenting a flattened reality in which any residual compartmentalization of time is in the process of further dissolution.

Wright's depictions of alcohol, and the formal aspects of the poems that resonate with its effects, register the way in which the totality of work-life is overwhelmingly oppressive and yet also in a process of being normalized. According to Sianne Ngai, this tension exists in processes of neo-liberalization. Ngai's quintessential example of the zany subject—Lucille Ball's character in *I Love Lucy*—personifies this emergent world of post-industrial instability with her toggling between various occupations and roles. *I Love Lucy* establishes "an aesthetic of action pushed to strenuous and even precarious extremes" (185), its heroine's spectacle of zaniness arising from a comedic "dialectic between social inflexibility and flexibility" (179) that accompanies her vocational capers. As Ngai concludes, zaniness as mode of production and aesthetic contains within itself its zenith and inevitable disappearance. As zaniness transforms from comedic quirk into a "rapid succession of projects" that become "immediately dissolved into an undifferentiated stream of activity" (231), its novelty becomes codified as neo-liberal norm. Wright's poems operate in this moment of tension between the unusual and the routine, suspending the transformation from zany to just everyday life; her depictions of the automaton-like state created by alcohol abuse capture and perpetuate this moment.

This alcoholic preservation of the moment at which the zany collapses in on itself is visible in Wright's well-crafted and yet repetitive, almost slavish formalism. The distinction between meaningful work and life and the automaton-like state of the zany neo-liberal labourer is discussed by Han, whose *Burnout Society* (2015) distinguishes the lives lived under neo-liberalism from those in which subjects have a greater degree of autonomy. Han describes the shift from an "immunological age" in which threats come from outside the self to the "massification of the positive" that defines the present (7). In this newly totalizing "achievement society," our ailments come not from disciplinary prohibitions and directives but from the "[u]nlimited *Can*" of "projects, initiatives, and motivation" (8-9). The response to this condition of unbroken work-life, Han continues, comes in the form of hyperactive productivity and a subsequent development of symptoms like those of "emaciated prisoners lacking all vigor who . . . have become entirely apathetic and can no longer even recognize physical cold or the orders given by guards" (19). Han's depiction of this aspect of the present resonates with the abundance of consumable goods in Wright's poems as well as the totality of the consumption regime she depicts. The exhaustion in Wright's poems is palpable: the more splendid the description of an exotic dish, the faster its distinction dissolves into the abundance of the book's endless buffet spread. What's more, as is suggested by lines from "Celebrity Chef"—"He is equally happy berating / philistines and plumping dumplings with grandmas" (62)—purported transcendence of the high culture/low culture divide is itself clichéd.

The insensate exhaustion brought on by these changing conditions of production is described by Han as creating a burned-out subject whose weakened capacity for negative feelings transforms thought into mere calculation. It is worth quoting Han at length here. Although what he describes is the computer, his language equally applies to the mind of this exhausted yet still efficient subject:

> calculates more quickly than the human brain and takes on inordinate quantities of data without difficulty because it is free of all Otherness. It is a machine of positivity [*Positivmaschine*]. Because of autistic self-referentiality, because negativity is absent, an idiot savant can perform what otherwise only a calculator can do. The general positivization of the world means that both human beings and society are transforming into *autistic performance-machines*. One might also say that overexcited [*überspannt*]

> efforts to maximize performance are abolishing negativity because it slows down the process of acceleration. If man were a being of negativity [*Negativitätswesen*], the total positivization of the world would prove more than a little dangerous. According to Hegel, negativity is precisely what keeps existence [*Dasein*] alive. (23-24)

If we are willing to look past the ableism in Han's diction—"autistic" and "idiot" especially—we might find in his final term, "alive," something that resonates with the at once agitated and dully predictable actions of Wright's beset poetic subjects. "Alive" here suggests that agency in this formulation depends on the alternating negativity and positivity that inheres in a comprehensible work-life division—or, the conquering of negativity that manifests in creativity or innovation on top of artistic skill or craft. Both of these aspects of negativity are absent from *Table Manners*: its lyric subjects employ alcohol to sustain participation in a world of constant consumption-oriented work, thus depicting and participating in a cycle in which they lose the ability to overcome negativity in Han's sense—more practically, to assert individual agency by solving their problems or escaping the totality of a system of competitive consumption and curation.

It is precisely this loss of agency that the formal characteristics of Wright's poetry register. Her self-conscious traditionalism, which in its repetitious excess is severed from the self-improvement associated with the honing of poetic craft, shows us the distinction between a meaningful overcoming of negativity and the increasingly passive neo-liberal labourer who has internalized this toggling between disparate tasks as just the nature of work. The poems' well-wrought nature—the ease with which they return to chiming consonance and metrical repetitions, their "plumping dumplings with grandmas"—mark them as participating in a poetic economy that prizes craft. Craft has been unpacked in more general terms by Sennett, who regards craftsmanship as "an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake" (9). This concept exists not only in the world of skilled manual labour, but also among roles as diverse as computer programmer, doctor, and parent; of course, he regards it as central to the arts as well, with all these areas of endeavour allowing a practitioner to focus on "objective standards, on the thing in itself" (9) as they pursue quality, or excellence, or, indeed, some kind of transcendence of the drudgery of repetition or mere efficiency.

It is in this latter respect that Sennett's ideas resonate with Wright's poetics. *Table Manners* consists of lyric poetry that is stylistically informed and conversant with the tropes of craft that sustain conventional notions of poetic practice. Wright's poetry, in other words, participates in the unrelenting requirements of maintaining its speakers' culinary-curatorial status. But its representation of alcohol consumption, specifically, contrasts the activities required to maintain one's curatorial brand with Sennett's valorization of the learning and autonomy resulting from more conventional notions of craft. It does so by depicting the consuming subject as numbed by intoxicants and defined entirely by the curatorial rituals of perpetual work-play. In the process, it has less in common with the well-known tropes of the Purdyesque poet-drinker than with the work of Daniel Jones, which combines frenetic, alcoholic activity with the world of on-the-clock labour and therefore itself anticipates Wright's beset, besotted, zany subjects.

The distinctness of the environment registered by Wright's poems is evident in "BBQ," which explicitly contrasts the brio of sociality-as-work with traditionally defined labour and in turn characterizes the latter as another object of assessment ("We debate day jobs, if they suffocate or inspire" [31]); the poem presents a still more encompassing regime of consumption than the spectacle depicted in "Mukbang." Its concentrated images depict alcohol not only as another consumable item for selection but also as a tool for sustaining the omnipresence of this regime. The opening line "The grapevine is strangling the basil" evokes not only gossip and botanical foodstuffs but also the vineyard; subsequent images ("the smell of lighter fluid" and "All the mint from the balcony bathtub has been juleped") include homegrown means of intoxication in this dynamic, expanding the undifferentiated work-play universe to include household culinary and horticultural practices as well. The imagery moves into stoner-party territory ("Dodging our voices, Frank Zappa cackles about rutabagas"), but the final couplet pulls back from this conceit. The catfish that "grows oily and succulent in its foil shroud, / cayenne-dusted whiskers igniting the air," is a cloistered, isolated entity—recall the popular online valence of "catfish," meaning one who presents oneself as something one is not—that marinates in the substances in question, the sensing apparatus of its whiskers contributing to the electric environment accompanied by Zappa. The

barbecue's attendees have been conditioned—not only by the dispensations of taste and distinction, but also by literally botanical and biological renderings, including the omnipresent alcohol.

This poetics is different from that of many Canadian poets in whose writing alcohol is a recurring component. The most well-known figures in the earlier tradition—Al Purdy, Alden Nowlan, Milton Acorn, and Gwendolyn MacEwen—were regarded as bohemians whose poetic depictions of alcohol were couched in a lifestyle that has either moved beyond the traditionally defined world of work or else avoided the latter almost entirely. Purdy's "robust," typically Canadian, ostensibly working-class demeanour would become well known as that of the country's unofficial poet laureate (Silverberg 230),[7] his plain-spoken free verse documenting such a lifestyle fairly cleanly and helping form this cumulative lyric persona.[8] Nowlan's alcohol-heavy lifestyle was supported by less-than-onerous university positions,[9] a fact that characterizes him as an adjunct to Purdy. Acorn and MacEwen are located still further outside a recognizable world of work: Acorn is Purdy's more politically authentic counterpart;[10] MacEwen's work has generated an irregular body of scholarship that has at times folded alcoholism into the mystique of her persona.[11] The role of alcohol in the work of these poets is subsumed under a series of variations on the Purdyesque example of the poet as existing after or outside a recognizable work-life binary—including, in the case of MacEwen, the ostensible anomaly of the tragically unstable woman whose extreme sensitivity is nevertheless given relatively direct expression in her poetry. In all cases, their speakers or poetic subjects do not navigate the massification of positivity that defines the world of Wright's poems. Instead, the "work" of poetic production is in this earlier tradition associated with a comparatively straightforward lyric expression of the sort Wright's poems transcend.

There are important differences between Wright's poems and these lyric expressions of the alcohol-abusing poetic subject who has avoided or transcended the need to coordinate such behaviour with a recognizable work schedule (and whose selection of beverages is seldom subject to the scrutiny experienced by Wright's drinker-curators). Wright's vignettes register instead a neo-liberal reality of frenzied social labour that is itself maintained by regular abuse of alcohol; they also exist at a remove from the mimetic quality

of free verse, registering in their formal features the rote, ultimately unfulfilling nature of this work. Her poems also resonate with the work of Jones—in terms of content, but also in that Wright's repetitive formalism is mirrored in Jones' poems by an excess of drinking imagery rendered as direct, unadorned reportage that resists the kind of sentiment or reflection that often adorns Purdyesque free-verse treatments of the bohemian poet lifestyle.

Jones, however, depicts in his poems an intense alcohol addiction that at times must coexist with the demands of the workplace. These situations anticipate the neo-liberal struggle of Wright's zany self-curators, even if they illustrate an earlier stage of the tension between modes of work that Wright depicts. Indeed, as Kevin Connolly's afterword to the second edition of *The Brave Never Write Poetry* (1985) suggests, Jones is an outlier when it comes to the above variations on the Canadian poet-drinker. What still stand out as "unusual" tales of "depression, drinking and doomed love" were dismissed by contemporary reviews as the stuff of a "tired drunken-poet 'persona'" (93). And yet, Connolly's reassessment of the book classifies this critical resentment as part of Canadian critics' aversion to confessional verse and resentment of its author's singularity—the "persona," in other words, was possessed of an unsustainable intensity of consumption and work that made for scarcely believable lyric tales by an inconvenient "*enfant terrible* from Hamilton writing about puke and semen and drunk tanks beating us all to the punch" (94). The sordid extremes of Jones' socially unacceptable tales diverge from the archetype of the post-work bohemian poet, registering a gruesome aesthetic of always-on that is at times similar to that of Wright's zany poem exploits, even if this plays out in an environment in which work appears more clearly divided from the purely social.

The aptly titled "Work" illustrates this resonance most vividly. While Jones wrote many poems about his regular drinking (which did not seem to be restricted to any particular time of day), as well as about the near impossibility of separating the latter from whatever time he managed to devote to remunerative tasks, "Work" illustrates a jarring combination of the two lifestyles that resembles the beset condition of the zany worker thrust into a succession of unfamiliar roles. The poem begins after the speaker, having "picked up a temporary job with the League / of Canadian Poets," has spent a night drinking:

> The next morning I was sick &
> an hour late. My desk was covered with
> books that had to be bundled & mailed
> out. I smoked a couple of cigarettes
> & read some of the books. People were
> running around talking about arts grant
> deadlines & various problems with the
> photocopier. I lit another cigarette &
> started to bundle the books. After I'd
> made about three bundles I walked down
> to the post office. On the way I went
> into a tavern for a beer. It went down
> quickly & I had two more
>
> When I got back
> to the office, the phone was ringing. I
> picked it up: some poet from the U of M
> couldn't make a reading:
>
> "No problem," I
> said, "no one would have shown up anyway"[.] (26)

The speaker here, like many of those in Wright's poems, drinks as part of his work, even though such behaviour is both unsustainable and at the time existed well outside the behavioural norms structuring Wright's vignettes. And yet Jones' speaker is distinctly different from Wright's smooth hipsters in easy (if anxious) dinner party symbiosis. Near the poem's conclusion, "The other people in the office / were looking at me strangely" just before the speaker walks out of the office to head back to the tavern for more beer (27). He hangs on to a job in a work culture that has, to the astonishment of all concerned, granted him temporary access to one of its spaces. Whereas Jones' speakers are rebels, or at least misfits attempting to manage a working life in the context of addiction, Wright's poetic subjects play by the rules—the spaces of work, socializing, and intoxication are fused, with alcohol sustaining as well as contributing to the work of advancing one's curatorial profile. Indeed, the poem uses alcohol to maintain the tension between the waning eight-hours-on-the-clock model of labour and the shambolic bohemian lifestyle that exists outside or beyond that model. "Work" captures the dysfunction of the intoxicated office automaton, preserving the tension between workaday diligence and carefree bohemianism, just as Wright's poems, with their performance and prolongation of the zany mode of social

labour via the use of intoxicants, reveal the ongoing normalization of this type of labour.

But Wright's work departs from Jones' more plainly signifying style, revealing in its formal characteristics the process of normalization contained within the zany. The poems' formal features demonstrate an ambivalence between the in-control, high-performing social subject and the unliving automaton. In an interview with Matthew Walsh, Wright states that the vocabulary in the poems is drawn from numerous sources:

> I was interested in exploring the language surrounding food culture, including restaurant reviews, menus, competitive cooking shows, dumpster diver message boards, diet tips in magazines, anthropological texts, opinion pieces about genetically modified food, etc. . . . I kept lists of new or interesting terms that I encountered and sometimes sonic riffs on those words—anagrams, rhymes, assonant words, etc. I drew from this lexicon while writing the book. (Wright, "Table Manners")

Wright describes a poetic method in which the author collects terminology, phrases, and images that will be manipulated so as to generate a series of related lyric voices. But this process of collection also speaks to the omnipresence of such ostensibly unique terms. The result is poetry that thrives in the interchangeability of consumable objects to the extent that it is almost proto-algorithmic; it registers the futility of searching for a "voice" amid information overload and the totality of our experience of consumption and curation, yet it remains within the realm of conventional (if formally astute) lyric poetry.

Still more crucial in establishing the omnipresence of this regime and the use of alcohol in enabling one's navigation of it is the collection's stylistic consistency. In addition to the previously mentioned uniformity in subject matter and the format of the poems, there is a limitation in the range of the formal devices Wright employs: despite her description in the interview with Walsh of what could be considered a reliance on found text, the poems of *Table Manners* could not be described as using any of the processual or algorithmic methods that characterize contemporary conceptual writing (or even a marked application of fragmentary syntax such as that characterizing previous iterations of avant-garde poetry, like Language writing). But the tightness of the collection, not to mention its appearance with Signal

Editions, the Carmine Starnino-edited poetry imprint of Véhicule Press, associates Wright's poetics with those who have at times been described as neo-formalist poets—poets who, whatever the distinctions among their own poetic practices, return in their critical writing to slippery ideas of craft, or the idea that objectively existing (or at least agreed-upon) standards are shared among all those practitioners of the form called poetry.[12]

Viewed solely in terms of this formal adeptness, the consistency of the poems demonstrates a certain self-control—a calmness that may seem at odds with the category of the zany. Sennett's exploration of craft as the desire to do a job well regards this commitment to excellence as existing apart from—indeed, often as being impeded by—market-centric constraints such as profitability or efficiency (9). Key to Sennett's exploration of craftsmanship are "the intimate connection between hand and head," the "dialogue between concrete practices and thinking," and how "these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding" (9). The very process by which one hones one's techniques and evolves one's craft, in other words, is according to Sennett anything but unthinkingly mechanical. One imagines that poets concerned with incrementally building on tradition as opposed to conceiving of innovation as a radical break with tradition—a position explicitly taken by Starnino on several occasions—would find Sennett's ideas appealing.[13] Wright's form is thus, at least on the surface, an example of the affirmative rhythms of the labouring poetic craftsperson.

But, given that the poems formally reflect alcohol's role in sustaining obsession and enabling unending participation in the regime of competitive consumption, Wright's formal skill in fact undermines this affirmative notion of craft, using it to demonstrate not agency but the containment of such within the rote, zany tasks associated with neo-liberalism. Sennett claims that "motivation matters more than talent" and that the craftsman's "desire for quality poses a motivational danger: the obsession with getting things perfectly right may deform the work itself" (11). These claims are reflected in Wright's manifold presentation of an obsession with or overcommitment to the fashions of competitive consumption, an uncomfortably consistent treatment of the topic, and the book's neo-formalist tightness, all of which are held together by the alcohol that sustains and animates her zany automatons' actions and lyric utterances. While not exactly subverting a

notion of craft like that held by Starnino, Wright nevertheless calls into question the earnestness of the craft practitioner by eliminating the problem-solving element of Sennett's equation. Despite the poems' formal dexterity, they exhibit a flatness born of their inability to advance beyond their topical and formal horizon. At the level of content, the poems' speakers are unable to escape the containment of competitive consumption and constant work. At the level of form, this containment is enacted by means of virtually unchanging neo-formalist techniques and a constrained image inventory. This consistency makes for precisely the rote mechanical craftsmanship that Starnino as much as Sennett rejects. *Table Manners*, in depicting the lyric subject labouring under the regime of taste-making-as-work, dramatizes precisely what Sennett diagnoses as the chief cause of a craftsman's failure: "our inability to organize obsession" (11).

Wright's elaborate, multivalent poetic engagement with these instances of containment does not offer any specific solution to the predicament of the zany neo-liberal subject or competitive consumer. Nevertheless, in using precisely the tools of the poetic craftsperson to illustrate the multiply-constituted containment of such a subject, *Table Manners* draws our attention both to the petty labours of neo-liberalism and, in its representation of the totality of this regime, to the possibility of finding fulfilling work even amid such frivolous and ultimately unfulfilling practices. The poems' resonance with Ngai's category of the zany continues in their depiction of an impossible, perpetual acceleration of culinary exoticism, as well as one's ability to command knowledge of such. The irreverence of their consonance and internal rhyme register the frenetic pace and sublimated desperation of this category of neo-liberal affect: selected almost at random, take, "Fallow Day," in which ironized productivity is rendered cartoonish by the exclamation and accompanying consonance of "curds squeaking like Bedlamite mice. 10 am and damn / I've racked up 70 percent of a damsel's / daily recommended sodium" (49). The poems unsettle with their formal consistency but also with their relentless pace. Opener "Gastronaut" takes only until its fifth line to move beyond images of exoticism straight into the speaker's aforementioned envy of a competing foodie, the quick narrative pace and signature internal rhymes—"When Cassie posted those pictures of barbecued tarantulas in Cambodia / I wept with jealousy and rage. It took days and days . . . just

to calm myself enough to sleep" (11)—reminding us that we can alternately fall behind in this relentless pace of knowledge accumulation and self-improvement, or else become an automaton that never will.

The zaniness of Wright's subject matter and her poems' abundant, almost musical sonic resonances draw attention to the inevitable totality of competitive consumption, but also to the limitations inhering in the poems' formal traditionalism—limitations that foreclose the possibility of attaining the hand-head reunification that Sennett envisions in liberatory enactments of craft. But at the same time, the book's depictions of this very process—its deployment of content and formal features that are themselves examples of such unceasing activity—signal the possibility of a poetic agency in their very registering of the pervasive unfreedom of the neo-liberal moment.

"Celebrity Chef" is in many ways the collection's most complete encapsulation of this dynamic. Consisting of five stanzas of three lines and a final stand-alone line, it begins with a ritual of performed peril: "He moves through the world with the confidence / of a matador / who marinates his sword in barbecue sauce" (62). The second stanza, with the lines "In Finland, he eats reindeer steaks and cunt- / shaped pastries," has the titular character at once respectful of Indigenous foodways and traditions and indulgent in the misogynistic scripts of masculinity that sustain the figure of the adventurer. In the third, where he gifts a Sicilian chef "ten tar-filled cannoli lavish with icing sugar," he is depicted as at ease with both market and gift economies. Then, the penultimate of the five stanzas builds on the culinary cliché in which the worldly chef has no fear of boundaries between high and low culture: "Feijoada. Adobo. Offal links. Sardinas con arroz. Zoodles. / He is equally happy berating / philistines and plumping dumplings with grandmas." The trope of breaking down binaries between high and low is subsequently made banal, with the lines "He loves his cameraman like mint / loves lamb" acknowledging that this process is reflected in the omnipresent language of televised popular culture.

The syntax of the above stanza's first line reinforces this totality with the alternating *a* and *z* of "Adobo," "arroz," and "Zoodles." The poem's final lines—"He drinks / himself into a dungeon every night and every day // he eats his way out"—complete a pattern in which each stanza provides a new demonstration of transcending binaries in its creation of a wholeness,

totality, or (to return to Han) massification of positivity. There's a frenzied activity in the poem's tireless shifting among locales, cultures, cuisines, and registers, such as when the second stanza moves at breakneck speed through almost free-associative connections. The lines "In Korea, / he stuffs cabbage into terracotta coffins, buries them" move from Korea and kimchi to terracotta, an archaeological image of Chineseness that, in being buried, might evoke the fermented eggs that are associated not with Korean but with Chinese cuisine. The speed is enhanced by the sense of acceleration coming from each triplet's progressively longer indents. And yet the impossibility of this perpetual acceleration of activity and experience is underscored by the familiarity of the figure of the celebrity chef and the poem's richly repetitive consonance; what emerges is not a permanent state of frenzy but what is instead coming to be accepted as a normal mode of curation and consumption, much as Ngai's zany includes within itself its completion and end. The settling into a more predictable day-night routine of alcohol abuse is the mediating factor that keeps the zany seeming zany even as the performance has ceased to be spectacle. The final, dangling line's pronoun-based polyptoton (he-himself-he-his) inscribes and parodies the lyric utterance of the supposedly individual subject whose ability to navigate the preceding stanzas' waves of abundance is sustained by the cyclical, quotidian push of the alcoholic subject. The enjambment is here resisted by additional blank space before "himself" and a blank line following "every day," the syntax of "a dungeon every night and every day" existing simultaneously with the sense of the longer sentence construction, the familiar ambiguity associated with the line break ensconced in a repertoire of conventional lyric that is at once studied and numbingly consistent.

It is this exaggeratedly formalist aspect of Wright's poems, combined with the consistency with which they address this culture of culinary competition, that reflects the unending containment of the neo-liberal experience. Yet Wright also raises the question of whether this kind of formally aware, craft-oriented poetics—even one that is self-consciously traditionalist—might be precisely what is needed to register the unfreedom of neo-liberalism and the historical moment at which it is most recognizable. The repetitious character of the book, with its voices negotiating their own limits while bumping up against them again and again, reproduces a middlebrow experience of the

drudgery of being hip and overworked. *Table Manners* avoids the romanticizing, straightforwardly signifying free verse of Purdy; it further ironizes Jones' earnestness even as it extends his at once desperate and irreverent performance of work. The manic, embodied acts that make up the poems finally might bring to mind once again the corporeal aspect identified in Julie Mannell's review of the book. The paradox of Wright's flamboyantly constrained traditionalism functions ultimately as an assertion of self: a simplified singing that is at once a cry for help from the dungeon of neo-liberalism and a reminder that, at the very least, we have the poetic agency to explore and represent our zany, cloying performances in all their irony, complexity, and erstwhile strangeness.

NOTES

1 Micallef provides a popular take on the social practice of brunch; Taylor has written both fiction and non-fiction about the world of competitive consumption that defines the contemporary foodie; Han takes a Hegelian approach to late capitalism's effects on freedom and mental health.

2 Among similar titles published in 2020, see Simina Banu's *POP*, Curtis LeBlanc's *Birding in the Glass Age of Isolation*, and Shaun Robinson's *If You Discover a Fire*.

3 Another art-world diagnosis of this condition is David Balzer's description of the ascendancy of the curator. Balzer argues that "curationism," or "the acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being," has since the mid-1990s created a scenario in which institutions rely on others to "cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers" (8-9).

4 The phenomenon Taylor identifies stands apart from past literary-critical analyses of consumption in Canadian literature, many of which analyze specifically marked cuisines and culinary cultures. See, for instance, Enoch Padolsky's attention to "places where we meet others as tourists, allies, or foes, and where history, inter-group relations, psychology, domination, and national and global forces are at play" (20), as opposed to the individual, quotidian behaviours explored by Wright.

5 Adrian Ngai's review of the book connects its depictions of food and its rituals with "the fraught union between content and form," although he does not explore the idea at length.

6 Minor variations include italicized dialogue that sometimes departs from prose syntax ("Magpie"), lists of lettered or numbered points ("Bliss Point," "How to Throw a Dinner Party"), and white space that sometimes creates a syntactical pause or break within a line ("Parties: A Selection"), but that more often adds only regularized visual spacing.

7 This post-work expressivity is invoked in George Bowering's *Al Purdy* (1970): after referring to Purdy's infamous "home-made wild grape wine" as "a famous Canadian literary libation" (2), Bowering describes meetings characterized by "the drinking and spilling of wine" as much as "talk about the poetry scene," the confluence of vice and verse, "and lots of loud raillery" (3).

8 David Solway, one of Purdy's most vociferous critics, has stated that Purdy's work is of value solely for its content, his delivery being "mere narrative or reportage" (88).

9 Biographer Patrick Toner has described Nowlan's "desultory attempts to lay off the sauce" as well as his frequent "boasting about his drinking prowess" (256-57).

10 Acorn's "behavioural instability," according to Shane Neilson, relegated him to the margins while Purdy "moved tirelessly from national gig to national gig" (131)—a difference more in socialization and success than in the way alcohol figures into their respective poetics and personae.

11 Brent Wood, for instance, argues that MacEwen's alcoholism was exacerbated by hypoglycemia, meaning that the intoxication she experienced would have been accompanied by "exaggerated sensations of mental confusion or intense awareness of one's own feelings" (50). Wood compares the "visionary" qualities of MacEwen with those of "mystics": "psychedelic experimentalists, vision seekers of North American First Peoples, and shamans from the polytheistic cultures around the world" (40). He thus makes MacEwen's alcohol abuse comprehensible by constructing an exoticized and feminized state of supernatural perceptivity.

12 Starnino led the charge in this direction, populating his anthology, *The New Canon* (2005), with poems that he claimed were the most "aurally ambitious, lexically alert, and formally intelligent" (16).

13 In *The New Canon*, Starnino rejects notions of an avant-garde break with tradition, stating instead that "[p]oetry is an incremental art: skills are added to the repertory slowly, and if useful, stay" (30). See also *A Lover's Quarrel*, pp. 94-95.

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Susan Ioannou

Organic

(*after hip replacement*)

The body has its own wisdom.
It need not be told
how or when
to ease itself whole.

Trust, and it surprises:
unasked, it rises from the bed
or on its own stirs toward a step
once feared might never happen.
Tightening to rebalance,
muscle is free of panic.

After long days of swelling,
a dip forms into an ankle,
a lump sculpts to a knee.
Loosened flakes of skin
unveil flesh regrowing.

Pain has diminished, unnoticed.
No need to think to know
it's body heals the spirit,
not the other way round.

Reading on the Frontier

Jody Mason

Home Feelings: Liberal Citizenship and the Canadian Reading Camp Movement.
McGill-Queen's UP $34.95

Reviewed by Faye Hammill

Teaching adults to read. Offering learning opportunities in remote locations. Distributing books free of charge. Who could doubt that these are good things to do, or that an organization which does them is benign? In 1999, a Canadian stamp commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Frontier College (formerly the Canadian Reading Camp Association or CRCA) featured the slogan "Education for all." In its early years, the CRCA provided travelling libraries and reading rooms for workers in mining, railway, and lumber camps, and soon began to offer evening classes in English and other basic subjects. Today, Frontier College announces itself on its website as "a national charitable literacy organization." It outlines an admirable student-centred philosophy, emphasizing mutual learning between student and tutor, and promising that "[w]e go where people are, rather than expecting them to come to us." Alongside this are statements of the organization's vision: "Literacy is recognized as a human right and a driving force to empowerment and prosperity"; "We work with volunteers and community partners to give people the skills and confidence they need to reach their potential and contribute to society." This part might give us pause. It draws on a discourse of entrepreneurial citizenship, stressing the individual's responsibility to be self-reliant and productive, and on a narrowed definition of literacy, oriented towards training for the workplace.

The history of Frontier College can legitimately be told as the stamp tells it. There was idealism—the founder of the CRCA and first principal of Frontier College, Alfred Fitzpatrick, sought to combat inequality, diminish urban-rural divides, and dismantle "hierarchical distinctions between manual and mental labour" (Mason 126). There was generosity, as labourer-teachers toiled all day in remote camps and dedicated their evenings to teaching their fellow workers. There was ingenuity: reading rooms were housed in old railway cars or repurposed shacks, and camp instructors made use of lantern shows, phonographs, and film, as well as books and periodicals.

Yet the concepts of self-improvement and national belonging which defined this organization—and which, in turn, helped to define it—have been fiercely contested over the whole period of its existence. Scrutiny of these debates, and of the ways in which adult-education movements became entangled with them, reveals a very different version of the history of Frontier College. In early-twentieth-century Canada, the requirements of capitalist resource extraction led to an influx of non-British immigrant labour. In this context, as Jody Mason persuasively argues,

> an early pedagogy for citizenship emerged that drew on the affective dimensions of citizenship ("home feelings") as a means of engaging a principal adversary and interlocutor—socialist and communist print cultures and the non-British immigrant communities with which these were associated. . . . [T]he Reading Camp Movement combined the cultural mechanisms of literature, literacy, and citizenship to encourage apparently benevolent forms of liberal selfhood, particularly among non-British immigrants. . . . Both literacy and citizenship served as important instruments of social distinction, differentiating those who could "give" them from those who . . . lacked them. (5)

Rather than helping to eradicate social inequalities, adult educators could actually end up reinforcing them. Frontier College received state support, arguably, because it provided ways of managing potentially disruptive working-class or immigrant populations and converting them into productive and loyal citizens. Even reading poetry and fiction, Mason suggests, could be understood as a way of turning workers away from collective action and towards introspection and sentimental community. The particular books which were selected for the camp libraries encouraged attachment to Canada, as well as to the families from which labourers were physically divided. Fitzpatrick, as he developed his ideas about citizenship education, drew on discourses of maternal feminism which identified the family as "the key site of individual moral formation and thus of the making of the citizen" (24). He requested government support for his travelling library service on the basis that books might supply the moral influence which women provided in a domestic setting.

One of Fitzpatrick's most radical ideas was that Frontier College should be granted degree-awarding powers. His ambition—described in his book *The University in Overalls: A Plea for Part-time Study* (1920)—was to establish Canada's first extramural degree program, and to ensure access to university education for all via off-campus instruction at mining and forestry sites. This plan, which threatened not only Canada's class structure but also the power of its elite universities, was vigorously challenged. The Ontario government withheld its grant to Frontier College in 1929, ultimately forcing Fitzpatrick's resignation. Mason identifies this as a turning point: "The demise of Fitzpatrick's vision signals an important step in the association's move away from assessing and acting on structural inequalities," and a shift in its emphasis "from moral to political citizenship, from home to state, and from British- and native-born Canadians to non-British immigrants" (126). And what else was happening in Canada during these interwar years? The federal government carried out its earliest "experiments in compulsory citizenship education" with Status Indian children at residential schools (127). A series of legislative measures introduced new

ways of selecting and excluding immigrants, with a focus on barring those involved in activities deemed subversive, as well as those from Asian countries, who were considered non-assimilative. The question of access to, and preparation for, citizenship had never been more pressing, or more contentious. To secure continued state funding, Frontier College had to engage with government agendas, even when its own priorities didn't fit them.

The full story of Frontier College and its Reading Camp Movement has never been told before. It's a very important story in itself, and Mason's telling, based on extremely thorough archival research, is nuanced, intriguing, and often surprising. But her study does much more than reconstruct the history of a single organization. *Home Feelings* also makes an enormous contribution to our understanding of the material practices of reading in the earlier twentieth century. Mason's sustained attention to topics including spaces, pedagogies, and communities of reading yields many new insights. More broadly, *Home Feelings* takes the pre-World War II evolution of Frontier College not as its entire subject but as a case study which enables a powerful analysis of the meanings of citizenship in Canada and the ways in which its development has been narrated. Citizenship education was to some extent collectively oriented, since it was intended both to bring opportunities to groups who had been excluded from formal schooling, and to develop a sense of collective identity for Canadians. Yet at the same time, it constructed citizenship as "an *individual* identity that entailed self-government, hard work, thrift, property acquisition, and lawful behaviour" (11). It located the individual in a private, rather than collective, social context. This intimate sociality, Mason argues, was consolidated through the educational and literacy practices of middle-class reformers, and used to counteract the literacies of the left. In contemporary Canada, its legacies are visible in liberal conceptions of the social. These, Mason suggests, are dangerous precisely because "they can seem so benign, relying as they do on commonsense appeals to private family responsibility" (234).

This book provides a model of archivally based, theoretically informed interdisciplinary research. Historians of education, of reading, and of citizenship will find Mason's discoveries extremely resonant.

Women's Histories

Tessa Jordan
Feminist Acts: Branching Out *Magazine and the Making of Canadian Feminism.*
U of Alberta P $34.99

Reviewed by Linda Morra

Published out of Edmonton, *Branching Out* was Canada's first second-wave feminist periodical, which entirely excluded men from its production and content; it had a seven-year lifespan, extending from 1973 to 1980, and included thirty issues. Tessa Jordan's *Feminist Acts:* Branching Out *Magazine and the Making of Canadian*

Feminism, published by the University of Alberta Press, relocates the periodical historically to chart its evolution over this period and to suggest its changing face to respond to and accommodate a more national and representative range of women. In so doing, Jordan also observes the kinds of challenges inherent in such an enterprise, from the struggle of raising appropriate funds to produce the periodical and support its editor (its second editor, Sharon Batt, remained unpaid), to the difficulties of managing volunteers, to the complexities of "branching out" to include different literary forms (fiction and non-fiction) and a polyphony of voices and beliefs (radical feminists to more conservative ones, the BIPOC community, and women from various income and education levels). On the one hand, *Branching Out* provided an alternative to "male-centred mainstream media," while on the other, it offered a "more moderate approach than the radical feminist press." It was not a publication that grew out of an event, Jordan fundamentally argues, but rather its "beginning was itself the event."

The book is divided into five chapters, with a foreword by Eleanor Wachtel, whose endorsement is appropriate given that she herself was a contributor to the periodical. The first chapter charts the periodical's history over three phases and its shift, therefore, from alternative women's magazine to feminist periodical. Jordan also examines the magazine's production, funding sources (and lack thereof), and regional representation, and analyzes the visual representation of its covers (also happily included in the book). *Branching Out*, Jordan observes, attracted both mainstream and emerging writers, and embraced both the arts and more explicitly political content. The periodical certainly engaged a wide range of writers across the country, so it was indeed more national in its representation than its production in Western Canada might otherwise suggest, including the likes of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Marian Engel, Mavis Gallant, Aritha van Herk, and Jane Rule. Jordan examines the various ideological commitments of these writers and the relationship they held to the periodical. As one example, Rule, Jordan maintains, was elitist in her contribution—a charge by which *Branching Out* itself was habitually confronted—because she believed that women should not work in the service of the feminist movement, but rather above it. If elitism played a role in shaping Rule's assumptions, so did particular ideological currents of American culture, which would have informed Rule's sense of working beyond what Marilyn Schuster called the "constraints of identity."

The second chapter locates the periodical in broader terms, analyzing the role that it played in the 1970s feminist movement. The third chapter provides a more practical look at its operational structure, the leadership roles within that structure, and its day-to-day operations. The fourth chapter assesses the periodical's complex engagement with cultural production and political activism, while the fifth chapter endeavours to define the brand of feminism that this periodical espoused by locating it within the 1970s women's movement, citing particularly the work of Judy Rebick and the digitization project *Rise Up! A Digital Archive of Feminist Activism*.

Jordan frames her discussion by arguing that researchers have habitually taken a "piecemeal approach to reading periodicals." Her book offers a welcome correction, contextualized within the trajectory offered by Sean Latham and Robert Scholes' scholarly work, by examining the periodical as a whole in order to derive a broader understanding of its audience, purpose, and reach. The book is accessible and enjoyable as a read, and the historical material largely well researched and well analyzed. Jordan undertakes crucial archival work and interviews with former staff members to reconstruct not only a history of this periodical, but also multiple literary and cultural histories related to women and the women's movement in Canada.

Fiction Aslant of Memoir

Alix Ohlin
Dual Citizens. Anansi $22.95

Zalika Reid-Benta
Frying Plantain. Anansi $19.95

Reviewed by Emily Ballantyne

There is something incredibly powerful about the minute detailing of the past self in fiction. With both of the books I review here, I found myself mentally checking and admiring their veracity, looking for clues in the text to confirm the rich lived experience of the powerfully perceptive and nuanced narrators. Both Zalika Reid-Benta and Alix Ohlin ground their fictional style in recollection, building trust and familiarity with their readers by carefully crafting a confessional quality in their narrators as they come of age. They document young women's lives in place, focusing primarily on the ways in which their protagonists construct their own identities as women, and on how their stories are shared through familial relations and against the backdrop of places both present and dislocated.

In *Frying Plantain*, Reid-Benta adopts the linked short story to detail the perspective of Kara Davis, a Jamaican Canadian adolescent living in the Eglinton West area of Toronto. Each short story poignantly captures a snapshot portrait of Kara's life as a child and as a teen. Reid-Benta emphasizes the ways in which Kara's behaviour is informed by her immediate relations. She is caught in the uneasy relationship between her mother and her grandmother, often serving as a pawn to both bring them together and keep them apart. Her mother, Eloise, protectively controls her, monitoring her appearance and actions for any sign of misbehaviour, while her Nana feeds her, assesses her, and through her, keeps tabs on her mother and her husband. Propriety and perception are everything, as Kara struggles to assert her sexuality and belonging with her peers, while at the same time maintaining the decorum required of a good girl in the Little Jamaica community to appease her family and maintain their pride and dignity.

In *Dual Citizens*, narrator Lark Brossard contemplates the distance she feels toward her absent mother, Marianne, and the closeness she feels toward her increasingly estranged sister Robin, across moves that take Lark from Canada to the US and back again. After a childhood of codependency on her sister for companionship and support as latchkey siblings in Montreal, Lark moves away for university, abandoning Robin and reconnecting with her in critical moments in a pattern that details the emotional cost of losing intimacy with the person you hold most dear. Over this series of reconnections, Lark comes to realize that she no longer knows Robin as she once did, tracing the ways in which omission has kept them together while pushing them further apart. The beautiful sadness of the sisters' bond is achingly compelling and perfectly unresolved.

Both works make use of artist-protagonists who are interested in crafting narrative and questioning the ways in which form and function shape events and inform meaning. Reid-Benta sets the tone in "Pig Head," where Kara tells and retells the story of seeing a pig's head in her aunt's freezer to her elementary school, casting the experience bigger and brighter with each retelling. For Kara, stories are a way to cultivate closeness and belonging, increasing her likeability as her tales grow tall. As Kara moves through high school, stories help elide truth and uncover it. Conjecturing about the emotionally explosive neighbours in "Brandon & Sheila" allows Kara to connect with Eloise about relationships when she can't bring herself to tell her mother about her first kiss and wants to avoid punishment. In "Faith Community," the pretence of picking up the car at the auto shop with her grandfather protects Kara from witnessing a raucous fight by eliding the reality of her grandfather's cheating. Stories are protective and incomplete, both spoken and unspoken. Reid-Benta carefully draws attention to the construction of these stories and how they shift in function in the course of life.

In *Dual Citizens*, Lark's job as a film editor also foregrounds the ways in which narrative is generated through the process of construction and elision. The opportunity to be filmed creates an opening for connection between Lark and Marianne. Marianne opens up before the camera and engages in stream-of-consciousness storytelling while Lark safely observes her mother at a distance through the lens. After her mother's death, Lark processes the loss by obsessively viewing and cutting this same film into a short film called *Marianne Forgets*, fixating on the emotional shifts between stories, between her mother's expressions. In this way, Lark seems to reclaim a narrative of her mother in part by silencing her and leaving her captured in wordless expression and emotion. She has no similar process for understanding and making sense of her relationship with Robin. However, Robin's role in elision, in cutting Lark out of her life at a critical moment, is key to the novel's complexity. The role of the "cut" in the construction of a narrative—what it emphasizes and what it elides—seems to be the deepest core of *Dual Citizens*. What is shared, what is left out, when it is revealed, and why are all questions that hum beneath this engrossing novel.

Fiction aslant of memoir instructs us richly in the ways that memory cuts and assembles reality into meaningful story. The self-awareness of both these works of fiction brings us closer to the constructs that shape relationships, protect them, and most importantly, make sense of them for our own needs and interests.

A Bowering Literary History of Canada

George Bowering
Writing and Reading: Essays. New Star $18.00

Reviewed by Conrad Scott

George Bowering's short essays in *Writing and Reading* portray a somewhat secret history of Canadian literary icons—but this historicization is perhaps familiar to many in parts (and to the select few more fully). In this book, Bowering remembers and reveals his personal experiences and takes on what has been a long and deeply embedded engagement with literature and culture in this country and beyond. His belles lettres delve into memories accrued while also wading through more aesthetic questions of literary merit about craft, genre, technicalities, and philosophy. He covers poetry, prose, film, drama, music, translation, archiving, and criticism. He sides with Irving Layton and observes Robert Kroetsch, the listener. In remembering a championing of British Columbian writers like Sheila Watson and Ethel Wilson, he also reminisces about a walk with Alice Munro. *Writing and Reading* even features pieces that work on explaining some of Bowering's own writing, as well as letters, responses, and a concluding "splinterview." The list, as they say, goes on—which is fitting, since he also contemplates lists.

While moments in a handful of these essays might be taken as Bowering playing the curmudgeon (or, as he phrases it, "an old coot in the literature business")—the chiding of *enRoute* magazine here, the somewhat technophobic nostalgia for the handwritten epistle there—Bowering always presents a loftier purpose as he also captures the elegiac and peoples his memories with value and poise, with humility and humour. In doing so, Bowering demonstrates not only that he is always a great student of art and literature, but also a critic interested in educating others. At one point in *Writing and Reading*, he pauses to illuminate us with his take on David Mitchell's puzzle of a novel, *Cloud Atlas* (2004)—and Bowering's point is not merely that he enjoys Mitchell's clever formal construction, but also his style and narrative appeal. Readability is something that Bowering returns to as his essays take the time to consider what he believes matters in poetry and prose.

But Bowering also defends what he describes as the lifelong pursuit of trying to understand harder writing, such as with Judith Fitzgerald's poetry or Michael Ondaatje's titles, because Bowering relishes the necessary audience time and effort to engage with and understand such work as a function of the creator's struggle to create, and the constant honing of their craft. For Bowering, the difficulty often

becomes part of the pleasure of the text, of the composition. And it is in recognizing such moments through his long foray into, and friendship with, Canadian literature and its literati that Bowering apprises us of the importance of the byplay his titular duality necessarily enacts and enables. The writer must also be a reader; both roles cycle for them and continually enrich their oeuvre.

New York to Muddy York

Scott McLaren

Pulpit, Press, and Politics: Methodists and the Market for Books in Upper Canada.
U of Toronto P $27.95

Reviewed by Ruth Bradley-St-Cyr

When we imagine those settlers to Upper Canada of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, we might imagine them as Susanna Moodie portrayed them in *Roughing It in the Bush*—illiterate farming drudges with no time for leisure and certainly none for reading. But perhaps no readers were more voracious than early Canadian Methodists (1790-1850), who bought books at a rate that likely rivals what Canadians spend today.

Scott McLaren's ability to make sense of this very particular time, place, and ethos—essentially the roots of publishing in English Canada—is impressive. The tangle of commercial, nationalist, and denominational concerns that surrounded Egerton Ryerson, the *Christian Guardian* (Upper Canada's leading newspaper), and the book business that emerged forms a plot as full of intrigue, drama, and betrayal as any great Russian novel. The Methodist Book and Publishing House (later Ryerson Press) survived by navigating between powerful American and British influences, developing its own culture in the process.

Its ties to New York made the Canadian house, essentially, the first publishing branch plant in Canada—ironic considering its eventual sale to American branch plant McGraw-Hill in 1970. The struggle at the time over whether the British would control the market in their Canadian colony was lost on the thoroughly practical point that books supplied from London were far costlier than those from New York, and thus unaffordable in Upper Canada.

McLaren's historical analysis leads to some very interesting comparisons with Canadian book publishing today. Do we read with Canadian sensibilities or are we "an imagined community of transnational readers"? Clearly, "books could be treated as straightforward commercial goods in a public market regardless of their geopolitical origins," but along the way, Methodist publishers developed a passion for inculcating Canadian nationalism as well.

I wonder, however, if McLaren has not missed an important reason for the closer ties to American Methodists than British ones—a mythological tie, more family than business. North American Methodism was founded in New York in 1766 by a group

of Protestant immigrants from Ireland that found itself uprooted once again by the Declaration of Independence and in 1783 were forced northward to British North America.

The strength of this tie is shown by Egerton Ryerson himself, who wrote in the October 30, 1839 edition of the *Christian Guardian*, "[t]his afternoon we dined with the only surviving children of the late memorable Mrs. [Barbara] Heck . . . O, my heart burned within me when I heard them converse about their sainted mother, and early Methodism in Canada; I could have sat for days as a child at their feet; I almost envied them the privilege of being thus related to the Founder of American Methodism."

(For more on the Irish Palatines and their influence on Methodism and Ontario see Carolyn Head's excellent *The Irish Palatines in Ontario: Religion, Ethnicity, and Rural Migration* (2nd ed., 2009). This mythology must surely have played its own part in the strong ties between York (Toronto) and New York.

As well, I wondered why McLaren ventured into the issue of the Department of Education and textbook publishing at the very end of his book—a huge issue and one that merits a book of its own—without mentioning the complications that this involved for Egerton Ryerson, then Chief Superintendent of Education. (On this note, see Linda Wilson Corman's "James Campbell and the Ontario Education Department, 1858-1884" in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada*, no. 14, 1975.)

These are minor quibbles, however. The book's only real flaw is its conclusion, which attempts to sum up in five pages the rest of Methodist publishing history in Canada, a history which includes forty years of William Briggs, another forty years of Lorne Pierce and Ryerson Press, and the industry-shaking sale of the press in 1970. In fact, by my count, the work of five scholars could usefully build toward such a broader history of Methodist/United Church publishing in Canada: McLaren on these early years, Janet Friskney on the Briggs years, Sandra Campbell on the Pierce years, me on the last ten years and the sale of the press, and George Parker for his encyclopedic knowledge. I would happily join such a project. Ultimately, those who study English Canadian publishing must read *Pulpit, Press, and Politics* in order to understand how it all began.

Stories, Good Food, and Friends

Beth Brant (Janice Gould, ed)

A Generous Spirit: Selected Works by Beth Brant. Inanna $22.95

Reviewed by June Scudeler

It is highly gratifying to finally have a collection of works by Mohawk writer Beth Brant (Degonwadonti), who passed away in 2015 with many of her books out of print. Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) rightly states in her foreword that without Brant there wouldn't be a Connie Fife (Cree), or Joshua Whitehead's (Oji-nêhiyaw) novel *Jonny Appleseed*.

Edited by Janice Gould (Koyangk'auwi), who passed away in 2019, *A Generous Spirit* brings together nineteen of Brant's essays, poems, and stories. Gould's introduction is a moving history of Brant's life and writing. Lesbian and working class, Brant didn't begin writing until 1981 when she was forty after having three children. She then had a relationship for twenty years with Denise Dorsz, who co-founded a feminist coffeehouse in Detroit. Gould not only gives us a biography of Brant's life, but the milieu in which she lived and wrote, emphasizing "the themes of survival and empathy permeates Beth's entire oeuvre." Gould also places Brant's writing in the context of feminist presses (*Selected Works* is published by *Sinister Wisdom* journal and Toronto's Inanna Press), some of the few places for a lesbian woman to publish in the 1980s and 1990s, although the editor noting specifically where the selections are from would further aid the reader in understanding Brant's writing journey. I am curious how Gould was able to gather together Brant's writings, especially as she stopped publishing in the mid-1990s, which was a great loss for Indigenous literatures.

Rereading the stories (I've taught Brant in my classes), I find it so apparent that Brant was writing and living kinship. In "That Place," the character David goes back to his reserve to die from an AIDS-related illness, a journey made less terrifying by Joseph, a gay elder who protected David's dad from bullying at residential school. David laments that "[i]n the city they didn't want me to be Native. In this place, they don't want me to be gay." A woman loses custody of her child because she loves another woman, which Brant intersplices with the anguish of a woman having to send her children to residential school in the 1890s.

Brant's work is prescient because it focuses on kinship and solidarity among women and among working class people, particularly Black and Indigenous peoples. "Food and Spirits" is deservedly one of Brant's better-known stories, in which Mohawk elder Elijah Powless takes a seven-hour-long bus ride to Detroit to see his twin granddaughters, who are late because of a traffic jam. Terrance, a Black Indigenous youth, helps Elijah at the bus station, taking Elijah to a bar while Terrance waits for Elijah's granddaughters. Elijah shares his frybread with Archibald, the bar owner and Alana, who works in the sex trade, forming a bond with them, telling them, "Your people didn't get the chance to be familiar yet. You was brought here without your say-so." The story ends with Terrance bringing the twins to the bar, where "the sign blinked off, then on. FOOD & SPIRITS. FOOD & SPIRITS. Inside there were music, stories, good food, and friends. Elijah was content," a space that Brant asks us to share.

Women in Publishing

Ruth Panofsky

Toronto Trailblazers: Women in Canadian Publishing. U of Toronto P $29.95

Reviewed by Melissa Dalgleish

With *Toronto Trailblazers: Women in Canadian Publishing,* Ruth Panofsky broadens and sharpens the focus of her practice as a historian of Canadian publishing, which includes her earlier histories of the Macmillan Company of Canada and of the Oxford University Press (OUP), along with a series of short but impactful biographical studies of women who worked for or adjacent to the English Canadian publishing houses of Toronto from the 1930s into the early 2000s.

By zeroing in on seven significant female employees of major trade and educational publishers, Panofsky aims "to lay the foundation of expansive scholarship on the subject of women and Canadian publishing by first considering the significant gains made by key women in mainstream publishing houses." This focus has the effect of limiting Panofsky's study to white women in Toronto, which she implicitly acknowledges as problematic in her mention of Black, Indigenous, and francophone women in publishing who are outside the scope of this project.

Anchored in extensive and skilful archival research, each biography—of Irene Clarke, Eleanor Harman, Francess Halpenny, Sybil Hutchinson, Claire Pratt, Anna Porter, and Bella Pomer—expertly weaves together correspondence, professional records, interviews, and other primary sources into a compelling professional narrative. The strongest are those of the most contemporary figures—Porter and Pomer especially—where records are rich and Panofsky can explore how these women navigated and negotiated their personal and professional lives, shaped the practice and field of publishing in Canada, and used their personal and professional privilege to speak out on issues of gender, race, and Canadian culture.

Some authorial and editorial decisions do bear questioning. The cover graphic reductively symbolizes women editors with pink pencils; this is mirrored by some shortcomings in how Panofsky addresses the intersections of work and gender. The many stories of challenging working relationships among female editors and male publishers and authors would have benefited from a stronger attempt to illuminate how adapting to (and being limited by) the gendered expectations of women in the twentieth-century workplace shaped each woman's impact on the field.

Likewise, a more nuanced approach to disability would have benefited the chapter on Claire Pratt; Panofsky frames Pratt's resignation from McClelland & Stewart to work freelance (with better control over her working hours and conditions) as a personal choice, rather than one driven at least in part by systemic ableism. And even though Panofsky should have been able to do so (as I was for my work on poet Jay Macpherson), she assumed she would not be able to access the in-house OUP archives for this project. In consequence, there's a significant gap in Panofsky's archival research in the chapters on Irene Clarke and Eleanor Harmon.

Despite its occasional limitations, *Toronto Trailblazers* is a fascinating and worthy addition to Canadian publishing history, one that will hopefully lay the groundwork for a more expansive history of women in Canadian publishing and how their contributions shaped what and how we read today.

Unmeaning Mental Illness

Roxanna Bennett
Unmeaningable. Gordon Hill $20.00

Lucas Crawford
Belated Bris of the Brainsick. Nightwood $18.95

Reviewed by Andrew McEwan

Roxanna Bennett's *Unmeaningable* and Lucas Crawford's *Belated Bris of the Brainsick* are two recent poetry collections that consider the language of identity and experience surrounding states of difference that become socially codified as mentally ill. Both, further, consider psychiatric institutionalization and the lived realities of navigating intersectional oppressions while receiving health care. Although tonally and poetically distinct, the overlapping concern in these books is with articulating the way those who identify as mentally ill, disabled, mad, and/or psychiatric survivors make space at the boundaries of the normative language they navigate, and with how poetry provides a medium in which to explore these spaces.

Bennett's *Unmeaningable* presents an interconnected series of lyric poems concerned with the body's relation to socially disabled subjectivity. Embodied experience in this collection continually shifts below the seemingly steady facade of identifying labels. The speaker negotiates and unsettles diagnostic language to perform the poetry of life under the medical gaze and to "unlearn sanism's purgatorial / spectacle." The stakes of this work are not only personal, as it is a question of "Who loses the game / of side effect or symptom. Who gets to be human." This poetry of mental illness, disability, and hospitalization articulates how the sterile language of institutions operates as a social project of normalization. Further, as the speaker has "lost the knack of knowing how / to unsick act," the poems figure health as a performance, and illustrate the work involved to meet norms of wellness. Performance becomes habitual, as the poems articulate that "[t]his too will pass / for routine, the tedium of madness" in a twist on positivity psychobabble that flexes on the line break. The poems further unsettle diagnostic language by echoing phrases within and between poems, each time with shifting implications. In the poem "Progression of the Disorder," the prediction that "You will fail to fill out this form" signals the hospital as a place administering to continued failure. The "progression" follows the word "form" through the patient being "strong armed / into forming opinions / of your worth," only to be "sent home with a fistful of forms" and "be called deformed." This twisting of the word mimics the repetition of institutional

language and life. Yet, in poeticizing and playing with this repetition and articulating its logic, the poetry performs the flexibility of poetic language to accommodate the critical shifts that official language cannot. Ultimately, *Unmeaningable* offers hope in the form of destabilizing the language of normative experience to express an "unmeaningable" body and mind: "other & sick / & more / unsorry."

The repetition of language to both perform the monotony of normalizing sentiments as well as to twist this language finds voice also in Crawford's *Belated Bris of the Brainsick*. In a book that thinks through overlapping and intersecting identity categories, Crawford's poetry considers queer mental health, among other subjects, with a humour that makes moments of intensity all the more striking. This approach is best described in the book itself as "high-camp pleasure and low- / grade pain." In a poem titled "Psych Ward Grub," a sign stating "ALL YOU CAN EAT IF YOU LIVE / ONE MORE DAY (now with sundae bar)" unveils the absurdity of life and death in the institution. "It hurts here," the speaker tells the reader, "We eat swill then try / not to shit shame. We are very different, / but our farts all smell the same." Yet within the institutional context is also the seriousness of carceral logic—a later poem addressed first to "officer" and then "nurse" attests to the grey areas between policing and psychiatric care. Crawford's deftness in blending humour with social critique creates an experience whereby the reader's frame of reference is constantly readjusting. In a rewriting of "I's the B'y" to articulate a personal history of trans Maritimer Jewish identity, the speaker argues that "the I in I's has always been / the most controversial pronoun." Such phrasings that recontextualize and blend ideas inform a poetics critical of the norms of language that leave many identities unspoken. A recognition of both difference and similarity through linguistic play fittingly finds its clearest enunciation in the collection's final poem, "Conjunction Tutorial." The poem highlights, through capitalization, the conjunctive ties between identities, colours, clothing, and language in a consideration of the trope of black "depression clothes," and how "pigment is always political." The connections and disconnections embodied in the linguistic play of this collection perform both humour and despair, and focus always on the social function of language.

"yearning distilled to its essence"

David Berry

On Nostalgia. Coach House $19.95

Reviewed by Shannon Lodoen

Although the mention of nostalgia might evoke thoughts of childhood memories and TV show reruns, David Berry's *On Nostalgia* makes it clear that the phenomenon runs far deeper than a mere personal desire to return to the past. His debut book considers the broader and more collective implications of nostalgia, exploring not just how and where it operates in today's society but most importantly *why.* He

deals with themes of loss, death, political unrest, and the inexorable passage of time, examining the role that nostalgia plays throughout life to help build identity, find community, and make meaning in a world that often seems devoid of it.

Berry's exploration of nostalgia starts with an explanation of the term's history and origins. It was coined in the seventeenth century from the Greek words *nostos* ("home" or "homecoming") and *algos* ("pain"), literally meaning "pain associated with home" or "homesickness." Interestingly, it was originally a medical diagnosis for soldiers returning home from war (exhibiting symptoms of what might now be classified as post-traumatic stress disorder). Over time, however, nostalgia has come to be defined more broadly as a yearning for a time or place in the past that simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of a return. Throughout the course of his book, Berry offers over twenty different definitions of nostalgia, including "a form of reconciliation," "a tool of identity" in politics, "the selfie of subject matter," and "the dream that we can give death a little less bite." As the variety of definitions indicates, the uses and applications of nostalgia are clearly far-reaching. Far from being an individual phenomenon, nostalgia is constantly spilling over into pop culture, social media, and even politics.

After explaining the history and origins of the term, Berry moves on to address its critics, its modern manifestations in art, the political realm, consumer culture, and nostalgia's potential role in the future. Taking on "anti-nostalgia" in the second chapter feels like a questionable choice, as it seems to set Berry's argument back before it even gets under way. Once the anti-nostalgic arguments of the Panglossians and Futurists have been acknowledged, however, the rest of the book is well structured and organized. Berry draws his material from a number of fields, engaging with the work of Fred Davis, Svetlana Boym, Clay Routledge, Thorstein Veblen, Barbara Stern, Vance Packard, and Johannes Hofer (the Swiss student who introduced the term "nostalgia" in 1688), amongst others. He also makes use of many short case studies to illustrate the ubiquity of nostalgia in society: *Star Wars, Back to the Future,* Coca-Cola, *Ready Player One, The Office*, *Mad Men*, and of course the *Odyssey*. Some of these studies can feel drawn out at times; the final chapter on the future of nostalgia falls a bit flat compared to the rest of the book, lapsing into an extended discussion of Internet archives and social media simulators that seems to this reviewer slightly beside the point. Other anecdotes and examples could benefit from further elaboration. Berry often mentions his love of his grandma's fresh-baked cookies but is conspicuously vague as to why the song "Heaven" by David Byrne holds such nostalgic joy for him. For the majority of the book, however, Berry maintains a good balance between the depth and breadth of information he delivers.

The book's fourth chapter, on political nostalgia, is particularly resonant in today's climate. Berry discusses nostalgia's role in the nation-building projects of the eighteenth century onwards, the rise of fascism in Italy with Mussolini, and Donald Trump's presidential campaign (especially evident in the slogan "Make America Great Again"). He draws some troubling parallels between past and present, especially regarding nostalgia's ability to unify populations by facilitating a

simultaneous remembering and forgetting of history, allowing for the cultivation of a collective past and identity that people can rally around. In the fifth chapter, Berry asserts that commodified nostalgia functions in a similar way, enabling people to form coherent identities based on the products or media they consume. It is, essentially, the means by which the past is made marketable to people who are searching for some sort of meaning and anchoring in life, who want to believe they can assuage their nostalgia and their consumerist desires in one go. People who use nostalgia as a tool for financial or political gain have often been criticized for doing so, but Berry emphasizes that even public criticism does not have much of an effect on nostalgia's ability to influence the masses. His analysis of nostalgia is, therefore, also a warning and a critique of the ways in which nostalgia is deployed to capitalize on people's desires for belonging and stability in a constantly changing world.

Although this book does not necessarily offer many new contributions to the field, it is a strong synthesis of existing scientific and social understandings of nostalgia interspersed with apt anecdotes and examples. The breadth and number of these examples means that certain aspects of Berry's discussion will resonate with certain readers better than others. It also means, however, that this is a book where there is truly something for everyone who is old enough to have experienced feelings of nostalgia. While nostalgia insists that newer is not always better, in the case of this book the recency of Berry's references—particularly in the political and technological spheres—makes for a relevant read that offers critical insight on many aspects of contemporary society.

Archives of Movement

Linda Morra

Moving Archives. Wilfrid Laurier UP $85.00

Reviewed by Gregory Betts

As archives move increasingly to the forefront of academic attention as an object of study, scholars have expanded their attention to a fuller range of their manifestation and conceptualization. An archive describes a range of collections: from a national institution housing the foundational documents of the State to the letters written home by an author collected in a shoebox in a parent's closet. The paradox is that while archival studies has reached maturity as a field of scholarship, and become attentive to the breadth of its field, the archives themselves are morphing under a variety of pressures, including budget cuts, digitization, and significant cultural shifts outside of the archive that raise essential and existential questions about what gets collected, who gets collected, how it is stored, how it can be accessed (and by whom), and so on. It follows that scholars like Linda Morra and the contributors to this timely collection have taken up the question of what to make of the moving idea of the archive and of the collected effects of such sundry shifts.

Moving Archives responds to developments in this object of study and begins mapping the implications of these changes. For over two decades now, archival studies has been guided by Jacques Derrida's theorization in *Archive Fever* (1995), in which he proposes a lingering abyss between the identity of a State or an author and the troubling gaps that persist in the construction of an archival record. As he writes in a now famous formula, "the archive reveals as much as it suppresses" (15). Such gaps haunt *Moving Archives*, too, especially in the contributions by Linda Morra, Katherine McLeod, and Karina Vernon, who consider the implications of charged public silences, especially as provoked by deleterious attitudes with regard to race and gender in Canada. These studies fit the traditional work of archival scholars, which has been to find unacknowledged objects inside or outside the archive and to bring those objects, with all of their attendant implications, into an ongoing scholarly conversation. Derrida's gap reminds such scholars of the persistence of materials yet outside the archive, despite their best efforts.

Morra's resonant introduction, however, seeks to advance the field beyond just supplementing existing literary scholarship, beyond even the post-structuralist sense of the death drive, the lack, and the gaps inherent to the archive. By expanding the trope of moving to its widest connotations, she seeks to pull the field toward affect theory's embrace of the living ethics, the links, and the emotional impact of things that establish our subjecthood in the world. In the words of Marika Cifor, affect is the "force that creates a relation between a body and the world" (8). This collection deploys models of affect and the ethics of our relations with objects, especially as developed by Cifor, Catherine Hobbs, and Sara Ahmed, to extend the conversation beyond what is not archived (or what is and why) to consider the emotional impact of objects and the ethics of their movement into and out of archives. This approach creates more room for the story of how archives are created and the emotional process of transforming objects into archived objects. Contributions by Susan Rudy, Patricia Godbout, and Marc André Fortin especially focus on personal stories and the emotional experiences of creating an archive.

In widening the purview, Morra's collection permits productive divergences and even contradictions between the ideas of what an archive does to things. Thus, for Joseph LaBine, the archive is a positive means by which a (postcolonial) nation establishes itself, such that archives moving out of country constitute a "cultural betrayal" (67). For Karina Vernon, in contrast, her archival scholarship was "never motivated by a desire to belong to nation" (134) and, instead, addresses the ambivalent and emotionally resonant history of Black bodies and how they came to the land now called Canada. Vernon imagines an archive, a potential archive, in which Black objects (made so by forced interpolation into a racist worldview) claim subjecthood on their own terms.

A similar desire for what the archives might be lurks beneath many of the papers in the collection. In opening up a space to consider affect in the creation of archives, including what Jennifer Douglas calls the "aspirational" archive, Morra invites the possibility for archival scholars to reflect upon their own aspirations for the archives

they participate in creating—and how those aspirations inevitably become encoded into the archives themselves. Thus does the field move, and as it moves it stirs, and the silt aroused by that movement stretches over the gaps and the abyss.

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Forum

I in an Own Place: Reading the Poetry of Canisia Lubrin

Introduction

Nicholas Bradley

Canisia Lubrin's two volumes of poetry to date have met with remarkable success. Her first collection, *Voodoo Hypothesis* (2017), was a finalist for the Raymond Souster Award, presented by the League of Canadian Poets, and was widely and well reviewed. Her second book, *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* (2020), appeared on the short list for the Governor General's Award and won the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2021. In the same year Lubrin received a Windham-Campbell Literature Prize from Yale University, joining a list of distinguished poets that includes Kwame Dawes, Carolyn Forché, Lorna Goodison, and Cathy Park Hong. This reception, coupled with our sense at *Canadian Literature* of the urgency and appeal of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, inspired this forum on Lubrin's writing: a standard book review seemed inadequate to the intricacies and accomplishment of the poetry. In lieu of a review of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, then, seven short essays that examine and pay tribute to a pair of books that have captured the attention of readers in Canada and beyond.[1]

The essays, most of which are written by emerging scholars, concentrate on aspects of poetic form and style: the distinctive use of the pronoun "I" in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, the tercet and the villanelle, the placement of words on the

1 *Voodoo Hypothesis* was reviewed in *Canadian Literature* 236; see Fitzpatrick.

page, titles, and punctuation. As the essays insist, such elements are laden with significance in Lubrin's poetry and demand consideration. In taking up the question of how to read the poems carefully and conscientiously, the responses here suggest that ostensible difficulty affords opportunities for creative interpretation, both in the classroom and on the critic's page. The very title of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* appears to defy pronunciation, but the superscript letter suggests a wealth of correspondences. In Aimé Césaire's *Une tempête* (1969), Caliban assumes *X* as his name, the proper designation for one whose true name has been stolen: "Appelle-moi X. Ça vaudra mieux. Comme qui dirait l'homme sans nom. Plus exactement, l'homme dont on a *volé* le nom" (28). In Safiya Sinclair's *Cannibal* (2016), the passage from Césaire introduces a poem in which words and phrases from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* are jumbled to give Caliban new voice from old language: "Master, Dare I // unjungle it?" (109).

Like *Une tempête* and *Cannibal*, *Voodoo Hypothesis* and *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* are works that portray and stem from the Caribbean and the greater Black Atlantic. They embody a poetics of diaspora and anti-colonialism, of islands and oceans, and of linguistic multiplicity. Thus the essays in this forum also focus on literary, cultural, and historical contexts for Lubrin's poetry. *Voodoo Hypothesis*, for instance, contains references to Derek Walcott, Saint-John Perse, Dionne Brand, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Gwendolyn Brooks, Afua Cooper, C. L. R. James, Priscila Uppal, and Christina Sharpe. The essays here suggest ways of approaching Lubrin's books in light of such figures, while emphasizing the originality and vitality of the poetry at issue.

"There is a spirit nation / under the ocean," writes Lorna Goodison in a poem called "To Become Green Again and Young": "May its citizens plead / for our recovery and redemption" (*Guinea* 113). In both *Voodoo Hypothesis* and *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, Lubrin evokes connections between the world below the surface and the world above it as she investigates matters of spirit and body, recovery and redemption, home and homecoming, self and location. Early in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* she writes, "[W]hat is I / but to always have been (t) here, I've asked it, what is I: I in an own place" (9). The pages that follow trace such concerns as they arise in Lubrin's astonishing poetry.

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Tracing the Black Diaspora in Canisia Lubrin's "The Mongrel"

Cornel Bogle

"The Mongrel," from Canisia Lubrin's debut collection *Voodoo Hypothesis*, offers an inventory and ontological sketch of the modern Caribbean subject through the figure of the mongrel, a recurring trope in Anglophone Caribbean literatures that refers to the racially and culturally hybrid Caribbean self. In "What the Twilight Says," Lubrin's fellow St. Lucian, the poet and Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, figures the mongrel as the ideal descriptor of the West Indian subject: "[M]ongrel as I am, something prickles in me when I see the word 'Ashanti' as with the word 'Warwickshire,' both separately intimating my grandfathers' roots, both baptizing this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian" (*What* 9). While Walcott locates the mongrel within a regional-nationalistic frame to assert a vision of a creole Caribbean identity, Lubrin's imagining of the mongrel emerges through the frame of a diasporic Blackness that is always in the process of composing its ontology in the wake of intergenerational transatlantic violences. Lubrin's account of the mongrel traces the spectre of the Caribbean subject that simultaneously haunts modernity and proves incalculably indecipherable to modernity's desires for a discernible sovereign subject.

"The Mongrel" is a suite in six sections, each framed by a mathematical symbol: the radical sign, which could also be read as a check mark (√ or ✓), and the symbols for "congruent to" (≅), "not equal to" (≠), "greater than or equal to" (≥), "less than or equal to" (≤), and infinity (∞). Through the use of these symbols as headings, Lubrin prompts readers to consider the fraught relationship that mathematics and the natural sciences more broadly have had with Black subjects historically and contemporaneously. Using the symbols to frame poetic reflections on the mongrel, the creolized Caribbean subject, Lubrin calls to mind the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, particularly her essay "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ − ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter beyond the Equation of Value." Ferreira da Silva creatively appropriates mathematical discourse and applies it to the question, does Black life matter? She contends that "[i]n the modern Western imagination, blackness has no value; it is nothing. As such, it marks an opposition that signals a negation, which does not refer to contradiction." Ferreira da Silva arrives at an answer, namely that Black life "is undeterminable, it has no form: it is ∞ minus itself or ∞ divided by itself. It is neither life nor nonlife; it is content without form, or *materia prima*—that which has no value because it exists (as ∞) without form."

This rendering of Blackness in relation to empirical reasoning resonates with utterances of the speaker in "The Mongrel," who casts the Caribbean subject beyond, or in a parenthetical relation to, empiricism: "science, inexact like birth" (4), "the Mongrel's Creole maps / mathless" (5). In her repudiation of empiricism, Lubrin asks us to consider what it means to reject ontological determinism in relation to the deracinated and racialized subjects of the Americas. The stakes of this questioning are best articulated by Ferreira da Silva: "blackness as *matter* signals ∞, another world: namely, that which exists without time and out of space, in the plenum." Put differently, to trace the figure of the mongrel outside of deterministic mathematical logic is to imagine a world beyond the present, which is buttressed by dehumanizing pseudo-empirical racializing logics.

The opening lines of "The Mongrel" are evocative: "Still unravelling from ghosting stars, / she moves us, light-formed, cue, / of Mongrel, also a corpse" (4). The image is amorphous; the "she" is ambiguous throughout the poem, but is suggested to be a maternal figure who gives birth to the mongrel. The

"ghosting stars" from whence the mongrel "us" is moved resonates—especially when coupled with the phrase "Mongrel, also a corpse"—with assertions in Black and Caribbean studies of the ontological status of those who are considered arrivants. Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) borrows the term "arrivant" from the late Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite "to signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe" (xix). Consequently, Lubrin's "ghosting" animates thoughts of how the figure of the "mongrel" arrivant functions as a "ghosting of modernity," especially if we understand that "ghostly discourse is the discourse of blackness" (Carter 591). The invocation of the "corpse" furthers the notion of the arrivant as a subject shrouded in grief, particularly when one bears in mind Orlando Patterson's conceptualization of social death, along with Frank B. Wilderson III's and Jared Sexton's elaborations of that concept.

Sexton argues that in a "perverse sense, black social death is black social life" (37) because of the centrality of transatlantic slavery to the composition of the Afro-Caribbean subject. Indeed Sexton asserts that "social death might be thought of as another name for slavery and an attempt to think about what it comprises" (17): "[T]he concept of social death cannot be generalized. It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel" (21). When not presented as socially dead, the mongrel is never rendered whole in Lubrin's poem. The mongrel is the bearer of a "wounded / head" (5), "bone branding flesh" (7), "the wounded name" (8)—a reference to how the word has been used as a racist, derogatory term—and "the Black bruising self" (6). This fleshly discourse is also indexed to the experience and legacies of transatlantic slavery. Theodora Danylevich turns to the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Alexander G. Weheliye, contending that "black flesh is a zone of suffering; an assemblage of resistance and alternate world-making; a designation of accumulation and death." "The Mongrel" emerges then, resulting from these resonances, as an ontological account of the arrivant in the new world that has been made through the deracinating experiences of the transatlantic slave trade and plantation society.

Elsewhere in *Voodoo Hypothesis*, in the poem "Polite Uncertainty," Lubrin positions "history as font" (46), suggesting that history is a discursive argument, not an objective and fixed account of the past. In "The Mongrel,"

history and memory function as motifs which characterize the affects of alienation and prolonged displacement experienced by arrivants. The "she" referred to throughout the poem is described as "feral / with remembrance" (5). Not only does "she" hold on to memory, but "she" is "feral" and thus agitated, distressed—the condition of the Caribbean subject in relation to history. Furthermore, the "Mongreled / air" is presented as "broken, invented again as *history* / in the rusted coils of coffee shops, inked / Mongrel skins" (6). The "again" in the phrase "invented again as *history*" is poignant, resonant of how history has been erased or manipulated by those in power to quell calls for accountability and reparative justice made by Black people in the Americas. The speaker reflexively asks, "What else reveals us, a species / of amnesiacs, cut off from the trembling that tore—/ our continents apart?" (9). These hyperbolic lines are also poignant, and point to how foundational anti-Black racism is to modernity and our collective conceptualization of "the World." The references to history and memory do not highlight the pathology of the arrivant. Instead, Lubrin deploys a politics of implication, wherein the absence or agitation of history and memory is a result of the practices that constitute a modernity we all share in.

The penultimate section of "The Mongrel" alludes to a Canadian landscape: "that Nova Scotia beach aglow with Mongrel flame" (8). Making the mongrel present in Canada is an important move, one that reminds readers of Canada's role in transatlantic slavery and its consequent position as a node in the transnational Black Atlantic. The invocation of Nova Scotia, in particular, orients readers to the historical and contemporary presence of people of African descent in the province. Among the first Black migrants to Nova Scotia were Black Loyalists who travelled to the province following the American Revolution. These refugees settled throughout Nova Scotia in various communities. Another wave of migration came in the form of exiled Jamaican Maroons who arrived in 1796. The figure of the mongrel is not fixed in a geographic space, but rather always on the move, diasporic, and engaged in a practice of fugitivity that is characteristic of the arrivant. The movement that Lubrin hints at is not entirely a matter of physical movement and migration, but is fundamentally about opposition, negation, and refusal. As Damien Sojoyner writes, "Black fugitivity is based on the disavowal of and disengagement from state-governed projects that attempt to adjudicate

normative constructions of difference through liberal tropes of freedom and democratic belonging" (516). The Nova Scotian "beach aglow with Mongrel flame" (8) is not to be understood as a negative image, but as one illuminated by the generative possibilities of an adrift fugitivity being met by the potential of land(ed) relations.

The final section of "The Mongrel" extends the motif of possibility to suggest that more may be available to the mongrel than "this grief, a story with swords and bite, sun / whose silence holds the invisible pulls of distant worlds" (9). The speaker remarks, "The Mongrel's / orienting grace is still its tail, showing up for things to come, / signalling that our knowledge of the Mongrel is only fragmentary" (9). To look towards the tail—a symbol of cultural retention and imagination which can engender a new world—requires abandoning the ontological conditioning of the world to which the arrivant has grown accustomed. In other words, Lubrin ends with an axiomatic statement that asserts that the diasporic subject, the arrivant, the so-called mongrel, is impermanent. To stay with the "tail" and all that it "signal[s]" is to imagine a world beyond the current. Dionne Brand writes in *A Map to the Door of No Return* that to "live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation" (18). With "The Mongrel," Lubrin edges us closer to understanding the fictions that have produced our current inequities. In our awareness of the power of these fictions, Lubrin asks us to claim fiction for ourselves rather than leaving it in the hands of those with power. She prods us to collectively imagine new worlds, newly rendered selves, and new ways of claiming our belonging to each other and ourselves.

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Voodoo Hypothesis and Wonder

Tavleen Purewal

1.

that a thing can name what
it survives in the in and gives hell on the way out
—Canisia Lubrin, *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st*

2.

Canisia Lubrin's *Voodoo Hypothesis* works wonders in the undergraduate classroom. I have taught it twice as a tutorial leader in Nick Mount's year-long first-year course "Literature for Our Time" at the University of Toronto. In a class constituted by students mostly from the life sciences and various humanities departments, this book of poetry invited their collaboration. We focused on the poem "The Mongrel," whose six sections begin epigraphically with a mathematical symbol. Divided into six groups, students were excited to share their expertise with peers outside their disciplines to identify the scientific contexts of the symbols and to trace their figurative significance. Whereas some students prioritized the hermeneutic possibilities of symbols, others worked with the poetry's approach to such themes as hybridity, history, violence, and knowledge to question the functions of mathematical symbols, interrogating the assumptions on which they are based. This interdisciplinary collaboration is facilitated by the poetry's own interdisciplinary methodologies, a form of Black art as study that operates through, as Katherine McKittrick explains, wonder.

For McKittrick, Black interdisciplinary study "is a way of living, and an analytical frame, that is curious and sustained by wonder (the desire to know)" (*Dear Science* 5). "Wonder *is* study," writes McKittrick (emphasis mine). This study is not aligned with the "epistemological project that 'grasps' and 'seizes,'" as Kyle Kinaschuk clarifies when thinking with Édouard Glissant elsewhere in this forum (pp 161-62). Wonder, as a "desire to know" in the encounter of different things, is a generous position, an openness towards the world's movement into multiple futures, pasts, and presents; in other words, it produces a temporality/poetics/episteme of relation. The opening and titular poem in *Voodoo Hypothesis* announces the text's poetic methodology of convergence, of assembling disparate and formally diverse knowledge-materials, or "black miscellanea" (McKittrick, "Dear April"). Lubrin's poem unfurls in wonder about the possibilities for Black worlds:

> Before sight, we imagine
> that while they go out in search
> of God
> we stay in and become god,
> become: Curiosity[.] (1)

A tool of scientific study *and* literary study, Curiosity is the NASA-launched Mars rover, an instrument of colonial epistemology, and an ideal personified as a woman: "She doesn't need to know our fears / so far too grand for ontology, reckoning" (1). In neoclassical poetry of the eighteenth century, personification as a device for universal ideals and values, like faith and truth, typically contemplates "a harmonious universe" (Wasserman 435). The personification in "Voodoo Hypothesis" creates an allegory for the contemporary colonial project whose Curiosity literally takes the observable universe as its field of representation and as harmonious with colonial invasion. Against "they," the invaders, who manoeuvre Curiosity, a collective "we" speaks back and beforehand. This collective offers an alternate encounter with Mars, recognizing it as a planet of "unsentimental magma" (2) onto which Earth's human history of colonial, capitalist, and environmental violence is projected, anticipated, and denied. The speaker analyzes the colonial machinations and patterns of violence formulating Curiosity's presence on Mars and thinks, "[W]e move too quick for understanding" (3). The collective "we" becomes an Anthropocenic "we" as the entanglements of

our era call (differentially, unequally, unfairly) on everyone. In this first poem of the collection, Lubrin sets the stage for an epistemic poetic movement that is slower—both against and beyond the flow of colonial "comprehension"—and that approaches the world (and other worlds) in its entanglements. This Black knowing allows for curiosity about worlds in their emergence, rather than in their capture, and it is presented in a form highlighting the possibilities and conventions of Black interdisciplinarity, which McKittrick suggests work partly to unsettle the "suffocating and dismal and insular racial logics" of coloniality (*Dear Science* 4).

However, what aesthetic power does a wondering text like Lubrin's wield against the "racial logics" underpinning general reading practices and receptions of Black art? In my tutorial settings, the group, consisting primarily of non-Black students, registered Lubrin's inventions within their own expressions of wonder. Many students who struggled gaining interpretive footing in Lubrin's text nevertheless had ideas about Black Canadian arts and poetics that could reshape their experiences with an institutionalized English literature. Some found that Lubrin's writing spoke to their desires and visions in a way that Western disciplinarities of literature had not before, while others were forced to grapple with a deficit in their experience—that their perspective and knowledge, as reflected by a canonical literature, represent a narrow reality. Still others extracted from Lubrin's work what felt legible to them and dutifully performed their awe at the uniqueness of the racialized voice before moving onto the next text the next week. Lubrin's poetry thus also functions in a settler-colonial undergraduate classroom as an object of wonder. This production of wonder fits what McKittrick, in earlier considerations, conceptualizes as "the emotion evoked by surprise, or in this case, blackness" (*Demonic Grounds* 92). McKittrick conceptualizes the colonial perspective of the geographic, epistemic, and affective place of Blackness and Black people in Canada as wonder or surprise because in "a nation that has and is still defining its history as Euro-white, or nonblack," historical and contemporary Black presences are "unexpected and concealed." "In Canada," McKittrick continues, "blackness and black people are altogether deniable *and* evidence of prior codes of representation that have identified blackness/difference as irrelevant" (93). As per McKittrick, expressions of wonder in the classroom about Lubrin's

writing therefore risk revealing an attachment to prior codes of representation that exclude and disavow Black art.

While some students' surprise at, for instance, the range of literary allusions in Lubrin's poems could stem from, in part, their settler-colonial K-12 education in literature, it is on the same spectrum as the surprise evoked by reviewers of the book who betray their non-Black conceptions of so-called great work. For example, the poet and reviewer Michael Dennis discusses *Voodoo Hypothesis* on his well-known blog, where he admits to not responding enthusiastically to the book at first. He realizes his mistake, however, during a reading by Lubrin. Breathlessly, Dennis recalls monumental readings that he has attended by poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Irving Layton, Earle Birney, Al Purdy, and Milton Acorn. He then exclaims that after Lubrin's performance, he and another poet friend could only agree that it was "one of the monster readings we'd ever witnessed. Hands down. It was stunning to behold." Though Dennis seeks admiringly to correct his misperceptions of Lubrin's literary power and to promote her poetry, his wonder at Lubrin's brilliance sits in relation to a canonical collective of poets that defines the norms of great poetry by settler, masculine, and white characteristics. An appreciation of Black Canadian poetry, through the affective structures of surprise and wonder, ends up reiterating non-Black conditions and contexts for literature.

I cannot pretend we were able to curtail or thematize such engagements and expressions of wonder in our tutorials, but they raise questions for me now: Can surprise about Black art be an ethical relation to its forever unfolding experimentation that invents and reinvents? Or is our awe always and already an othering of Black writing and art? For some students, our classroom study of *Voodoo Hypothesis* was shaped by different expressions of wonder occurring simultaneously: wonder at Lubrin's insurgent experimentation, but also wonder as a discriminatory and differentiating gesture that situates Black experience outside an intellectual and artistic commons. As Kyle Kinaschuk reminds me in our conversations on wonder, if we, as readers and pedagogues, were to attend to the Black methodologies of wonder that a work of art enacts, then we could be better positioned to practise a more ethical relation between wonder, study, and Black experimental poetics.

3.

> Was I ever that young to come back now, like rain
> Fingers the colour of blossom, plucking hibiscus from their mien
> While at dusk the leisure star falls from altitude sickness
> —Canisia Lubrin, "Bricolage"

4.

The wonders of *Voodoo Hypothesis* make urgent demands on our reading practices, something I grappled with when presenting a mini-lecture on the text. Apart from our classroom duties, Nick Mount provided tutorial leaders opportunities to lecture in front of more than three hundred students. In early February 2019, during the week that we read *Voodoo Hypothesis*, I chose to present on the poem "Bricolage," whose title further illustrates the interdisciplinary lens through which Lubrin imagines Black artistic methodology and Black life. I began by introducing the poem's form, the villanelle, in which the first and third lines alternate as the last lines of five tercets and then appear together as the final couplet in a quatrain. For a modern and strict example, I read them Dylan Thomas' famous poem, "Do not go gentle into that good night." Lubrin's version of the villanelle departs from the conventions of the form. In free verse, "Bricolage" eschews the traditional rhyme scheme, which conventionally weaves the refrains into the tercets to sonically reinforce the thematic or narrative unities between the refrains and the ideas in each stanza. Instead, Lubrin's refrains refuse sonic similarity to the rest of the lines while producing their own repetitive identical rhymes. She also employs one fewer tercet than the conventional villanelle, the impact of which becomes clear in a graphic mapping of the poem. I presented such navigational mappings to the students.

The patterning of the refrains in Thomas' poem resembles a double-helix structure as the lines criss-cross and end with the promise of another intersection if the poem were to continue. In Lubrin's villanelle, the pattern becomes parallel in the quatrain and then trails off, ending the poem absolutely and without the hint of formal continuity. Her poem, one can argue, rejects gestures to the genetic predispositions, DNA, of poetry. There is a disconnect between both refrains—the first trails off and the second follows suit, but the lines are asymptotic, never able to touch.

I encouraged students to examine Lubrin's poem as a navigational map that could be overlaid atop other maps. In fact, *Voodoo Hypothesis* prompts us to use maps as interpretive frameworks, since page-wide topographic maps with epigraphs superimposed on them mark the different sections in the book. Such an interdisciplinary form offers a set of visual and linguistic codes through which the reader, too, may wonder about modes of literary analysis that elaborate a kaleidoscopic/diasporic relation to the world. For example, what analytic possibilities and interpretations emerge if we superimpose "Bricolage" and its formal patterns, its internal routes, onto a map of the Atlantic Ocean?

In this mapping, the pattern of Lubrin's refrain lines immediately recalls the murderous routes of the transatlantic slave trade. However, the pattern also reveals more complicated networks of travel, the entanglements of slavery and Black diasporic movement in their afterlives. The first line of "Bricolage" focalizes the specific spatiotemporal movements of the speaker: "Was I ever that young to come back now, like rain" (*Voodoo* 75). The poem reveals haunting, chiasmic connections between "then" and "now" and struggles with full sensual access to the speaker's past. If we link one iteration of the "now" to where the route begins in the cartographic poem, *a* present is located in Canada. From Canada, the speaker therefore looks back—south then east on the map—to the Caribbean, where the "routes" run close together, and then to Africa, into which they descend.

When read through an interdisciplinary practice bridging cartography and literary study, the refrains demonstrate experiences of Black diasporic life to be world shattering and world making. Here, diasporic movement is cyclical: "Was I ever that young to come back now, like rain" (75). As part of a hemispheric water cycle, the waters of the Caribbean Sea become raindrops in Canada. Something like memory is lost, and something is gained in the transformative movement; but it is dizzying: "While at dusk the leisure star falls from altitude sickness." The star, primarily a symbol of guidance and eternity, has altitude sickness not dissimilar to the nausea the speaker may be feeling, if we imagine the poem overlaid on the map. Looking backward (and forward) to the past but downward spatially to the Caribbean and to Africa, the speaker feels nauseated in Canada. We can call it latitude sickness, or vertigo from being "in and out of place and time" (Sharpe 76), in the shatters

of a world. This vertigo marks an important response to the Euro-Western world we live within. The speaker's nausea, caused by spatiotemporal warps and distances, reveals the colonial and anti-Black conditions that make the world appear stable, whereby certain subjects are allowed to feel settled, while others are made unsettled. To articulate this sense of vertigo and diasporic dis-ease is to recognize how place and time are constructed, not naturally occurring. Because this reality is a construction, it can be re-constructed, a task Lubrin takes on in *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st*: "[W]hat is I / but to always have been (t)here, I've asked it, what is I: I in an own place" (9). Black vertigo, therefore, is also produced by the experience of momentarily dropping into (and creating) different and already existing worlds within the cracks and spaces of the colonial world. In the last refrain of "Bricolage," "the leisure star falls and altitude remains" (75). Without losing altitude, or its place in the world, the star falls into an alternate present. Its vertigo, therefore, is a portal. The refrainic and asymptotic "routes" at the end of the poem that map onto West Africa create a doorway (in the sense Dionne Brand theorizes) into a Black diasporic world that orients itself back into (enters) and out of (exits) Africa. Again, experiences of Black diasporic life are both world shattering and world making.

This extended lesson plan and reading unfolds chiefly to learn from Lubrin's methodology of wonder as it deconstructs colonial conceptions of time, space, and knowledge as much as it becomes a portal into Black life lived otherwise through interdisciplinary and vertiginous sites of knowledge and being. Attending to the wonders of *Voodoo Hypothesis*, thus, is attending to sustained, committed, and curious relations with Black poetic methodologies, Black epistemologies, and pedagogy.

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On Canisia Lubrin's Tercets

Kyle Kinaschuk

Readers of Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* will notice that the tercet is the long poem's predominant mode of lineation. In what follows, I hope to say a few words about the parameters of the tercet in Lubrin's poetry. I am especially interested in how the tercet can be imagined as a formal index of what one might term the pronominal ensemble at work in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*. The pronominal ensemble is Lubrin's triangulated structure of address that holds down and ruptures the "I" so that it is irreducible to a single form of appropriable being. As the poem's "*Dramatis Personae*" establishes, this triangulated structure of address, which oscillates among the first-person singular, the second-person singular, and the third-person plural, is facilitated by the figure of Jejune, who makes sensible the poem's immanent address to the self. Shazia Hafiz Ramji describes this poetic operation as one that "occupies the 'I' so that it is re-populated with a performative chorus that blooms . . . to imagine alternate ways of being and knowing" (121). Indeed, as Bertrand Bickersteth notes, "*The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is a masterful engagement of Black life reworded" (101).

In this regard, Lubrin's aesthetic itinerary both interrupts and exceeds colonial grammars by explicitly taking up Christina Sharpe's assertion that the "orthographies of the wake require new modes of writing, new modes of making-sensible" (113). Sharpe defines the orthography of the wake as "a dysgraphia of disaster, and these disasters arrive by way of the rapid,

deliberate, repetitive, and wide circulation on television and social media of Black social, material, and psychic death" (21). I want to ask how the tercet might anchor Lubrin's "ocean drama" (1) in its production of alternative modes of sense-making despite global formations of anti-Blackness. And what is the relation between Lubrin's triangulated, collective self and the poem's tendency to stage again and again its perceptive generosity by way of the tercet?

Before attempting to address these questions, I want briefly to describe a general movement of the tercet in order to outline at least one of its routes in *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st*. The opening two acts of *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* are sustained by percussive tercets that slow into the occasional monostich and then explode into a miscellany of stanzaic improvisations in the third act. As the tercets seemingly fade, the antiphonal relation of the third act—the call and response between "*dream and return*" (49)—brings back the groove of the tercet. On the final page of the act, a pair of near-triadic lines unfurls behind an aquatic parabola. In the fourth act, Lubrin expands the visual field of the page with an ode of wayward tercets (and a lone quatrain) that differ from the tercets on the left side of the page not only because of their position on the right side of the page, but also because of their typographical distinctiveness. This experimentation with the visual intensifies in the fifth act, in which a sequence of interrupted tercets shifts the phenomenological gravity of the page from the flush upper-left corner down to the world of the footnote. Lubrin carries incomplete lines to the bottom of the page in a way that formally intimates the interdiction of Black life, tilting the perception of the page to acknowledge Blackness as centrifugal to modernity. In the sixth and seventh acts, the percussive tercets return with full force, echoing the opening two acts. These tercets (and another solitary quatrain) complete the long poem, which concludes with a series of three tercets, variously indented, each on a page of its own.[1]

How is the pronominal ensemble of *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* tied to Lubrin's handling of the tercet? To make an argument for correspondence, I focus on a pair of tercets from the penultimate act, "Ain't I a Madness?" Lubrin writes,

1 For an insightful discussion of *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st*, especially its structure, please listen to Lubrin's conversation with Layla Benitez-James.

> or were we unaware that we had cracked I
> to save us, split us three ways
> as the centuries that made us possible left us
>
> with all possible comprises, we have this one
> existence, this so many elsewheres, in others,
> I, and in every elsewhere, us both (128)

In one sense, these tercets are a program for the triangulated self that orients *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*. Lubrin arranges an immanent address in the plural that questions whether the triangulated self has knowledge or perception of that which "cracked" the "I" in order "to save us." To "crack" the "I" alludes, in part, to the poem's structure of address, which sonorously breaks the "I" open to "split us three ways": the first-person singular, the second-person singular, and the third-person plural. This triangulated structure proffers another way to inhabit the "I," an indirect return to Lubrin's *Voodoo Hypothesis* and its pronouncement that "I break apart in the only vowel we have begged / to exclude: that I, that dreadful *I*" (73). This "I" prompts dread precisely because of its function within an individualistic schema that maintains a monological and exclusionary conception of the human that is inextricable from capital and white supremacy.

Beyond this phantasm of individuated subjectivity that forms part of racial capital's logic, Lubrin estranges the "I" to mark the unknowable depth of its relation. This relation emerges from transatlantic slavery and its aftermath: "as the centuries that made us possible left us // with all possible comprises" (128). Here the tercets suggest the terrifying unknowability and possibility of Édouard Glissant's abyssal "nonworld" that is synonymous with the Middle Passage: "the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out" (6). As Katherine McKittrick notes illuminatingly, Glissant's "nonworld" is "one (but perhaps not *the only*) beginning of blackness. . . . Suspended, undifferentiated identity, removed, not-yet, without names, nowhere at all, unmade, unknown, unclaimed richness of possibility" (32). Glissant's nonworld clarifies at least one aspect of the *x* in the poem's title: in this light, *x* signifies unknowability and possibility as well as violability and infinity. One might also hear the word "comprises" in Glissantian terms as obliquely naming an epistemological project that "grasps" and "seizes" rather than "gives-on-and-with" (Glissant 144), since

"comprises" is etymologically tied to the Latin *comprendĕre* ("Comprise"). Over and against this "seizing," the second tercet invokes "one / existence," a certain unknowable totality, that is paratactically recast as "so many elsewheres." This tercet effects a tidal movement that opens "we," "I," and "us" to an abeyant zone that defies being seized by and for individuated thought. The enjambed clause—"we have this one / existence"—is seemingly infinite as it overruns itself while falling to "so many elsewheres" that are "in" (immanent to) "others." These "so many elsewheres" immanent to "others" enunciate the opaque and ordinary worlds that *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* honours with momentary clarity.

I want to suggest that the triangulated structure of address and its sense of possibility, its "so many elsewheres," are distributed across every tercet in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*. One might register "split us three ways" in the passage above (128) not only in the context of the structure of address, but also in reference to the poem's principal mode of stanzaic organization: the tercet. "[T]he tercet anchors," Dionne Brand tells us in *The Blue Clerk* (77). Likening Rashied Ali's drums in John Coltrane's "Venus" to the tercets that constitute Brand's long poem *Ossuaries* (2010), Brand's figures in *The Blue Clerk*, namely the clerk and the author, touch on how tercets are "consistent, sheltering, pushing" while also "conducting the ideas" (76). A tercet "is not regulated," Brand's author continues, "by rhyme or equi-metric length of line but by the sense of infinity or possibility, in-betweeness" (77). The tercets in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* might thus be taken to anchor and sustain the pronominal ensemble. If the poem's triangulated structure of address bends the first-person singular, the second-person singular, and the third-person plural, then the tercet perhaps can be seen as a formal complication of another tripartite structure: the past, the present, and the future. To perceive each tercet in this manner would be to envision the tercet as giving form to an atemporal movement that holds time at a triadic standstill in its refusal of dialectical movement. In an interview, Lubrin mentions how the long poem "also depends on a kind of nontime or at least a kind of cyclic rhythm/movement, which, in the manner of Kamau Brathwaite's tidalectics, the ocean best represents" ("Interview"). Read from this vantage, the tercet effects an atemporal rhythm and makes felt an infinite glimmer of other worlds. *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* and its tercets produce a perceptive openness that

invents an alternative syntax for making sense within and apart from the propertied grammars of the present.

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I Is the Chorus: Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*

Manahil Bandukwala

Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is a book of poetry in the form of seven acts. Dedicated to "*the impossible citizens of the ill world*" (v, emphasis original), it is embedded within a state "of intensified capitalist fascism, toxic nationalism, and climate disaster," as the cover copy reads. Theatre and performance are integral to the structure, and the naming of each act echoes Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I a Woman?" In this essay, I focus on Lubrin's rewriting of the pronoun *I* as a noun and proper noun. The characterization of "I" slowly establishes "I" as the impossible citizen(s). "I" is simultaneously singular and plural, as stated in the book's dramatis personae:

"i: First person singular. I: second person singular. I: Third person plural" (1). The speaker and subject change throughout the acts, creating a fluidity between self, other, and collective. I concentrate on Act I ("Ain't I at the Gate?") and Act II ("Ain't I Nickname for Home?") to consider how Lubrin establishes who "I" is and the world "I" inhabits. Lubrin cites the influence of Black scholar Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, as well as mentorship from poet and scholar Dionne Brand (165). I cite their scholarship on language and Blackness to analyze how Lubrin reshapes and reinterprets one of the most common and familiar words of the language we know. The plurality of "I" makes "I" a citizen of the world rather than an isolated individual. Ultimately, because "I" is figured in terms of plurality, Lubrin opens up the possibility of multiple and collective ways of being.

Making readers rethink how they approach language is a central aspect of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*. Dionne Brand's words on dysgraphia in "An *Ars Poetica* from The Blue Clerk" read as a challenge that Lubrin has taken up. Brand writes how "Poetry, perhaps, with its capacities to deposit and unearth plural meanings, with its refusals of a particular interrogative gaze might cut out a space toward a description of being in the diaspora" (59). The plurality of poetry makes it an ideal setting in which for Lubrin to upend language amidst a falling and failing world. In the prologue, she writes,

> *where the world is full of reasons to push*
> *the back seat down and set a life-force soaring back to its ragged world | to the*
> *ones preoccupied with the ragged that is I | the ragged that implores the ragged*
> *that turns all narcotic and detour | that a thing can name what*
> *it survives in the in and gives hell on the way out* [.] (3, emphasis original)

Within the ragged world—and surviving the ragged world one day at a time—is "I." This is Lubrin's stage; "I" is every impossible and ragged citizen who "gives hell on the way out." In the first act, Lubrin writes that "I is here breeding out of the deadland a definable origin / where everyone is—yet-to-be-named equipment, as if whole / where news of uncut humanities discarded" (10). The collapse of language in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is subsequently a collapse of time as "I" returns to the beginning to find the point of origin. Therefore Lubrin describes the circumstances from which "I" comes. These circumstances of discarded humanity stand in contrast to a certain beauty in how "I" takes back language.

The Dyzgraph^x^st itself does not exist apart from a lineage of influence. Sharpe's writing in *In the Wake* gives context to the historical and present conditions of Blackness that Lubrin expands upon. Sharpe writes that she has "been thinking about what it takes, in the midst of the singularity, the virulent antiblackness everywhere and always remotivated, to keep breath in the Black body" (109). From this emphasis on breath comes the base structure of *The Dyzgraph^x^st*: a narrative told in poetry and performance, art forms for which the breath is a necessity. When Lubrin writes the character of "I," she takes away from a sense of singularity and isolation. In reference to centuries of Black subjugation, she writes, "[B]ut let I go, given the choice now to speak / after five hundred years of dysgraphia / let I approach the witness stand in any chosen language" (22). Using the pronoun "I" for the third-person plural evokes a sense of "I" as a chorus of Black voices choosing the language in which they now speak after centuries of erasure of language and personhood. Readers must retrain themselves to read "I" as narrator and subject, rather than individual pronoun, in order to extract meaning from the words; reading the poem out loud allows for a better hearing of "I" as proper noun.

For Lubrin, Sharpe, and Brand, the destruction of language is a great violence that for centuries has had rippling effects, which continue in the present. Sharpe's influence on Lubrin is evident from Sharpe's writing about *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip:

> Language has deserted the tongue that is thirsty, it has deserted the tongues of those captives on board the slave ship *Zong* whose acquisition of new languages articulates the language of violence in the hold; the tongue struggles to form the new language; the consonants, vowels, and syllables spread across the page. (69)

"I" carries this deserted language at the beginning of *The Dyzgraph^x^st*, but as the acts and the narrative move forward, "I" reaches out to find ways to reclaim language. "I" switches between English and Créole and is constantly concerned with language and belonging: "I becomes: the Créole mouth // hem ya haos blong mi kaye sà là sé sa mwen / him here house belong me" (13). In such instances, "I" is at the gate, taking language and seamlessly moving between tongues. While Sharpe writes about what has been, Lubrin imagines the possibilities of what "I" can become. Brand identifies how "character in narrative . . . [is] weighted with whiteness as a fundamental/

originary category" (60). Lubrin leaves no doubt about the Blackness of "I," switching between English and Créole as "I" returns to the point of origin of language. This origin is not limited to English, nor is it a colonial place of beginning. The place of origin is as plural and expansive as poetry. Though Lubrin sets up "I" as a plural voice, she also establishes the Blackness of "I."

Though *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* is set within "*the ill world*" (v), "I" is in a constant state of reclaiming language. However, within these considerations of voice, speech, and language is still the body. Sharpe writes, "We, now, are living in the wake of such pseudoscience, living the time when our labor is no longer necessary but our flesh, our bodies, are still the stuff out of which 'democracy' is produced" (112). In the context of Sharpe's observations, voice and language become even more crucial as a mode of resistance to the ill democracy of the world. Lubrin writes that "I layers its new language taking back / the miserly mouth, mouth that sours the pot / in our bigbeautiful bigbeautiful" (36). The shift from the language of origin to the language of the colonizer was, as Sharpe identifies, wrought with destruction. Therefore the reclamation of language is one of love and care, of taking back unapologetically. At one point, "I" speaks directly to the tercet forms of Acts I and II, breaking down a wall between observer and inhabitant: "[B]ut love, it is one hour before the morning ties / your tongue to every tercet here, one hour / before the loved world arrives by the wild of our tongue" (27). The reclaimed tongue brings the loved world out of the ill world, but the reclaimed tongue is also contingent on "trust / to have in the idea of our voices altogether calling home calling home" (30). "I" has always been responding to its direct experiences of the world, rather than simply observing the world from the outside. This type of embedded living informs "I's" calls for language reclamation as decolonization.

As the second act—"Ain't I Nickname for Home?"—closes, Lubrin introduces "i," the first-person singular, shifting away from the second-person singular and third-person plural "I" that we have come to know. Lubrin writes, "i wake remembering nothing / but the locomotion of lips, maybe mine / maybe the page and some faulty language" (48). Unlike previous encounters with "I," "i" is the singular self, waking up devoid of memory. In this state of "remembering nothing," the movement of lips is the first to come. Even when Brand writes about poetry's ability to shift ways of

thinking of language, this thinking is embedded in the act of speaking language. Brand writes that "Poetry, in my formulation, changes what I see as the racist alphabets of narratives—the prevalent modes of speech and key impediments to Black being" (59). Language, as Lubrin writes it, is contingent on speech, the ability to speak, to speak language in a chorus. The plurality of "I" throughout the first two acts establishes the importance of the collective over the individual. "I" is a collection of shared histories, shared violences, and shared encounters with the world.

With *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, Lubrin takes on Brand's suggestion of what poetry can do. She explores a collective consideration of language and speech as they have affected Black people from the slave ship *Zong* to the future. The primary characters are "I," "I," and "i," each of whom inhabits what Lubrin calls "*the ill world*" (v). By using the familiar pronoun "I" in an unfamiliar context that initially seems to break grammatical rules, Lubrin forces the reader to approach language from a different perspective, one that comes from a place that builds language up again after violence and colonization. In order to reshape language, Lubrin has to articulate the new rules of this language to the reader, which she does successfully. Structuring the collection as a drama emphasizes, right from the beginning, how important performance and speech are to understanding the narrative. As the reader becomes familiar with "I" as a character, the language becomes as natural as the speech we use daily. *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* breaks the individual "I," a key destruction if we are to dismantle "intensified capitalist fascism, toxic nationalism, and climate disaster." Thinking beyond the confines of individuality, "I" is now the collective. "I" is the chorus.

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I in the Liminal: Verging in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*

Rina Garcia Chua

now even with a percussed tongue
I can put the world back together
with the twisted timbres of a ship.
—Canisia Lubrin, *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*

The multiple "I" in Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* distorts the environment that I, as a reader and visitor, am brought into. Often I am not certain where the speakers are taking me, if what is real is truly real, or if what is real is a dream. Yet the three lines above sum up for me the kind of environment that Lubrin attempts to build and reimagine in this stunning book: it is neither place nor country, but space that exists in liminality.

In a current project,[1] I define the *liminal environment* as one in which individuals exist among overlapping movements that require, or invite, a renegotiation of their cultural identities and expressions.[2] The liminal environment can be a space to make sense of a new world, or a moment of transition into a process of building a new world. The world that Lubrin reconstructs in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is not only imaginative but also ambitious in scale: it pauses, breathes, listens without compromising the movements of the poem's personas. It is obviously not the world we are currently living in. Instead it is an active counter-narration of the world we inhabit, where ghosts of deep

1 This project—"Migrant Ecocriticism: Unbinding Movements and Spaces in Anthologies of Ecopoetry"—attempts to define a migrant reading practice in ecocriticism as a "pause" in the movements of a space that the migrant encounters. This pause allows for self-reflexive inquiry into personal and interrelated counter-narratives that might have been rendered invisible or erased by dominant and homogeneous meta-narratives of "place" and "environment."

2 The movements mentioned here are specific to migrant movements. I also think about Elizabeth DeLoughrey's discussion of how recognition of migrant movements offers a distinct method for deterritorializing the historiography of European colonial models of the past—models that forget these invisible narratives (22).

space-time come to haunt and are welcomed with open arms. What I find most compelling about *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is the portion in Act III ("Ain't I Épistémè?") that juxtaposes "*dream and return*" (49), as if in a chiastic conversation about the image and the reality that is right in front of the speaker. These juxtapositions somewhat correspond to a pause in the chaos of the multiple personas, with each rendition of a "dream and return" constituting a new space:

> but what for & for whose sake do I feel
> only anger, sweet jolts, disappointment
> gone from me and hope ran cold—say
> nothing of art, nothing of the variable logs
> again, here: I have this problem with dream (Lubrin 63)

The phrase "I have this problem with dream" repeats and resonates throughout this part of Act III. Through a language that resists the colonial and imperial tongue, the speaker processes all that negates the self and the identity that bubbles up from beneath the surface. Both the "dream" and the "return" have a problem with dream. What this problem is becomes clear (or not) through the verses: it is fear, hope, denial; it is oppression, anger, disappointment; it is losing land, leaving land, and finding new land but not being accepted by the land. It is the self facing the inevitability of a volatile world. It is a space where dreams from the "*impossible citizens of the ill world*" (v) are unwelcomed, discarded. I think the dizzying conversations in this section force me as the reader into a kind of dysgraphia: I am not entirely sure I am supposed to know what is going on. I accept this, however; I am okay with it. *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is not an invitation; it is the opportunity for me, us, to be silent and listen. It is an opportunity to accept the perplexity offered in front of me.

When I talk about the liminal environment, I also think about "verging," a word I borrow from René Dietrich. It is a phenomenon that individuals experience when they are in perpetual awareness of instability and ambivalence (Dietrich 463). In verging, the world at large is realized through reversals, opposites, and inversions (Thomassen 104). If one is able to pause in the liminal environment, the transition into a new space—a new world, a new beginning—may not ever be completed. Some are paralyzed by the enormity of this "rite of passage" and are perpetually in between, constantly verging and neither here nor there. They are frozen in time.

The verging that happens in *The Dyzgraph^x^st* is momentary but powerful. The multiple personas come together to make sense of the liminal environment and the environments they will be transitioning into. There is no future if there is no past, and there is no future if all pasts are unaccounted for. Maybe that is the problem with dream; maybe that is the key to the process of self-reflexivity, embodied in the liminal environment, so that one can transition and move away from verging. Luckily, the personas in *The Dyzgraph^x^st* are not trapped in liminality as they narrate their bodies, identities, memories, and futures. The idea of verging ends, I believe, when "I" declares, "[A] city is time for me, so I cut the road / I exit that spastic age, pamphletless / that decade, I reject" (158). The last few verses of the book open up possibilities of creating an identity outside of place, language, gender, race, and the liminal environment. This identity involves an acceptance of movement away from verging: "wondering what we might have become were we not so alive" (164). The self moves on but does not leave everything behind. One is often tempted to stay within the liminal environment, to continue verging and resist the transition.

I think a lot about that possibility myself. As challenging as it is to read *The Dyzgraph^x^st* at times, when I accepted that the poem is a conversation that I am listening to and not participating in (it is not my "I" who is called upon), it flowed better, and each word started to sing within me. I recognize this liminal environment, this tentative "I" in all its iterations. I know Jejune—the "voice addressed" on "every page" of the poem (ix)—and I know a problem with dream. I too have crossed oceans and am trapped in a land that is not my own but that feels familiar to me. I have images in my head of how my heartland was, but I know it will be different when I go back after three long years of feeling paralyzed here in this continent. I too know how the brain short-circuits in the midst of exhaustion, of oppressions, and how I reset back to the tongue my ancestors speak. I dream—a lot. Sometimes I dream in Tagalog, sometimes in Taglish.[1] My English is never Canadian, but it can pretend very well.

1 Taglish is a mix of English and Tagalog that many Filipinos use in daily conversation. It is often associated with the upper middle class, especially when it is accentuated with specific terms associated with resistance to how the "masses" speak.

I share the liminal environment in Lubrin's work and know that transition is as unwieldy as the verses she has written in abrogation of the colonial tongue. When I mention abrogation here, I think about Filipinx writer E. San Juan, Jr., who writes that in syncretism, abrogation is used to appropriate the colonial tongue and invent hybrid "interlanguages" that become adept at expressing what cannot be fully expressed in, say, Canadian English (75). He also mentions that choosing to write in the colonial tongue is not a genuinely free choice because of the limitations of literacy and translatability. It is clear to me that Lubrin's intricate process of unwriting may be a resistance to choices that were not hers to begin with. It becomes an active and embodied choice to reclaim the many choices that were not available.

Yet the self remains intact at the end of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, just as the "I" of this reader remains intact despite many movements and the never-ending cascade of liminal environments. At the end of Act II, Lubrin writes, "I won't come back now / from imagining into I / there are worst fates" (48). The pause in these liminal environments will not bring back the pasts that we are all moving, running away, from; however, we can write about them, sing them at the top of our lungs, and make everyone else listen. We can make our space and claim it. We will always have something that is not, never, theirs.

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Focus on Another Locus: Poetic Attention and Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*

Shane Neilson

Canisia Lubrin's sophomore poetry collection *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* has received a share of attention in the form of reviews commensurate with the prizes it has received. Some of these reviews—those by Bertrand Bickersteth and Jason Wiens in particular—unpack the book's formal choices, an increasingly rare phenomenon in contemporary reviews culture. In *The Malahat Review*, Bickersteth writes of Act IV that

> the reader is offered a choice of either continuing to read conventionally (i.e., vertically) or leaping across the space between the columns to the orphaned stanza. Semantically, both choices make sense here . . . These disconnected connections introduce another plane of dialogue that boldly strives to work beyond the limitations of the poem's form. In Lubrin's hand, limitations can be both confining and redefining. (99-100)

Following Bickersteth's fluent formal description is the insight that Lubrin's text offers "a masterful engagement of Black life re-worded" (101). It is my hope in this short essay to focus on a critical tendency that confines and redefines, as it is germane to *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*—namely the rush to link text to context or theme.

In *Quill and Quire*, Wiens also does an admirable job of describing the text's structure: *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is a "long poem . . . divided into seven acts with a dramatis personae, prologue, monologue, and epilogue," divisions that "further complicate[] its relationship to genre, while the titles of each act—which invoke Sojourner Truth's 'Ain't I a Woman?'—insert the poem into a wider diasporic African tradition." Wiens continues with form in mind, explaining that "the first two acts maintain a consistent pattern of tercets" only for *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* to "open[] up into eclecticism" in the third act, where "alternating 'Dream' and 'Return' sequences" appear "in varying forms, from prose poetry to shaped or visual poems." He concludes with an important statement: that Lubrin's poem

"can be at times an overwhelming, dense poetic text. And that is the great challenge, but also the gift, of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*: each individual poem demands (and rewards) careful attention, an attention that can be difficult to sustain across the book's ambitious length." The concept of "attention," the poem's orchestration of form, and the challenges that Lubrin's chosen forms pose to attention's sustainability are key elements in my reading of her work. Bickersteth refers to limitations that confine and redefine when considering Lubrin's formal deployments as they connect to "Black life" as a theme, and Wiens refers to poetic density that resists attention while mentioning the link to "a wider diasporic African tradition." How then can *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* be read such that poetic attention itself is sustained alongside the no less important context of the diaspora? Wandering the field of form against the grain is one way.

In the same year that Lubrin's book was published, a new scholarly text by Lucy Alford appeared. *Forms of Poetic Attention* bridges philosophy, literary studies, and rhetoric, using the familiar technique of close reading to suggest a myriad of ways that poetic form is created by and influences how attention is formed. Alford's project is to supply alternative interpretive tools for reading poems, using attention as her organizing principle. The text is a rare resuscitation of formal analysis of poetry in contemporary scholarly discourse. Alford writes that "what is formed *by* and *in* poetic language is an event of attention generated in the acts of both reading and writing . . . [A] poem might be better understood not simply as a gathering of composed formal features, but as an instrument for tuning and composing the attention" (3-4). *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, as suggested by Wiens and Bickersteth, is crafted in an almost overdetermined manner, with conspicuous and ornate formal choices within each section. Despite the skill with which Bickersteth and Wiens identify some of those choices, the end point of their accounts remains a familiar yoking of form to theories of race and diaspora. Alford's text is an excellent tool with which to think about *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* in a different way because, as I see it, Lubrin frequently writes in an intransitive fashion, generating what Alford refers to as a "mode[] of poetic attention that [is] objectless" (6). Can Alford's critical tools show how attention is not only formally influenced and directed, but also how this attention offers an opportunity for social justice, in Lubrin's work and elsewhere?

The book's cover copy refers to a collectivity:

> *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* presents seven inquiries into selfhood through the perennial figure Jejune. Polyvocal in register, the book moves to mine meanings of kinship through the wide and intimate reach of language across geographies and generations. Against the contemporary backdrop of intensified capitalist fascism, toxic nationalism, and climate disaster, the figure Jejune asks, *how have I come to make home out of unrecognizability*.

Wiens effectively supports the case for an objectless quality to the poetry (and thereby suitability for intransitive attention) when he writes that "[t]he poetry here gestures toward a dystopic global condition of climate change . . . war, and mass migration, rather than presenting it directly." Furthermore, the book at times espouses what I take to be a poetics of *entreaty*, which, Alford contends, "can sometimes produce a double dynamic in which transitive, desirous attention turns into intransitive vigilance. The acts of desiring and of asking are transitive, yet their respective objects in these cases are ultimately unknowable, ungraspable, and unguaranteed" (154). An objection that comes immediately to mind runs like this: *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* is so deliberately crafted that the formal elements reflect a concerted, organized effort. How can such a book be "objectless?" This is where distinctions get interesting.

Alford concedes that "[p]oems, being composed of language, a medium of representation, are full of semantic objects . . . Yet some poems produce a very different experience *out* of this transitivity. Sometimes the object of attention serves as a frame and foothold that allows the attention to open into a wider awareness" (156). Consider a passage of *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* that begins with that classical frame and foothold known as the pronoun "I." In Lubrin's hands, "I" is a means of allowing attention to open up:

> I is here breeding out of the deadland a definable origin
> where everyone is—yet-to-be-named-equipment, as if whole
> where news of uncut humanities discarded—whole, islands
>
> made of antagonizing food—lift today—Pacific Ocean, tomorrow
> Indian Ocean, and then another tomorrow another ocean
> surge clearing wave, where nothing is open, where things exist
>
> to be drawn outward by singing (10)

Here we have a seemingly clear subject ("I") that soon becomes subsumed in a temporal inflection that includes past, present, and future, a mix that Alford explains is a means to make attention intransitive and thereby to de-create the self. The poem helps this to happen by creating disparate immensities to contrast with the self's relative smallness. These immensities include "uncut humanities," a space where "everyone is," and specific and vast oceans (Pacific, Indian) that in their naming pour out into a more generic ocean during a more generic tomorrow. The waves of these oceans become legion, individual entities lost in the whole. At work in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is a kind of writing that, in terms of its whole effect, constitutively encourages a shift into intransitive attention.

"Because it is difficult to intentionally shift into intransitive states at will," Alford explains, "this capability must be practised, through cognitive exercises, rituals, and, in poetry, the use of repetition, semantic ambiguity, and constraints" (153-54). Achieving intransitive attention involves "letting go—of effort, of self, of objective, of ambition—primarily so as to allow the subject to slip towards immersion in objectlessness awareness" (154). The result is, in Alford's words, an "intentional unintentionality or active passivity." Reading *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* as intransitive generates new possibilities. With form reconceived as an interdependent conduit for and of attention, something of flux and not of classical fixity, what changes might open up in the world if our practices of close reading are redirected from intervention to dwelling? Might we uncreate what we know by pouring ourselves out towards new discoveries?

To itemize all the ways *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* focuses intransitive attention is beyond my scope; more could be written about how Lubrin's temporal inflections create intransitive attention, as well as how her use of hypotaxis and parataxis contribute to this effect; a paper or three could dig in to Lubrin's poetics of entreaty as a generator of intransitive attention. To read a page of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is to encounter intransitive attention arrived at by a myriad of strategies for creating relative objectlessness. Why the hurry on the part of critics to infuse such attention with direction?

Perhaps a less obvious question. Why is reading Lubrin (or any poet) in such a manner important? The reasons are simple. As Alford explains, "an examination of the subtler forms of attention . . . illuminates poetic qualities that play a vital role in poetic history and practice, but have fallen beneath

and between the generic spotlights" (164-65). By the same token, "[g]iving language and attention to these modes . . . also enables a recognition of poetic dynamics that cut across existing generic boundaries, causing them to either be overlooked or lumped into an ill-fitting mold" (165). Surely the critical reflex to link formal choices to specific contexts in an overly straightforward manner can be reformulated by paying closer attention to the medium of language itself. This is the kind of attention that Alford demonstrates at length with virtuoso reading after reading, and also the kind that Lubrin's text offers beneath its surfaces.

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A Poetics of Elsewhere

Veronica J. Austen

I remember a year during my growingly distant undergrad in which my final essays routinely became contemplations of the failures and inadequacies of language. I saw this trope everywhere. And now that I sit to write this, I'm realizing that I've been writing and talking about language, its treacheries and opportunities, in one way or another ever since. How it fails, how it frustrates, how it empowers, how it—to borrow from Daphne Marlatt—both "sustains and contains us" (9). Although I've been interested in the bounds of expression for a long time, in encountering *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, I realized I was facing new challenges and contemplations. The content itself may point towards a complex, even torturous, relationship with language: the "illegible hand overcrowds what I need to say" (136); "language" sits beside "(languish)" (123), which hearkens to NourbeSe Philip's "Discourse

on the Logic of Language"; "footnotes lodge the throat" (29); the tongue is "slash[ed]" (12, 105); the mouth is "sewn" (19). And yet it is less this narrative of language and more so how the reader is positioned *in* language that is the gift (and perplexity) of *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*. Lubrin figures *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* as contemplating the question, "What does one do *in* language—and *in* writing and *in* books?" ("Canisia Lubrin Uses"; emphasis added). I very much take to heart that repetition of "in." Language is a space and time inhabited. *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* creates a "word-world" (58) in which the reader is asked "who will stay here long enough / to exit with me" (69). The reader is implored to "rest here *in* this sentence where nobody knows I, or you already" (30; emphasis added). This is a text that positions the reader not as witness to language but as resident in language, a positioning at once empowering and unsettling. As Lubrin describes it, "A reader is in control of their reading. The imagination is a great—and troublesome—guide" ("Exploration"). Reading may be a "creative act" ("Canisia Lubrin Wins"), but to be creative in reading, as with other arts, is to enter an unknown with risks and trepidations.

As I settled into *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* and my slow—often halting, often recursive—reading of it, the question that most poked was, what was my reading process communicating? More specifically, what was Lubrin's form, and the reading process that it motivated, communicating? What I discovered—or created—was a sense that Lubrin's poetic form consistently points towards an elsewhere beyond the text we have in front of us, an elsewhere still within language but offering an alternate path where meaning's possibilities multiply.

Thanks in part to Lubrin's overt acknowledgement that she "owes a great debt to Christina Sharpe" (*Dyzgraph^{x}st* 165), my reading imagined Lubrin's poetic form into a manifestation of Sharpe's conceptualization of "otherwise" in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Throughout *In the Wake*, Sharpe seeks "ways of knowing" (13) that involve "imagin[ing] otherwise" (18). If "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13-14), then "to imagine otherwise" (51) is to ask, "What lives would Black people have had outside of slavery?" (11). What is it "to confront [one's] inability to think blackness otherwise" (11)? Lubrin's elsewhere spaces may not offer answers to these questions, but they motivate an engagement with the imaginative act of

discerning and interpreting alternate discourses. As such, these elsewhere spaces become training ground for imagining otherwise.

I am not sure when I started to notice the elsewheres throughout *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*. I do not know what line first caught my attention. Was it the "unrecognizable versions of elsewhere" (121)? Was it when "this one / existence" becomes at the same time "this so many elsewheres" (128)? Or was it earlier when the "I" admits, "porous as I am elsewhere a dream" (80)? What I do know is that when I recognized the pattern of the act titles, I knew that there was something going on. Each of the seven acts in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is titled with a question beginning with "Ain't I"; each act is also said to be "elsewhere called" something else. So, for example, Act I's "Ain't I at the Gate?" is elsewhere "*the means by which to burn*" (5); Act II's "Ain't I Nickname for Home?" is elsewhere "*a matter of fact*" (31); Act III's "Ain't I Épistémè?" is elsewhere "*the transaction of dream and return*" (49); Act IV's "Ain't I the Ode?" is elsewhere "*to be*" (95); and so on. Possibly crafting a further elsewhere, I also played with the thought that perhaps solely the "I" in the act titles is named differently elsewhere. I wondered if, for example, "Ain't I at the Gate?" is elsewhere "Ain't I the Means by Which to Burn?"; that "Ain't I Nickname for Home?" is elsewhere "Ain't I a Matter of Fact?"; that "Ain't I Épistémè?" is elsewhere "Ain't I the Transaction of Dream and Return?"; that "Ain't I the Ode?" is elsewhere "Ain't I to Be?"; and so on. In this second interpretation, the questions about the "I" multiply and thus the need to define the self against how it has been defined by others intensifies. In the first interpretation, however, the elsewhere that is envisioned is one in which, for good or bad, the "I" is no longer part of a question, is no longer questioned. In this elsewhere, as much as there is an assertion that one can speak from a position of being—namely Act IV's "*to be*" (95)—there is also the implication that the loss of questioning is a loss of self. After all, Act VI's "Ain't I a Madness?" becomes merely "*archaeology or case closed*" (117), a movement suggesting that the self becomes of the past with little of it left to navigate and/or to define for the future. I would acknowledge too that even Act IV's movement towards "*to be*" is a movement away from "the Ode" (95) and the ode's function as a celebration of its subject.

Lubrin's crafting of the act titles as shifting subsequently pointed me towards other aspects of the text's form where we are given the opportunity to glimpse elsewheres and/or to create them. Strategic repetitions, for instance, created a

déjà vu of sorts, sending me back through the text and making my reading process itself an engagement with elsewhere. In essence, in encountering a word, phrase, or image that I thought I had encountered before, I went in search of it, and thus in search of what it had meant elsewhere. These repetitions, particularly those that formed patterns—the "*elsewhere called*" of the act titles, the "problem I have with dream" in Act III (64), the phrase with variations "*Jejune, all these words . . . anyway*" that appears throughout—made me hyper-aware of the meaning created by the subtle differences between each instance. This attention to detail likewise sent me to an elsewhere beyond *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* itself; much as Lubrin's Prologue, Monologue, and Epilogue engage in acts of definition, my attention to detail sent me to the dictionary, to multiple dictionaries, so as not to take a term and my understanding of it for granted. This movement beyond the text offered alternate ways of thinking about a word and therefore further elsewheres to glean.

It is in the multiplication of meaning that *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st* creates its elsewheres. Parentheses, for instance, often signal an additional meaning haunting the discourse. One grows "cold" and "old" through "growing (c)old" (28); "somebody's wor(l)d" (43) is "word" and "world" at once, perhaps even becoming the "word-world" (58) that Lubrin later references; "family" holds onto "familiarity" in "famil(iarit)y" (106); "a life now (re)fuse(d)" (121) is "refused," "refuse," "fuse," and "fused." Frequently these palimpsestic parentheses create a confluence of opposites, "there" peeking through "here" in "(t)here" (9, 22, 25), and the negative and positive of a word coexisting—"(un)rewound" (13), "(un) openings" (23), "(un)flagging" (26), "(un)thinkable" (48), to name a few.

In this text, meaning too is multiplied through delay. What is "war" on one line becomes "war / -ning" (61) by the next. In other words, that which can be seen as complete is revealed also to be continuing. For example, "a sewn mouth, or what could be" (19), which can seem like a statement with closure, becomes "a sewn mouth, or what could be // whole" in the jump to the next stanza. The opening between stanzas allows both possibilities to coexist (while also performing its own segmentation of a whole). *The Dyzgraph*^{x}*st*, in fact, often deploys open spaces to create multiple reading paths which thereby function to point towards the elsewhere of alternate narratives. Where, for instance, do we travel if we read "Dream #27" or "Return #36" as two columns rather than as horizontal lines broken in two? In "Dream #27," would we find "an offer / I can / light / a dream" (80)? In "Return #36," would we overlook the plethora of "ifs"

and land on the imperatives freed from the conditional? Could we "dive in / dig / make do | bend / keep watch / spare no country / skim I loose / sing wind / say so / make do / give us" (89) without worrying about "if" we are "given" anything?

In *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, there too are elsewheres intimated that do not find voice. For example, pages end with a colon or a dash (21, 25, 71, 77). These punctuation marks are meant to link, and yet here they do not lead readers towards any further text, nor do they discernibly connect the syntax across pages. As such, readers seem to be sent towards some space beyond the text, a destination to which they cannot arrive, remaining instead in the open space of the page. In other instances, absences are marked; space is held for the existence of a discourse beyond the text even as that discourse does not reveal itself: "a night" is "too heavy with _____" (81); "[blank]" is the alternative to "what the fuck was I thinking?" (88); "I clear the wave / crease the [_____]" to "where everything opens" (104). These marked vacancies suggest an elsewhere glimpsed but not quite entered, an elsewhere where the diaphanous curtain remains drawn. Similarly, the superscript *x* of the title *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* at once marks the absence or displacement of the *i* and appears as a reference mark without its corresponding footnote/marginalia. In assuming the visual appearance of a reference mark, the superscript *x* points towards the existence of another space of discourse, even if that space does not manifest or speak within the text itself.

As *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* concludes, the speaker leaves us in a state of pondering, asking "what we might have become were we not so alive" (164). This is a vision of and demand for an elsewhere in which there is room for such imagining. In the end, the elsewhere spaces that *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* makes known may be ephemeral, a h(t)aunting, much like Kamena's Terre Bouillante in Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. They may be spaces that you glimpse but don't necessarily enter, spaces that call without promise of arrival. But these elsewheres also hold space for imagining otherwise, granting hope that things need not be solely as they are.

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Six Short Takes: Q&A with Canisia Lubrin

CANADIAN LITERATURE: Your books include familiar formal structures—such as tercets in *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* and almost-sonnets in *Voodoo Hypothesis* (in "The Mongrel")—as well as striking departures from these forms. What appeals to you about moving from one mode to another? Do you see a dialogue in your writing between "old" and "new"?

CANISIA LUBRIN: I commit to finding the form that best suits what I'm trying to express. Whether this means something familiar or something new or a modification of what is familiar all depends on that work and what it requires in order to exist the way it makes sense to me as its designer.

CANADIAN LITERATURE: In both books you mention Christina Sharpe's work, and *In the Wake* in particular. The authors in this forum have gravitated toward *In the Wake* as a context for your poetry. When you write, do you perceive a difference between poetry as a mode to draw on (or to be in conversation with) and non-fiction or scholarly writing? Or is any work a potential source of ideas and language?

CANISIA LUBRIN: Same as above. I do what the work needs. What I know or think or believe is not usually in question. I write toward uncovering something I don't know or understand. This exploration takes whatever route is needed. Anything is a potential source. And I can see how one might think I am "breaking form" if one is trained to look through a certain lens. Otherwise, I am more interested in exploration.

CANADIAN LITERATURE: In the acknowledgements to *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, you generously thank your "dear readers. I and i and I and you" (167). (And you thank the reader in *Voodoo Hypothesis* too.) In writing, do you have a particular reader in mind? Or readers who read in a particular way?

CANISIA LUBRIN: I have huge respect and regard and trust in the reader's imagination and abilities. I am aware that readers (whoever they are) bring way more to the page than a writer can put into it. Of course, I assume certain things about my primary readers, which are clear based on how I write.

CANADIAN LITERATURE: In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel (see Lubrin, "Eleanor Wachtel"), you speak movingly about your having been uncomfortable with the lyric "I" (in Dionne Brand's class, for example). After *The Dyzgraph^{x}st*, which is full of "I" (and "I" and "i"), do you feel any differently?

CANISIA LUBRIN: *The Dyzgraph^{x}st* is the actual answer to that question.

CANADIAN LITERATURE: The musicality of your poetry is powerful—there is a lyrical quality even when the poetry is more exploratory than lyric in a conventional sense. Where do you turn to hear the music of language? Are there particular authors whose sound you especially admire? Or musicians?

CANISIA LUBRIN: My poetry is always lyric. All of it is music. Whether one hears and recognizes the music depends on how much one knows or is familiar with the sounds the poetry makes.

CANADIAN LITERATURE: Lastly, what can you tell us about what you're working on now?

CANISIA LUBRIN: My next book is a collection of linked fiction based on King Louis XIV's *Code noir*. It will be published in 2023 by Knopf and is called *Code Noir*.

With our thanks to Canisia Lubrin for her time. — *Canadian Literature*

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Articles

Veronica **Austen** (she/her) is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at St. Jerome's University, where she is also Associate Dean. With research specialities in contemporary Canadian and Caribbean literatures, she is currently completing a SSHRC-funded project which explores how representations of the visual arts are deployed in contemporary Canadian literature to navigate experiences of (un)belonging

Manahil **Bandukwala** is a writer and visual artist. She is completing her MA in English at the University of Waterloo. She is currently Coordinating Editor for *Arc Poetry Magazine* and Digital Content Editor for *Canthius*. She is a member of Ottawa-based writing collective VII. Her collaborative chapbook with Conyer Clayton, *Sprawl | the time it took us to forget* (Collusion, 2020) was shortlisted for the bpNichol Award. Her debut collection, *MONUMENT*, is forthcoming with Brick Books in 2022.

Pamela **Bedore** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, where she teaches courses in American literature and popular culture. She is author of *Great Utopian and Dystopian Works of Literature* (The Great Courses, 2017), *Dime Novels and the Roots of American Detective Fiction* (Palgrave, 2013), and several articles on detective fiction, science fiction, and writing program administration. She is the book review editor for *Clues: A Journal of Detection* and is currently working on a new book: *Canadian Crime Fiction* (Routledge).

Cornel **Bogle** is a Jamaican-born poet and PhD candidate in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. Their research interests include Caribbean and Black Canadian literatures, postcolonial studies, and creative writing. Cornel's critical and creative writing has been published in the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, *Canadian Literature*, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, *sx salon*, *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Moko Magazine*, and *Pree: Caribbean Writing*.

Nicholas **Bradley** is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Victoria. He is the editor of *An Echo in the Mountains: Al Purdy after a Century* (2020), and an associate editor of *Canadian Literature*.

Rina Garcia **Chua** is a PhD candidate in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. She is the editor of *Sustaining the Archipelago: An Anthology of Philippine Ecopoetry*, published in 2018 by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, and *Empire and Environment: Ecological Ruin in the*

Transpacific, with Heidi Hong, Jeffrey Santa Ana, and Xiaojing Zhou, forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press in 2022. She is currently the Diversity Co-Officer for the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) and Poetry Editor of *The Goose: A Journal of Arts, Environment, and Culture in Canada*.

Erin Goheen **Glanville** (PhD) is an instructor in the Coordinated Arts Program at the University of British Columbia and previously held a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. Dr. Glanville's community-engaged research project, Worn Words, develops a cultural refugee studies approach to narrative media making and pedagogy. She serves on the Executive Committee for UBC's Centre for Migration Studies and on the board of directors for Kinbrace Community Society. Glanville is also the editor of *Countering Displacements* (2012). Her short multimedia documentary *Borderstory* (2020) is available online as an educational resource for classrooms and communities: https://vimeo.com/42754559 or www.eringoheenglanville.com.

Evangeline (Vange) **Holtz-Schramek**'s (she/they) writing appears in *Canadian Literature*, *The Puritan*, *The Humber Literary Review*, *Fashion Studies*, the *Martlet*, and *Grain*, and is forthcoming in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. Vange is from the territories of the Qayqayt peoples, currently called New Westminster, BC, and is pursuing a PhD in Communication, New Media, and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in what is currently called Hamilton, ON, the traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations.

Kyle **Kinaschuk** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Toronto, where he studies the lament form. His research is nested in Canadian literary studies, poetry and poetics, critical and cultural theory, and questions of pedagogy and the university.

Shane **Neilson** is a poet, physician, and scholar from New Brunswick. In 2018, he received SSHRC's "Talent Award" and in 2019 received the Governor General's Gold Medal for his academic work at McMaster University. He recently co-authored *Poetry in the Clinic* (Routledge, 2021) with Alan Bleakley and will publish an intergenerational poetic memoir of disability with Goose Lane Editions in 2022 called *You May Not Take the Sad and Angry Consolations*.

Tavleen **Purewal** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation examines the set of relations that emerge between Black and Indigenous communities, histories, and politics in contemporary Black Canadian literature. She has publications in *ARIEL*, *Canada and Beyond*, *The Puritan*, *rabble*, and in a collection of essays on Roy Kiyooka (*Pictura: Essays on the Works of Roy Kiyooka*).

Carl **Watts** teaches at Huazhong University of Science and Technology. In addition to his articles and reviews, he has published two poetry chapbooks, *Reissue* (Frog Hollow, 2016) and *Originals* (Anstruther, 2020), as well as a short monograph, *Oblique Identity: Form and Whiteness in Recent Canadian Poetry* (Frog Hollow, 2019). A collection of essays on contemporary Canadian poetry, *I Just Wrote This Five Minutes Ago*, will be published in 2022 by Gordon Hill Press.

Toyah **Webb** is a Master of Arts student at the University of Sydney. She received her Bachelor of Arts with First Class Honours from the University of Auckland. Her latest publications can be found in *Whose Futures?* (Economic and Social Research Aotearoa, 2020) and *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook* (Massey University Press, 2021).

Poetry

Brian **Bartlett** lives in Halifax, NS. George Elliott **Clarke** lives in Toronto, ON. Susan **Ioannou** lives in Toronto, ON. Paddy **McCallum** lives in Gibsons, BC. Tolu **Oloruntoba** lives in Surrey, BC. Elana **Wolff** lives in Thornhill, ON.

Reviews

Emily **Ballantyne** teaches at Mount Saint Vincent University. Gregory **Betts** teaches at Brock University. Ruth **Bradley-St-Cyr** teaches at the University of Ottawa. Melissa **Dalgleish** lives in Toronto, ON. Faye **Hammill** teaches at the University of Glasgow. Shannon **Lodoen** is a PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo. Andrew **McEwan** is a PhD candidate at Brock University. Linda **Morra** teaches at Bishop's University. Conrad **Scott** is a PhD candidate at the University of Alberta. June **Scudeler** teaches at Simon Fraser University.

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