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## Editorial



## Articles



## Poetry

## Opinions & Notes



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# Producing *Canadian Literature*

*Sharon Engbrecht and Sarah-Nelle Jackson*

## Thinking through Modes of Production

When our Editor-in-Chief Christine Kim graciously agreed to let Sarah-Nelle and me write this editorial, she was interested in our perspective as graduate students on the production of *Canadian Literature*. As PhD candidates in the Department of English Language and Literatures at the University of British Columbia (UBC), we bring different experiences to the production of both the journal and the field of CanLit. The term *production* registers different modes of meaning: as an action of manufacturing raw materials, as a process of management, and as a larger project of providing ideas for consideration. When I was hired to work at the journal, I became involved in the first mode of production, as I began coordinating the journal's social media presence, assisting in the administrative workflow, and organizing *CanLit* special events.[1] But as a graduate student working on contemporary Canadian and British women's writing, when I think about *production*, I come back to the labour involved in the last mode and CanLit as a broader intellectual project. My research is deeply concerned with the ethics of disruption and how we navigate the tension between inherited socio-political spaces and our own sometimes disorienting experiences. Jody Mason's contribution to this issue touches on this latter mode of production as well, as she asks readers to consider "the material conditions of knowledge production, dissemination, and reception" in teaching literature produced on or about the lands known as Canada (139). For me, then, producing *CanLit* is fraught with questions about how to ethically and mindfully navigate the material conditions

of both the journal, as a potential institution of power, and CanLit as an intellectual project more generally.

Putting an issue of the journal together involves managerial and administrative choices that affect the dissemination and reception of the journal; the way I perform those tasks is always informed by the labour involved in scholarship's constant negotiation of multiple ethical concerns and responsibilities. During my candidacy process, I'd read Sarah Banting's "If What We Do Matters: Motives of Research in Canadian Literature Scholarship," where she suggests we "position ourselves rhetorically as knowledge-makers, as scholars who are working hard to always improve our collective critical understanding of important texts and phenomena" (32). As part of the intellectual project of knowledge production, we are taught to enter into and "attempt to shift, define, and exemplify" (41), ethically, our values and responsibilities as a community of scholars. Positioning myself as a knowledge-maker means critically understanding the different ways institutional power shapes our processes of knowledge production. This connects with Richard Ohmann's work on the way canons are shaped, and how, historically, literary objects and theories become canonized because they receive "the right kind of critical attention" (206). In being a part of the production of *Canadian Literature*, I'm cognizant of the politics involved in producing an enduring object of study that, on the one hand, helps promote our collective critical understanding of important texts and phenomena about Canada and, on the other, canonizes the *right kind* of critical attention through the production process.

While, as Sarah-Nelle suggests below, in CanLit and other fields, literary value is closely tied to the reproduction of whiteness and other forms of privilege, we attempt to use CanLit and *Canadian Literature* as a platform to shift, question, and challenge those spaces of privilege and preconceptions of legitimized critical inquiry. In my interview with Junie Désil, we explore the experience of Blackness and how the figure of the zombi(e) disrupts white, historical, privileged narratives (which includes naming and questioning my own privileged perspective as a white settler born on the lands known as Canada). Along another line of inquiry, Neil Querengesser's contribution to this issue considers how Alice Major's poetics of ecological catastrophe addresses the

ways in which "a disproportionate number of peoples affected by the current global crises are non-white, colonized, and otherwise globally disadvantaged" (38). Querengesser's investigation of language, meaning, and pedagogy resonates with my own concerns (as many of the articles in this issue do) about the ethics of knowledge production as he maps out the residual effects of "imperialist and colonial activities" (45).

As graduate students, we are quite familiar with the research, writing, and editorial processes of producing knowledge. In my first year of the PhD program, I participated in an article workshop. *CanLit*'s former editor, Margery Fee, was my faculty mentor. During the workshop, she patiently guided my essay through revisions, looking for an argument that would contribute something new to the field. I was looking at Margaret Atwood's production of *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, developing a narrative about the communal efforts of research and production assistants, readers, and editors, in the form of a gift economy, in which Atwood's literary output is located. In *Payback*, Atwood approaches debt as a metaphor, thinking about how different kinds of relationship are established through economies of reciprocity. Debt, for Atwood, becomes about responsibility, balance, and interconnectivity. Margery was interested in my approach, but after a few revisions had to break the news that I didn't really have an argument. I was narrating Atwood's process, discussing how *amazing* it was that the book-length lectures were produced in just under six months, while uncovering Atwood's wit and managerial style in the archival research I'd done. But the volume of Atwood's literary output isn't really news. Margery pointed me towards Lorraine York's *Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity*. I read it, sighed, and abandoned the essay when the workshop was over.

A couple of years later, I submitted a revised conference presentation to a special call for papers at another journal. It was rejected. I sent the article and review letters to my mentors for advice. Reviewer 1 was kind, offering a generous "Revise and Resubmit" along with advice on restructuring the essay and streamlining my argument. One of my mentors scoffed at the damning report from clichéd Reviewer 2 (a clear "Reject"), asking if they'd even read the article. It was good

to have insight from my mentors that softened (and interpreted) the referee letters. But, alas, an R&R and a Reject meant the editors couldn't accept my article. Still, I was grateful for the feedback and experience, and wrote to thank the editors for the time and energy that went into the peer-review process as well as their thoughtful, encouraging, and constructive feedback.

Both the navigation of my ethical responsibilities as a scholar and my own work as a knowledge-maker informed my sense of scholarly publishing when I was hired to work at *Canadian Literature*. And, relying as it does on the contributions of many individuals, the production of each issue calls to mind Atwood's notions of debt and other critical conversations about indebtedness and gift cultures. It's not unusual to describe these gift economies in academia with the term *service*, or required labour and a necessary evil that supports our research, but service work in the context of a gift economy is an integral part of the intellectual project of knowledge production. Although, in many ways, gift cultures have been co-opted by the encroachment of capitalist corporatism in the university, in her review of Lewis Hyde's work, Atwood describes this co-optation as the crucial dilemma of "how to maintain yourself alive in the world of money when the essential part of what you do cannot be bought or sold" ("Trickster"). While we must always be mindful of how we contribute to the canonization of literary objects, approaches, and perspectives, what Hyde describes as "the emergence of community through the circulation of knowledge as gift" (131) is fundamental to the production of many scholarly journals and publications.[2] This ideal is often at odds with the actual mechanics of knowledge production. As an aspiration, however, it reiterates the goals of community values and ethical concerns we attempt to produce and reproduce through the circulation of knowledge within the community we create of authors, mentors, and readers.

We should foreground these goals each time an issue of *Canadian Literature* comes together and each time we contribute to CanLit as an intellectual project. The labour involved in the different modes of production requires that we maintain ambivalence about the status of CanLit and *Canadian Literature* as institutions of power while at the same time we attempt to improve our critical understanding of what

*Canada* means or what it means to be *Canadian* or how identities tied to those categories develop. By circulating knowledge as a gift, we can collectively draw on our diverse experiences as ethical readers, thinkers, writers, interpreters, and advocates to shape future critical understandings and possibilities. Doing this work will ensure that what we do matters and comes to shape the different ways we can think about what the "right kind of critical attention" might mean for the intellectual project of knowledge production.

*Sharon Engbrecht*

## Canadian Fictions

As a copy editor for *Canadian Literature*, I can't help but turn an editorial eye to the journal's title. A term of nationality, *Canadian* signals a relationship between person and place that Canada, a place in question, struggles to fulfill. To account for Canada's existence, John Borrows contends, one "might as well speak of magic crystals being sprinkled on the land as a justification for the diminution of Aboriginal occupation and possession" (563). As place, the phenomenon of Canada rests on a legal claim that is difficult to account for; even to formally acknowledge one of the many legal orders that predate the Canadian common law, as Val Napoleon points out, constitutes "a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the western legal system" on these lands (154).[3] Those of us who think and work with Canadian texts—literary or legal—must confront the reality that, in Aileen Moreton-Robinson's words, Canada "takes a great deal of work to maintain" (xii), and that this work resides in the continual dispossession of Indigenous peoples. If a Canadian is a person whose relationship to place serves colonial dispossession, what does a literary tradition produced and enshrined by Canadians do beyond culturally reinforcing that dispossession?[4]

This pause over Canadian-ness will sound familiar to CanLit scholars, so I should admit that I am not a scholar of Canadian literature; I'm a medievalist. I came to Canadian literature and *Canadian Literature* in an elliptical way, finding remarkable the settler-colonial ethics of place and arrival alternately outlined and implied by scholars such as Borrows and Napoleon. The courts' inability to account for Canadian sovereignty constitutes a limit of imagination,

its dispossessive effects the inverse of Daniel Heath Justice's decolonial call to "imagine otherwise" (210). Settler difficulties with land acknowledgement and reconciliation are, accordingly, not incidental but fundamental. I began my doctoral study at UBC because these ethics, such as they were, bemused me. How long has strategic forgetting, or unimaginative unaccountability, been a tenet of what would become the settler-colonial imagination? Where can we see tactical irrelation develop as a Eurowestern political strategy? By *tactical irrelation*, I mean the process by which people are abstracted from the places they occupy, becoming mobile and in some sense fungible: a precondition, in my view, for the transplant of people that is central to settler colonization (see also Moreton-Robinson 30-31). I asked and still ask these questions as an above-defined Canadian at a Canadian institution, and I turned to medieval English literature with an interest in possible futures for the lands currently known as Canada. But Canadian literature remains for me unclear and imprecise.

Oddly or appropriately, my trajectory toward *CanLit* began in closer-than-usual proximity to the Crown. The summer of 2019 saw me travel to London, England, to consult a late medieval English manuscript with the support of UBC's Shakespeare Research Travel Grant. During that trip, I emailed a fellow medievalist, Tarren Andrews, about contributing to the special issue of *English Language Notes* that she and her then-supervisor, Tiffany Beechy, would be editing. The issue's theme was Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts, and while I'll spare Canadianists a plunge into the rigours of medieval studies,[5] many of the problems Andrews raises in her introduction speak to CanLit, too: she asks, for example, how "the fraught history of medieval studies, with its ties to imperialism and role in colonialism, complicate a sincere coalition with Indigenous studies and Indigenous scholars," and cautions against settler and other scholars taking up such questions "without much (if any) Indigenous input" (1-2).

Taking part in Andrews and Beechy's volume was challenging and exciting. As I worked on what I hoped would be my first article, I saw for the first time, fleetingly and in a deadline-induced fugue state, the collaboration that scholarly writing production entails. Andrews' guidance and editorial synthesis were generous and acute, and my

reviewers' comments were insightful and constructive. (As in Sharon's case, Reviewer 2 proved much more skeptical of the article's merit than Reviewer 1.) Unexpectedly, too, I was struck by the copy editors' comments. The notes and corrections from Christopher Mazzara and Ellen Leach filled me with mild chagrin, but also admiration, aspiration, and pleasant surprise. A long-time freelance editor and one-time communications assistant, I had held academia and copy-editing as distinct career paths, insofar as academia still qualifies as one. Besides still more chagrin when Mazzara later found a tortuous coordination error afflicting a clear half of my endnotes, I also felt vocational hope.

Two years later, when Sharon encouraged me to apply for the role of *Canadian Literature*'s assistant to the editor-in-chief, I was preparing a syllabus that engaged, finally, with Canadian literature. This late encounter was spurred in part by the long list of absences in Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, a place-based poem whose narrator glimpses, however peripherally, early Canadian settlers' dispossessive irrelation: "*How do you grow a past/* / to live in" (35)?[6] Soon, I had brought to the question of Canadian literature two niche, arguably unpalatable interests. The first was *Seed Catalogue*, for which few students shared my enthusiasm. Finding Kroetsch's efforts vain in more than one sense, they preferred Jan Zwicky, Dionne Brand, and the more direct disruptions to the bounds and limits of *Canadian* and *literature* we encountered in Elizabeth LaPensée and Michael Sheyahshe's third, futurism-themed volume of *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection*. The second niche interest was copy-editing.

Working with Christine Kim and the scholars who write for *Canadian Literature*, together with my colleagues Sharon, Emma Gilroy, and amanda wan, has allowed me to cultivate those same facilitative, sharp-eyed skills I admired in Mazzara and Leach. This work brings its fastidious pleasures: moving a misplaced comma, say, or fighting—valiantly, I like to think—the ever-encroaching tide of academic scare quotes. But even those of us who enjoy such emendations should pause over them. Copy-editing is prescriptive by nature, evoking and reinforcing race- and class-based hierarchies of correctness, its necessity belied by that heyday before standardized

spelling when, for instance, Geoffrey Chaucer could render cushion as "qwisshin." Editing to a house style such as *CanLit*'s relieves some of these faults: a matter of preference and ongoing discussion, house style reflects descriptive, contextual coordination, not idealized universalism. In my job interview with Christine and Donna Chin, our tireless managing editor, I often repeated the word *precision*. Through niceties of grammar and style, as well as more substantive questions of clarity and organization, I hope to help contributors communicate as precisely as possible their negotiations of Canadian literature. CanLit itself may be imprecise, but that imprecision can foster creative and scholarly imagination within, beyond, and in spite of Canada.

As Sharon's synopses above suggest, each article in the present issue takes on identity and imprecision in Canadian literature. Drawing twentieth-century French existentialism together with postcolonial discourses of exile, Ric Knowles develops a theory of *refugee theatre* to illuminate the ambivalence of escape and arrival in the work of Ahmad Meree, a Syrian refugee and playwright. In "Performing the Divided Self: The Refugee Theatre of Ahmad Meree," Knowles contends that Meree's theatre at once entertains and confronts its settler audiences. It is before and in spite of these audiences, within and despite Canada, that Meree "has chosen to write and perform himself into meaning" (74). Eleanor Ty similarly explores the pressures of racialized and gendered cultural narratives in "Asian Canadian Graphic Autopathographies," a study of Kimiko Tobimatsu and Keet Geniza's *Kimiko Does Cancer* and Teresa Wong's *Dear Scarlet*. Both graphic memoirs document not only the difficult process of being-inhabiting a newly ill bodymind, but also the "influential ideologies" of success, health, womanhood, and the model minority that each author wrestles with in her gradual, irresolute process of recovery (82). Finally, Sherif H. Ismail considers identity and relation in a climatological key. Reading Claire Cameron's *The Last Neanderthal*, he brings Dipesh Chakrabarty's controversial notion of "species history" to bear on the bonds humans share with Neanderthals and asks how these bonds might pertain to Earth's more-than-human past, present, and future.

As a journal led by non-Indigenous scholars that explores how Canadian identity creates and contests itself through literature,

*Canadian Literature* cannot resolve the alchemical fiction of Canada any more than CanLit as a literary category or Sharon and I as individual settlers can. Following the authors in the present issue, rather, we might take the aporia of CanLit not as a problem demanding resolution, but as a potentially fruitful space to face Canada's inherent tensions and contradictions. As readers, scholars, and editors of Canadian literature, we might seek to build on past successes and failures of those similarly situated—not to settle questions, but to be transformed by them.

*Sarah-Nelle Jackson*

## Notes

1. When I was hired in early 2021, I also quickly became involved in the process of updating the workflow of the journal's production, including our knowledge base and student-staff manuals, and managing our websites. Additionally, I helped renew the journal's print design and logo with the assistance of a student from the UBC Arts Amplifier program. It was through this program that Sarah-Nelle and I first worked together on another project and where I learned about her editorial experience.
2. I balance Hyde's optimism about the gift with what Sianne Ngai describes as *ugly feelings*, cognizant of how entitlement can seep in around the edges of gratitude and expectation as well as how rage, alienation, paranoia, irritation, anxiety, and complaint can challenge hierarchies of assumed power and break down exclusionary narratives of community.
3. Borrows explains Crown title in alchemical terms: "A society under sovereignty's spell is ostensibly transformed, for use and occupation are found to be extinguished, infringed, or made subject to another's designs" (558). Five years after Borrows' article, the Supreme Court of Canada affirmed that "Canada's [*sic*] Aboriginal peoples were here when Europeans came, and were never conquered" (para. 25), in the same sentence taking Canadian sovereignty as a given.
4. In a forthcoming article, Emily McGiffin draws on Tiffany Lethabo King and Katherine McKittrick to advocate greater engagement with Black Canadian studies in the premises and framing of such questions—and such halves of editorials.
5. Suffice it to say that medieval studies can also be, to borrow a phrase from Alicia Elliott, a "dumpster fire" (93; see Rambaran-Olm).
6. I want to acknowledge my wife, whose inspiration has been vital: they are an avid reader of Indigenous legal scholarship and an effortless memorizer of prairie poetry.

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*As the current Marketing, Communications, and Outreach Coordinator at* Canadian Literature*, Sharon Engbrecht is interested in many aspects of the journal's management. While they are currently completing their PhD in English literature at the University of British Columbia, their work at the journal has led them to explore the project-management side of literary production.*

*Sarah-Nelle Jackson is a PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, where she researches medieval English literature, environmental humanities, Indigenous legal studies, and game studies. In her dissertation, "The Troublesome* Erthe*," she traces the Middle English word* erthe *("earth") across texts that narrate imperial failure and crises of human–non-human governance.*

**Sherif H. Ismail**

# **Species History/New History:** Different Remembering in Claire Cameron's *The Last Neanderthal*

Neanderthals are newly remembered in the Anthropocene. The current climatic threats recall climate changes suffered by Neanderthals, which in part might have led to their final extinction. We may indeed ask, with William Connolly, "are we the Neanderthals of today . . . ?" (163).[1] At a time when we are called upon to consider our "species history" in light of a new definition of humanity as a "force of nature" (Chakrabarty, "Climate of History" 212, 207), Neanderthals can be a spectre of closure, and their prehistoric extinction looms as our very future. But things also get complicated as to how we may now remember Neanderthals. New genetic and paleontological findings published since 2010 cast Neanderthals in a new light. Among other things, conclusive evidence has finally been offered on human-Neanderthal interbreeding in prehistory, showing how many present-day humans inherit Neanderthal DNA (Green et al. 721; Sankararaman et al. 354). The findings, comments evolutionary biologist Michael Hammer, require us "to modify the standard model of human origins" (qtd. in Kaplan), and, as Terence Keel writes, "to acknowledge the opacity of the human past" (214). A new origin story, it turns out, may now be told about our species and how we relate to Neanderthals (and other early humans).[2] In this case, there may be a new history to remember, and a different future to look forward to, as well.

Canadian author Claire Cameron responds to these findings in her 2017 novel, *The Last Neanderthal*,[3] which is in part a cultural mediation on science and in part a formal and speculative experiment that opens up possibilities of remembrance beyond scientific evidence. While Cameron's text is not particularly sophisticated, I find its dual-time

structure and its speculative aspects very successful, not least at a time when writers of narrative fiction are called upon by critics to vary and expand narrative scales and scopes, and to find ways to link what is narrowly human to the more-than-human, so that they may reflect essential entanglements between humans and non-humans. Whereas prehistoric fiction, to which *The Last Neanderthal* in part belongs, is typically deemed a category of popular or pulp fiction or sensational writing, and is often devalued for its investment in violence, it is worth considering what kind of intervention prehistoric fiction might make in this moment punctuated by climate crisis, and how it may help us read our evolutionary past as reconstructed in fiction. Recent literary studies, it should also be noted, are already starting to find in popular and genre fiction, such as sci-fi and horror fiction, a capacity to engage with deep time and the non-human world, concerns that have become prominent in the Anthropocene (see McGurl 537-39; Heise 279-83).

*The Last Neanderthal*, a bestseller in Canada, aims to re-present Neanderthals and correct their stereotyping in Western culture.[4] But it also links past to present, and affords us the opportunity to consider our history holistically. The book features Rosamund Gale, or Rose, a contemporary Canadian archaeologist, and Girl, the last Neanderthal, who lived forty thousand years ago. Rose works on an archeological site in France, which contains two skeletons, one of a male human being and the other of a female Neanderthal, and readers can infer that this female Neanderthal is Girl of the prehistoric narrative. The dual-narrative structure of *The Last Neanderthal* evinces several parallels between Rose and Girl in their experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and early motherhood. After a climactic moment when Girl loses her baby, the last Neanderthal born, we immediately learn about the survival of Rose's baby, and the prehistoric is echoed in the present.

This leap in time evokes and responds to our recent revelation that Neanderthals' demise in prehistory was not without a future, and that Neanderthals indeed contributed to, and their DNA continued with, our survival. But this also opens to us a new way of thinking about time and the history that separates us from Neanderthals. The distance separating us from the last Neanderthals is a gap in time that we may fill with a narrative of progress, reiterating the account that Rose herself rejects

in *The Last Neanderthal*: "As humans," states Rose, "we are drawn to the simple story about our species: that we evolved from primitive to become perfection" (87). This "simple story" has more or less been our (modern, Western) conception of human history as a grand narrative of progress toward freedom and rational self-determination, beyond the realm of non-humans, or the state of nature (see Dupré 819). As we will see below, this (hi)story is no longer tenable, not least because human history cannot now be thought of as only human in the first place.

Taking a cue from Cameron's transtemporal leap from Girl's baby to Rose's baby, the death that is bound to life across species boundaries, and from the capacity of the literary to link times and forge relations, I want to map out another story about our species in relation to, not separate from, the non-human. The contiguity *The Last Neanderthal* produces between prehistory and the present allows us to invoke a different sense of time. I turn to James Hatley's notion of ethical time, as theorized mainly in *Suffering Witness* (2000): that time is not an empty frame for progress to perfection or freedom, but an ethical continuity that links not only generations, but also species, and even matter and life.

I will need to offer a brief overview of the emergence of a new interest in and debate about species thinking and species history in the Anthropocene before I turn to ethical time, and how it may provide a viable model for considering our species history as an ongoing record of indebtedness and responsibility that encompasses humans and non-humans. Now signalling non-human ancestry in our origin story and a mode of continuity with us, Neanderthals offer a possible starting point for conceptualizing that species history. Returning to *The Last Neanderthal*, I show how the book allows us to acknowledge Neanderthal inheritance as both an interspecies and intergenerational relation in which the past holds weight in the present, and thereby allows us to consider a larger continuity with non-human life. At once illustrating and suggesting this continuity across time, the form of *The Last Neanderthal*, with its oscillation between past and present, points to a mode of remembering species prehistory as contiguous with, and thus haunting, present-day life. In this way, species history ultimately becomes an ethical address to us, so that we may take responsibility toward life that is not only human.

## Species History and Ethical Time

Since historian Dipesh Chakrabarty voiced the need for "species thinking" and for extending historical analysis to "species history" in the Anthropocene (212-13), a debate has ensued around this "species-talk" (Lepori 104), mainly based on how it may smuggle a new universalism into narratives about humanity, reinstating essentialisms while ignoring "realities of differentiated vulnerability on all scales of human society" (Malm and Hornborg 66). Ursula K. Heise, too, notes how Chakrabarty, in positing a species history that "cannot subsume particularities" (Chakrabarty 222), posits a notion of species "with no positive content" (Heise 224). Chakrabarty thus invokes our "shared sense of a catastrophe" to underline a sense of species belonging that, for him, is impossible to experience (221-22). As Shital Pravinchandra insightfully remarks, appealing to catastrophe to ground species thinking would amount to an "unthinking imposition of an ethics of human life preservation" (45), noting that "the same instinct for survival and self-preservation that Chakrabarty is calling upon here is what has led to our present planetary predicament in the first place" (38). Instead of encouraging us to "embrace our vulnerability" so that we may think and act differently from what "we have done so far," Pravinchandra concludes, Chakrabarty asks us to "recognize our vulnerability only to take drastic steps to defend ourselves from it" (38).

If Pravinchandra invites us to embrace our vulnerability, I would argue that our vulnerability as a species should in the first place tell us something about the time we live on Earth, and, in turn, our species history. I take the fact of our vulnerability to point to how that time is neither absolute nor self-evident. This is not to say that we should anticipate an end of time, but that we rather need to reconsider our existence in time and what indeed enables it. Our survival from prehistory to the present is not, or not only, the result of our sheer ingenuity, or of something special about us that destines us to survive. Integral to our survival was the availability (rare in the history of the Earth) of favourable conditions for human life, most obviously climatic conditions. Our current vulnerability in turn attests to how our life is and has always been inseparable from, and in innumerous ways dependent on, non-human life and the natural world in the broadest senses.

Pieter Vermeulen has approached species history through the "notion of immemorial life [that] sutures human history to a more encompassing history of life" (192). The immanence of the Anthropocene brings forth a "realization" that human life is "inescapably part of the natural history of the planet" (186). This realization, Vermeulen adds, is "a historical event in a human history that learns that it was never merely human" (186). In other words, ours is a moment when we learn how we have long disowned the integrity of human and non-human life, and that our human history itself is a misnomer: "Human life in the Anthropocene discovers that what it believed to be its human history has now to be remembered differently—as always already entangled with non-human life" (186).

But this different remembrance requires a different understanding of time in the first place. Indeed, "if the Anthropocene teaches us anything," as Stephen W. Sawyer writes, "it is that time and historicity itself are not specifically human," and that "our understanding of how humans relate to that which we previously defined as 'non-human' requires a temporal analytic that situates 'us' (that is the human as well as that which is beyond it) in time" (para. 37) So, the question is not, or not only, how to extend our historical imagination to recognize our species history's relation to non-human or natural history, but what notion of time may accommodate a fundamental connection of humans with non-humans, as well as what terms may describe this connection. As I argue below, Hatley's notion of ethical time, in its broad application, can offer us such a mode of connectivity as diachronic continuity; it also allows us to frame this connectivity as an ethical relation involving debt and responsibility. This in turn responds to how the crisis we have now entered links humans and non-humans in shared vulnerability. Timothy Clark considers the "strange figure of protest" that is the human and non-human unborn, whose "spectral multitudes" imbue environmental politics with the weight of future generations (46), and the "cry of the nonhuman" makes an equally urgent ethical demand of us in the present (Johnston 636).

Hatley builds on Emmanuel Levinas, for whom "time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but . . . the very relationship of the subject with the Other" (39). To Hatley, this relational idea of time

translates into the time that enables ethical human collectivity across time (and allows any such collectivity in the first place). Ethical time, in other words, unites a particular genos (a culture or ethnic group or a whole species) from within through "an ongoing series of ethical relationships" (60).[5] The notion posits that the time we get to live is filled by and premised on generational indebtedness and responsibility: "When thinking of temporal succession in terms of a difference between generations, one no longer can characterize time as the simple lining up of one moment after another . . . [T]ime is articulated as a differentiation across which and by means of which responsibilities are born" (61). Through this generational differentiation, "voices" of the long dead, and of the unborn, will be audible:

> As a *genos*, one does not live in one's own time, as if time were a habitation, a nesting together of moments and memories for the sake of dwelling securely within one's own place. But one does live time as an address across generations, as a responsibility to carry on the voices of those who have existed by the manner in which one responds to them. And even as one responds, one also addresses those voices who come after one. (61-62)

Hatley also explicitly suggests extending ethical time to encompass relations between species, and between matter and life:

> One might even develop the notion that the very crossing-over of aeons is not confined [to] a passing from one human generation to another, but can be expanded to a multi-dimensional crossing-over of species into species, of kingdom into kingdom, of matter into life. All these diachronies could be as well articulations of responsibility. (63)

Developed in the course of his study of literary and historical testimonies to the "irremediable violence" of the Holocaust (2), Hatley considers ethical time as a mode of generational and collective memory. Yet, again, memory for Hatley can also course beyond the human community, both within and beyond conscious memory. As he puts it,

> nature in its own way might remember humans, even after we have disappeared. As we remember the dinosaurs through their fossils, as well as through the very manner in which our bodies carry on the structures of their previous bodies, so too

> might and probably will future generations far removed from our own time remember our human species. (63)

Above all, Hatley recognizes the role of literature and the capacity of the act of reading to mediate ethical claims: in reading, readers appropriate lost memory and are implicated in its inheritance. In his reading of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Hatley comments on how

> Levi's prologue calls his readers to an uncanny and disturbing responsibility for those very generations that Hitler and his Nazi followers had condemned to disappear. In this way one is given a filiation, is initiated into a *genos*, and so remains in contact with an articulation of time that would again be *diachronic*, that would again allow difference and so open up into the generosity of one generation succeeding another. Levi's prologue gives all of its readers the occasion to become that generation who inherits Auschwitz. (30)

One major lesson from the Holocaust is how an exclusive notion of the human can be deployed to other certain human beings and link them to animality in order to rationalize "inhuman" atrocities against them. Anat Pick writes of how the Holocaust "took to its limit the violence inherent in the distinction between human and inhuman," and she in turn underlines "the insufficiencies of a humanist project of remembrance whose implications for the practical pursuit of justice for living beings are as far-reaching as they are debilitating" (50-51). Pick's reference to "the insufficiencies of a humanist project of remembrance" should prompt us to consider the equal insufficiencies of Hatley's "wave of memory" (60) if it is taken to course through a closed and only human collectivity. This in turn returns us to Vermeulen's different, more-than-human remembrance, and, appropriately, to Neanderthals, and how we may remember them.

For most characters in *The Last Neanderthal*, remembering Neanderthals is itself a mode of forgetting, a continued othering, and few are willing to accept kinship with them. "People resist the idea of being close cousins to Neanderthals," says Rose, "because of how the species has been characterized in the past. No one wants to think of himself as a hairy beast" (163).[6] When Rose pitches a more nuanced view about our Neanderthal inheritance to a local museum curator,

Guy Henri, her findings only spark a fantasy about prehistoric heterosexual romance (87). Guy uses this framing as part of a "marketing plan" (87) to attract visitors to the privately run museum, reasoning: "Sex is interesting . . . Almost as interesting as war" (54). The book itself, however, through its layered temporal structure, links past and present, and gestures to a form of remembrance as generational and interspecies continuity from Neanderthals to present-day humans. Similar to Levi's work in Hatley's reading, *The Last Neanderthal* offers its readers an occasion to consider the presence and present of Neanderthal inheritance: to inherit them, so to speak.

## Death and Survival

*The Last Neanderthal* starts with the last Neanderthals: Girl, Big Mother, and brothers Him and Bent. Their circle also includes Runt, a human foundling adopted by the Neanderthal family, and Wildcat, an actual wildcat and the family's friend. The Neanderthal narrative, focalized by Girl, points us to the tribulations of nature and the Neanderthals' struggle to survive. The book then shifts to Rose's first-person narrative, which shows Rose's lifelong interest in the Neanderthal as it figures in stories, as it appears to her in childhood as a spectre, and as it materializes in the form of a skeleton she discovers and studies in the present. Through its dual-time structure and the relation between Girl and Rose, *The Last Neanderthal* personalizes interspecies continuity between humans and Neanderthals. In the last of the book's four parts, chapter twenty-six ends while Girl, alone with her newborn baby, is at a loss and on the verge of perishing:

> Girl didn't feel anything except that her body was ice and a barren land. There was no meadow or sweet stink. There was no hand left to stoke the fire, no fuel to burn, no food to eat, no milk in her breasts for her baby. Her family would not be of the land. She would freeze in the well of this tree. She would never feel warm. (246)

The unnumbered chapter that follows, however, is entitled "Survival." This is not the survival of Girl or her baby (who, we know, dies frozen shortly afterward). It is rather the survival of Rose's baby, who has been treated for jaundice.

These events are apparently unrelated, but the dual structure of *The Last Neanderthal* impels us to connect them. The story imparts to us a sense of generational succession across species. But the situation, and the very word *survival*, resonates beyond the personal connection between Girl and Rose, and their babies. If the death of the last Neanderthal baby points to the imminent extinction of Neanderthals, the survival of Rose's baby could also intimate the survival of the human species at large, since Rose's is the only baby that manages to live in the book, and since a baby is an almost self-evident symbol of new life.[7] But this is also because the whole evolution of the human species has in a sense contributed to the production and delivery of this very baby. Rose describes the labour of delivering her baby as follows:

> I pushed and felt him move and I kept going, finding the muscles and going past any kind of physical strength I'd ever had before. I growled and yelled and didn't stop, and time didn't move in a linear way. Every body that had come before mine, every change in our species' structure over millennia, every flex of my ancestors' muscles came into play. I pushed and pushed through more years than I knew there were. (229)

In its narrative intersection with the survival of Rose's baby, the death of Girl's baby does not happen in vain. Instead, we might read Cameron's account of its death as a gift for those who live: "What is important about a death narration," Hatley contends, "is that one's own passing away becomes a gift for those who follow, as well as an address to them. Death narratives are vocative; they call to one's survivors for some mode of response" (212n17). By addressing later generations, "one's death is given a future," a "temporal weight" (62, 46). Thanks to the dual-narrative form of *The Last Neanderthal*, the death of Girl's baby receives this kind of future. And by giving future to the death of Girl's baby, and linking that death to the survival of Rose's baby, Neanderthal inheritance becomes present and immediate, personal and collective.

Cameron further encourages her readers to derive ethical, trans-species continuity from the intimate particularities of Girl's and Rose's narratives. Cameron situates Rose's relationship with Girl at the heart of the question of "why we were put on this planet" (168). The question preoccupies Rose, whose lifelong interest in Neanderthals

is itself a mode of species thinking, and it points to a concern not dissimilar to our own concern about humanity's species history (if we address that concern beyond both secular and theological teleology).[8] The structure of *The Last Neanderthal* also leaves the continuity from Girl's baby to Rose's baby as an exclusive connection only readers can make, which serves to implicate readers in a sort of testimony to this continuity, and to the way previous death addresses readers', and humanity's, future life. Importantly, too, Girl's baby has a material future to which we as readers can relate, and beyond what Rose can possibly know. In prehistory, we witness Girl attach her dead baby's arm-bone to her belt as a memento (264). Though Rose notices this small bone among Girl's remains, she cannot understand its meaning (272). This reminder of the baby is therefore left in the care of readers, as if we have been chosen to bear witness to its memory.

## Oddkin

The continuity in *The Last Neanderthal* from the last generation of Neanderthals to our present and future human generations is borne out by DNA inheritance, which shows that "the vast majority of living people are [Neanderthals'] descendants" (Sykes 377). But the imbrication of death with life is not limited to species genealogy and DNA kinship. Though she alludes to the new scientific findings about human-Neanderthal kinship, Cameron allows us to go beyond this narrow realm of interspecies filiation. In the book's speculative account of prehistoric life, Neanderthals are not a lone species separate from the natural world in which they live. They are rather repeatedly depicted as having understood their lives and deaths as integral to those of other species and life forms, even their predators, and they actively "make kin" with the natural world around them (Haraway, *Staying* 1).

For the Neanderthals in the novel, death feeds life both symbolically and literally. When Bent, Girl's brother, dies, the family bury him in the shape of a fetus, and none of his tools are buried with him. This is not a mere convenience, but a philosophy of continuity of relations: "Honor lay in the family's using these things in their day-to-day lives. These items held the memory of Bent's work" (90). By using the dead Bent's tools, the family turns his memory into an offering, a sort of debt.

At this scale of the family (which includes the adopted human foundling Runt, who simply partakes of the inheritance), the family's debt to the dead keeps Bent symbolically and metonymically alive.

But the dead can also literally live again, in and with other life forms. As shown repeatedly in *The Last Neanderthal*, death need not be an end; it can rather be a beginning for possible regrowth. Immediately after the family bury Bent, we learn that, long ago, the family buried another brother, Fat Boy, and this time they buried the body in a hole made by a freshly fallen pine tree. The death of Fat Boy gives new life to the tree:

> The root ball left a large hole that was big enough to place a body in with only a little more digging. With the body curled into position under the root ball, Big Mother instructed them to right the tree again. They packed dirt around the bottom to replant the roots. In a short time, Girl could feel that the life from that body had transferred to the tree. The needles turned a deep green and the branches stretched to the sky. (90)

Even predation is a way for death to feed life and create odd kinships. After Big Mother is killed, Girl is at the fish run. She speculates that some parts of the body of Big Mother are in the belly of a female bear, and that this causes the bear to approach Girl:

> The mother bear . . . sniffed curiously. She held up her nose and lingered in a way that reminded Girl of Big Mother. Had this bear eaten her mother's meat? Was the old woman inside? . . . The idea of this bear bringing part of Big Mother to the meeting place in her belly felt efficient, since Girl couldn't have carried the body. She found herself trying to feel Big Mother in this bear. (161)

In these instances, Cameron imagines Neanderthals comfortable with a decentred understanding of life that aligns with the emergent view, especially in science studies and posthumanist philosophy, that "life is not so much in organisms as organisms *in* life" (Ingold 219; see also Braidotti, 32). The last Neanderthals invest in this understanding of life to secure continuity, even though through vulnerability. This continuity is in turn a mode of kinship that mixes death with life and muddles the time of both. To use Donna Haraway's words, Cameron's Neanderthals make *oddkin*: kin formed not through ideological,

genealogical, or biological connection, but through "unexpected collaborations and combinations" across type and time; in this novel, kinship is an active and possibly innovative or experimental undertaking (*Staying* 4). While Cameron may appear to romanticize interspecies relation, there is nothing utopian or idealistic about the premise on which this kind of kinship is thought. Its premise is the simple fact that death feeds life, or, as Philippe Lynes puts it, death is "co-constitutive of survival" (xxv).[9]

This representation of Neanderthals offers us a provocation. If we want to consider our kinship with and indebtedness to Neanderthals based on DNA inheritance, we should also be able to recognize our indebtedness to the previous network of life of which Neanderthals were a part. Doing so will point us to our responsibility for future life, human and non-human, within the frame of Hatley's ethical time. Thinking through this continuity, our species history can thus be an ethical opening-up of our human history, as we move from an exclusive notion of human time and progress, to reckon instead with humanity's essential entanglement with other species and forms of life. *The Last Neanderthal* allows us to capture a sample or index of this larger continuity. As the book connects the death of Girl's baby to the survival of Rose's baby, it shows how such continuity may not only be based on the DNA bond between (most) humans and Neanderthals, but that it can also be considered within a larger mode of inheritance. When her baby dies shortly after it is born, Girl buries its bones "near a tree so that the baby [will] grow into the trunk" (264). Since the death of her baby is already echoed in the survival of Rose's baby in symbolic and dramatic ways (correlative to possible DNA inheritance), we can remind ourselves that this specific tree, too, and other trees to which Neanderthals might have given life—and every other tree, and all life forms in prehistory that could have related to those trees in ecological assemblages—may have contributed in innumerable ways, literally and actually, to the possibility of human life.[10]

Trees, as I've just said, offer a resonant example of how non-human life is integral to ours. Our indebtedness to trees has never been clearer than now, in the Anthropocene, since deforestation is one main reason for our current climate crisis. *The Last Neanderthal* gestures

to the history that will culminate in this crisis when Girl sees violence committed against a tree by, the book suggests, humans:

> Girl didn't know why the slashes were on the tree, but they weren't from an animal claw. They looked as though a body had been testing a stone tooth to see if it was sharp enough. But it was odd to cut into live bark. It hurt the tree, just like cutting skin. Its sap had bled and bubbled up from the wound. To Girl it was a kind of senseless violence. Why wouldn't a body test a tool on a downed log instead? The family injured bodies all the time, but only for food or fuel. This seemed to be neither.
>
> Girl used her fingers to spread the sap into the wound and stanch the bleeding. (219)

Girl's anger, and her attempt to heal the tree, may, again, be deemed an idealized portrayal or a form of romantic primitivism that in some way casts Neanderthals as vanishing "noble savages."[11] This is indeed a justifiable critique. Cameron, however, is also attentive to how conflict between species is a fact of life, and the book records this repeatedly and in detail. While conflict is an inevitable necessity, the wound on the tree is still outrageous because it is *not* necessary; there seems to be no possibility of mutual conflict here, and the wound can rather be read as a sample of how (some) humans have taken it for granted that the non-human exists only for their own sake, manifesting an early sign of a mode of destructive anthropocentrism that views non-humans as sheer resources. Treating non-humans as resources may have been an effective adaptive strategy for a long time. If so, this makes it difficult, but necessary, to counter, as our unprecedented environmental crisis alerts us to the interdependence of planetary life. Indeed, Indigenous cultures for example may point us to alternative modes of relation with non-humans, and Cameron's imaginative account need not stand as a statement on the human species at large and how it relates to non-humans. The tree wound should therefore recall not simply a moment of prehistoric casual violence that may implicate the human species generally in destructive anthropocentrism, but also later, systematic destruction of nature under capitalism and empire, when (some) humans "progressed" by means of mass deforestation, wounding, felling, and clearing as many trees as they could, in order to expand

their territories and economics. And we now know how such large-scale arboreal destruction has contributed to global warming, which, in turn, threatens the very possibility of human life on Earth.

We need not (and should not) idealize Neanderthals, or, for that matter, nature, or the way humans may relate to non-humans. But we could at least consider the simple "pragmatic fact" that, as Rosi Braidotti writes, "we are all part of something we used to call 'nature'" (32); or Heise's trope of multispecies investment, according to which humans and non-humans are "stakeholders" in one large ecosystem (237). In the case of trees, the stakes of interrelation are clear: had trees been left to live, they would have consumed many of the carbon emissions humans have been producing and in turn secured more life to come (see Lewis et al. 25-26).[12]

The wound of the tree is not the only violence the book suggests humans have committed against non-human life in prehistory, and this violence includes aggression against Neanderthals. This prehistoric violence is a believable origin story for human history, a history whose consequences we are encountering in the Anthropocene. By differently remembering our species history, we may recognize its entanglement with the non-human and configure a new history to emerge in and with that remembrance. *The Last Neanderthal* offers us a possible starting moment for that new history, and, actually, for several possible histories.

## History and Histories

*The Last Neanderthal* does not suggest a simple binary opposition between Neanderthals as good and humans as bad. Gesturing to humans' violence and aggression, however, is necessary to acknowledging our evolutionary competition with Neanderthals in prehistory.[13] This prehistoric conflict should have ethical consequences. As I mention above, Hatley draws on Levinas's ethics of otherness; according to Levinas, accusation and responsibility define human existence. As Joanna Zylinska explains:

> My "place in the sun" is for Levinas always a usurpation; it is never *originally* mine. Instead, it belongs to the other whom I may have oppressed, starved, or driven away. No matter how much we invest in the illusion of our own

> self-sufficiency and power, for Levinas we always find ourselves standing before the face of the other, which is both our accusation and a source of our ethical responsibility. (55)

In *The Last Neanderthal*, Girl finds the camp of her elder sister's family deserted, and the book suggests that the camp has been invaded by humans.[14] This points to the probability that one reason Neanderthals went extinct was their conflict with early humans. But this too describes Levinas's concept of ontological responsibility and writes it across species: Neanderthals stand as those others whom humans "have oppressed, starved, or driven away," which points to the need to extend the Levinasian ethical command of otherness to Neanderthals.[15] This invites us to understand evolutionary conflict as indebtedness, and to take in turn our originary violence against Neanderthals as "a source of our ethical responsibility."

This account remains a totalizing and undifferentiated story. I have referred above to the species-thinking debate in the Anthropocene, and the need that emerges to reckon with intrahuman difference. In one of his several comments on these issues, Chakrabarty recommends balancing a universalizing view of humans as a species with attention to intrahuman histories: "to both zoom into the details of intra-human justice—otherwise we do not see the suffering of many humans—and to zoom out of that history, or else we do not see the suffering of other species and, in a manner of speaking, of the planet" ("Whose Anthropocene?" 111). In *The Last Neanderthal*, however, species history is not necessarily a distraction from smaller histories, and its attention to the suffering of other species can help us notice the suffering of humans as well. As I show below, Cameron's text allows us to start thinking about our species history and our different histories together.

In Cameron's account of prehistoric life, humans mainly figure as faceless signs and traces of aggression against non-human life, and, repeatedly, as alien footprints, the very signature of our history as it impacts Earth.[16] Looking at prehistory from the vantage point of the present, we may be able to glimpse how our history is tied up with this destructiveness, and how we are indeed in the thrall of that history in the Anthropocene. But the prehistoric account in *The Last Neanderthal* closes with a brief encounter with an actual human: a woman who is,

unbeknown to Girl, accompanied by Runt. A long blizzard has starved everyone, but, on seeing this early human, Girl starts waving: "The woman looked into Girl's eyes. As she did, tears welled up in her own. She pressed the skin of her hand against Girl's larger hand. The same blood flowed under their skin. Their hearts beat at the same time. They shared a single thought: *We are not alone*" (268). This is a moment of origin for human history that bypasses the scientific evidence of interbreeding and the fantasy of a heterosexual romance. It rather signals shared vulnerability and empathy. That the scene features a female human, not a male one (at least not a visible, adult male), opens this encounter to possibilities beyond the normative nexus of sex and war between humans and Neanderthals.

The first humans we meet in *The Last Neanderthal* are not reducible to any singular sign or concept; we cannot call them a family, in the normative, nuclear sense, since the missing male disrupts the sign of such a normative family, and the absence of this sign allows those figures of humanity to be the very sign of difference, bypassing the encompassing figure of Man as the "generic face" of humanity, as Haraway calls it ("Ecce Homo" 86). They thus enable a contrast between humanity as faceless force of destructiveness (or, for that matter, agency and ingenuity), and humanity as irreducible difference, as a collective of actual humans. In an account of our species history, in turn, humanity can be recognized not as an abstract concept that elides intrahuman differences, but as a (hi)storied mode of destructive anthropocentrism that represses, but is eventually opened to, human and more-than-human difference. Starting from these figures of humanity in prehistory, and from a moment that is typically ours, marked as it is by vulnerability shared with non-humans, our species history can be opened to many different histories: histories past, and histories that we may yet make.

Those early humans, and, for that matter, Neanderthals, trees, and the other non-human life that encompasses them all may still remain too distant from us. The form of *The Last Neanderthal*, the contiguity it creates between past and present, short-circuits this distance. Following Chakrabarty's claim that species belonging is not possible to experience, Vermeulen suggests that species history, coded

as immemorial life, "can enter phenomenological experience only as the experience of an absence, as a lack" (193). In *The Last Neanderthal*, we readers become witnesses to this very absence. While few characters in the contemporary narrative, if any, recognize their continuity with past human and non-human life, in the prehistoric narrative, we are singularly addressed by it.

The question remains: How can humans respond to that prehistoric address? In other words, and to return to Hatley: What kind of future should we look forward to, or seek to bring forth, if we start tying our history to non-human life? I link above the cry of the non-human with the protest of the unborn, and I imagine that attending to these together could give rise to different narratives about the future in fiction and non-fiction alike. *The Last Neanderthal*'s endings point to this very openness to new narratives. In the prehistoric narrative, we do not know what will transpire between Girl and the humans, and we may consider possibilities that will come out of their encounter. In this case, each possibility could point to a different origin story. The contemporary narrative, in turn, renews the prehistoric encounter and its indeterminacy when Rose approaches Girl's skeleton, looks into her eye sockets, and identifies with her: "We are so much the same" (272). The two endings link past and present and telescope our species history. But this history, in both endings, remains open ended.

## Notes

1. To be fair, our situation is different, since Neanderthals, unlike us, probably did not bring about the conditions of their demise.
2. Not all humans inherit Neanderthal DNA, nor do we inherit the same percentages of that DNA; according to recent studies, people of African descent carry the least Neanderthal DNA (see Green et al. 721; Sankararaman et al. 354).
3. The book's prologue alludes to the studies' findings (3).
4. *The Last Neanderthal* ascribes to Neanderthals' abilities, skills, affects, social order, and natural morality comparable in many respects to those of humans. Mostly, these are true to scientific evidence, such as the details about Neanderthals' use of tools and of fire, their linguistic ability, their burial practices, and their use of ornaments. Cameron draws on several scientific sources (see Gerry 566-67).
5. Since a *genos* can be a cultural or ethnic group, smaller histories can also be opened to an alternative vision of human–non-human interdependence as diachronies of ethical responsibility. While species thinking may help us go beyond Western anthropocentric modes of history, we need not forget that

postcolonial and subaltern histories are, in the main, not less anthropocentric (see, for example, Oppermann 412).

6. On the history of the representation of Neanderthals in Western culture, see Hackett and Dennell, as well as Sommer.
7. Countering the assumption that humans are superior to Neanderthals because humans survived while Neanderthals did not, Rose points out how Neanderthals existed for much longer than humans have, echoing current concerns about human survival: "They had a stable culture that survived for more than two hundred thousand years, which is far longer than the modern human has endured or likely will" (53).
8. Rose's species thinking can be read as anchored in, rather than disavowing, cultural difference. Rose is, of course, a fictional character; yet, as a Canadian, and as created by a Canadian author (however problematic this label can be as an all-inclusive marker of a national culture), Rose's interest in Neanderthals, and her eventual identification with Girl, can be traced to a specific history of identification with the non-human, with the figure of "the Native," and with extinct species in Canadian culture and literature; Margaret Atwood explores the prominence of such themes in Canadian literature in *Survival* (79) and *Strange Things* (35, 60), respectively.
9. To the hypothetical objection that, "if death is so constitutive of natural life . . . why bother with sustainability?" Lynes responds by reminding us that sustainability can "only make sense in light of an abnormal, 'unnatural,' or monstrous degradation or extinction, precisely what we currently face in the Anthropocene extinction" (xxv).
10. "The existence of every human body," as Aidan Davison writes, "is as much dependent on prehistoric life, elemental diversity, thermodynamics, subatomic flux, and the sun as is climate change" (303).
11. I suggest above that Rose's interest in Neanderthals can be traced to a history of identification with the non-human and with the figure of "the Native" in Canadian culture. One cannot also ignore a possible displacement of a settler/Indigenous narrative in the way Cameron describes Neanderthals.
12. While I follow Girl's reading of the slashes on the tree as "senseless violence," I may also note that Girl is necessarily using the practices of her own species group as a reference point to denounce this apparent act of violence: namely, how, as I quote above, "[t]he family injure[s] bodies all the time, but only for food or fuel." As I have said, we need not idealize Neanderthals; they are neither good nor bad, and their point of view can be just as flawed as humans'. One can therefore also be critical of Girl, noting the speed with which she jumps to conclusions about why the marks were made, moving easily to "other" humans by reproducing her species' assumptions.
13. See for example Delson and Harvati.
14. Evidence accumulates over the course of the scene, including the unfamiliar footprints, the advanced tools, and the unusually seamed hides, as well as the very appearance of humans shortly later.
15. Levinas's Other is human, but, as Deborah Bird Rose writes, "the significance of Levinas's philosophy is too great to be left in a zone of humans-only" (134).
16. We have Runt from the beginning, of course, and the book suggests that he is human. Runt's adoption by the Neanderthal family, which raises questions about

species essentialism, points to hospitality and refuge as a possible mode of relation between humans and Neanderthals.

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**Neil Querengesser**

# **"In medias res":** Alice Major's Perilous Invitation to the Anthropocene

The titular poem of Alice Major's volume, *Welcome to the Anthropocene*, invites the reader to a familiar yet unsettling journey through the global technological, environmental, and geological crises now threatening the planet. "Welcome to the Anthropocene" can be read in the context of a growing body of twenty-first-century creative and critical ecopoetic texts, particularly those that emphasize the politically fraught connotations of the term *Anthropocene*. Lynn Keller designates such texts as part of the "self-conscious Anthropocene," a period that, beginning with the new millennium, "identifies a cultural reality more than a scientific one" (2). This is not to say that the scientific reality is ignored, especially in "Welcome to the Anthropocene." Indeed, the poem incorporates many elements of science, even as it shapes these elements in creative, often provocative, ways. With its smoothly regulated form and veiled heroic couplets, "Welcome to the Anthropocene" simultaneously advances and partially deconstructs scientific concepts as it builds toward a compelling conclusion that offers but does not insist upon a way through the current ecological crisis. The poem is both a perilous invitation to and a navigational guide through the troubled waters of the Anthropocene epoch.

"Welcome to the Anthropocene" is a contemporary intertextual "response to Alexander Pope's 10-part 'An Essay on Man,'" a work that "is imbued with 18th-century science" (Major, *Welcome* 117) and that appears almost three centuries earlier than Major's poem.[1] Major's poem interrogates prevalent assumptions from the Age of Reason about science and humankind's place in the world, even as it elucidates current plights that have resulted in large part from historical events

of the Enlightenment era. As Murray Citron puts it, "Pope, writing in the century of Newton, Leibniz, and The Great Chain of Being, could explore his universe and conclude, emphatically, 'Whatever is, is right'" (372). Major, however, "writes in the age of quantum physics and climate change and has her doubts." While Major may have her doubts about some of Pope's self-assured pronouncements, she offers a creative way of reframing them in light of contemporary realities.

Like other Canadian poets such as Margaret Avison, Don McKay, Christopher Dewdney, Tim Lilburn, Christian Bök, and Rita Wong, Major has engaged with scientific and ecological concerns. Over the past three decades, she has incorporated numerous aspects of scientific discourse into her poetry, offering new, often challenging and complex perspectives on topics routinely marginalized or ignored in most poetic texts. Concepts from mathematics, physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, and ecology inform many of her poems. Through much of her poetry, Major shows the extent to which science is essential to and interpenetrates day-to-day existence, illustrating difficult concepts in illuminating ways, and almost always demonstrating some unexpected connections between the ordinarily esoteric and the ordinary. "Welcome to the Anthropocene" is no exception to this practice.

As much as Major's poem embodies aspects of the ecopoetic, it also makes even closer imaginative connections between poetry and science. In his essay on the Anthropocene, McKay refers to geologist Harry Hess, who coined the word *geopoetry* and argued that the poetic imagination was necessary for people to visualize the process of plate tectonics before it became a widely accepted theory. McKay writes,

> I think that . . . any . . . creative scientist enters a mental space beyond ordinary analysis, where conjecture and imaginative play are needed and legitimate, and that this is a mental space shared with poets. . . . Geopoetry . . . provides a crossing point, a bridge over the infamous gulf separating scientific from poetic frames of mind, a gulf which has not served us well, nor the planet we inhabit with so little reverence or grace. (47)

With its allusion to C. P. Snow's famously controversial contrast between scientists and "literary intellectuals" (4), McKay's claim dovetails with Major's claim that "science and poetry are both . . . central to

understanding how human beings fit into the world" (*Intersecting Sets* xv). As Major weaves scientific truths into the fabric of her verse, she invites some potentially creative responses to them, beginning with the title of her poem.

As I mention above, the term *Anthropocene*—literally, "recent human"—is politically fraught. It was first proposed by chemist Paul J. Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 to designate the past three centuries, owing to the pervasive influence of the human species on current geological and ecological processes. This unofficial term was floated as a possible successor to the *Holocene* ("wholly recent" or "entirely new") geological epoch, although *Holocene* is still the term officially designated by the International Commission on Stratigraphy to cover the past ten thousand years ("International Chronostratigraphic Chart"). Nevertheless, in many scientific, academic, and, increasingly, popular circles, the term *Anthropocene* has taken hold, but not without controversy. As Kathryn Yusoff puts it,

> given the proliferating debate and institutionalization of the concept in so many disciplines, the Anthropocene cannot be considered a monolithic or even resolute concept; however, there is a common fundamental adherence to a statement of geologic agency . . . How this geologic agency and its subjective modes are thought is the basis of political subjectivity in the Anthropocene. ("Politics" 258)

This political subjectivity is apparent in the arguments of scholars such as Jason W. Moore, who contends that the all-inclusive connotations of the term *Anthropocene* belie the roots of the present global crisis. For example, several scholars, including Moore, propose instead to rename the present epoch the *Capitalocene*, in order to emphasize the past half millennium as one shaped "by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital" (Moore, "Rise" 94). Without this recognition, according to Moore, the global crisis cannot be solved. Renaming the current epoch the Capitalocene focuses attention on the relentless exploitation of Earth's resources—including much of humanity rendered as non- or subhuman resources—and the concomitant systems of colonialism and imperialism that have been driving and enforcing global capitalism since 1450.

Other names that have been proposed for this epoch include the *Chthulucene*, which derives from the underground spider species *Pimoa cthulu* with its chthonic associations (Haraway 53), and the *Necrocene*—i.e., "new death"—which "reframes the history of capitalism's expansion through the process of *becoming extinction*" (McBrien 116). Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* emphasizes the necessity of the racially specific modifier:

> The Black Anthropocene (in the singular) indexes an inhuman proximity organized by historical geographies of extraction, grammars of geology, imperial global geographies, and contemporary environmental racism. It is predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth. (10)

Still others argue for a reframing of the term. Heather Davis and Zoe Todd confront the inherent connotations of the Anthropocene from an Indigenous, anti-colonial perspective. They "argue that placing the golden spike [of the epoch's onset] at 1610, or from the beginning of the colonial period, names the problem of colonialism as responsible for contemporary environmental crisis" (763). A focus on colonial beginnings also sharply contrasts two differing views of a dystopian future. For most settler societies, this future is imminent. However, as Kyle Powys Whyte argues, "in the Anthropocene, then, some Indigenous peoples already inhabit what our ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future" (207). These are just a few examples of arguments characteristic of the "self-conscious Anthropocene." Such alternative names and dates, with their specific political, cultural, and economic connotations, differ from the notions of scientists such as Creutzen and Stoermer who, in locating the Anthropocene at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, prioritize the technology of energy production rather than the capitalist and colonial forces that have driven it thus far. According to Rob Nixon, "We may all be in the Anthropocene but we're not all in it in the same way." Indeed, a disproportionate number of peoples affected by the current global crisis are non-white, colonized, or otherwise globally disadvantaged.

Although Major's poem does not challenge the connotations of the term *Anthropocene* as directly as the arguments of the above-mentioned critics, it addresses some of these arguments indirectly. Moreover, the poem encompasses not only the past five hundred years of ecological transformation but the past five hundred million as well. "Welcome to the Anthropocene" is by no means a phrase of comforting hospitality. Major's poem takes aim at various human activities and states of being that, as the products of evolutionary millennia, are direct or indirect causes or symptoms of the crises characteristic of this present epoch. The causes go beyond colonialism, beyond race and religion, beyond political systems, to the cosmological, geological, and biological processes that have led to the late appearance of *Homo sapiens* in planet Earth's history. In "The Anthropocene: The Promises and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea," Nixon argues that

> the Anthropocene hypothesis shakes the very idea of what it means to be human. . . . We're simply not accustomed—maybe even equipped—to conceive of human consequences across such a vastly expanded temporal stage. How can we begin to internalize our role as Anthropocene actors, to inhabit that role feelingly?

This is the essential question that Major's poem addresses.

In the prologue to *Welcome to the Anthropocene*, titled "In medias res," the speaker, styling herself as "just / another figure in the chorus / of greying heads, wringing her hands," addresses her audience as a "poor child . . . born / *in medias res*" (3). This is followed by a depiction of the contemporary world as a staged performance of a "play without an author" (3).[2] Indeed, in today's (social media, post-truth) climate of conflicting political and economic ideologies, it is difficult to discern any single "author" able to bring order and sense to the stage. The "poor child" may have affinities with every human being simply by virtue of inhabiting Earth, although the contrast between the "greying heads" of the chorus and the youth of the "child" suggests a resigned farewell of sorts from those who are soon to leave the stage to the remaining generations, their legacy a battered, suffering home planet. Those who remain have no scripted lines. They cannot expect any

"prompters in the wings" or any redemptive "gods / descending in a basket" (3). "We are writing it ourselves," the speaker says, asking the actors to "just play your part" (3). However, if it is the voice of the speaker that carries over to the titular poem, the child is indeed offered wisdom in the lines that follow, lines that have the potential, to use Nixon's words, to help it "internalize our role as Anthropocene actors, to inhabit that role feelingly."

Major's speaker, who slyly casts herself as just one of the grey-headed choristers, will soon step to centre stage, inviting her audience members to position themselves as participants in the extended lyric poem that follows in order to comprehend more fully who they are and what parts they may have to write for their own survival in the Anthropocene. The implied audience appears to be mainly those readers, likely younger than the speaker, who are interested enough to read the poem for the benefit of its advice and wisdom. But the use of the seemingly all-inclusive "we" throughout the poem may trouble some readers. At times the term may fairly embrace all of humanity, as in the following lines: "We are not atoms in emptiness" (25). Elsewhere, referents of the "we" seem quite circumscribed. The lines "Feckless godlings, we're inflamed / by our capacities, creating mice / in our own image" (8) could apply to only a small segment of geneticists capable of altering murine DNA, although figuratively the "we" could embrace the much larger, albeit not universal, technocratic society enabling and supporting such activity. Overall, however, the poem leans toward general inclusiveness in its use of "we." Regardless, the poem is a perilous invitation, a welcome, but an ominous one, to a virtual tour of the Anthropocene for any interested readers.

A central message of this tour is that Earth does not really care about which of its species survive or go extinct. While life on this planet has undergone many catastrophes since its creation, some form of equilibrium has always been restored. Major remarks with almost apparent dismissiveness that

> the earth still manages
> to maintain its total biomass. That bulk
> may shift from balanced muscle to a pulp

> of sagging flab around the waist; it matters
> not the least. There are as many creatures
> living on the planet as have ever been
> —even if a lot of them are hens. (15)

The qualifying final line of this quotation emphasizes the significance for humanity of the difference between muscle and flab. In other words, although Earth's biomass has always maintained and will maintain equilibrium long after whatever may become of them, human beings should be acutely aware of the difference that they are presently making. While the current crisis will likely not destroy the planet over the next few million years, many of us are indeed imperiling humankind's own immediate survival. Today's almost eight billion human beings comprise only a small fraction of Earth's total biomass. Yet our numerous species of domesticated animals total close to seven billion mammals ("Most Populous Animals") and well over fifty billion domesticated fowl ("How Many Chickens"). As Nixon observes,"humans and our domesticated animals now constitute over 90% by weight . . . of vertebrate terrestrial life" and have collectively exerted over at least the past two centuries a substantially disproportionate effect on the rest of the planet. We have crucially altered the balance of biodiversity at the expense—often leading to the extinction—of non-domesticated species. As the World Wildlife Foundation notes in a recent comprehensive report on biodiversity, "the global Living Planet Index shows an average 68% decrease in population sizes of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish between 1970 and 2016" (6). If the problems of the Anthropocene are indeed within the power of human beings to solve, Major's poem offers, if not potential solutions, at least a way of reaching toward them.

The poem offers this in sometimes subtle, sometimes forceful, ways. As noted earlier, Major characterizes her poem as a "response" to the first epistle of *An Essay on Man* (117), in which Pope seeks, with a nod to Milton, to "vindicate the ways of God to man" (Pope 1.16). Each section of Major's poem is preceded by and thematically builds upon an epigraph drawn from Pope's *Essay*, sometimes harmonizing and sometimes contrasting with him. Pope, positioned on the eighteenth-

century edge of the Industrial Revolution, with its many technological and scientific advances, is indeed an ironically appropriate model for Major, living in an age that is heir, for better and for worse, to the scientific, economic, and political consequences of Pope's era. While Major's poem is neither a vindication nor a justification of divine ways, its formal qualities invite close consideration of what forces, particularly human attitudes and actions, have come to shape her times. Pope's *Essay* is marked by its use of heroic couplets, which radiate confidence, wit, and a sense of control. Pope does not doubt the science, theology, and philosophy of his time—an attitude that he expresses, for example, in the famously didactic opening couplet of his *Essay*'s second epistle: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of Mankind is Man" (2.1-2). While Major's poem is no less erudite, it is characterized by a more intimate, conversational manner that nevertheless belies its strongly formal qualities, of which the following passage is typical:

> Mown, shorn vegetation.
>
> Chronically impoverished, yet unchastened
> we think the gadgetry we've gained redeems
> our losses. Why should we miss one small, green,
> leaf-shaped frog (14)

The poem's basic metre is iambic pentameter, although minor metrical variations are the rule rather than the exception, and silent elisions will bring a line even closer to the standard ten syllables (e.g., "Chronic'ly impov'rished, yet unchastened," albeit reversing the metre from iambic to trochaic in this instance). Similarly, the lines are organized in sometimes hard-to-discern rhyming couplets, echoing Pope but also definitely departing from him. Half-rhymes ("vegetation" and "unchastened," also encompassing the gap between sections); enjambment ("redeems / our losses"); caesuras ("our losses. Why should"); and uncapitalized line beginnings except for new sentences, among other devices, contribute to the superficially informal, but deliberately tightly-controlled, style. In other sections arguments are ironically countered or diminished by such phrases as "—or not" (18) or

"Mere myth, perhaps" (25). A significant consequence of such techniques is that the poem does not so much preach as attempt gently but firmly to persuade. Unlike Pope's more didactic *Essay*, "Welcome to the Anthropocene" often makes many of its arguments indirectly, sometimes almost casually, in part through the variously mentioned devices, potentially allowing readers more flexibility in their responses.

The ten sections of "Welcome to the Anthropocene" also cohere through statements of welcome to many of Earth's inhabitants and to the planet itself, including domesticated and engineered species: i.e., various dog breeds, "Freckles the goat" implanted with spider DNA, "Black-6 Mouse," "transgenic zebrafish," and the "dumbed-down [*Drosophila*] denizens / of Bottle 38" (7); urbanized feral species including "raccoon, coyote, house mouse, peregrine, / squirrel, red fox, *Rattus norvegicus*," and "Canada goose" (13);[3] "all you entries in the global database / of life" (14); "*Homo sapiens sapiens*" (18); "all you refugees . . . And your descendants" (20); "the billions muddling through" (20); and finally, "you battered, tilting globe" (23). One might reasonably ask, Why welcome all of those who already call this planet home, or, in the latter instance, that which serves as their home? What are they being welcomed *to*? A closer examination of the identities of those being welcomed is unsettling. The genetically altered animals introduced in the opening section were created by members of a species that sees itself superior to and in dominion over them. The poem describes them as

> outré
> artificial creatures, genetic lines
> we've crossed and recrossed far too many times
> in our comprehensive drive to flout
> all natural order. (8)

It is not too much of a leap to see the connections between this hubristic attitude and the notions of racial or ethnic superiority that have led to slavery, colonialism, and other forms of injustice and dominance. The urbanized feral species have been similarly displaced from their natural existence by the encroachment of human beings on their ecosystems. The "entries in the global database / of life" could be a general figure of speech referring to all forms of life, or, more darkly, to the uncontrolled

proliferation of DNA data banks, "this hyperspace / during which humanity has hacked / into the planet's history," unaware of "when we've pressed 'delete' / once too often" (14).

The various welcomes extended to different groups of humanity are also unsettling. The "Homo sapiens sapiens" (modern human beings, having first appeared some two hundred millennia ago in distinction to other subspecies of *Homo sapiens*) are identified with correct biological nomenclature, but here the doubled *sapiens* also serves a highly ironic purpose, as this supposedly wise species is narrowed down to some of its most fanatical members, both religious ("nailed to all the stations / of your crossroads" [18-19]) and military/political ("flanked by flags / of national identity, the tags / of partisan allegiance" [20]), who appear to be freak-show specimens arranged along the walls of a large dystopian museum that suggests the modern world. The welcoming of refugees and their descendants is similarly troubled. Refugees are welcomed but to the "iron gate / and worn-down steps of this repository" (20), suggesting perhaps safekeeping but perhaps also another type of oppression. Further, their descendants are described not as thriving in a land of opportunity but as selfishly "denying entry . . . to all those bobbing in the seas behind" (20). Such a bleak and cynical view is perhaps meant to be deliberately shocking, suggesting that no group, regardless of former oppression, is completely immune to humankind's inherited impulses of selfishness and tribalism.

Indeed, the final and largest group of human beings to be welcomed are "the billions muddling through," i.e., the rest of humanity. Despite the manifold changes to its environment, this group is still "using brains that helped us to survive / millennia ago" (20) but which have not evolved sufficiently to help it deal successfully with its present plight. Overall, the speaker extends little to no sympathy to the creatures and the human groups that the poem ostensibly welcomes. The "welcome" is a perilous invitation to a dystopian world in which humanity finds itself very much *in medias res*. As a text of the self-conscious Anthropocene, the poem refuses to embrace wholeheartedly the new possibilities afforded by science and technology or to take sides overtly against political or economic oppressors as a solution to the current crisis.

What "Welcome to the Anthropocene" does do is to offer the "poor child" of the prologue a different way of conceiving its present reality. The poem achieves this in various ways, but perhaps most significantly through a scientific reconfiguration of the great chain of being. In his definitive work on the subject, Arthur O. Lovejoy writes,

> Through the Middle Ages and down to the late eighteenth century . . . most educated men were to accept without question—the conception of the universe as a "Great Chain of Being," composed . . . of an infinite, number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents . . . through "every possible" grade up to . . . the highest possible kind of creature, between which and the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite[.] (59)

As an educated man of the eighteenth century, Pope accepted this concept. But in Pope's case, as in the greater civilization he inhabited, the gradations of the chain often extended with racist assumptions to other groups of humankind as well, as in the poem's reference to "the poor Indian, whose untutored mind / Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind" (1.99-100), apparently unaware of a scientific appreciation of the cosmos, and hence lower on the chain than Pope. This myth of the "noble savage" is but one of the ways in which the idea of the great chain of being, whatever it may have done for the advancement of science, also helped to influence imperialist and colonial activities of Pope's time, and indeed still does today, in a variety of forms of nationalist, racist, and religious conflicts. Even though the concept began to fall somewhat out of fashion in the nineteenth century, it still influences other contemporary views, for example, popular conceptions of Darwin's theory of natural selection that erroneously distinguish between "lower" and "higher" forms of life.

Significantly, "Welcome to the Anthropocene" retains the notion of the great chain of being, but it reframes it radically, particularly in light of DNA research that demonstrates that humankind cannot be seen as a higher or lower life form but simply as one of many produced through the laws of natural selection. Major contextualizes her poem's connections to Pope by noting how the microscopes and telescopes of eighteenth-century science supported "Pope's concept of the

Great Chain of Being ascending from the 'microscopic eye' of flies to the supreme being who ordains the Newtonian orbits of planets" (117). While there are correspondences between Pope's and Major's views of the great chain of being, she refashions many of its elements, not excluding flies' eyes and the idea of a supreme being.

Each of the sections of "Welcome to the Anthropocene" opens with a quotation from *An Essay on Man*, which Major subsequently answers from a twenty-first-century perspective. The first section of Pope's poem begins with a warning against the unlinking of the great chain as a result of pride: "In pride, in reasoning pride, our error lies; / All quit their sphere, and rush into the skies" (1.123-24). Major echoes this idea when, following her list of genetically modified creatures, she asks, "But is it not the sin of pride / that we express? Hubris personified? / We will not admit to limits" (8). Inherent in these lines is a sense of an underlying order of things that human beings have disturbed, whether or not this order involves a great chain of some sort. But whereas Pope believed God anchored the great chain of being, Major says, "We don't believe, / these days, that God rebukes presumption"; nevertheless, she continues, "we are not gods / who know the outcomes that we set abroad" (9). In other words, God or no God, the hubristic attitude of some toward the world and its other creatures has precipitated our current perilous state. And the natural order of things continues to be imperilled, as evidenced not only by scientific data, but also, more and more, by our everyday experiences.

Major retains the notion of the great chain of being as an approximation of this natural order, but refashions it in light of modern scientific discoveries. In the next section, whose epigram reads, "All are but parts of one stupendous whole" (Pope 1.267 qtd. in Major 9), the chain is no longer "a ladder to the angels," but "a horizontal loop that rearranges / life repeatedly" (Major 9). In these lines and others, Major weaves through her poem the strands of a more contemporary "chain" of being, that is, the strands of the DNA double helix. When the narrator says, "We have been rattling The Great Chain / of Being," the rattling refers to ongoing experiments in genetic modification (8), experiments that need to be seen in a wider context. Operating unto its own laws, DNA has shaped the natural selection process of all life

over the past 2.5 billion years. While Earth has passed through several geological catastrophes over this time, it only now faces imminent catastrophe as a result of one of the more current manifestations of DNA replication, that is, *Homo sapiens*. Major invites humankind to see itself not as the apex of the evolutionary process but as a species that shares its "box of HOX and PAX . . . with chimp and fruit fly" (9). In a line that bathetically inverts Pope's "stupendous whole," Major situates *Homo sapiens* as not separate from, but as an inextricable part of, this planet's "boiling Petri dish / of life" (10).

Human beings are enmeshed in Earth's essential systems: the atmosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere, and geosphere. Melanie Challenger writes, "The human species is an integrated part of life on our planet, not an exceptional creation by itself" (7). She further notes "the fundamental refusal to accept that we, too, are animals and that being an animal matters to us," arguing that belief in humanity's uniqueness and separation from other animal species "has reached the end of its usefulness" (29). This belief, as many have recognized, is rooted in the fact of human consciousness—a quality that has generally made humans consider themselves closer to the "angels" (10) than to the "fruit flies" of Major's poem. And the poem indeed has much to say about how humanity might best perceive the fact of its collective consciousness and where it might locate human beings in a new configuration of the great chain of being.

Perceptions of what constitutes consciousness have shifted significantly from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Pope's *Essay* is no doubt informed by Cartesian dualism, after the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, who posits that the mind and body are distinct yet nevertheless interrelated entities. For Descartes, the mind exists within the body yet is still essentially separate from it. This perspective, which Gilbert Ryle ironically describes a few centuries later as "the Ghost in the Machine" (22), predominated throughout the Enlightenment. For Ryle and the modern materialist philosophers who followed, however, mind—or consciousness—and matter are not really separate, and virtually all of our thoughts, emotions, and actions occur at a level over which we have only the illusion of conscious control. However, these extremes of

dualism and materialism are certainly not the only points of view when it comes to understanding consciousness.

Major's poem invites a view of consciousness from a somewhat materialist perspective, although one modified in a way that is perhaps best expressed by Merlin Donald, who contends that "the human mind is unlike any other on this planet, not because of its biology, which is not qualitatively unique, but because of its ability to generate and assimilate culture. The human mind is thus a 'hybrid' of biology and culture" (xiii). Among the many implications of Donald's statement is one that is central to Major's poem: consciousness is not individual and unique, but, in many ways, collective, and humanity needs to focus on and understand more fully the collective nature of its consciousness in order better to navigate the challenges of the Anthropocene now facing it. Major's deft portrayal of humanity's present troubled relationship with its planet is informed by humanity's continuing failure to recognize and act upon what is necessary for common survival. Its tragic flaw is similar to what Pope identifies as human pride. It rests upon an often implicit assumption that consciousness sets human beings apart from other terrestrial species. As Major puts it,

> our vaulting crania, our vaunted brains—
> these advantages, we feel, explain
> our value, status, function. Thus we stand
> above a mindless landscape, in command.
> From our cloud-capped towers, consciousness
> looks out through window slits, past buttresses. (17)

This image is, I suggest, meant to be read ironically. In other words, many people inhabit, Prospero-like, their individual "cloud-capped towers" (their heads), believing that they have subdued the world ("a mindless landscape") and have dominion over it, everyone looking out from the fortified perspectives of their own "window slits" (their eyes). Each believes in the uniqueness of his or her own consciousness and individual powers, with the resultant endangerment of both themselves and the ecosystem. Set against the great physical laws that have governed the universe since its origin, human consciousness as a means of governance now seems rather inadequate. Further, humans have instinctive awareness of themselves as social

beings, an instinct that has previously helped to ensure their survival: as Major puts it, "recording / angels of our DNA inscribe / commandments for belonging to a tribe . . . [with] our ineradicable love of clubs" (20-21). Such clubs (e.g., social or cultural groups, weaponry, gaming), whatever advantages they may have held in the past, pose problems in the present. Much of humankind's thinking is still too deeply rooted in the self and immediate social groups; as advantageous or even essential as these groups may be, their own well-being depends on the physical survival of our entire species, which is now increasingly imperilled.

Understanding how consciousness has evolved can illuminate humankind's current plight and perhaps offer a way forward. Like every other species, *Homo sapiens* are "partners in the great translation enterprise / from chemistry to useful energies / for living" (11). Unlike other species, however, human beings were able to fill

> —a gap we call
>
> intelligence. Not a separate limb
> or magic faculty inserted in
> our brains. Rather, an elaboration
> (through millennia of tiny, patient
> trials-and-errors) of the skills required
> by any animal that has been wired
> for movement in the world. (11)

However, if this intelligence is a product of natural evolutionary processes, perhaps it has a yet unrealized purpose beyond dominating and subduing Earth and its creatures, and quite possibly destroying them in the process. With an arch reference to slime mould, eukaryotic organisms whose single cells can live separately but which literally pull together when threatened and then disperse for further survival, Major asks,

> Is this perhaps our role? To climb
> the tower of consciousness and then become
> a scatter of gametes, a kind of seed,
> DNA the universe may need

—although she immediately undercuts the possibility with the phrase "—or not" (18). Nevertheless, she does provide an alternative conception

of consciousness that will help to inform her conclusion, a conception that seems to bear affinities to the Jesuit scientist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's somewhat esoteric but nonetheless stimulating idea of the noosphere (from the Greek, meaning the sphere of the mind or intellect). While Major does not address the idea of the noosphere directly in her poem, it overlaps significantly with and informs central images and concepts of the poem's conclusion.

For Teilhard, consciousness is "nothing less than the substance and heart of life in process of evolution" (178).[4] Although not material per se, it is the product of material processes, beginning on this earth with the formation of non-living matter, the geosphere, followed by organic and living matter, the biosphere. Consciousness forms the third and highest level, the noosphere (182). The noosphere is Teilhard's name for the collective consciousness that forms a part of all life and is particularly, especially, manifest in human beings. While often at odds with contemporary material theories of consciousness, particularly in its inclusion of a religious dimension, Teilhard's concept of a collective consciousness arising naturally and inevitably from evolutionary processes is helpful to understanding the conclusion to "Welcome to the Anthropocene." Indeed, it reflects Major's concept of the soul:

> It's not likely to be individual—
> a bodiless homunculus that floats around
> without the laws of physics to impound
> its mini-mind. No, it's far more likely
> that soul is yet another force field, tightly
> coupled to the world (26-27)

Replacing the word *soul* in these lines with the word *consciousness* provides a close parallel to Teilhard's noosphere,[5] which, he contends, harbours the next stage of human evolution. Regardless of the validity of Teilhard's own teleological assumptions, the concept of consciousness as a driving force growing from and enveloping geological and biological forces does successfully illuminate many aspects of "Welcome to the Anthropocene." Bearing this in mind, it is helpful to incorporate two apparently disparate images that will cohere—along with this concept of the noosphere or reconceptualized

soul—in the poem's concluding lines. These images are a fly's eye and, a concept central to Hinduism, Indra's net.

In a note to her poem, Major mentions the "microscopic eye" of flies, an allusion to one of the many memorable couplets in Pope's *Essay*: "Why has not man a microscopic eye? / For this plain reason, man is not a fly" (1.193-94). While the question and answer are essentially rhetorical, their implications are central to Major's poem. Although Pope was surely aware of the early-seventeenth-century invention of optical microscopes, which essentially gave human beings "microscopic eyes," his common-sense argument is clearly grounded in his understanding of the great chain of being. In contrast, Major draws some powerful metaphorical parallels between human collective consciousness and flies' eyes. Major mentions flies a few times throughout the poem, first, as subjects of genetic modification, engineered by humans to be incapable of learning. When Major later wonders about the purpose of human beings, she asks, "Are we just fruit flies batting at the surface / of a lonely bottle?" (22), an allusion, no doubt, to Ludwig Wittgenstein's contention that a central goal of philosophy is "to shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (103). This can be read as a warning that humans may not have *yet* become, like the genetically modified fruit flies, incapable of learning, although they now stand in danger of not learning what is essential to their survival. In another passage, Major recalls what *Homo sapiens* has in common with these same fruit flies, specifically "opsin molecules that line our retina" (9). Opsin molecules are specialized proteins that convert photons into electrochemical signals, allowing humans and flies to see. And seeing becomes central to the poem's final image, which alludes to the arthropod eye: "We are time's derivative. / And for a little while, we are each a lens / in its compound eye" (27). Through such comparisons, it becomes clear that humans have more in common with flies than they may care to acknowledge. In this, Major's poem aligns with Challenger's comment that "human life remains an animal life" (53). Indeed, individual human beings may now be seen, in a stunning inversion of Pope's "microscopic eye," as parts of a macroscopic compound eye. But the image is not complete without a rudimentary understanding of Indra's net.

Most of Major's poem to this point has been informed by scientific imagery and concepts, largely in order to portray how survival in the Anthropocene is vitally dependent on an awareness of human interconnectedness with the planet and its other species, all part of the great DNA chain—or more accurately now, "a horizontal loop" (9)—of being. As Major puts it,

> we are not atoms in an emptiness.
> We're entangled, markings in a palimpsest
> that's written over, time and time again,
> by equations of the universal theorems
> that underpin the cosmos and preserve
> its balance— (25-26)

Major makes few overt religious references or allusions throughout most of her poem. However, near the poem's end, she incorporates an essential Hindu deity and symbol, Indra and his net. For readers familiar with Hinduism, Major's shift from images of flies' eyes to the figure of Indra perhaps causes little interpretive difficulty. For other readers, however, the appearance of Indra likely requires an imaginative leap of understanding. After referring to electromagnetic fields, photons, and the fabric of space-time, Major segues to the following passage:

> Indra's net hangs above the peaks
> of his holy mountain—the shining pleats
> of a tent of stars draped above the world
> where every knot is fastened with a pearl
> and every separate jewel in the mesh reflects
> every other gem at every vertex. (25)

This rather startling and unexpected passage is seemingly at odds with the previous scientific references. While Major follows these lines with the words "mere myth, perhaps," she uses the image to prepare symbolically for the poem's conclusion.

If Indra's net is a "mere myth," it is nevertheless a powerful one, connecting closely both to the idea of the noosphere and to the physiology of the arthropod eye. According to Rajiv Malhotra, "Indra's Net symbolizes the universe as a web of connections and

interdependencies among all its members, wherein every member is both a manifestation of the whole and inseparable from the whole" (4). He further explains,

> The metaphor of Indra's Net originates from the *Atharva Veda* (one of the four Vedas), which likens the world to a net woven by the great deity Shakra or Indra. The net is said to be infinite, and to spread in all directions with no beginning or end. At each node of the net is a jewel, so arranged that every jewel reflects all the other jewels. No jewel exists by itself independently of the rest. Everything is related to everything else; nothing is isolated. (5)

This interrelatedness and interconnectedness are essential to the conclusion of Major's poem, which moves from conceptions of isolated, individually conscious souls to an understanding of souls as integrated parts of a much larger whole. A fly's eye, human consciousness, and Indra's net—images that respectively occupy positions at the bottom, middle, and top of the (traditional) great chain of being—now overlap brilliantly in the final lines:

> We are time's derivative.
> And for a little while, we are each a lens
> in its compound eye. We might not unite
> behind Pope's verse *Whatever is, is right.*
> Still, whatever is, matters, in a wholeness where
> everything is common and everything is rare. (27)

Here Major offers a beautiful gloss of the metaphor of Indra's net, effectively transforming it into the "compound eye" of space-time, while simultaneously alluding to the "microscopic eye" of Pope's fly. The compound arthropod eye normally consists of many thousands of ommatidia, or cone lenses, each with its own light sensitivity. While human beings have neither microscopic nor compound eyes, their individual, localized perceptions combine into a universal "compound eye," which sees the world through the aggregate perspectives of all humanity. Each of these individual lenses reflects every other lens. Indra's net has affinities with Teilhard's noosphere, since it too comprises each individual human consciousness. When Major speaks of "the soul as yet another force field, tightly / coupled to the world" (27),

she echoes both of these concepts, offering a way of seeing that may help to guide the reader through the perils of the Anthropocene.

To return to the prologue to *Welcome to the Anthropocene*: if it is indeed a self-deprecating chorister who goes on to narrate the titular poem that follows "In Media Res," Major's speaker has left her "poor child" with much knowledge of how to play its part, albeit a part whose final lines are as yet unwritten. Although Major's chorister claims in the prologue that she cannot help anyone, "Welcome to the Anthropocene" provides sufficient prompts to lead the child to a better understanding of its world, in the poem's radical reconfiguration of the great chain of being. Seeing a "wholeness where / everything is common and everything is rare" (27) is to see from within "the middle of things" (3), an essential step towards understanding what to believe and how to act in the current epoch, whatever its name. Major invites her readers to a new way of seeing reality, with all its inherent perils, through a collective enlargement of wonder. As Challenger puts it, "our proper place is with our fellow creatures. It's time we told ourselves a new story of revolutionary simplicity: if we matter, so does everything else" (218). In many ways, of course, this is not a new story. Indigenous and other world views have long emphasized the interconnectivity of Earth and its creatures. But it is an old story made new in light of the facts of science, particularly in light of a modern understanding of the great chain of being from an evolutionary perspective. The survival of humanity may well depend on this understanding.

## Notes

1. Many scientists equate the beginning of the Anthropocene with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, for which there have been various proposed dates, but which *Encyclopedia Britannica* lists as 1733 (the same year as the publication of Pope's *An Essay on Man*). See "Industrial Revolution."
2. She most likely alludes here slightly but archly to Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.
3. It is worth noting that two of these species, *Drosophila* and *Rattus norvegicus*, were among the first animals studied by Thomas Hunt Morgan in his follow-up work on Mendelian genetics (Sauer 201-02).
4. Davis and Todd contend that the concept of the noosphere is a product of colonialism, which has historically separated human thought from nature. It is consequently incompatible with concepts such as Vanessa Watts' Indigenous

Place-Thought, "the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated" (21). Following Watts, Davis and Todd argue that "life and thought on earth is animated through and bound to bodies, stories, time and land" (769-70). However, as much as Teilhard himself may have focused on the noosphere as it applies to human beings, he indicates throughout *The Phenomenon of Man* that the noosphere encompasses *all* of life and has been developing since creation. While this is not to be taken as equivalent to Watts' concept of Place-Thought, it is not completely dissimilar to it. This is not to deny, however, that other scholars may appropriate Teilhard's term more within the colonial context that Davis and Todd indicate. (Watts herself does not refer to the noosphere in her article.)

5. This seems to me to be related to but a definite shift from Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. Whereas for Jung, consciousness is individual and private as opposed to humanity's archetypal unconscious, for Teilhard, consciousness itself is collective, an essential part of evolving life.

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**Ric Knowles**

# **Performing the Divided Self:** The Refugee Theatre of Ahmad Meree[1]

*for Majdi Bou-Matar*

Ahmad Meree is unique among Canadian playwrights. Bringing influences from the Theatre of the Absurd and the existentialist philosophy that undergirded much of that post-World War II theatrical moment in Europe to bear on his own position as a refugee of the Syrian war,[2] Meree has in his first three plays in Canada introduced a kind of neo-existentialist exilic refugee theatre that is grounded, unlike the work of most of the classical existentialists, in his own experience and in the realities of contemporary global politics and life in Canada. Meree's existentialist vision is not, like those of Jean-Paul Sartre, Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and others who have influenced him, grounded in a universalist articulation of "the human condition," of "man" [*sic*] standing alone in the universe; rather, it is historically specific and deeply personal. And it lifts existentialist philosophy and the Theatre of the Absurd out of their positions as phenomena relegated to the historical past to constitute a renewed kind of exilic vision for the Canadian twenty-first century. This essay will contextualize Meree's work with an account of his own refugee experience, on which all of his plays to date are based, and try to locate the plays in relation to existentialist philosophy and Yana Meerzon's articulations of "exilic theatre" in the land now called Canada.

Exilic theatre presents perhaps surprising convergences with existentialist philosophy and the Theatre of the Absurd. Exilic theatre, as defined by Meerzon in her monograph *Performing Exile, Performing Self*, is "a transient state of transnational experience and transcultural art" that is characterized by what she calls the "exilic performative" (3), in which the artist living in exile (re)fashions an alienated, divided,

theatricalized self, employing autobiography, memory, metatheatre, and multilingualism (or the collision of languages).[3] Cut off from their cultures of origin, exilic artists—and particularly, I would argue, those who are refugees—are confronted with the freedom and obligation to (re)invent their own subjectivities and construct their own meanings. The so-called Theatre of the Absurd, thus labelled by Martin Esslin in a book of that name first published in 1961, is a grouping-together of a diverse body of plays by Euro-American men from the post-World War II period characterized by absence, emptiness, nonsense, and nothingness. The characters in these plays find themselves lost in a universe without meaning: "Cut off from his [*sic*] religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Ionesco, qtd. in Esslin, *Theatre* 23). The plays—of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, Albee, and others—are inhabited, like exilic theatre, by characters who must take responsibility for fashioning their own identities and meanings, and like exilic theatre these plays are often self-referential and metatheatrical in form. They are also often, like Meree's plays, very funny. Many of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, finally, are grounded in the French existentialist philosophy that also emerged out of the horrors of World War II. Jean-Paul Sartre articulated this philosophy most comprehensively in his *Being and Nothingness* (*L'être et le néant*, 1943) and popularly summarized his view as "existence precedes essence" (588): that is, being has no inherent reason or justification, as a (universalist) "man" finds himself in a condition of angst, faced with the freedom and responsibility to, again, give meaning to a beingness that he did not choose.[4]

What I am calling Meree's "refugee theatre" draws from both existentialist philosophy and the traditions of the Theatre of the Absurd, and it rewards theoretical analysis based on Meerzon's articulations of exilic theatre. Meree's work is also influenced by a determinedly political, imagistic, and physical contemporary theatre in the Middle East and North Africa that I have witnessed in the past several years at Arab theatre festivals (the major sites for the dissemination of Arab theatre). This theatre largely reflects and addresses a widespread despair in the wake of the failure of the

Arab Spring movement throughout the Arab world, as the Theatre of the Absurd did in the wake of World War II. Much of that work focuses on issues of identity and remains grounded in European theatrical traditions, including the Theatre of the Absurd. This is particularly true of the work of the best-known Syrian playwright and Meree's favourite, Saadallah Wannous (Email), all of whose work is political, and whose early work was also strongly influenced by the European Theatre of the Absurd. Wannous came to be known for an attitude summed up in his World Theatre Day address in 1996, when he was suffering from the cancer that would kill him the following year: "Our lot," he proclaimed, "is to hope."[5] As we will see, Meree emerges in some significant ways from recent decades of Arab theatre that have been characterized, in a 2012 collection of essays inspired by Wannous, as "doomed by hope" (Houssami).[6] Refugee theatre, as exemplified by the work of Meree, I argue, emerges from a coalescence of influences that have brought him to write and perform himself into meaning, and even, ultimately, into some version of hope, in an alienating Canadian society that he did not choose, and in which, despite support from within the theatre community, he often finds himself alone.

Ahmad Meree came to Canada in 2016 at the age of twenty-five, co-sponsored as an actor and a Syrian refugee by the MT Space Theatre in Kitchener, Ontario. Meree was born in Aleppo, joining his school's theatre group and being cast in his first play at the age of fourteen. "But honestly before I even joined the theatre group," Meree recalls,

> I knew what I wanted from the time I was 10 years old. I wanted to be an actor. Performing with the school's theatre group and then later with a group in the University of Aleppo (although I wasn't a student in the university) I got the attention of a director in the National Theatre of Aleppo who asked me to join him in a play he was directing. (Email)

He was accepted into the National Theatre of Aleppo at eighteen and worked there for the first time with professionals, *as* a professional (Meree, "The Interview").

Meree and his colleagues had been excited by the 2011 Syrian revolution (part of the larger Arab Spring), but were devastated when that movement devolved into the repressive Syrian war of attrition by

the regime of president Bashar al-Assad. "Suddenly a lot of Syrians like myself found ourselves under bombing in the middle of a war when you could die at any moment," Meree says (Email). He had been involved in protests and had been sought out by the regime at the theatre where he worked. He was, moreover, worried about being forced into compulsory military service in support of a regime he despised. In 2012 he left for Egypt and enrolled in the four-year program in the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts at the Academy of Arts in Cairo where he studied acting, with a minor in directing, and trained in such things as improvisation, juggling, piano, painting, and the history of drama, including both Western and Arabic theatre.

In his final year of studies, with the situation at home no closer to any kind of resolution, Meree's Syrian passport expired. The Syrian embassy in Cairo refused to renew it, and the Egyptians, who had been deporting Syrians, would not renew his visa. He couldn't safely return to Syria, and he couldn't stay in Egypt, a situation later reflected in his play *Suitcase*. "I started to lose hope," he says (qtd. in Fricker). He contemplated paying smugglers and undertaking the notoriously dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean to Europe, but, as reported by Karen Fricker, "Possibility opened up in the form of contact with Siba Al-Khadour, the co-founder and executive director of Levant Canada, a Kitchener-based organization that enables refugee sponsorship initiatives and supports refugee integration through the arts and culture." Al-Khadour contacted Majdi Bou-Matar, the Lebanese Canadian founding artistic director of MT Space Theatre, who started an *Indiegogo* campaign that raised $13,500 in two months to bring Meree to Canada. "When the opportunity to come to Canada came along," he says, "I didn't hesitate. But it still doesn't feel like I chose" (Email)—a comment that resonates with a major speech in his most recent play, as discussed below. Refugees do not have the right or opportunity to choose. His parents, at the time, refused to leave Syria; when they later decided to try to come to Canada, it was not possible. And of course Meree himself cannot safely return to his country of birth to reunite with them—a source, for him, of considerable anguish that underlies all of his dramatic work.

When he arrived in Canada in July 2016, he was picked up at the airport by Bou-Matar and Syrian Canadian actor Nada Humsi (also with MT Space), who welcomed him to Kitchener and to MT Space as his artistic home. According to Bou-Matar, most of the funding raised to bring Meree to Canada came from "Canadian actors, directors, and playwrights" who continue to provide him solid, and necessary, emotional support (Ahlmidi). When he arrived in Canada Meree spoke little English, but he quickly established himself as an actor and artistic associate at MT Space, where he has been a co-creator of their devised work—including two shows dealing with the experience of a Syrian refugee family, *The Occupy Project* and *Amal*—and co-director of their Young Company, a group of BIPOC students sponsored by MT Space to learn the rudiments of theatrical creation. He is also a core member of Theatre Mada, a collective of Arab theatre artists in the Waterloo Region founded by Humsi and Bou-Matar. In the six years since his arrival, he has established himself as a Canadian playwright with a unique semi-autobiographical perspective on the refugee experience. Meree's work as a playwright in Canada tracks his own emergence from civil war in Aleppo and the shelling that destroyed most of the eastern half of the city, including the neighbourhood where he grew up and the building he grew up in. It also tracks, from a personal if quirky perspective, the refugee experience in Canada. As Bou-Matar says, Meree's work is "humorous, it's political and it's very personal" (qtd. in Ahlmidi). His first two plays, *Adrenaline* (2017) and *Suitcase* (2019), both directed by Bou-Matar and premiering in Arabic with English surtitles at the Registry Theatre in Kitchener, have toured to festivals in Canada, were performed together as part of Theatre Passe Muraille's mainstage season in 2020, and were published together back-to-back in Arabic and English by Scirocco Drama, also in 2020. His latest work, *I Don't Know*, premiered at the IMPACT International Theatre Festival in 2021 directed by MT Space's current artistic director, Pam Patel. It is his first play written in English.

Meree's work might be understood to inhabit a subcategory, refugee theatre, of what Yana Meerzon has usefully identified as *exilic*—or later *cosmopolitan*—theatre, though I find the earlier term more

applicable to his body of work. Much of Meerzon's work is concerned with those whose exilic condition, geographical or cultural, has come about through the exercise of some degree of choice or agency and whose outlook is cosmopolitan. I use *refugee theatre*, however, to refer to work produced out of a need to *claim* some agency by artists whose circumstances have been forced upon them and who, in Wannous' terms, are "doomed by hope." Meree's work inhabits a virtually unexplored space in Canadian professional theatre, where the refugee experience in this country has rarely been the subject of theatrical representation except in the case of applied theatre in work with non-actors by artists such as Yasmine Kandil, herself an immigrant (though not a refugee) from Egypt.[7]

Meree's work deals with the (cruel) incongruity of the refugee experience largely through the destabilizing lens of an absurdist brand of humour that is stylistically closest to the work of Ionesco. It is firmly grounded, too, in the kind of philosophical existentialism propounded in the postwar Europe of the 1940s and 1950s that also underpinned much of what Martin Esslin famously labelled the Theatre of the Absurd, the only theatrical influence Meree identifies in a 2021 interview with his publisher ("The Interview"). He dates the Theatre of the Absurd's earliest influence on him to his final year of theatre school, when he directed and acted in Ionesco's *La Leçon*. Few non-immigrant playwrights in Canada are now influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd or directly by post-World War II European high modernism, but in being so influenced, Meree joins the company of other exilic artists from the Middle East who are trained under those influences and for whom the experience of postwar anguish or despair is still directly relevant. This juncture of influence and experience is evidenced in the work of directors such as Lebanese Canadian Majdi Bou-Matar, of MT Space Theatre, and Iranian Canadian Soheil Parsa, founder and director for over thirty years of Toronto's Modern Times Stage Company.

Meree's own grounding in what I think of as "the existentialist absurd," as I have argued elsewhere (Knowles 12), allows him to be unflinching in his representation of things that many in the West have little direct experience of—war, torture, deep personal and political

instability—without being exploitative of human suffering in the way much media coverage of the refugee experience can be. His plays are deeply felt without invoking the easy, appropriative empathy and the concomitant cathartic release of "a good cry," and they provide at once powerful and playful—indeed often very funny—theatrical windows into a world that was created, but hidden from view, by policies and practices of the Global West and North. And their grounding in the lived experience of a racialized and minoritized refugee allows Meree to avoid the pitfalls of philosophical abstraction.

In 2014 Meree had written a play, *Underground*, at the Academy in Cairo, as a response to what was happening in Aleppo. Four characters, strangers to one another, meet underground sheltering from the bombings, quarrelling ridiculously with one another when they could at any moment be killed. Unlike his later work, it was written in a fundamentally realistic mode; but like that work, it was inspired by his own experience, in this case, of gathering with neighbours in the basement of his family's building, struggling with one another, and taking political sides even as the lethal fighting proceeded outside. Although the play was never produced, it won first place in a new play competition at the Academy. The three plays Meree has written in Canada differ significantly from *Underground*, and from one another, in both form and content. The first, *Adrenaline*, the least complex but perhaps most immediately affective of the informal trilogy, deals centrally with grief; the second, *Suitcase*, with loss; and the third, *I Don't Know*, with fear.

## *Adrenaline*: Everything Becomes Meaningless

As Debbie Fein-Goldbach notes in her review of the play, New Year's Eve is a time of reminiscing. *Adrenaline* is set on the first New Year's Eve in Canada of its central character, Jaber, on the first anniversary of the shelling of his home in what is almost certainly the Battle of Aleppo (2012-2016)—the same event, and shelling of *his* home, that drove Meree to leave Syria. As he says, writing the play was his attempt to relive his experience of that terrifying time, and to tell the story of his Syrian experience to the world ("Playwright's Notes" 10; Ahlmidi). Jaber (played by Meree in every performance to

date) enters his tiny flat as though arriving at a party, complaining of the cold weather, and carrying groceries, leftover pizza from his work at *Pizza Pizza*, and gifts for his brother and parents. His mother, father, and younger brother are represented by what the audience for the one-person show understands, at least at first, to be indexical signs representing his living family:[8] audiences accustomed to suspending their disbelief at first willingly recognize a suit with a hat hanging from a coat stand as Jaber's father, whom he addresses, with great respect, as Abou Jaber. We accept that a shawl draped over a fan represents his mother, whom he teases lightly. And we willingly, if laughingly, allow a propane tank wearing a t-shirt and hat to represent his brother, Salim, whom Jaber defeats at a *PlayStation* game. The coat stand, fan, and propane tank seem, at first, to function as indexical signs for the audience but turn out to do so only for Jaber; for the audience, in the end, they are not only signs but, in Charles Sanders Peirce's sense, icons, standing within the fiction for what they are in the real world in the same way that the chairs and table do.

In the early stages of the short, thirty-five-minute performance Jaber distributes gifts, banter, and food to his family. "Thank God we are still together after all [t]hat happened back home," he proclaims (77). As he reaches back into memory, however—and autobiographical memory plays, as Meerzon indicates, are characteristic of exilic theatre, as the exilic subject attempts to reconstruct the shattered self ("Theatre in Exile")—we realize that these seemingly comic objects are in fact surrogates, in Joseph Roach's sense (2-3), for the family that is not there, but died in the bombing the previous year while Jaber was out buying bread. Roach outlines surrogation as a "three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and substitution" (2), and this relationship plays itself out quite precisely in Meree's monodrama. As in Roach's account, the surrogation here does not succeed; but unlike in Roach's examples, where surrogation is a community endeavour rather than an individual one, it fails spectacularly to stitch together a shaky continuity or to constitute intergenerational cultural memory. "Sometimes I feel like a traitor because I didn't die with you," Jaber says to his family, echoing Meree's own feelings of guilt at having escaped from Syria ("Playwright's Notes" 9). While Meree himself has asked, "What is the price that all

refugees pay for safety?" (Ahlmidi), Jaber, in *Adrenaline*, responds, still addressing his family: "You were the price of my safety," he says. "It's a very high price to pay / And I paid it" (87-88).

As the celebratory New Year's Eve fireworks of his unfamiliar new homeland trigger Jaber's trauma memories of the previous year's bombing, the destruction brought about by those bombings is powerfully represented by his frenetic overturning of the table and visceral demolition of slices of pizza and disemboweling of vegetables. Recovering, Jaber slowly and deliberately tidies up the mess he has created and abandons the illusion. "I have to let you go now . . . I have to say goodbye to you" he tells his surrogate family (88). He methodically restores the coat stand, fan, and propane tank to their mundane, iconic thingness, and is left alone in what Meerzon might call his divided subjectivity (*Performing* passim—alive and safe, but alone and alienated in a world bereft of meaning or significance for him). "I felt," says Meree of his own experience, "like I was physically here but mentally and emotionally, I wasn't" ("The Interview"). Or as Jaber says in the play, in the earliest hint in Meree's oeuvre of the influence of existentialist philosophy, "everything becomes meaningless" (85). The show ends at midnight as Jaber, in isolation at the centre-stage table, in a moment of what reviewer Istvan Dugalin calls "painful absurdity," blows once, desolately, into his unfurling celebratory New Year's Eve noisemaker.

Many of the diverse body of plays that Esslin groups together as Theatre of the Absurd share a self-referential metatheatricality that is also characteristic of Meerzon's exilic theatre. "In exile," Meerzon argues, "the artists find themselves forced to generate instances of meta-discourse as they begin to rely on the devices of meta-dramatic, meta-theatrical, meta-cinematic, and meta-narrative communication" (*Performing Exile* 11). *Adrenaline*'s metatheatre manifests in a disarmingly simple way, as the audience slowly comes to realize over the course of the short play that it is watching the performance of a performance—what Meerzon calls the exilic performative of a divided self (35), both Jaber's and Meree's. Following Judith Butler and invoking J. L. Austin, Meerzon argues that all social identities are performative—that is, are performed into being—but that exilic identities are particularly and, unlike in Butler I would note, consciously so (17).

Theatrical representations of exile, then, are always and inevitably metatheatrical insofar as they are necessarily theatrical performances of the extra-theatrical performing of the self into being.

### *Suitcase*: An Overwhelming Sense of Loss

If *Adrenaline* is centrally about grief and wears its Theatre of the Absurd lineage lightly, *Suitcase*, a two-hander, deals most directly with loss and has evoked among (re)viewers such classics of the Theatre of the Absurd as Sartre's *Huis Clos* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (see Lucas; Dugalin; Fein-Goldbach; Nestruck). But the play was inspired by real-life tragedy. Meree tells the story of asking his mother, when he was in Egypt, to send a suitcase with new clothes to him by way of an old school friend, Abdullah, who was planning to leave Syria for a safer space in Cairo. But Abdullah never showed up. Meree and his mother only later learned, by accident, that he was killed just before his planned escape. This story, and Meree's own memories of "the things that I had hoped to bring with me, the things that I had hoped one day to go back and see and feel" (Email), but that were destroyed when his home was bombed, prompt the play's dedication to Abdullah "and to all those who wanted to leave but couldn't"—including his parents (*Suitcase/Adrenaline* 15).

Sartre's *Huis Clos*—a play that Meree says he "loves very much" (Email)—is the most obvious dramatic inspiration for the setting of *Suitcase*. As in Sartre, the action takes place in an abstract liminal space; in Meree's play, the setting initially suggests some sort of refugee holding centre. The play follows Samer, a Muslim musician, and his wife, Razan, a Christian journalist, played respectively in all performances to date by Meree and Nada Abusaleh. Together, like Didi and Gogo in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Samer and Nada wait, their single suitcase upstage right dominating a stage that is otherwise empty except for two chairs upstage centre and a stand-up microphone down left. The couple passes the time brushing dust—the residue of a bombing—from one another's clothing, arguing about why they left home when they did, reminiscing, playing games, rehearsing their English, and performing versions of their imagined future selves on the mic. Razan flirts and meditates, Samer vents his

frustrations or imagines life as a music star in a new land, and, with the metatheatricality that is characteristic of both the theatre of exile and the Theatre of the Absurd, each rehearses for the other what they will say to "him" when he shows up. Neither the mysterious "him" nor Razan and Samer's location is ever identified: "They don't know where they are," Meree says, "[t]hey are waiting for someone and something to happen. They could be alive waiting for a European immigration officer, or maybe they're dead waiting for God" (Ahlmidi). And like Godot, of course, "he" never does show up, except, perhaps, in the form of mysterious knockings and coloured lights—perhaps only imagined.

Their rehearsals, which take the form of mutual interrogations, involve the revelation of the torture that had drawn false confessions and betrayals from Samer at the hands of a regime he is even now afraid to name, and the violation that Razan, as a journalist, a Christian, and a woman, had undergone at the hands of ISIS. The accounts are graphic and powerful, but the depictions of the characters' relationship are laced with humour—even, in Bou-Matar's staging, physical comedy and farce. The rehearsals also constitute Meerzon's exilic performative, as Razan and Samer attempt to perform into being new versions of their now exilic selves, no longer as musician and journalist, but as humble sellers of popcorn: "there is nothing," Samer says, "like the simple life" (43).

As the action proceeds and Samer and Razan, in a scene worthy of Ionesco for its comic surrealism, see the story of the bombing of their home on the television news, we come to realize that the couple, in delaying their planned escape by one day, had died in the attack and are now in some kind of suspended afterlife, similar to that of the characters in *Huis Clos*.[9] They are nervous and uncertain, but also naively innocent, without the guilt or judgment of Sartre's Garcin, Estelle, and Inèz. Like Beckett's Didi and Gogo, however, they are waiting. As Meree says, "*Suitcase* reflects the post-traumatic psychology suffered by most of those who became displaced, who had to leave everything they loved behind with no option of returning, like myself. We are," he says, "waiting" (Playwright's Notes 10). In *Suitcase*, the waiting is broken up by flashes of concern, then certainty, about what they've forgotten or had to leave behind: the painting, the blue vase, the oud, the house, the neighbourhood kids, the salt, the fleece pyjamas,

the pomegranate syrup, the zucchini scorer, the smell of bread in the morning. The play ends, as Samer and Razan step into their otherwise empty suitcase, with, as one reviewer notes, "an overwhelming sense of loss" (Lucas).

*Globe and Mail* reviewer Kelly Nestruck, noting that Meree had directed Ionesco's *La Leçon* before coming to Canada, comments on the obvious influence on Meree here of the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, Ionesco and Beckett in particular, whom Meree elsewhere identifies as his favourites (Email). Nestruck usefully concludes his review by observing, "That post-Second World War artistic movement was a reaction to a world seemingly without meaning following unfathomable death and destruction, and by writing in this mode," he says, "Meree makes it clear that [experience] is not [just] a part of history for many of the people on this planet." Meree himself says that he had been attracted to the work of Ionesco and Beckett long before he really grasped its resonances, but that going through the war had deepened his understanding of their work: "I think because I lived through an experience close to what these kinds of artists went through after World War II, I got more and more interested in it and in creating it" (Email).

## *I Don't Know*: Performing the Divided Self

Meree's most recent play deals, like its predecessors, with grief and loss but is dominated by fear. *I Don't Know* is the playwright's most complex work to date, perhaps best described as an existentialist, absurdist farce about suicidal ideation, and it is where his own distinctive existentialist vision emerges most clearly. It is also the most directly autobiographical of Meree's plays and the one that most accurately reflects Meerzon's accounts of exilic theatre, particularly in its representation of what she calls "the artist's self-estrangement" (*Performing Exile* 5). Unlike the earlier plays, *I Don't Know* is about the refugee experience after the dust has settled, as it were, and the exilic subject—here named Saeed—finds himself alone in his adopted country. The play draws directly on Meree's own experience living in Kitchener, Ontario, using lines actually said to him by his therapist, and quoting verbatim from the results of his own web research on so-called Dr. Google.[10]

As the audience enters the space, Saeed (played by Meree in the premiere) is onstage, waiting. The Man (played by Majdi Bou-Matar) enters in his underwear—neither he nor Saeed knows what he wants, or why he has come—and starts to stoke Saeed's fears: of facial asymmetry, of cancer, of darkness, of death, of COVID-19, of herpes, of car bombs, of a bearded man (Meree, playing Saeed, has a large beard), and "of today, tomorrow, yesterday. Especially yesterday" (25). Later, agreeing that Saeed's life is "shitty" (30), a "farce" (16), The Man urges Saeed to kill himself, a proposition to which Saeed reluctantly agrees, twice. In the premiere, staged in the historic Waterloo County Gaol yard, the first attempt carried with it at once farcical overtones and a site-specific, metatheatrical frisson: when The Man presents the gibbet with a *ta dah!* that channels, on director Pam Patel's instructions, television game show *Wheel of Fortune*'s Vanna White, the moment is also ghosted by the fact that this same location was the site of at least three executions employing a similar stage and gibbet (see "Law and Order"). The attempt is interrupted when Saeed remembers, "I have to make a call." "Coward," The Man responds (20).

What gradually becomes apparent to different audience members at different times—bilingual speakers of English and Arabic will realize before monolingual English speakers—is that Saeed and The Man are the same person, The Man being perhaps best understood as an embodiment of Saeed's fear. This constitutes a powerful and literal embodiment of Meerzon's concept of exilic theatre involving "the divided self" (*Performance* 7-11), or perhaps more precisely, the *I* seeing the self as other (26). The fact that the audience's realization of this comes in large part through linguistic difference—some scenes are played out once in English, once in Arabic, with the characters' roles reversed—is also representative of exilic theatre, where "language often functions as a mechanism for constructing the divided self on stage" (40). At one point in *I Don't Know* Saeed complains to The Man in English, "I don't understand you. I don't understand the language you speak," to which The Man replies in Arabic, "Do you understand me now?" Saeed, clearly understanding, responds, "No, I don't understand that either." "You're scared," observes The Man (10). This multilingual confusion is perhaps best read as representing

what Meerzon, discussing multilingualism in exilic theatre, calls the "cultural explosion" brought on by the exilic position of being at once "*in between and above*," which postulates and conditions "the exilic performative as the émigré's site for the negotiation of self" (*Performing Exile* 22). In the case of the refugee this negotiation is, of course, not voluntary but obligatory, less a negotiation than a struggle imposed by circumstance.

Alienation from the self *as being*—a phenomenon Sartre calls *being for-itself*—grounds the play directly in existentialist philosophy, and in particular that of Sartre as dramatized in his plays, narrativized in his fiction, and expounded in his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*. Perhaps more obvious than the influence of Sartre on *I Don't Know*, at least as directed by Patel, is that of the most absurd and even farcical elements of the Theatre of the Absurd—particularly the work of Ionesco: the handing out of one outsized and dozens of other lollipops each time Saeed visits the doctor and the closing of the show with the 1958 song "Lollipop" as recorded by the Chordettes; The Man's use of a gloriously outsized pencil when Saeed dictates his will; The Man's donning of a grotesque black gas mask to protect himself from COVID-19; Saeed's entanglement in reams of computer paper, representing his online research, in a Keystone Cop-style chase scene; the use of a banana as a gun and, later, of another banana's voracious devouring by Saeed to represent sexual intercourse, with the subsequent discarding of its empty peel representing a used condom; and much more.[11] Patel's staging is clearly inspired by the play's dialogue. At one point, as a consolation for Saeed's fear of cancer, The Man offers Saeed a cigarette; at another, Saeed is reluctant to shoot himself because it will make a mess and he's just mopped, or because it will disturb the neighbours—to which The Man replies, "[I]t's a weekend" (31). Saeed is ultimately saved from this second suicide attempt when a sound cue from his cellphone indicates that he has a *Tinder* match.

But what is striking is that this is all grounded in the Sartrean view that existence precedes essence. Sartre's philosophy is rooted, in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, in the arguments that man—Sartre consistently uses the universalistic, masculine singular—stands alone in the universe and that existence itself is absurd in the sense

that it has, in itself, no purpose, no direction, no meaning (24-30). It simply is. As Sartre's English translator writes, "Being is already there, without reason or justification" (Barnes xxiv). And this is humanity's source of anguish, despair, and dread. It follows, then, that man is on his own, responsible for his own condition; is continually, of necessity, (re)making himself, as in Meerzon's exilic theatre; and is asking existential questions, that is, questions pertaining to existence. Meerzon writes of exilic theatre that, "unable to properly communicate with the new world, the exile repeatedly asks him/herself the essentialist questions, such as: Who am I? Where am I coming from? What is the purpose of my existence? What am I doing in this world? and Why am I doing what I've chosen or was pushed to do?" (*Performing Exile* 23-24). *I Don't Know* ripples with such questions—"have you ever been a bird?" (2), "why don't you want to die?" (140), "what does right mean?" (25), "what does truth mean?" (26)—and it echoes Sartre's position on the existential dilemma with remarkable accuracy. The Man tells Saeed, "Basically, you're here by chance. Two people had sex then you were born" (15). Elsewhere, Saeed asserts, "we're already here, we had no choice. I think we just have to make the most of it" (26), and later, "we fear [in order] to live. To survive. Everything we do, we do it because we fear something. Hunger, loneliness, death, extinction. . . . So, we eat, make friends, make love" (29). As reviewer Lynn Slotkin says, "It's all existential in Ahmad Meree's new play."

Meree's existentialist vision, like Sartre's, but unlike those of most academic Western philosophers, has been earned. *Being and Nothingness* emerged directly out of Sartre's having fought in World War II and served in the French Resistance. His discussions of despair, (in)decision, dread, and self-deception (or "bad faith"), however centrally reliant on reasoned argument, are grounded, at least in *Being and Nothingness*, not in abstraction but experience. Meree, too, grounds his existentialism in his own experience, as Nestruck has noted: of the Syrian war and, of course, of his own life in Canada as a refugee. "Much of the power" of Meree's plays, Nestruck writes, "comes from the knowledge that their creator is not dealing with abstract ideas, but embodies the subject matter; his presence on a Canadian stage is an artistic statement in itself." In Canada in 2021,

existentialism would perhaps have been largely understood as an obscure and dated philosophy, and the Theatre of the Absurd merely a (European high modernist) style among many others, stripped of its personal application and political import. For Meree, as refugee, both existentialist thought and its manifestations in absurdist theatre reflect and inform his deeply felt experience. As Meerzon puts it, "This search for 'essentials' often makes an exilic artist 'a modernist by default'" ("Theatre in Exile").

And while Sartre, at the heart of Parisian intellectual life in the postwar years, and ultimately a Nobel Prize winner, was in many ways the ultimate insider, Meree has remained an outsider. Or, as Algerian-born absurdist Albert Camus, Sartre's fellow resistance fighter, existentialist, and playwright would have it, Meree is *l'étranger* (the stranger, the foreigner).[12] For Sartre, what follows from the fact that the human condition is absurd, and even tragic, that all people stand alone in the universe, responsible for their own condition, is the recognition that they have the absolute, terrifying freedom to continually make themselves. "Instead of *being*," as his translator says, man "'*has* to be'; his present being has meaning only in the light of the future towards which he projects himself" (Barnes xxii; emphasis added). "Acceptance of one's absolute freedom," she argues, is for Sartre "the only existence commensurate with an honest desire to exist fully as a man . . . [even though] the recognition comes not in ecstasy but in anguish" (xxxi). To live with integrity, then—without what Sartre calls *bad faith* (*Being and Nothingness* 86-116ff.)—"one spends one's life pursuing and making oneself. [Bad faith] is the refusal to face the anguish which accompanies the recognition of our absolute freedom" (Barnes xxxix). But integrity, or even courage, involves accepting the absurdity of one's condition and along with it the freedom and responsibility, as critic Walter Kaufmann argues, "to reach above the stars" (47).

Meree's Saeed does not reach above the stars, and in fact the play seems to end where it began, in a closed circle with the same litany of *I don't knows* as at the outset, but with the roles reversed: it is now Saeed who shows up in his underwear and The Man who asks why he is there.[13] More importantly, Saeed begins, tentatively, to take control of his situation: to assume agency. Just prior to the final litany

Saeed makes choices: to control his own schedule and not respond to The Man's stoking of his fears, as he does at the outset. In dramaturgy sessions with me, and in rehearsals, Meree was clear that he did not want the play's structure to invoke typical, totalizing, high-modernist self-enclosure but wanted Saeed to be seen, in a vein more Sartrean and more culturally and historically located than that of many existentialist philosophers, to be accepting of his own responsibility for his own freedom, and for his ongoing self-(re)construction. This may also reflect the influence of Saadallah Wannous and the vision of a *world* that, like Saeed, may not reach above the stars but is nevertheless doomed by hope.

But unlike Sartre, Meree is not generalizing from his experience, writing from the position of what Sartre consistently calls *man*, positing a universal human condition that makes no distinctions based on gender, race, culture, position, or privilege. Meree is writing *from the position of the refugee*, the exile: the bearded, racialized Arab man in Canada, very much marginalized and often demonized and perceived as threatening. And there is another twist. As I have shown, Meerzon talks about exilic theatre as "an encounter with the self as other" (*Performance* 23). But it is not only the self, The Man, or some supposedly universal existential condition that Saeed confronts at the end, and this is where he most crucially differs from Sartre. He directly confronts the audience as well, an audience that is implicitly constituted as dominant-culture Canadian and as part of the problem for the refugee artist. In one of the play's few extended speeches—the play is for the most part constituted by rapid-fire exchanges—Saeed turns to confront the audience directly, metatheatrically positioning us, in the audience, as "you," constituting a community of which he is not a part. He grounds his second-person address in the specificities of the refugee experience in Canada here and now, the expectations aroused by his very presence as a refugee that "we"—the audience—have "generously admitted" to "our" country, and in the personal: "I'm supposed to be happy . . . Ambitious . . . Hard working . . . I have to be a functioning member of society," he protests:

> I have to work and make money to eat, pay rent and be happy. SAEED. Isn't that what my name means?[14] I have to

> be happy in a place I did not even choose. No one asked me for my opinion or if I wanted to come. I did not even choose my appearance, my family, my country. I did not choose anything. Then suddenly, BOOM, I opened my eyes and found myself here in front of *you* and I have to do all this and if I don't, I'll be letting you down and become a burden on a society I did not choose. And if I object, they will tell me to look at others. *You too* are telling me to look at others and comparing me to them. Why should I do that? (28; emphasis added)

## Conclusion: O Canada!

Meree's plays are fundamentally autobiographical, fictionalized versions of his own experience, as I've described it, as a Syrian refugee coming to Canada, a country he did not choose, and facing expectations and circumstances not of his own making. What they don't acknowledge within the fiction, except through their very metatheatricality, is that the autobiographical source of the plays is a writer and actor.[15] As an exilic artist Meree has made what Meerzon suggests is the liberating choice for the exile—as exile, as artist, and as human subject—to write and perform himself into existence, choosing, in Sartre's terms, to accept the responsibility that the fact of being-without-meaning imposes. At the same time, unlike Sartre, Meree is fully conscious that this condition is globally unequal and is socially and historically produced in the here and now, by *us*, his audience, which can safely be presumed in the Canadian theatre world of 2021 to be overwhelmingly made up of white settler Canadians. Referring to the life he escaped in Syria, Meree says, "I felt hugely responsible and could somehow hold myself accountable by writing" ("Playwright's Notes" 9-10). As both playwright and actor, Meree has chosen the exilic performative in response to the dilemma of the refugee artist directed towards the future: he has chosen to write and perform himself into meaning. This requires accepting a terrifying, Sartrean freedom: "Basically," Meree says, "I can do whatever I want in my plays" ("The Interview"). In doing so, Meree has at once written and performed himself into being as an artist in Canada, carved out a new kind of refugee theatre, and brought new life to the Theatre of the

Absurd with its underlying existentialist thought by grounding both in the culturally and historically specific rather than in philosophical abstraction or any universalist "human condition."

In December 2021 Ahmad Meree performatively declared his allegiance to Canada, once again performing his new self into being, and was, in what J. L. Austin calls a felicitous speech act (22), declared a Canadian citizen. On December 22, 2022 he posted the following on *Facebook*:

> I am grateful for life for giving me another chance after I was very close to death so many times.
>
> I am grateful to the [I]ndigenous people of Turtle Island for having me on their land.
>
> It's emotional and absurd how the world looks at you differently because now you hold "decent" citizenship, while you are still the same person!
>
> O Canada, I am a citizen!

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Ahmad Meree for responding to my questions by email during the pandemic. All information and quotations from him are from the email listed in the Works Cited unless otherwise indicated. I am also grateful to him, Majdi Bou-Matar, and Nada Abusaleh for inviting me to assist in rehearsals for *Suitcase*; to Meree and Pam Patel for hiring me to work as dramaturge on the 2021 production of *I Don't Know*; and to Patel for talking with me about her decision-making process as director of that show. All references to the rehearsal project derive from my direct participation in it throughout. I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Majdi Bou-Matar, who passed away suddenly in June 2022.
2. This event is known in the mainstream media as "the Syrian civil war." Meree, however, feels that it was not a civil war but a war of repression and has asked that I refer to it as "the Syrian war" (Email).
3. Meerzon argues that "multilingual theatre uses language to depict our divided self as situated between experience and repetition, repetition as distortion, and trace" (*Performance, Subjectivity, Cosmopolitanism* 36).
4. The Theatre of the Absurd, as Esslin discusses it, groups together a wide variety of plays that are very different from one another in form. Similarly, existentialism is a complex philosophical movement that encompasses a diverse group of thinkers "from Dostoevsky to Sartre" (Kaufmann), including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Heidegger, de Beauvoir, Camus, and others; and Sartre's *Being and*

*Nothingness*, his fullest articulation of his philosophy, is a long and complex book. Meree indicates that he did study existentialism and, particularly, Sartre while at the Academy of Arts in Cairo, but not, he says, in great depth (Email).

5. As I write, Meree is adapting Wannous' play, *The King is the King*, for Pleiades Theatre in Toronto.
6. For a good short account of the current state of Syrian theatre, see Elias; for discussion of Arab theatre more broadly, see Houssami.
7. Meerzon incorrectly identifies Kandil as a refugee ("Theatre and (Im)migration" 19).
8. I am using *indexical* in the semiotic sense outlined by Charles Peirce, who distinguishes between iconic signs that resemble what they represent (an actor stands for a character), indexical signs that point towards their referent ("him," "there," a knock at the door, smoke), and symbolic signs such as words that stand in for their referent by convention but have no logical connection or resemblance to it (Peirce 5).
9. According to Meree, some in the audience believed the couple still to be alive, as revealed in talkbacks, and he indicates that ambiguity about this is what he wanted. To me, the show eventually makes clear that they did not survive the bombing.
10. Meree's therapist, for example, advised him, "You should try to think about the things that you really have control over" and to "write down what you just said on a paper and try to put it up on your fridge where you can look at it 10 times every day at least," both lines that appear in the play (9). The line "Smoking exposes your face to toxins. It makes sense that smoking was directly related to facial asymmetry in the 2014 study" (7) alters only one word—changing *a* to *the*—from an online article in *Healthline* (Watson); the line "HHV-8, also known as Kaposi sarcoma-associated herpes virus (KSHV), has been found in nearly all tumors" directly quotes, with the punctuation altered, the US Library of Medicine (Mesri, Cesarman, and Boshof 33).
11. These farcical touches are the invention of Patel, who says they are a function of her generation—Xennials, or the generation bridging Millennials and Gen-Xers—and are not indicated explicitly in the script (Personal communication). Meree fully embraced them in rehearsal, indicating that they represent "the kind of theatre I like" (Personal communication).
12. *L'étranger* translates literally into English as "the stranger" or "the foreigner," but its title when published in English was *The Outsider*. A novella by Camus, it is the story of a French settler in Algeria who does not weep at his mother's funeral, kills an Arab man, is tried, and is sentenced to death. While Camus rejected the label *existentialist*, I would argue that his novella is a central example of what I have been calling the *existentialist absurd*.
13. An earlier version of the script included another scene following this one, in which Saeed laughed at The Man's renewed attempts to frighten him, and which ended in an armed conflict. Full disclosure: as dramaturge, I was involved in the decision to cut that scene.
14. Saeed, a man's name, literally translates as *happy*.
15. The partial exception to this is Samer in *Suitcase*, who is, however, a musician: he only briefly imagines his future ability to perform himself, musically, into fame and fortune.

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**Eleanor Ty**

# Asian Canadian Graphic Autopathographies

Life writing, whether in the form of memoirs or graphic narratives, not only documents and records experiences, but can also help writers navigate, see anew, and make sense of themselves and events of the past. For minority writers, life writing becomes a means to think deeply about their racial and sexual identities, enabling them to negotiate their place within their families and within mainstream society. These works often challenge stereotypes and help us to understand the complex dynamics of the social, cultural, and ideological that form a subject.

Starting with Sylvie Rancourt's *Mélody*, which details Rancourt's work as a strip club performer in 1980s Montréal, Candida Rifkind and Linda Warley observe in *Canadian Graphic: Picturing Life Narratives* that "graphic life narratives have a long and varied history in Canada" (2). Rancourt's book fits into the motif of confession which Kevin Ziegler identifies "in many contemporary Canadian graphic life narratives" (23), although he does not mention *Mélody* specifically. Ziegler argues that authors such as David Collier, Julie Doucet, Seth, Chester Brown, and Sarah Leavitt "frame their accounts . . . as though they were divulging shameful details about the past" (23), thereby creating a sense of intimacy with the reader, an unfamiliar observer. He explains, "A confessional is inspired by feelings of impropriety or wrongdoing; the confessant exposes the past with complete candour to ask for judgment and understanding" (25). In "The Un-Erotic Dancer," I provide an alternative reading of Rancourt, contending that using the graphic memoir form enables Rancourt to "raise important issues about sex work, affect and female desire" so that the graphic narrative becomes "a form of memory work, a form of witnessing, of self-construction, and self-expression" (Ty 122).

I begin with this early example from the history of Canadian graphic life narratives because the two Asian Canadian graphic life narratives I study below are similarly situated at the intersection of confession and witnessing. Though I am not looking at them primarily as confessional texts, they follow the tradition of Canadian independent graphic life narratives that collapse the space between the public and the private. The authors write about women's experiences which are considered intimate and possibly shameful in an androcentric society, using graphic memoir to reframe the conditions of their lives. Even as they are "confessing" their feelings of inadequacy, fear, and doubt, they use their art as a form of resistance and self-affirmation.

Until recently, Asian Canadian graphic novelists have not made much use of the confessional mode of graphic narrative. Artists like Mariko and Jillian Tamaki and Michael Cho, whom Rifkind and Warley list among comics' "second-generation print and digital Canadian alternative cartoonists" (3), have written fiction, albeit based on autobiographical events, rather than memoirs. Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim* (2008) is based on Mariko Tamaki's experiences as a Japanese Canadian high school student who struggles with her weight, her romantic interest, and her racialized and queer identity. Michael Cho's *Shoplifter* features a Korean North American young woman who becomes disenchanted with urban life and her job at an advertising agency (see Ty, "Asianfail in the City"). Of the Asian Canadian graphic novelists who have published notable works in the last five years, Aminder Dhaliwal and Hiromi Goto with Ann Xu use elements of speculative fiction. Only Lorina Mapa has written a graphic life narrative, based on memories of her childhood in the 1980s and her return trip to the Philippines. In the last three years, coinciding with the boom in graphic pathography which, according to Gesine Wegner, has resulted from the popularity of autobiographical comics and the interest in illness and disability memoirs (see Wegner 60), a number of graphic memoirs by Asian Canadian female artists have emerged which deal with illness and its repercussions. In this article, I study Teresa Wong's *Dear Scarlet: The Story of My Postpartum Depression* and Kimiko Tobimatsu and Keet Geniza's *Kimiko Does Cancer: A Graphic Memoir*. These two graphic memoirs deal with

different kinds of illness, but they are important contributions to the development of Canadian graphic narratives because they grapple with intersectional issues of race, gender, and health.[1]

## Graphic Autopathographies

Now a subgenre of graphic novels, graphic pathographies, or "stories of illness conveyed in comic form," are useful for both medical practitioners and patients (Myers and Goldenberg 158). Susan Squier and Irmela Krüger-Fürhoff explain that "pathos is, at its origins, a complex amalgam of suffering and experience. In addition, it is a set of rhetorical strategies: the use of storytelling, metaphor, passionate emotion, and performance to engage an audience" (2). Myers and Goldenberg note that "these stories are helpful tools for health care professionals who seek new insight into the personal, lived experience of illness and for patients who want to learn more about their disease from others who have actually experienced it" (158). However, Squier and Krüger-Fürhoff remind us that while the term *pathography* is "a written, nonfiction narrative of illness," we need to remember that "acts of fictive creation . . . are integral to every piece of life writing" and that the term carries "assumptions of human-centered individuality that must be questioned" (3). Pathographies, though based on real life incidents, often still follow novelistic conventions, such as character development or the use of imagery, in their narrative. In Canada, a graphic pathography that has been widely read and taught is Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me* (2010), about a queer Jewish woman's relationship with and care of her mother, as her mother gradually loses her identity and memory. Writing about this work, critic Kathleen Venema observes that "Alzheimer's narratives . . . reflect their writers' (sometimes desperate) negotiations with the processes by which selves and identities are evacuated" (46). *Tangles* documents physical, emotional, and mental loss and how these losses affect the family.

G. Thomas Couser coins the term *autopathography* to describe first-person accounts of illness created by those who have "challenged medical scripts and/or the cultural constructions attached to their conditions," associating these accounts with "the counter-discursive,

and . . . post-colonial implications of defining one's condition in one's own way" ("Genre Matters" 143). Like other authors, when Asian Canadians write graphic autopathographies, they are not just writing about their physical illnesses or their emotional and mental challenges, but also bringing societal assumptions and judgments about wellness and proper and improper behaviour into their narratives. In particular, for Asian Canadian autopathographers, influential ideologies could include discourses of success and failure, linked implicitly or explicitly to the stereotype of the model minority. They might also include ideas about the strong body, gendered ideologies of beauty, femininity, and motherhood, as well as discourses from medicine about healthy, diseased, and disabled bodies. What is significant to note is that in these works there are often added feelings of shame and inadequacy. Illness is often linked to a confession of failure: a failure to succeed as a model minority and to fulfill the expectations of one's immigrant parents. Writing about Asian American illness memoirs, James Kyung-Jin Lee describes the success that

> Asian Americans are supposed to have enjoyed in the past half century or so, a broad social narrative of educational and economic mobility that has captured the imaginations of social scientists who marvel at a racial group's meteoric rise and fuels the expectations and demands of Asian American (immigrant) parents who expect nothing less from their children. . . . Asian Americans must exemplify success, in the classroom and the workplace; by extension, they must also inhabit indefinitely healthy bodies that serve this success frame. Yet they, too, get sick, become disabled, and, perhaps . . . also die. (3)

Given these expectations, it is remarkable that a number of graphic autopathographies have been produced in recent years by Asian Canadians who deal with illness and health issues. These graphic memoirs are important to the development of comics production in Canada as they reveal how comics provide a space to articulate feelings that are seen as shameful or debilitating for Asian women from immigrant families. Ann Jurecic points out that "autobiographical illness narratives reclaim patients' voices from the biomedical narratives imposed upon them by modern medicine" (3). These texts

amplify the voices of ordinary Asian Canadian women, giving space to those who are not traditionally deemed important in history. Hillary L. Chute observes that comics and graphic novels, with their use of visual-verbal form, can "represent trauma productively and ethically" (3). The three graphic novels that have received the most critical attention and scholarship to date are Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004, 2005), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006). They all deal with trauma of various kinds. Chute notes, the "cross-discursive form of comics is apt for expressing that difficult register, which is central to its importance as an innovative genre of life writing" (2). However, there are also life stories that are not necessarily traumatic or horrifying, those that are not about the Holocaust, wars, or suicide, but about everyday experiences that are quietly disquieting or quietly joyous. This essay studies two contemporary Asian North American writers who depict what Rachel Bowlby has called "everyday stories," the "ordinary daily lives . . . of people from classes or regions not previously associated with artistic representation—or representation of any kind" (2).[2] These graphic autopathographies show two different illnesses (postpartum depression and cancer), diverse autopathographic backgrounds (cisgender mother and single queer woman), a range of issues (cultural expectations of motherhood and treatment of lesbian patients), and different styles of drawing. These creators convey a sense of intimacy, guilt, and vulnerability, resisting stories of triumph for authenticity. Chinese Canadian Wong depicts suffering from postpartum depression, while Japanese Canadian writer Tobimatsu and Filipina Canadian illustrator Geniza depict the negotiation of relationships and medical cancer treatments for a young queer Asian Canadian woman. Both Wong and Tobimatsu struggle with cultural stigmas as they make sense of their illnesses, the expectations of their families and communities, and the negative feelings that come with being sick as racialized women. In the process of creating their autopathographies, they reclaim their senses of themselves, challenge socio-cultural expectations of the successful Asian Canadian, and contest the "biomedical narratives imposed upon them by modern medicine" (Jurecic 3).

## Drawing Bodies

Comics is a unique form in which to write about mental and bodily discomforts and disorders because of "the centrality of the body in autobiographical comics" (El Refaie 51). Elisabeth El Refaie has coined the term *pictorial embodiment* to refer to the way comics artists have to engage with their own bodies and identities: "the requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one's self necessarily involves some engagement with the body and body image" (51). She notes:

> [T]he autobiographical comics genre offers artists the opportunity to represent their physical identities in ways that reflect their own innermost sense of self, often by using a range of symbolic elements and rhetorical tropes to add further layers of meaning to their self-portraits. (51)

The act of drawing requires artists to remember and re-imagine what and how they were feeling in a given moment, choose a perspective from which to display their bodies, and reflect on the significance of that experience.

In life writing, there is an expectation of faithfulness which is not present in fiction. As Charles Hatfield notes, the genre of autobiography demands "fidelity to . . . experience, yet storytelling demands license; narrative needs shaping" (112). For graphic autobiographers, "the genre isn't about literal but rather about *emotional* truths" (113). The drawing styles used by Wong and Geniza are not realistic. The autopathographies use fairly simple, cartoon-like drawings, but they nevertheless achieve the effect of truthfulness, sometimes through irony, humour, satire, or exaggeration. My essay examines the link between text and image in these graphic memoirs, discussing the ways these elements work together to tell encounters between cultures, between social expectations and subjective impressions. My analysis looks closely at panel and page layouts, graphiation, the drawing style of the artist, or "visual enunciation" (Baetens and Frey 137), as well as the "graphic substance" of the text (Jean-Gérard Lapacherie, qtd. in Baetens and Frey 153). Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey note that graphic substance includes "the form of the lettering, the configuration of the words in the speech balloons and the insertions of these balloons in the panels, the presence of letters and other written symbols within the fictional world,

the presence of the typical onomatopoeias . . ." (153). In short, it is not just what they say but also how words appear in comics panels that influence our reading expectations and the narrative.

### *Dear Scarlet: The Story of My Postpartum Depression*

In *Dear Scarlet*, Wong writes about her struggle, both mental and physical, after the difficult birth of her first child. Through her graphic autopathography, Wong grapples with postpartum depression and the negative feelings that come with motherhood. She confesses that she was "so tired" and "a bad mother" (53) and that she felt "like a monster" after the birth of her daughter (52). Though her drawings are simple and cartoon-like, she uses techniques such as exaggeration, satire, and humour to counter the fairy-tale-like stories of childbirth. Writing *Dear Scarlet* becomes a form of therapy for Wong, but it is also a feminist work that shows how gendered and cultural expectations still shape and constrain women in the twenty-first century.

*Dear Scarlet* is dedicated to Wong's daughter, who has expressed her desire to grow up "to be a mommy" (7). Wong questions the cultural assumption that all women are destined and biologically programmed to be mothers. She comments, rather ironically, "My parents raised me to be academic, not domestic," and that when she was growing up, she "never once thought of being a mother" (8). In the Western world, while feminists from the early-twentieth century such as Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Helen Hamilton Gardener, Eliza Burt Gamble, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman have "grappled with questions of biological sex difference, the extent to which maternity did (and should) define women's lives, the equitable division of household labor, and female reproductive autonomy" (Hamlin 2), today's mass and social media still persist in idealizing motherhood when they "show . . . women swaddling infants in their arms, beaming with parental pride, as if caring for a newborn were the most natural thing in the world" (Bresge). Questions of sex difference, the social construction of gender, and appropriate feminine and masculine gender roles were raised by second-wave feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet in the 1960s, but their ideas have not necessarily influenced the generation of children who grew up in the postfeminist era of the 1990s

in North America (Mikkola). Nevertheless, Wong and her peers grew up believing that women could have it all: careers, equality, and sexual liberation. Being a wife and mother was not necessarily their main goal.

While Wong does not explicitly refer to feminist thought, her guilt, confusion, and anxiety after the birth of her first baby demonstrate her struggle with these unconscious and pervasive beliefs in gender roles. Women are still expected to possess "maternal instincts" or know how to be caregivers, with little or no training given. In an interview with *CityNews*, Wong said, "I think there's a lot of pressure on mothers to put out an image of motherhood that is all joyful and kind of slick," so "a lot of mothers who don't feel that way, who don't really love taking care of a small baby," need to hide their feelings. In popular culture, images of proud, loving, or happy mothers abound: from the highly revered Christian image of the Virgin Mary to recent celebrity moms like Beyoncé, Cardi B, and Kylie Jenner. In contrast, discomfort and uneasiness with maternal duties are less frequently the subject of stories, *Instagram* posts, or novels. Rare and not often discussed, "postpartum depression is different from the 'baby blues'" because it is a "deeper depression that lasts much longer" (CAMH). Though attitudes are changing, people with mental health conditions are reportedly still stigmatized and are "faced with multiple, intersecting layers of discrimination as a result of their mental illness and their identity" (CMHA Ontario). People with depression are sometimes not taken seriously, and their symptoms are trivialized. In an interview with *CTV News Calgary*, Wong says that when she first told her doctor about feeling low after she gave birth, her "doctor brushed it off as baby blues" and advised her "to go out for more walks and get more sunshine." However, Wong "knew something deeper was happening"; she did not feel like the happy moms on TV in the first months of motherhood.

## Wong's Artistic Techniques

Wong's graphic autopathography was written as a form of therapy when she was pregnant with her third child and unable to sleep at night. According to Wong, the memories of the first weeks after Scarlet, her first baby, was born were "so vivid that they made [her] cry" (Koeverden), so she got a sketchbook and began drawing her fears. She

says that she did not think she was a good artist and felt self-conscious about her style of drawings. Drawn in black and white, they are simple sketches with minimal background. People's faces are circles, eyes often consisting only of dots or short lines. The illustrations look childlike, yet her graphic memoir still manages to convey a powerful story through her multi-voiced narration, splashes of colour, exaggeration, irony, humour, and parody. Though it is told mainly from Wong's point of view, Wong incorporates various discourses—from health professionals, the media, her friends and family, song lyrics—to create a sense of what she was experiencing. The book is firstly a memoir, but it also functions as a helpful guide about postpartum depression for new mothers and a challenge to discourses of happy motherhood.

One technique Wong uses to convey her deep anxiety is through the use of the colour black. Often, she uses dark backgrounds to show the state of her mind. For example, soon after giving birth to her first daughter, she loses a lot of blood. When her husband brings her their baby to look at, she is unable to focus and "things [start] going fuzzy" (15). The page describing her feelings consists of four panels which are all black except for the caption boxes and, in the last panel, a small dialogue bubble containing the cries of the baby. The page is striking for its darkness, which suggests Wong losing consciousness. Without dialogue and without drawings, Wong is able to convey her immediate physical response to giving birth, which is very different from the joyous moments one sees on TV shows or in films. Susan Squier notes how, "as a hybrid genre—a combination of word and image, narration and juxtaposition—the imagetext or graphic narrative has the capacity to articulate aspects of social experience that escape both the normal realms of medicine and the comforts of canonical literature" (Squier 130). The caption boxes describing Wong's state of mind are narrated from the perspective of the present moment. Andrew J. Kunka observes, "The use of caption boxes in autobiographical comics usually indicates the presence of the narrating I, the present version of the author who retrospectively tells the story" (62). In this example, Wong is recalling the difficulty of her experience and the use of black becomes an artistic representation of her feeling of hopelessness and the loss of control, physically, mentally,

and emotionally. For Wong, giving birth entails a loss of self, albeit momentarily, shown through colours or the lack of them.

Chute has argued that graphic narratives are particularly useful in processing traumatic experiences because they enable authors to "both tell *and* show" what "could not be communicated any other way" (2). They "push" our beliefs about "conceptions of the unrepresentable" and invisible (2). While Wong's feelings of inadequacy as a mother and her subsequent depression are not traumatic in the same way as, for example, Lynda Barry's stories of childhood abuse, they are unspeakable because of cultural taboos. Women in North America, as in Asia, are supposed to be good wives and mothers; they are viewed as natural caregivers. Those women who are unable to provide maternal love are seen as monstrous. After the birth of her daughter, Wong feels physically weak and unable to care for her infant, as her body is still recovering from postpartum blood loss. In her illustration of scenes in the hospital, she depicts herself caught and enchained by hospital equipment, unable to move from the bed. While her husband is able to move around the hospital room, her hands are literally tied. Intravenous needles and tubes prevent her mobility, and the illustration shows the intravenous medicine bags and stands framing her. In contrast, in the lower panel, her husband sits on an armchair, stands by the change table, and burps the baby (17). These illustrations provide a visual representation of Wong's feelings of entrapment. Squier says

> Comics can show us things *that can't be said*, just as they can narrate experiences without relying on words, and in their juxtaposition of words and pictures, they can also convey a far richer sense of the different magnitudes at which we experience any performance of illness, disability, medical treatment, or healing. (131)

The contrast between the panels of her husband unencumbered and of Wong herself all tied up by hospital equipment not only reveals her feelings of immobility but also reminds us of the unrealistic expectations we tend to have of new mothers. Our culture leads us to expect women to bounce back quickly from the tumultuous experience of giving birth and perform the roles of motherhood regardless of their specific health complications.

The choice of words in the caption boxes also reflects the irony of gender expectations and the contrast between Wong's husband and herself. Wong describes her husband as an "expert on caring" for the baby (17), while she says of herself, "I was inexperienced and incapable . . . I had no maternal instincts and no clue how I was supposed to take care of a baby" (18). This feeling of inadequacy, which is somewhat exaggerated, comes about because of socio-cultural expectations of gender. A man would likely feel less self-conscious if he were not able to provide the baby with care because society does not expect him to fulfill that role automatically. Wong's reaction shows that she has internalized society's expectations of women's mothering roles and feels ashamed about her inability to fulfill them. Wong experiences what Sianne Ngai calls *ugly feelings*, or "negative affects that read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social" (2). They are small moments that contribute to our sense of Wong's debility and incompetence.

## Picturing the Woman's Body

Aside from the senses of imprisonment and inadequacy, Wong also feels like her body is no longer hers to control. She looks at herself in the mirror and sees her swollen face and hair encrusted with vomit (20). El Refaie points out, "When mirrors are used in self-portraits, they can form a potent visual metaphor for the ambiguity involved in seeing something that both is and is not 'me,' as well as for our inability to pin down our fluctuating sense of self" (66). Wong's sense of herself is destabilized. When she tries to stand up and move around the hospital room shortly after delivering her baby, she accidentally urinates on the floor and feels ashamed and embarrassed about it. This scene is described with some self-deprecation and humour, as she notes that "gravity was too strong for my bladder—I peed all over the floor" (19). Subsequently, she draws a page that looks like a health info poster pointing out all the things wrong with her body after childbirth (fig. 1). Entitled "My Postpartum Body," the splash page lists symptoms like "puffy face," "inflamed bladder," "episiotomy stitches," "swollen feet," "massive hemorrhoids," and other conditions (21). In some cases, like her "thyroid issues" and "deflated balloon belly," which is "squishy

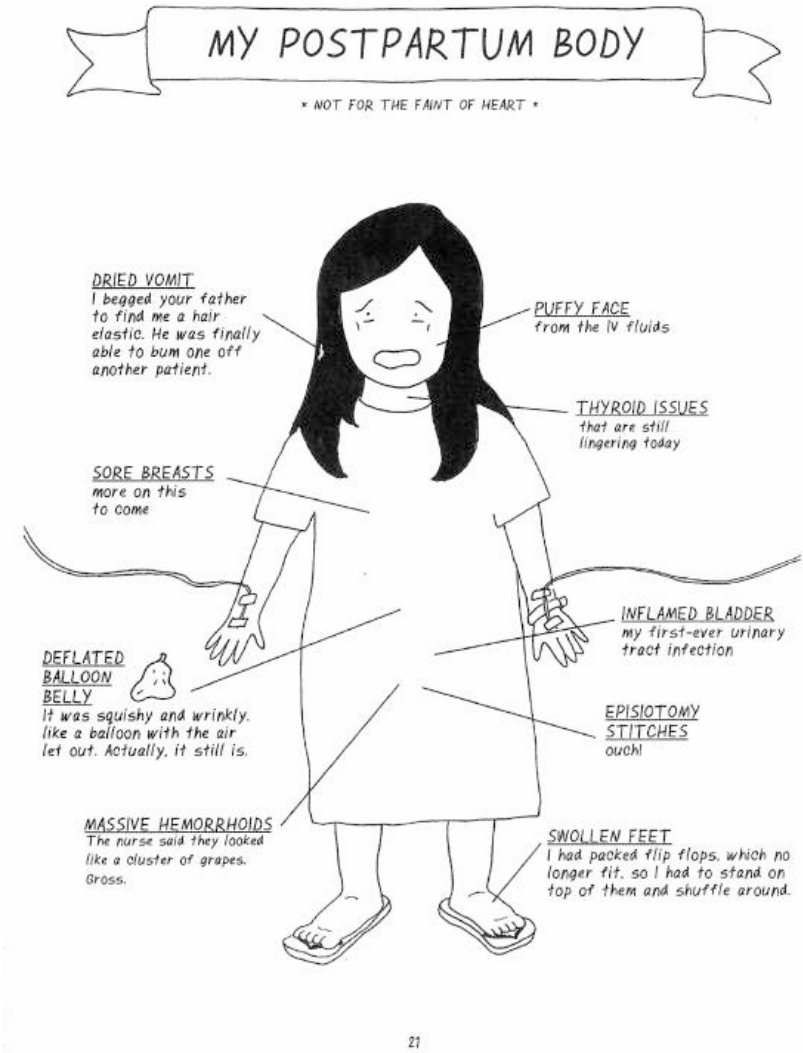


**Figure 1.** Wong's full-page, info-poster-style diagram of her own postpartum body, clad in a hospital gown and with parts marked. Teresa Wong, *Dear Scarlet*, p. 21. Reproduced in greyscale and with permission of Arsenal Pulp Press.

and wrinkly like a balloon with the air let out," Wong notes that these conditions still exist. While such posters and infographics are usually used as reference tools or to reinforce awareness of health and safety best practices, Wong's infographic is self-deprecating, deliberately exaggerated, somewhat humorous, and ironic. Each part of her body is itemized, found wanting, and in need of treatment.

In her discussion of "pictorial embodiment," El Refaie draws on Drew Leder to discuss the "appearances and dis/dys-appearances" of our bodies. She argues that since René Descartes' valorization of the mind over the senses in the seventeenth century, we have been taught to separate our minds and our bodies (61). Our bodies essentially disappear from our conscious thought in our everyday lives. Following Leder, El Refaie explains that

> it is only at times of dysfunction, when we are ill, in pain, or experiencing the physical changes associated with puberty, disability, or old age, that the body forces itself into our consciousness. The body is now perceived but is experienced as a 'dys-appearance,' the very absence of a desired or ordinary state, and as an alien force threatening the self. (61)

In Wong's graphic memoir, we see how the body *dys-appears* and threatens her. She can no longer function without becoming conscious of her various bodily parts and their dysfunctionality.

Wong constructs her postbaby body as an abject body, one that is loathsome and filthy. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes that the abject is the unclean and the "radically excluded" (2), something that "disturbs identity, system, order" (4). We recoil from things that are associated with the abject: the maternal body, excrement, menstrual blood. Yet the postpartum body is very much a body that is full of liquids, blood and milk, rather than one that is discreet and seemingly solid. In the months after giving birth, Wong feels tired, sad, and unable to sleep. At home alone with her baby, it seems that time has "stretched into an unending yawn" (48). The panels where she illustrates herself taking care of the baby become smaller in size (49). As Barbara Postema notes, "layout and contents profoundly affect one another on comics pages: the layout can change how the contents of the panel signify, and the panel contents can alter the signification of the layout" (29). Postema points out that "gutters and frames give structure

to the layout" and signal "the existence of sequence by creating a progression from panel to panel" (30). In a two-page spread showing how time drags on, Wong starts with a clock in the background, her avatar trying to sleep but being woken up and having to bounce the baby. The pages begin with Wong's usual gutterless, framed panels, but then shift to three panels surrounded by framed gutters, which emphasize the passage of time (48-49). Time here becomes "subjective time" rather than clock time (El Refaie 94).

One way of visualizing the cultural ideologies that bombard Wong is through her illustration "My Depressed Mind," where, with a cross-section diagram of her head in profile, she shows how she has internalized what people say to her and what she is feeling. In this full-page splash, she shows how her brain is so crowded with these thoughts that there is no room for anything else (53). The surrounding background, all in black, shows the darkness of her feelings at that time. Later, when she is diagnosed with depression, she presents a checklist of the symptoms of depression using another full-page splash. This list includes "excessive crying," "feelings of shame, guilt or worthlessness," "recurrent thoughts of suicide or death," and "fear that you're not a good mother" (79). The checklist goes a long way in explaining Wong's behaviour to herself and to her readers. It makes us understand the preceding pages, where she draws herself in bed, weeping, unable to sleep and also unable to get out of bed (74-75, 77). She has experienced what Einat Avrahami calls *the invasion of the real*, a term Avrahami uses for "the experience of illness as a process of learning that underscores the changed body as a source of knowledge" (3-4). The body is no longer something that functions in the background but becomes a site of chaos and confusion. These pages, illustrating Wong's various symptoms, function as *graphic medicine*, coined by Ian Williams to describe the use of graphic novels, comics, and visual storytelling in medical education, patient care, and other applications (see "Graphic Medicine"). Not only is *Dear Scarlet* an engaging and compelling work; Wong's graphic life narrative can also be used to teach others about postpartum depression, help them recognize its symptoms, and build a community of those who want to share information, care for, and understand those who experience it.

## Graphic Memoir as Cultural Ethnography

Finally, because Wong is of Asian descent, her graphic memoir functions in part as an ethnographic narrative of Chinese cultural practices. Chinese mothers are told not to leave the house for a full month after giving birth. This custom is to allow women to heal properly and not to have to worry about the world outside. The disadvantage of this practice in Calgary, where Wong lives, is that there is not a big Asian community with which to socialize. As a result, despite her mother coming over to help her and Wong's gratitude for this motherly care, Wong finds the first month somewhat isolating. One panel shows a diminutive version of her holding her baby to emphasize her loneliness and her shrinking world (60). A full-page splash on the next page illustrates the exotic foods that Chinese consider good for postpartum women. These include marinated pigs' feet, pork liver soup, and wood ear fungus (61). These autoethnographic pages provide a cultural specificity to the graphic memoir, and the fact that they are strategically located in the middle of the book and only comprise a few pages of the narrative is important. They provide ethnographic context without taking over the whole story. Because her Chinese background is not the central concern of the graphic autopathography, the pages' inclusion does not present what Deborah Reed-Danahay calls "the persistent dichotomies of insider versus outsider, distance and familiarity, objective observer versus participant, and individual versus culture," which often troubles autoethnographic accounts. As a second-generation Asian Canadian, Wong's relationship to these Chinese traditional practices is a mix of respect, ambivalence, and amusement.

Wong ends the story with advice to her daughter as well as to her readers to learn from her example and to "never be afraid of your feelings" (111). In keeping with the theme of depression, the pages are still dark, but she ends with a quote from quintessential Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen's song, "Anthem." The song lyrics are in white bubbles amid the dark background: "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering . . . There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in" (113-14). Through imagery and song lyrics, she suggests not a complete and quick triumph, but a slow process of healing the body and understanding its fragility.

### *Kimiko Does Cancer*

Like Wong's graphic narrative, my second graphic life narrative reveals the gendered assumptions of medical practitioners and the influence of cultural expectations on an Asian Canadian woman with an illness. *Kimiko Does Cancer*, dedicated to "our fellow sick queers," has a more overt agenda: to advocate for queer and racialized subjects who must access and use the healthcare system. The memoir goes beyond specific health problems to raise social justice issues for underrepresented people. Tobimatsu herself is a queer, mixed-race woman and Geniza is a queer Filipina Canadian. In an interview, Tobimatsu says,

> One of the main reasons I wanted to write this book is because typically we only see breast cancer survivors who are straight, white women. Not only does that mean those of us who don't fit the box don't get to see ourselves reflected, but it also creates a bunch of other problems. It means healthcare providers are less likely to provide quality care because they're not used to patients like us, it means cancer support organizations might not cover the topics that matter to us. ("Exclusive Interview")

Illustrator Geniza's style is different from Wong's. While Wong uses cartoon-like figures with simple faces and minimal backgrounds, Geniza's drawings are more realistic. Geniza uses shading, decorative patterns, and elements of setting including furniture. There are more details of characters' clothing and surroundings, such as doctors' offices and urban landscapes. Geniza draws in black, white, gray, and light green but, like Wong, she frequently uses black to create mood.

*Kimiko Does Cancer* begins with Kimiko's discovery of a lump on her chest. To show the drastic and devastating change that is about to happen, the first three pages have dark backgrounds and show Kimiko in an undershirt, only partly lit, a hand touching her chest. The black colours and images of darkly lit stairways, as well as the panels with Kimiko standing behind a door or about to open a door, present ominous metaphors of the cancer that is about to invade her life. She is hesitant to enter rooms, afraid and reluctant to enter the fray. Her thoughts are dark and morbid: "I wondered what I'd look like

without boobs. Without hair. Would I keep working? What would people say at my funeral?" (9). These scenes contrast the more energetic, lighter moments depicted in framed photos around the house.

## Gender and the Medical System

One of the issues Tobimatsu highlights is the need to educate and advocate for oneself when one is dealing with a serious illness. Though well-meaning, sometimes the advice of healthcare providers is contradictory or limited. She notes, "I had to make several important snap decisions about my treatment. I also had to wrestle with the fact that there was no consensus among my doctors about what caused the cancer, or even how best to proceed" (17). In a nine-panel waffle-iron grid, Tobimatsu and Geniza show the headshots of eight different doctors and medical practitioners who are all giving Tobimatsu different advice on topics from chemotherapy and radiation to preventive mastectomy (17). While such grids typically narrate actions chronologically where "each panel presupposes the one before and after it" (Postema 55), on this page, there is no action or sequence. Instead, the characters speak individually without connection to or dialogue with one another. The first panel, which has a dark background, contains Tobimatsu's statement about the non-consensus among her doctors, but the overall effect of the page is rather like what Scott McCloud calls *scene-to-scene* transition between panels (71). Scene-to-scene transition offers no master narrative and mimics the feeling of confusion and randomness that Tobimatsu feels when multiple doctors offer her various alternatives. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank observes that we are now in the postmodern experience of illness,

> when popular experience is overtaken by technical expertise, including complex organizations of treatment. Folk no longer go to bed and die, cared for by family members and neighbors who have a talent for healing. Folk now go to paid professionals who reinterpret their pains as symptoms, using a specialized language that is unfamiliar and overwhelming. (5)

Instead of progress, this use of a waffle-iron grid by Tobimatsu and Geniza suggests the opposite. It highlights the overwhelming and

baffling effect of so many doctors offering advice to a layperson. The doctors are like talking heads on an unsynchronized Zoom call.

Not only does Tobimatsu have to deal with breast cancer in the immediate present, but she is also told to think of her fertility and of her family plans for the future. Assuming that all women wish to be mothers one day, her doctor advises her to freeze her eggs "today" in case Tobimatsu decides to have a family later (18). Tobimatsu feels pressured to decide as she replies, "Today?! I don't even know if I want kids." In an interview with the CBC, Tobimatsu says,

> Reproductive cancers, in particular, are so connected to gender identity, gender expression, because it relates to fertility, it relates to femininity. A lot of the breast cancer movement so far has really been focused on breasts and reconstruction and what type of bras to wear . . . it's very pink, so all of that just felt very alienating, and it was very cis, heteronormative. . . . Those conversations I just couldn't connect to. (Tobimatsu, "Interviews")

As a queer person, Tobimatsu finds it difficult to relate to conventional breast cancer resources and the support systems designed for heterosexual women. In the memoir, she shows how her feelings about a mastectomy are different from her mother's as Mrs. and Mr. Tobimatsu sit beside her in an information session about radiation treatment. She reflects, "losing my breasts wouldn't be the worst thing in the world . . . I wonder if I'd like the look. I could play with gender a bit more" (25). At another point, she recalls being given "bad medical advice" by a doctor who tells her that "only women who sleep with men need [Pap smears]" (26). Another example of how Tobimatsu feels alienated by conventional support resources occurs when she goes to meet other survivors of cancer after her six-week radiation cycle. She imagines three friendly women who welcome her to the group, but rather too artificially, too joyously, and too cheerfully. In a cheeky way, Tobimatsu calls them "Macy, Stacy, Lacy" to show their homogeneity. They proudly proclaim, "We kick cancer's butt!" (38), as if reciting a slogan or advertisement. Keet Geniza's illustration represents them as pretty white women with bows and flowers in their hair, rather like manga characters (38). Tobimatsu feels quite uncomfortable with this attitude.

In an interview, she comments that there are many after-effects of cancer treatments, such as menopausal symptoms and decreased sexual desire. Cancer survivors "don't need to have this shiny image . . . it does harm to just paint a rosy picture of people just moving on" after their treatments (Tobimatsu, "Interviews").

## Confronting the Weakened Body

Although Tobimatsu does not mention the model minority myth, her avatar does exhibit some features of the hard-working, self-sacrificing Asian Canadian woman. Throughout her cancer treatment, she says, "I plugged away at work" (32), going to medical appointments between work obligations at the office. A digital clock shows that she barely takes a thirty-minute break for these breast cancer appointments. She narrates, "I didn't consider emotional stress a legitimate reason to stop working. I would have if it was happening to someone else." As an articling student and recent law school graduate, Tobimatsu has embarked on a stressful and difficult career path, and it is not until a year after she starts treatment that she comes to the realization that she has difficulty asking for assistance. In a full splash page shown in Figure 2, Tobimatsu reclines on a couch with different thoughts going through her head: "I'm hungry . . . maybe a friend could help?"; "I feel bad asking for help"; "It's not like I'm bedridden"; "Why am I so tired"; "I can do it myself" (66). These thought bubbles overlap one another, showing her jumbled thoughts and anxieties. They are drawn in different scripts and colours, some larger and more urgent than others. Tobimatsu is reluctant to reach out for help. She has a strong work ethic and does not want to show her vulnerability. She confesses her weakness to her readers: "Repressing emotions is typical for me, though I find it difficult to ask people for support. It requires emotional vulnerability that I'm not used to expressing" (66). She attributes her attitude to her sense of "masculinity" which is linked to her ability to "provide for others" (67), but her work ethic is similar to the attitude of Asian Canadians, who are less likely to seek help for mental health than Canadians from other ethnic groups (see Chen et al.).

Tobimatsu's parents seem reluctant to support their daughter's need for psychotherapy after her cancer treatment. Breast cancer does not


**Figure 2.** A full-page panel of Tobimatsu lying on the couch, debating with herself about asking for help. Thought balloons crowd the page. Tobimatsu and Geniza, *Kimiko Does Cancer*, p. 66. Reproduced in greyscale and with permission of Arsenal Pulp Press.

just affect her physical body, but also her mental health and well-being. Not understanding the full effects of Tobimatsu's illness, her mother tells her to keep to her work schedule: "You don't want the partners to think you're lazy. I had to put in a lot of time as a young lawyer to get where I wanted to be" (77). When Tobimatsu tells her mother that she has decided to go for therapy, her mother asks, "Are you sure about this? You don't want to talk through that decision first?" (81). The mother's concern about the expense of therapies is a manifestation of her reluctance to let others know about Kimiko's emotional and inner challenges. The family hides behind a veneer of respectability, as shown by the representation of a family photo. In the iconic portrait of Tobimatsu's family, the visual narrative has to be supplemented by the textual one. In the narrative box, Tobimatsu remarks that if members of her family "cry at all, it's not with each other," because they tend to "hold everything inside" (82). The image shows them all smiling at the camera, well-dressed and seemingly happy.

El Refaie reminds us that "unlike more private acts of remembering . . . autobiography is also a deliberate and self-conscious act of *communication*, whereby the events of life are made public in order to be shared with others" (100). Thus, we see Tobimatsu reconstructing and supplementing the message of coherence behind the family photograph. In the panels after the photograph, she discovers from her brother that at their last meeting, her father "seemed worn down" and "had tears in his eyes" because he was worried about Kimiko (82). At the hairdresser's, Tobimatsu learns that after Tobimatsu's cancer diagnosis, her mother "would cry" as her hair was being cut (83). Both these revelations surprise Tobimatsu because she only sees what her parents want her to see. Like her, they too need emotional and mental support but are reluctant to seek help. Through the memoir, Tobimatsu is able to be honest, revealing and sharing the difficult psychological effects of her cancer journey on the whole family.

In the epilogue, Tobimatsu resolves to "go on with [her] life" and reconciles herself to her induced menopausal state even though she is quite young (87). There are still one or two images of dark stairways and doorways that link back to the opening pages of the memoir (88, 90). Thierry Groensteen uses the term *braiding* or *tressage* to describe

"repetition . . . with or without variation" that serves to connect scenes and produce "an enhancement, a layering, a deepening of meaning" (Groensteen). Here the repetition of these panels with darkness and shadows reminds readers that even if Tobimatsu has survived cancer, she has limitations. She cannot just go back to normal. The door, once opened, cannot easily be shut. Instead of following the "mainstream cancer narrative" that is "about overcoming adversity," she reflects on whether she may have an "ongoing disability" (92).

Tobimatsu's graphic autopathography, like Wong's, is a critical contribution to Canadian comics because it dares to represent the unpleasant but important subject of illness in Asian Canadian and queer communities. As Lee notes,

> illness narratives, stories told by people with and about their illnesses, stories told through their ill, wounded bodies, can represent—*as no physician's memoir can*—just how disruptive and transformative illness is to the person who experiences it. Illness most immediately and viscerally wrecks a person's self story . . . (16)

*Kimiko Does Cancer* shows how breast cancer affects multiple facets of Tobimatsu's life—her romantic life, her career and job, her relationship with her family—and forces her to make decisions about her body's reproductive system before she is ready. Her narrative reveals the implicit and explicit biases of the medical system against queer people and the difficulty for Asian Canadians to let go of the myth of the hard-working and successful model minority.

The graphic life narratives of Wong and Tobimatsu and Geniza lay bare the feelings of guilt, fear, and inadequacy experienced by the body with illness. The works critique problematic medical treatments and gender ideologies and ask us for empathy and understanding. Though the graphiation of the two works differs, due in part to the more realistic and detailed illustrations of Geniza, both these graphic autopathographies depict Asian Canadian protagonists in relation to other people in their lives. They show these women as multiply-constituted, interesting subjects leading complex lives. Wong often draws herself from the shoulders up, alone against a white background, with tears, hands over her face, or eyebrows slanted downwards to

show her despair and frustration when she hears advice from health professionals (81), other mothers (92), and the media (89). What helps Wong in the end is having a postpartum doula who comes to give her practical techniques, well illustrated in separate panels by Wong: a "better way to burp the baby" and a "tighter swaddle" (82). The doula also offers psychological reassurance to Wong about her mothering attempts and reminds her "to let go." Geniza's illustrations of Tobimatsu show Tobimatsu's reactions as she listens in different situations: while her mother talks about her treatments to other people (30), with the radiologist and dentist (35), with other survivors of cancer (39), and in bed with her girlfriend (31). Tobimatsu is often drawn with a worried face and looking away in these scenes, rather than interacting directly with the other characters. The images reveal her relative isolation and express, even without dialogue, her doubts and fears. The use of text and images together illustrate and validate the experiences of the sick and contest the medical model, "which assigns patients the 'sick role'" (Couser, "Body Language" 5). These works defy preconceptions about resilience and Asian Canadian success by representing the challenges in dealing with mental and physical illness as young women. At the same time, they suggest alternative models for treatment that take into account the particularities of one's sexual orientation, background, and ethnicity.

## Notes

1. In this same period, Vivian Chong and Georgia Webber have also published *Dancing After TEN*, which chronicles Chong's efforts to express herself through singing, drumming, and dancing after a rare skin disease leaves her blind. For a study of Chong and Webber's book, see Chiu.
2. Bowlby is referring to nineteenth-century realist paintings and novels.

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**Junie Désil and Sharon Engbrecht**

# **"the suitcase in the closet":** Talking Zombi(e)s with Junie Désil (an Interview)

## Introduction

Junie Désil's debut poetry collection, *eat salt | gaze at the ocean* (Talonbooks, 2020), explores the historical and present-day treatment of Haitians, Black bodies, and Blackness. Using the Haitian zombi, at times metaphorically and at other times literally, the poems connect Désil's search for her parents' unspoken histories to the discovery of cultural hauntings that give voice to the burden of anti-Black racism that Black bodies still bear today.

Désil's collection chronicles her research on and affective response to discovering the history of zombi(e)s and their role in her parents' silences and fear. In "A Zombie Manifesto," Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry make an important distinction between the Haitian spelling of *zombi* and the Western appropriation, spelled *zombie*. "The Haitian *zombi*," they write, is "a body raised from the dead to labor in the fields, but with a deep association of having played a role in the Haitian Revolution . . . the *zombie*, the American importation of the monster . . . has morphed into a convenient boogeyman representing various social concerns" (87). In her poetry, Désil uses the *zombie* spelling, only indicating a difference between the various cultural beliefs with such references as "*the back-home kind*" and "now mass-culture mass-consumption zombie" for the reader (8, 10). However, *zombi(e)* becomes a layered term in the writing, doubling as a whitewashed, appropriated term at the same time bodies are turned ashen through zombification and their labour is appropriated for white prosperity and imperialism. Désil's use of *zombie* also implies the tension between life and death in the Haitian zombi figure, as

reanimation is both the zombi state and a release from this form of enslavement: "reanimated / leapt up ran off toward their respective graves / reburying themselves. // free. / to finally die" (39).

Throughout our conversation, we use the above terms to indicate the difference between the Haitian zombi, the pop-culture zombie, and *zombi(e)* as the intermingling of and tension between various cultural beliefs through the acts of storytelling and mythologizing. As Désil expresses in her poems, the meaning of *zombi(e)* shifts depending on the location and context of the term(s) used to describe the state of being encapsulated in the animated-reanimated, possessed-haunted, dead-undead corpse-body. This in-betweenness is akin to what Paul Stenner describes as a liminal experience, where the subject as potential object exists "in an as-yet indeterminate condition whose present is defined by the fact that it is no longer what it was, but not yet what it will be" (6). Liminality resonates in both the figure of the zombi(e) as well as in the experience of Blackness, aspects of an identity defined by the past and its possible futures, none of which accurately captures the "as-yet indeterminate," and at times uneasy, present. Moreover, the term *zombi(e)* comes to occupy the same liminal spaces as the transatlantic slave trade's "human cargo." Each transatlantic, speculated origin of *zombi(e)* comes to contain a slightly different meaning and context for its liminal state of in-betweenness:

> ombres/z'omb'e (français) shadows jumbie juppy/duppy
> (West Indian languages) ghost zemis (Taíno) souls of the dead
> zumbi (Remosam/Bonda) by way of Portuguese slave traders
> ndzumbi (Ghetsogho) cadaver
>
> zombie (American English) consumed en masse
> (Désil 21)

The zombi(e) becomes a figure of the in-betweenness and otherness of Blackness, of the ways in which Black bodies, and narratives about Black bodies, have been animated by white, colonial histories. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai reads this process of white, colonial narrative animation—what she calls *animatedness*—as an effect of representing racialized characters. She likens animatedness to apostrophe, where, as Barbara Johnson argues, "The absent, dead, or inanimate entity

addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic . . . [T]he speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness" (Johnson 218). The zombification of Black bodies operates through this kind of address. White, colonial accounts, in addressing Blackness, render human cargo, the cadaver, and the zombi(e) as objects that are "brought to 'life' as racialized characters by being physically manipulated and ventriloquized" (Ngai 12). Animating the body, creating a zombi(e), becomes a way of containing its potential as a threat. Moreover, through the animating process, "the person is 'made' uniform, accountable, and therefore safely 'disattendable,' at the cost of having his or her speech acts controlled by another" (93). But, at the same time, the animated body incorporates a "crucial ambivalence" where "the excessive energy and metamorphic potential of the animated body make it a potentially subversive or powerful body" (101). The animated zombi (always a Black body) is both an "object imbued with life" (92) and a potentially subversive and powerful body with the ability to be reanimated in the sense of coming back to life—taking back one's subjectivity—after succumbing to animatedness. Or, in contrast, the once-zombi returns to the freedom of their existence in death. The animated subject finds their way back to the grave, after being animated as a slave or escaping enslavement, by fleeing *to* one's death in the ocean.

Each section in the collection captures an instance of the "strange inheritance one carries" when moving through the world as a Black body (4). While at times the narrative of the poems slips into colonial histories that misname and misrepresent Black realities, the poems also name the present historical moment where the poet-narrator calls out the violence of white privilege and systemic racism. Désil writes:

> it is exhausting to write about slavery, ongoing oppression
> as if that's my only history or point of interest origin
> in fact it is *your* history an interruption
> your attempts on our life (54)

Désil imagines the privilege of the white poet who basks in the luxury of being able to write "banal musings" (54), while by virtue of birth—"a *birthwrong*" (60)—she must always acknowledge her own haunting:

"we are a haunting the haunted a spectre a ghost a revenant or a zombie / this is how you remember us as we re-member ourselves" (54). The process of Black identity-making always entails a piecing-together of cultural identity, of split and multiple selves, from the strange inheritances of the "monstrous" Black racial identities of white histories to the current anti-Black police brutality captured in "*I can't breathe*" (69). In naming these histories, Désil seeks to recover and remember the "names of **Black** people who had faces, who had stories, who had aspirations and hopes" as part of the cultural identity she too carries with her (70). The poems also reclaim space for these Black bodies to breathe. As Désil writes, "i write this Black body live" (77).

In April 2022, Junie was part of Verse Forward 3, *Canadian Literature*'s poetry reading series. After hearing Junie speak at Verse Forward, Sharon wanted to learn more about Junie's research for *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*, including the zombi(e) as a dystopian-apocalyptic figure with connections to Blackness, colonialism, and systemic racism. They spoke over Zoom on June 17, 2022,[1] and their conversation illuminates some of Junie's personal experiences and the discoveries she writes about in her first poetry collection.

## The Conversation

**Sharon Engbrecht:** You start *eat salt | gaze at the ocean* with this idea: "how to write about what you carry but don't know" (4). In your memory, when did you first hear about zombis? Or, how did that become part of your identity as a possible Haitian mythology?

**Junie Désil:** When I was eight my parents were having a small gathering. One of our—my brothers' and my—favourite activities was going through my mom's suitcase. She had this weathered suitcase with her old passport from Haiti, [and] this cookbook that she hand-wrote when she was in home economics at school in Haiti. That night I was rifling through and I saw this *Enquirer*-esque newspaper. It had this scary . . . All I remember is seeing the eyes and an ashy face. And there was a big title, *ZOMBI*,

but it was written in *créole*. I was kind of guessing what it said. I tried to ask my parents another day, and they freaked out—didn't want to answer. So, we never talked about it. I didn't make the connection that the zombies I would grow up with from movies like *Night of the Living Dead* were the same thing, or at least coming from there.

When I chose to write *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*, it was hard because I wanted readers to learn about zombi(e)s. I had a moment when I decided to write from the position of a zombi(e), but that got scary—the idea of inhabiting that space. I felt like I didn't know enough about zombi(e)s or my history. Instead, I just needed to keep it simple and write exactly how I felt about the subject. But I also felt, I can't help it, writing from a position of a Black Haitian woman who's never been to Haiti, who just has this imagination of what Haiti is, from my parents and what the media and the world say.

So, as I tried to allude to in my collection, you carry these things but you don't know—deep culture stuff that I would have understood if my parents weren't trying hard to assimilate and suppress aspects of their Haitian identities.

**SE:** The "suitcase in the closet" is an interesting metaphor because the collection talks about bones and skeletons (20), as in those hidden histories, and both the suitcase and those histories are "*ne touche pas*" (20). I sense there's a religious critique, especially because the loss of identity is the loss of Vodou[2] spiritualism and religion that gets caught up in the "racist image of a devil-worshipping, black-magic wielding, and uncivilized tradition imagined by Western popular culture" (Moreman and Rushton 2). Is that part of what you read into your parents' silences or their fear and skepticism of that history?

**JD:** Yes. I think there were many layers to their silence. There was certainly the religious element-slash-angle where Vodou, and many spiritual aspects of Vodou, diametrically opposed a fundamentalist Christian life.

That was what I grew up with. We don't talk about certain things because it might mean *something*. More to the point, I grew up in a Haitian home where my parents did their best to not be . . . Haitian. I did not grow up with the typical cultural markers like music, art, or artifacts, nor did we celebrate cultural holidays or even visit Haiti.

But I would add that there was also an element of shielding us from racism and the racist assumptions people had of Haiti, including that Haitians were "backwards," Vodou practitioners, poor, et cetera. Growing up, all news accounts always started with: *Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere* . . . Then there was the AIDS scare in the eighties, where the origin of AIDS was initially blamed on Haitians. So, I think there were many layers to my parents not answering questions. As I got older, questions that touched more specifically on Haitian Vodou went unanswered or dismissed or were regarded fearfully. Asking those questions could have also meant that I was potentially interested in Vodou, in being a practitioner or dabbling. And that freaked my parents out. I also learned that I had to ask questions carefully; otherwise, I wouldn't have access to information for quite some time. And I only had this one narrative—my mom's narrative. But my mom would just shut down if I asked her too much or wasn't careful about how I asked about certain things.

As an example: When I was twenty-four, I travelled to Portugal, Morocco, and Spain and felt so proud of myself. I bought this beautiful red scarf, and I thought, "This will be perfect for my mom." When I got back, I went to visit her and gave her the red scarf. And she had this *look*. Her look didn't connect for me then, but I also noticed she never wore the scarf. Another time, she came to visit me, and my décor is *red*, Persian carpets, I had two black cats, incense burning. My mom thought I was a Vodou priestess, like deep into these things. I didn't know that red *could* be a symbol that you're involved in one of the Vodou societies. But I don't know—I *love* red! [*laughs*]

**SE:** It's the colour of your soul! [*laughs*]

**JD:** Right?! But it is that tension: that my mom doesn't want to talk about her ideas of Haitian culture, doesn't want to explain what's good and bad, what we should and shouldn't do, so I'm bumbling around figuring things out. And I also don't want to rock the boat because she might panic and spend time figuring out why I'm asking questions, rather than answering the questions.

I remember saying, "Before I turn twenty-seven, I need to visit Haiti." Well, that never happened. But for a year—I cannot make this up—my mom called every other day: "So, are you going? Who's making you go?" She has such trauma around Haiti. And I get it; that is what she grew up under. And we just don't talk about it.

**SE:** And you wouldn't have known. You were haunted by the figure of the zombi but had no access to the Haitian cultural meanings because, I imagine, your mom doesn't even really understand it, in kind of an academic sense: *this is the cultural significance of the zombi in Haitian culture*. Which is a very sanitized kind of way of thinking about it—a way to frame the beliefs she has about the Vodou religion as someone who was converted to Christianity. I assume she was converted?

**JD:** Yes. Multiple times. The best way to explain the zombi's grip on the whole culture is when the senior Duvalier, the first president, was elected in 1957—for life.[3] [*laughs*] He ended up personifying and taking advantage of Haitians' fears. In Haitian mythology there are *lwas* and a god-creature called Baron Samedi who rules over the crossroad of life and death. His signature is to wear mirrored shades, a top hat, and suit. During his reign, Duvalier often dressed liked this figure, speaking in a nasal tone to mimic the god-creature, while his secret police wore uniforms and mirrored shades, reinforcing this idea that his whole army—what they called the Tonton Macoute—was an army of zombis at his beck and call.

**SE:** He weaponized belief. That's dangerous.

**JD:** But, at the same time, you have to suspend a bit of judgment to be in the military and to follow orders. So, there's layers to this imagery of the army as zombis, and he took this cultural myth to the next level. People were terrified. People would go missing—my parents have traumatic stories of relatives disappearing during that political upheaval. What would sound normal, *political disappearance*, now becomes this extra layer of Vodou. That's the thing with Haitian culture. It could be a simple Western-scientific-medicine answer, *or* . . . But why do we need the concrete?

**SE:** I ask about religion because when you ask your dad about zombies, in the collection, he responds, "*I am a man of God. Don't pay attention to such things*" (Désil 8), and your mom is silent. There's an interesting play on superstition, and it's hard to make connections between what could be real and what's fabricated, as a possible cultural belief, if Christianity is the only thing that defines how you approach other kinds of spiritual practices.

**JD:** I've read medical articles that try to explain the science behind the zombi: "Well, it's the pufferfish."[4] I have a poem on page twenty-seven where I have the ingredient list that they [Vodouisants] would concoct and prepare. There's this debate that zombification is just superstition or when people appear to medically die but not really. But superstitions can be just as real as the real thing. They're a tool for creating social norms. And in Haitian culture, you don't mess with people, because they could turn you into a zombi!

My poetry collection has been described as "wake work"—and to a certain extent I am attending to our *deaths* in this collection.[5] I also wanted to explore what it is to live in this liminal space as Black folks in a world that is decidedly anti-Black—a space where we live at the crossroad of life and death. And so, this is why the zombi(e) as metaphor works: When you think of its origin story, the fact that salt reanimates it, and that the zombi(e) metaphor also works as a stand-in for enslavement . . . And, more to the point of how the fictional zombie has been appropriated in white culture, the zombi(e) does heavy labour and lifting as a stand-in for all of

society's ills. And my whole point is that Black people have been operating as zombi(e)s.

This reminds me of one of the stories about my dad, since he's opened up a bit more about his experiences in Haiti. In the collection, I talk about how a relative of his said that he didn't look like a zombi anymore: "Uncle! your face! alive—no longer like a zombie" (23). Now, concerning my dad's zombification, my mom has this theory that dad was demon-possessed—and I allude to this when he goes to the airport and he's told that he needs a bath because he's dirty (23). But my dad was very confused—he didn't realize that he was basically being told he *was* carrying demons—and that the person was offering to help him, to clean that up by giving him a sacred Vodou ritual bath with herbs and incantations.

But my mom, in contrast, embodies some aspects of what we understand a zombie to be: she's a husk. I don't feel that she's quite alive, especially when it comes to her Haitian roots. My mother's fears, reticence, and, likely, experiences that remain a bit of mystery certainly influence how I approach researching and digging deeper. And with her silences and her fear, trying to ask her to tell me more and meeting resistance, I felt like I was circumnavigating the issue of who I was-slash-am.

A quick example: My mom would tell me not to receive gifts from people, even if they were people we knew—"Mother won't tell we know not to hug him or receive his gifts" (25). That made no sense. But, in our culture, if someone is jealous or wants to mess your shit up, they give you something that they've cursed. So my mom has all these stories—I call them urban legends because I've never met these people!—like the woman who borrowed a hat and went mad.

She's become this thing—she's been burdened with this knowledge—that's how she presents it, and she's punished for that, which is a kind of curse. Hence, her being a zombie. But it is interesting: She doesn't put salt in her food, so I want to tease her, "Oh, you wanna be a zombi(e), eh?"

**SE:** Oh! But does she talk to you about zombis? Or no? That's still taboo?

**JD:** No. It's still pretty taboo. If I asked her, I would get this barrage of questions: "Why do you want to know? What's going on?"

It makes me think of Lindsay Wong's *The Woo-Woo*, where she talks about the intersection of mental health in her Asian family and all these myths. The myths explain things but also don't. In our family, it was the same thing. If you have mental health struggles or developmental delays, it was a powder you ate, someone's hat you took, or somebody you pissed off—

**SE:** Don't take gifts from strangers!

**JD:** —That's right. [*laughs*] That's what you get! Don't drink things. My mom has this saying, "Oh, they drank *a* poison." And I'm like, "A poison? What poison was this?" "A *poison*!"

And you're not immune from family members either. So, there's this other story: My dad wore this beautiful suit for his wedding, and his younger brother asked to borrow it for his wedding. (He was in medical school and couldn't afford a suit.) My dad sent it. Never saw the suit again.

When my dad tells the story, he says, "Oh? I don't know what my brother did with it," and shrugs it off. But when my *mom* tells the story: "*This* is the beginning of our problems!" Because you can curse someone from afar; you just need an article of clothing. So, that's my mom's story—that my dad's entire family are these card-carrying zombi makers.

**SE:** Is your mother a refugee?

**JD:** No, she actually immigrated. Both my parents immigrated but met in Montréal. But they were both looking to leave Haiti. They wanted to get out of there, and they would have immigrated just before "Baby Doc" [Jean-Claude Duvalier, the elder Duvalier's son and successor] left the country in 1986. I remember we were all glued to this thirteen-inch black-and-white TV, watching him flee the country—and be received, ironically, with open arms in France.

**SE:** So at a time of political upheaval.

**JD:** Right. So my mom—don't talk to her about Haiti. But, in contrast, my dad has always wanted to retire and have a home there. Recently, he said, "I have a place of birth, not a home." And I started to see how my dad and I are similar, in that this has always been how I felt, despite being born in Montréal and having lived in various cities. I allude to that when I start the collection with "here" and I go on to say that it isn't the same ocean, but "ocean is / ocean" (3). The sense of being here—not from here—not from there-here. Again, another space of liminality, of in-betweenness.

So, it is that tension of what I'm trying to say in the collection: that if you are in the culture and you get it, you know what to do and what not to do. But my parents are here, in Canada, trying to be as Canadian as they can. So, all the things that would make sense there [in Haiti] did not make sense here.

**SE:** Your mom, in a sense, refuses to pass on what she's learned, which makes it harder for you to piece that knowledge together.

**JD:** I was worried that in writing *eat salt* . . . The tension that I feel that comes out of that fear, although I'm a grown woman—I still don't want to rock the boat with my parents. I don't want to invite any bad luck or bad juju. There were a lot of things that I don't . . . I didn't want to be that bumbling Westerner. I actually felt like that person, even though this is my culture. But because my parents were gate-keeping that knowledge—they were very serious religious fundamentalists—there was no room for that kind of thing.

I was also worried because I didn't want people to think I was an authority on zombi(e)s. There were these ideas I had, but I feel like I don't know enough. I don't know if I would be cursing an entire group of readers by using, for example, Haitian *vèvè* symbols.

**SE:** I'm interested in the connection between the figure of the zombi(e) and control. You write from the subject position of being zombified: "do/what/we're/told/to so we do // what we're told" (24). In "A Zombie Manifesto," Lauro and Embry discuss conventional

zombie films: "To kill a zombie, one must destroy its brain" (95). The figure of the zombi(e) lacks, as Ann Kordas suggests, "all traces of intellect, volition, or self-awareness," and it feels "no anger or resentment" (20). But, at the same time, they always have the potential to be reanimated—or their ability to think, to become self-aware and act upon their resentment and anger, is always a potential threat.

**JD:** One of the things, as I got older, that fascinated me was finding out that people, like Haitian ex-patriots or Haitians in Montréal, would pay five thousand dollars to go to Haiti and be zombified.[6] I'm not sure if this is a real thing, but it's in my mind as a possibility —from a documentary I saw when I was maybe nineteen—that really impacted my ideas about my Haitian identity. I remember watching *The Serpent and the Rainbow* [Wes Craven, 1988], too.[7] And as I was learning about zombi(e)s, I was also learning about the things people would do to prevent zombis from wandering or a body from being used as a zombi. They would decapitate the person—when they're dead, of course [*laughs*]. Or they'd put beads on the body to distract the dead person, so they would be counting them instead of answering the call of the master who's now made you a zombi. Or, when they have the funeral procession, they would take a very confusing route. Then, if the body became a zombi, it wouldn't find its way back.

All the rituals were to prevent the dead body from being reanimated. The whole point being that your body was still useful even if you're dead. I think I was also trying to connect being a zombi(e) and being Black: the labour that the zombi myth makes—they're dead, and even when they're dead, the Black body, the zombified body, continues to labour.[8]

**SE:** So, zombis are real. They aren't just imagined or a metaphor. In doing these rituals, zombis are a real threat.

**JD:** Well, that's the thing. As far as we're concerned, they're real. You can make someone a zombi. That's what those adept practitioners of forms of Vodou do—the purpose is to have your body for labour,

whether as payment for a wrong, real or perceived. Put this way, many of us may not actually believe that we'll have bad luck if we cross the path of a black cat or walk under a ladder or open an umbrella inside, but we still do the rituals in case. More importantly, who is deciding what is real or not? When high-ranking military officials were publishing books and pamphlets on Haiti and Vodou, they were imposing their own, Eurocentric cultural lens to explain phenomena they could not explain.

**SE:** Oh, I'm definitely superstitious. There's just too much we can't explain. But, that brings me to another aspect of the racialized zombi(e) figure. Lauro and Embry write, "The zombie is an antisubject, and the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of the individual remains" (89). In reading that, I thought, there's a privilege in having an identity that is perceived as being *beyond* race—as white—a privilege I've experienced. Lauro and Embry are writing from a subject position where the white individual gets to be an individual from the moment they're born. In contrast, you write, "i want to tell you what it's like to be born unloved already despised by / this world . . . DOA spells *B-L-A-C-K*" (46).

**JD:** When I felt *super* clever about using the zombi(e) metaphor, I loved that I could critique it as being this overused metaphor to the point that even the zombie's tired. But also—and I remember having this conversation with local BC writer Wayde Compton—the zombie is the one monstrous and mythical figure that is so malleable compared to the other monstrous figures. Even that is a sign of resistance and defiance. Zombi(e)s are also this weird in-between state. And for me, that is how I've always felt, being in-between, in-between cultures: there's one way to be at home, there's one way to be out in public. There is a dual consciousness towards Black people, towards me.

And my presence is already rebellious and defiant. I write, "this is not a poor us" (54), and I'm not sitting here going, "It sucks to be Black; it sucks to be me." I'm not a victim, even though it was hard to write this collection.

**SE:** It's a really vulnerable collection, and I also think it's really important. To situate my own experience: I'm a white settler living on the lands known as Canada. So, reading this collection, there were times when I felt like I was invading, I was intruding on the narrative. But then there are moments when you call out the white reader, and I realized, I'm meant to read this. Lauro and Embry write, "The zombie does not attack other zombies. It seeks to transfer its burden . . . no zombie body is relieved of its condition by passing it on" (100). And I get the sense that *eat salt | gaze at the ocean* is a process of transferring the burden of being racialized.

**JD:** The collection is meant to be read by everybody, and different people will react. One of my friends wrote this beautiful heartfelt blurb for the collection. He's African American—and it's not like he hasn't heard these narratives—but I'm writing from the perspective of a Caribbean woman "stolen" here to Canada. That means I don't always fit that "Black" narrative—I'm kind of some weird settler. So when Steven read the poems, he said he let out this big "Black-ass wail."[9] I really felt seen when he said that because I think different people are going to have different reactions. I really want for everybody to understand that in-between place I feel.

I didn't realize that I was . . . I don't want to say that in some ways I was seeking approval from *the* Black community, but there are differences and there are similarities. Being a Black person in Canada isn't the same as being a Black person in America, unless you are from that early group that's been here for hundreds of years. I was more worried about what other Black people would say or feel or read. I felt like I was airing out some of our dirty laundry.

It makes me think of Danez Smith, a queer, non-binary African American poet. If you just listen to them read, it's powerful. But for their recent collection, they had two different titles: one [on the cover] that, as I like to call it, the gen-pop could say out loud, and inside, the title was for the community, what the community could say—they didn't want that word on everybody's lips. The front cover says *Homie* and the inside cover says *My* — [*Junie makes a*

*gesture to imply the N-word without saying it*]. I thought that was an interesting, layered way for everyone to have access, but to also show that there's an inner crowd. I think as a more experienced writer, I'll be able to do that. My main concern was not to give away too many of our secrets.

And I don't think I was being as vulnerable as I could have been. At one point I was like, that's enough of that for today! We're just going to stop right there. [*laughs*] So there are times, you can see, I veer, I take a break—even in the book there are breaks, there are historical documents.

**SE:** I like how the poet [Smith] sets that boundary, and essentially says, "Because you haven't experienced the same kind of racist violence I have experienced, you don't get to say that." But that brings me back to the tension between how you are able to narrate these histories and how you recover them. You're not trying to tokenize your experience as *the* Black experience, because Black experiences are so varied. It makes me think of Audre Lorde, when she writes: "Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves" (123). There's that complexity and the layered nature of the histories you bring simply by being identified as a Black individual.

The whiteness of my skin allows me not to have those same kinds of histories; or, the histories that I embody are the slave-owner histories. So, I think it's important that you do have those historical documents in there, even if they're a break. They are authoritative versions of history, and there's a moral authority in them that you're seeking to break down, you're seeking to add to. They're often about rebellion—the moralizing of the Haitian rebellion and white loss—and the erasure of other diverse histories. And in contrast, you have, for example, "here's a story about dead men working sugar fields" (38). I'm wondering if you could talk about the tension you have between authoritative white histories and the stories, the other histories, you are uncovering.

**JD:** When I first started writing the collection, I was reading all the "authoritative texts." The "dead men working sugar fields" is from William Seabrook's *Magic Island* (1929). It's about these zombie stories by ex-marines stationed in Haiti. That's how these weird colonial images of zombies ended up here. While I was researching, I remembered Zora Neale Hurston, who I knew was this African American anthropologist. I'd only known *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from my undergrad at UBC [the University of British Columbia]; she had gone to Haiti and Jamaica and collected folktales. From what I understand, she went full-on into learning about Vodou rituals and participating. They both took the same path, but Zora's is much more engaging; it feels a bit more respectful, even though she is still kind of a tourist. There were very few texts that were from the position of someone who had been there, was closer to the culture, and wasn't there to malign Vodou and the rituals.

You kind of see in my collection, in some ways, I'm sympathetic to the whole idea of being a zombi. That's what I'm used to, contrasted with all the nonsense you get to read and hear about zombies.

**SE:** You write, "punishment eternal mindless / toil the curse zombie. // like current conditions / that hell is fresh" (40). You're talking about histories, but they aren't really histories. In the epigraph and then again later, you quote Ta-Nehisi Coates: "how do I live free in this black body?" I sense there is a conversation you're having with his collection *Between the World and Me* (2015).

**JD:** Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote *Between the World and Me* after those high-profile murders of Black men like Eric Garner had happened. He had a fifteen-year-old son at the time, and he's going through the process of how to talk to his son about this: "This is what it's like being in this world."

Sometimes I feel that being in this body, as a Black person, there's these constraints, visible and invisible. I am technically a free person, but *am I*? I kind of talk about it in being dead on arrival and the world being like the ship's hold (46). So my conversation

was not just with Ta-Nehisi but also Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*. It felt like a conversation: How did you do it? How are you figuring this out, living in this Black body, under these conditions?

I also use the June Jordan reference, "to be this valuable / this hated" (qtd. 50), and her poems are raw, real, and some of them are like, "You went there? You said that?" But it is a conversation. The style is: "Hey, I'm talking to you all about this experience."

**SE:** After the second quotation [from Coates in *eat salt*], "it is tradition to destroy the Black body – *it is heritage*" (68), you bring history into the present. On the next page you write, "*I can't breathe*" (69), in reference to Eric Garner, George Floyd, and others' deaths. You're uncovering the dead bodies from the debris of history.[10]

**JD:** Figuratively, literally, there is that sense of not being able to breathe. But, also, we have to create the spaces for us to be able to breathe and survive. That's the struggle. What would be our little piece of paradise? Where would we feel free to breathe? I don't think I have the answer yet. It helps to feel away from it, and I know that's not a privilege everyone has.

You kind of have to protect yourself when you're going through the archives of your ancestors. I took a three- or four-month break when I was writing because I was reading all these narratives, and I was getting technical about how ships were built and what ships were better for transporting [*Junie pauses and is visibly uncomfortable*] human cargo. Nobody warned me about this. Always have a counsel of people who can advise and support you.

The other thing with Ta-Nehisi Coates, he had come to UBC as part of the Thinking Black series. I'd attended his talk; it was nice to hear him speak, as I was in the middle of fresh edits, and to think, "I'm on the right track."

So, I think I wanted to acknowledge the difficulty: "I'm aware, and here are the experiences." And, also, I feel little bits of joy. I have people who care about me and my well-being. At the end of the day, we're all in this crappy little world together. Yes, some of us have it better than others, but I also feel a little ice needs to be

broken—I'm not trying to say who has responsibility for doing that, because that gets complicated.

My point is that I wrote the collection. It was hard. I cried. I never wanted to see the it again. But, now, I'm like, "I wrote this thing." I'm proud, I can move on, I can write other projects. I'm not wallowing in how hard it is to be a Black woman in Vancouver, Canada.

**SE:** I did not, and could not, read it as wallowing! The collection reads as through you are sharing the burden. You don't lose the burden when you share it, but the more collective support you can have the better things will be. It's tapping into an important cultural conversation about how we—and here I'm thinking about of those of us who aren't the target of racism and racist violence—still envision racialized bodies.

You also bring up the Twitter hashtag #NotAllCops (73), which is a response to #BlackLivesMatter and, in part, a denial of discrimination against individuals who are *made* marginalized, as you might say, by the system. I'm interested, then, in the way the collection calls for accountability. Further down, you have a line, "the intersection where cops police," then a line break, followed by "Indigenous and Black youth" (73), but I thought that choice, to have a pause, allows the reader to fill in what the cops police. In that hesitation, I read, "the intersection where cops police race."

**JD:** I wrote that in a moment when I was hanging out with a Métis friend of mine and we saw this interaction where several police officers surrounded a Black man, took him to the ground, and then held him down. We were like, "This is us." We were both wondering, "Should we step in? Should we do something?" But we are the people who are the target.

There were multiple weird layers of responsibility. Yes, I do feel there's an overall responsibility. We live in this system: all of us are complicit in some way, shape, or form. Also, the multiple ways that even those of us who are part of those communities that are targeted—once we become "comfortable," the further tension of having to decide: Do you step in?

**SE:** If it's systemic violence, if it's systemic racism, *whiteness* plays a significant part in creating the system. It's not just the government; it's not just the right or the left. And this whiteness includes every single person who benefits from, or interacts with, or is part of that system. We all need to share that burden and share the responsibility, but there is a specific way in which white people—people who experience the privilege of whiteness—need to step up, need to take on more of that burden and responsibility.

**JD:** Have you read Robyn Maynard's *Policing Black Lives*? She went through the history of policing in North America and what the purpose was. Worldwide the purpose was to maintain settler interests. There is no protecting us from crime. Logically, they don't [protect us] because they show up after the fact or escalate things. So, with #NotAllCops, I wanted to point out that even nice cops are part of the system.[11]

You can't just read a history book or an account and say, "Well, that happened and we're good here." Everywhere, everyone is complicit, so we do have to take responsibility even when it's hard. People like to see a direct line between an action and a consequence: "I did this, so therefore . . ." But we all consume culture, we sometimes bumble unaware, and this is an opportunity to learn—after reading this, you can't be unaware.

**SE:** You're asking readers to share the burden and take responsibility—to learn about histories of colonization and cultural genocide—and that can sometimes be uncomfortable.

**JD:** People don't have to be out on the front line—I do really think we all have our own talents and ways to dismantle the system. It doesn't all have to look one way, but we all can't just turn on the TV and ignore everything that's happening. We are all responsible for this and we can't pretend. And a lot of these poems, [for example] where I write, "this probably made your heart lurch" (51), are literally to get a reaction. I want people to feel how horrible it is.

Wayde Compton would ask, "So, you're calling for a revolution?" And I would say, "Yes . . . ? *Yes*!" That is exactly what I'm calling

for; burn it all down! We all have to realize this doesn't work for everyone; let's tear this down and rebuild.

**SE:** I get that sense from the collection. And I'm curious, then, about the title: *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*. The ocean seems to represent passage, but also death, freedom, and memory entangled with the traumatic histories of Black, colonized subjecthood. But the ocean is also cyclical, enduring: past, present, and future. It represents the magnitude of the history you are drawing on.

**JD:** The title comes from what are considered cures for being a zombi. If you've been zombified, one of the things you can do is stare at the ocean. Again, this is the interesting thing where you don't know what is true, what's fiction. When you think about the foods that enslaved people were given, it's usually the unsalted scraps. In Haiti, the slave owners decided they wouldn't salt the food because then the zombis would become reanimated and run away.

I have a little story where that apparently happened: "those dead folks working the sugar-cane fields like it's 1820" (39). It's a fairly big story, or myth, where the slave owners saw all these Haitian workers for this Haitian American sugar company. The person in charge of them took them to the market and gave them peanut brittle but forgot there was salt in it. So, then, the zombis got reanimated and ran back to their graves.

**SE:** Freedom in death? Which is another interesting thing that's going on in the collection.

**JD:** That's right, and I play with it in ways that are a bit dizzying. Because I thought, "Huh, whenever we go to the doctors, they always tell Black people that we eat too much salt." But we need good salt—sea salt. Salt is a major part of our bodily composition. We need a balance of salt.

As for gazing at the ocean, I love sitting by water. There is something to be said about that because of how I got here. My parents had to cross the ocean; our ancestors crossed the ocean, willingly or unwillingly. The ocean became this important metaphor both as a healing property and also as our watery

grave—our liberation and freedom. And what the ocean does to memory, to artifact—I talk a bit about how there are all these shipwrecks, "five hundred / to a thousand / wrecked five found" (64), but only two have actually been recovered. You know, it's money and work; I know *National Geographic* did a special on all these folks who have voluntarily trained to dive and look for slave ships.[12]

So, for me, I love water, the ocean; it's where I feel calm and at peace. But it's also this powerful nexus.

**SE:** The ocean, in the way that it allows you to remember, it's also a very effective tool for forgetting, for losing things.

**JD:** And that's why I talk about swimming in the ocean, in the memories.

**SE:** You end *eat salt* with an implied question: "can i undo the zombie curse" (78)? There's that distinction: the Haitian zombi and the zombie curse—the Western imagination of the zombie curse the "i" needs to undo. Even as you are working through these traumatic images of how Black bodies are treated in history and in the present, you write in a way that "breathe[s] life into Black Lives" (69).

**JD:** I know that people read it and it feels heavy, but it's not intended for you to wallow in it. We have to create the spaces for us to be able to breathe and survive. I think with the collection, I wanted to create that space of exhalation and letting go.

Notes

1. Our two-hour conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.
2. We follow Christopher Moreman and Corey James Rushton's advice, "with Vodou being the preferred spelling of the religious tradition, and Voodoo reserved for sensationalistic, horrific, or racist depictions of it" (3).
3. François Duvalier (b. 1907) was President of Haiti from 1957 until his death in 1971.
4. An example would be Gino Del Guercio's "From the Archives: The Secrets of Haiti's Living Dead," which explores different scientific hypotheses for the "living dead" phenomenon in Haiti.
5. "Wake work" here draws on Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe investigates the multiple meanings of *wake* as a path, a state of

mind, and "a problem of and for thought" (5). In thinking about death, Sharpe also considers the way "Black deaths [being] produced as normative . . . leaves gaps and unanswered questions for those of us in the wake of those specific and cumulative deaths" (7), which includes thinking about how Black people's lives "are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (8).

6. Ann Kordas argues that the figure of the zombi was not always negative:

> According to Haitian belief, zombies could take many different forms. A zombie could be a soul stolen from a living person by a magician to be used to bring luck or to heal illness. A zombie could also be a dead person who had willingly, at the time of death, given his or her body to the Vodou gods to use as a receptacle. Finally, a zombie could be a reanimated, mindless, soulless corpse taken from its grave to serve the master who had awakened it. (16)

Kordas tracks down instances where zombis are also represented as "helpful spirits, Vodou gods, or heroic slave leaders" (18), representations that disappear after the widespread popularity of Seabrook's *The Magic Island*. Kordas goes on to argue that the figure of the mindless, defenseless, racialized zombie appeals to "white anxieties concerning African Americans . . . linked not just to fears of potential black violence but to white resentment of the new control over their own labor now exercised by African Americans" (19).

7. Craven's film is based on ethnobotanist Wade Davis' *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist's Astonishing Journey into the Secret Societies of Haitian Voodoo, Zombies, and Magic* (1985).
8. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison writes about the ways in which Black bodies are used to construct literary whiteness where language can "powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering'" (x). She describes the Black body as a trope, as "a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and mediations on ethics and accountability" (7). Even when we don't see or recognize the Black body as a part of whiteness, or in the zombi(e) motif, it is still present. This presence empowers it "to enforce its invisibility through silence . . . allow[ing] the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (10).
9. A shortened version of Steven Dunn's endorsement appears as a blurb on *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*'s back cover. With Dunn's permission, here is the full, unedited text of his endorsement:

> After experiencing Junie Désil's *eat salt | gaze at the ocean*, I didn't know what to do with myself but moan/wail the Blackest, deepest lament/celebration of death, life, and healing. Désil offers us more than a book here: this is a field where we're invited with her to do the work of turning the soil, rooting out, cultivating, and growing. These feelings I have right now are so big and impossible that my words feel insufficient, and I have to return to my Black-ass wailing, which sounds like my grandmother's. Thank you Junie, for opening me up and giving me a space to connect with the deep parts of myself and my people.

10. This idea is adapted from *Language and Historical Representation*. As Hans Kellner writes, "history is not 'about' the past as such, but rather about our ways of creating meanings from the scattered and profoundly meaningless debris we find around us" (136-37).
11. Junie referred here to Dave Dickson, a former Vancouver Police Department Constable. He was awarded a BC Achievement Award upon his retirement in 2006 for his "significant contribution to the vulnerable citizens of the Downtown Eastside" ("Dave Dickson").
12. The six-part podcast series is called *Into the Depths* and hosted by Tara Roberts.

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*Junie Désil is a poet. Born of immigrant (Haitian) parents on the traditional territories of the Kanien'kehá:ka on the island known as Tiohtià:ke (Montréal), she was raised in Treaty 1 Territory (Winnipeg). Junie's debut poetry collection,* eat salt | gaze at the ocean *(Talonbooks, 2020), was a finalist for the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize. Junie currently lives on the traditional territories of the Homalco, Tla'amin, and Klahoose, where she is currently working on a novel and a poetry manuscript.*

*Sharon Engbrecht (they/she) is a PhD Candidate in the Department of English Language and Literatures at the University of British Columbia on the unceded territories of the* xʷməθkʷəy'əm *(Musqueam) people. They are also currently a white-settler guest on Treaty 7 land, the traditional territory of the Blackfoot, Tsuu T'ina, Stoney Nakoda, and Métis peoples of Alberta. Their work focuses on contemporary British and Canadian literature, with a special interest in writing produced by women. They explore feminisms in the wake of Virginia Woolf, as well as narratives that critique what Sara Ahmed describes as "straightening devices."*

**Amanda Fayant**

# After the 215 but knowing there were more . . .

Who was not careful with our babies?
What are their names? Did they have a family?

It's too easy to blame this on just one church, it took a village to
steal our babies
Day after day
Month after month
Year after year
Decade after decade

I want to know the person, the people
I don't want to let them hide behind the silence of history
The excuse of being a part of a cluster of monsters
I want to see into their past, hoist some of our trauma unto them

How did they reconcile the loss of our babies with possessing
their own lives,
their own experiences . . .
their own right to breathe.

What number of breaths did they have that our babies did not?
How could they breathe with the knowledge that they stood
upon our babies,
the babies they deprived of life?

I take a breath for each and every baby, hoping I am taking one
away from the monsters who stood over them,
as they cried to come home

One last breath to come home.

One last breath to get away.

*Amanda Fayant is a Cree/Métis/Saulteaux/French writer and artist from Treaty 4 land (Regina, SK).*

**Dawn Macdonald**

# best if left

before
(a stone, a rock)
you should say
your thoughts
(in the language of thought
which is, dread, language)
you should stop.

it's a sign

I cannot tell you how much pleasure I have derived from taking things absolutely literally.

50 km per hour when children are on roadway

say good night, Gracie.

I walk into the boreal
(a tree, a stalk)
and there is nothing to take.

*Dawn Macdonald lives in Whitehorse, Yukon. Her first collection is forthcoming from U of Alberta P.*

**Crystal Hurdle**

# Dredging Sylvia Plath

I find myself back in Canada, on a lake
less constricting than the puddling oceans of Europe
I am at its pure centre
thankfully alone with Charon's boat

I breathe in lungsful of the spring scent
I am learning to live in the moment
Oh, how I am enjoying this

Remember our camping at Rock Lake?
Remember my *Ocean 1212 W*?
You know how much I love water

replete with good intentions I catapult in
        lower lower
deeper deeper
        become fish gill
become coral reef
        shale, elemental, bottoming out

I breathe water
It is no problem

You, absent husband, must be below
on the lake's bottom
Children believe they can dig to China
I can do better

above me in the distance reflecting wavering
a dredge searches for a drowning victim
with grappling hooks like your Iron Man's

down here all the accumulated silt from my throat, sand, debris
contaminants, all the dirt of my broken heart and your black one
mountain upon mountain
enough surely to reshape our land

Will. Mine. For. Precious. Elements.
Reclaim. I claw and paw at the sediment it is not futile
it is not too much
How many of my tears necessary to transfigure this freshwater
into our sea?

boom lowered, I vibrate prone on the lake bottom, my lungs
alone surely offering
sufficient suction
to pump you
from my
deep

*Crystal (*Sick Witch*) writes, teaches, swim-dances, and creates visual and textile art. crystalhurdle.ca*

**Suzette Mayr**

# Maggot Love Poem

Winter 1989, Renée L. has her turntable set up next to the window in this 1912 bachelor apartment in downtown Calgary, record albums stacked on the carpet and lined up in milk crates because she loves music, because she works in a record store, because she is in your face and everyone else's faces with her swearing and belching and Olympic beer-drinking and you find her so thrilling in her outrageousness, her obsession with scatology and Jonathan Swift, her snarky girlfriend named Tonya C.

Renée L. and her girlfriend Tonya C. are the only real lesbians you know. This is the first lesbian house you've ever stood in, drank in, peed in; you perch on the lesbians' black-framed couch with other English majors, all of you thinking you're just so damn smart, flashing your new vocabularies, a contest to see whose books are thicker.

Your own history of messing around with exactly one woman—a woman named Christy M.—a shadowy secret, a larva buried in your chest, squiggling under your ribs as you rub your hand across the lesbians' upholstery fabric, your fingertips too sensitive in this den of iniquity, the radiators blooming heat, fourth drink in your hand.

The whirling turntable shrieks about a birthday in this white-walled apartment called Darlington or Bricker or Colgrove Apartments, the ceilings high and curved like cervixes, Renée L.'s bicycle hanging from the ceiling in the

bedroom, Tonya C.'s courier bike propped against the wall, English majors drinking and sweating cedar incense and Kraft Dinner, and Björk wailing. Renée L. tells a loud story about how she left a dirty saucepan on the kitchen floor for so long it grew maggots; Tonya C. curls her red lip at this story, disgusted with her maggot maiden, this story of a pot delirious with maggots, and while you take in Renée L.'s slim hips and loud, crooked laugh, while you try not to stare at Tonya C.'s wet red lips and muscled legs, you can feel yourself getting slithery like a maggot too, distorting, contorting, that larva in your chest is you, it's you. Once you exit this apartment and pick your way down the staircase, your own housefly wings will unfurl, stretch wetly, buzz buzz, you too will start to fly, your tiptoes scuffing then leaving the floor, buzz buzz.

One night not too soon after, you'll fly in the door of their open relationship, lie in crumpled bed covers in naked Renée's naked arms, her naked bicycle hanging above you in this naked cathedral.

Years later, you'll be eating those red lips of Tonya C. in a zippy red Honda Prelude in Fish Creek Park, Tonya C. a one-night stand who twenty years later will buzz with you into unholy matrimony. At your wedding you will whirl like a turntable, like a bicycle wheel spinning from a ceiling, like two flies in a jar, you will dart in the air with each other, hello, Tonya, my wife, buzz buzz.

*Suzette Mayr is the author of the Scotiabank Giller Award-winning novel* The Sleeping Car Porter.

**Daniela Elza and Alan Hill**

# Fire Song

Apply the bandage of a perfectly formed metaphor
to your ashen forehead  to our burning world.

The fire that you see at night—  eats itself
across the curve of known universe—

 the orange light of our disappointments.

Across the small arcs of apricots  cherries  peaches
today we sit withering
 under the red sun of our disbelief.

The soft prunes the gods served us for their entertainment—
the glowing amber of my mind—peeled  exposed—

We eat what we are served.  We'll have to change
our metaphors to fit this feast.

In our parched and ailing minds
 grows a loneliness fit for gods.

My mouth swollen with beautiful words  I have
been saving to heal the forest  and the meadows.
I remember
 their impatient wild flowers.

My windpipe contracts in this anaphylactic
season of unbearable heat  it's viral corona.

The poem truly begins here—  after the harvest
what's left unanswered
  what still remains
    un-severed.

*Daniela Elza has worked on poems-between-two with more than thirty collaborators.*

*Alan Hill's latest collection,* In the Blood*, is out now with Caitlin Press.*

**Ben von Jagow**

# Toronto from the 44th Floor

Cold lulls the raindrop
dribbling down the pane
on the forty-fourth floor.

Smoke clouds curtain the sky,
underscoring the stars
that shine below. Street lights

dot swaths of pavement
like constellations too perfect
to exist naturally. Gilded

rivers of flowing headlights
snake across the vast horizon
at a honey-drizzled pace. The city

exhales a parade of brake lights.
Cars depart the cluster, hurl
towards distant porch lamps

where each bulb glows
as though it were a beacon,
a familiar source of light,

a private and faithful sun.

*Ben von Jagow is a Canadian poet living in Paris.*

# Decolonizing Pedagogies: Pipelines and Publishers

*Jody Mason*

Like many of you, I have spent a lot of time in the past couple of years engaging with antiracist and decolonizing pedagogy. Struggling to navigate the treacherous waters of online teaching while reckoning, as a white settler, with the unequal effects of the pandemic on students in my virtual classrooms, I found the renewed turn in conversations about pedagogy to issues of equity helpful and challenging. Many of the questions and challenges being posed in the present, in discussions such as Aisha Wilks and Eugenia Zuroski's "Where Do You Know From? Antiracist Pedagogies" (2020), are not new. If the canon wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s fixated on books and authors, then postcolonial studies and critical race theory, among other fields, tackled questions about institutions and classrooms that put race at the forefront of their inquiry. This latter kind of analysis found its place in literary studies in Canada during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when essays such as Len Findlay's "Always Indigenize! The Radical Humanities in the Postcolonial Canadian University" and books such as Cynthia Sugars' *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature* instantiated conversations about Indigenous epistemologies, programs of "English," and classroom dynamics and racialization, among other issues. Indigenous voices were shaping those conversations—I think especially of Marie Battiste (Potlotek First Nation) and Emma LaRocque (Cree and Métis)—and their force has only grown alongside the emergence of Indigenous literatures as a field of study in postsecondary institutions.

As these scholars tell us, the analysis of literatures and cultures in the classroom can defend the status quo, shore up reactionary defences,

or effect transformations in the way learning happens, knowledge is valued, and cultural difference is understood: much depends on who is in the classroom and how the material is engaged. Much depends too on institutional affordances and constraints and, as Findlay reminds us in "Always Indigenize!," "dominant patterns of ownership of the means of production" (309). As someone who has spent time researching both the history of the discipline of English and the history and sociology of reading (namely the uses of literary cultures), I keep coming back to the ways that a meta approach in the classroom is a crucial tool for opening up questions about the conditions necessary to transformation: a meta approach is self-reflexive about disciplinary history and canon formation; about the relations of taste and distinction to class and the dynamics of racialization; and about what we might broadly call production-oriented forms of analysis. Following from this, I want to pose two questions: What do such meta approaches in literary and cultural studies classes share with decolonizing pedagogies, and how might their common interests be brought to bear on classrooms? The strategies I have in mind could generate interrogations of what has functioned as education; they could encourage active reflection on the roles literatures and cultures (and the dispositions related to them) have played in those processes at different historical moments around the world; they could generate questions about who owns culture in the present and why.

A meta approach in the classroom—as I know it—draws inspiration from a diverse range of scholars old and new. I think here of studies oriented to the history of the discipline or to the humanities more generally: Heather Murray on the conditions that shaped English as a discipline in post-Confederation Canada; Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngati Awa and Ngati Porou, Maori) on the ways that Enlightenment epistemologies, including the humanities and the very concept of disciplinary difference, enabled Western European claims to legitimacy; Gauri Viswanathan on the invention of the discipline of English in colonial India. I think also of texts that question how the *literary* is and has been produced as a category of value or how it has been contested as such a category: Pierre Bourdieu on distinction and literary taste or Janice Radway on the "professional-managerial class"

and literary authority. I think of scholarship that probes the influence of capitalist relations of production on the meaning and circulation of cultural forms in the past and in the present. The best essay I know on this topic is Walter Benjamin's "The Author As Producer," but I think here too of books like Jasper Bernes' *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*. I think of scholars like Richard So on how hierarchies of class and race in twentieth-century America have shaped the publishing industry as a whole. Diverse in terms of subject matter and geographical and temporal focus, these scholars do not share a single theoretical lens, though many of them are explicitly or vaguely Marxist. Nonetheless, this list of texts converges on a particular set of methods that are of tremendous value to the meta classroom: they share an interest in querying the material conditions of knowledge production, dissemination, and reception.

In the classroom, such thinkers and the approaches modelled in their texts offer ways for students and teachers alike to reflect actively on the conditions of their learning; they seek to disrupt the idea that learning is a process of ingesting (or depositing, to follow the banking trope introduced in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) predetermined content by insisting that learners ask how they know (or how their instructor knows) what they know. Such texts implicitly urge questions like the following: What is the relation between high tuition costs in most Canadian universities and declining enrolments in the humanities, or between these costs and the lack of diversity in English classrooms? Between creative-economy thinking and the current popularity of the "creative" side of English studies? Between neoliberal imperatives to count and measure and "big data" approaches to literature and culture? (On this question see also Laura Moss's insightful 2014 editorial to this journal.) Between the way a text is made and disseminated and how it is (or is not) taken up in a particular context? Between the whiteness of a given classroom and the forms of knowledge, interrogation, and critique that are privileged there? Between a "resistant" text and its recuperation by the capitalist logic of the creative industries?

One advantage of questions like these is that they encourage intersectional lines of inquiry that must grapple with the complexity

of overlapping experiences of oppression and the economic structures that subtend them; they are less amenable to forms of individualization, which so often lead to "native informant" situations in the classroom or discussions in which identity politics cease to be an opportunity for collaboration and solidarity. Drawing on the work of Kwame Nkrumah and Mahmood Mamdani, Blake Stimson argues that decolonization understood in a narrowly cultural sense "contributes to the process of neocolonial political and economic exploitation by emphasizing differentiation, self-definition and other-recognition"; such emphases do not produce solidarity, Stimson contends, but lead instead to an "ever-disenfranchising 'culture politics.'"

The meta approaches I have been describing encourage a reflective and self-conscious evaluation of the conditions of one's learning, and this is precisely the kind of pedagogical practice that can be found in the work of many Indigenous scholars of education. Marie Battiste's work on constructivist models of literacy instruction in *Decolonizing Education* offers a crucial general framework. Battiste rejects a "mechanistic" approach to textual analysis that devalues the learner's "prior knowledge and experience," seeking instead to recognize that "literacy is not abstract but embedded in social contexts" (179-80). Sandra Styres (Kanien'kehá:ka) has written about her experiences teaching a course dedicated to "narratives, storying, and literature" (25): like Battiste, she describes a "decolonizing praxis" based on a "lecture-light and highly reflective format that opens space for inquiry and experiential approaches to course content" (34). At the same time, theories of decolonizing pedagogy add elements not necessarily present in the meta approach I have outlined. Like decolonizing approaches to education more generally, Styres' pedagogy depends not simply on identifying the needs and challenges of each student, but also on legitimizing Indigenous voices through place and culture; embracing Indigenous knowledge and experience; and working toward "normalized Indigenous knowledge as subject matter and ways of knowing and learning" (Battiste 176). Styres' approach privileges *Land* as a first teacher—as both physical space and bearer of "conceptual principles, philosophies, and ontologies" (27). She encourages learners to ask questions about their relation to the land on which they are

studying and to the land that is represented in the texts they are reading, while developing "critical consciousness about the realities of oppression and social inequities for minoritized peoples" (32).

Other Indigenous scholars who are not necessarily thinking actively about pedagogy offer resources that are very helpful, it seems to me, for bringing a decolonizing pedagogy together with the resources of meta approaches that draw attention to the conditions in which knowledge is defined, circulated, validated, instrumentalized, and owned. As many Indigenous scholars have argued, decolonization is about more than culture; or rather, it is about how culture relates to everything else. Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkaunen defines decolonization as a struggle for "political, intellectual, economic, *and* cultural self-determination" (143). Glen Coulthard (Dene) pushes this argument somewhat further, insisting that without "a massive transformation in the political economy of contemporary settler-colonialism, any efforts to rebuild our nations will remain parasitic on capitalism, and thus on the perpetual exploitation of our lands and labor" (171). To realize economic self-determination, which is for Coulthard a crucial element of Indigenous resurgence, he argues that Indigenous nations "must actively participate in the construction of Indigenous alternatives to [capitalism]" (173). This is not a matter of building pipelines in the context of resource revenue sharing or more comprehensive impact benefit agreements, asserts Coulthard; such arrangements in his view "remain dependent on a predatory economy that is entirely at odds with the deep reciprocity that forms the cultural core of many Indigenous peoples' relationships with land" (171). How then to commit in the classroom to this insistence that self-determination is political and economic as well as intellectual and cultural?

Indigenous writers are having a moment in Canada. Métis Nation of Ontario writer Cherie Dimaline's young adult novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) remained on the national bestseller list for over three years; Indigenous writers were amply represented in the literary delegation for the 2021 Frankfurt Book Fair as part of Canada's Guest of Honour campaign (thirteen of the fifty-eight authors were Indigenous); and Indigenous writers such as Dimaline,

Billy-Ray Belcourt (Driftpile Cree Nation), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), Michelle Good (Red Pheasant Cree Nation), and Joshua Whitehead (Oji-Cree/nêhiyaw) are populating, even dominating, the nation's literary prize lists. If the instructor is encouraging active reflection about questions of place, positioning, and history—including those settler-colonial policies and laws that have so deeply shaped Indigenous experiences in Canada—bringing the work of these writers into the classroom may lead to the disruption of what Styres calls *dominant normative discourses* or settler-colonial logics (35). Yet in the present moment, when the symbolic and economic capital accrued by some Indigenous writers is so considerable, should the classroom not also be a place to ask questions about economic structures and ownership?

In the last fifty years, a dramatic narrowing of ownership in the English-language publishing industry has produced a consolidation of capital that has left us with four giant trade publishers and a host of very small players. This is a top-heavy industry that is dominated by the English language and geographically concentrated in Western Europe and the United States. Attending to the production of Indigenous-authored texts within the contexts of contemporary global publishing offers one important means of introducing questions about political and economic self-determination. One could pose these questions with the guidance of Indigenous scholars, an approach that might be complemented by continuing to draw on the Marxist, materialist, and sociological approaches to literatures and cultures I cite above.

In "Aboriginal Publishing in Contemporary Canada" (an interview with Sabine Milz) and "'We think differently. We have a different understanding': Editing Indigenous Texts as an Indigenous Editor," Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm (Chippewas of Nawash First Nation) interrogates editorial practices and cultural policy as these relate to Indigenous writers and publishers; in "'I Write This for All of You': Recovering the Unpublished RCMP 'Incident' in Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*," Deanna Reder (Cree-Métis) and Alix Shield demonstrate why Indigenous editorial practices must be adopted by the non-Indigenous publishing companies that snap up rights to

Indigenous-authored texts; in "Gathering Knowledges to Inform Best Practices in Indigenous Publishing" and *Elements of Indigenous Style*, respectively, Rachel Taylor (Iñupiaq and settler) and Greg Younging (Opsakwayak Cree Nation) probe a wide array of production and ownership issues, including editing and intellectual property. More general assistance could be drawn from Coulthard, whose analysis of primitive accumulation as dispossession in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* offers a very useful set of tools for thinking about Indigenous cultures and their present use-value for the capitalist settler state.

Alongside such readings, instructors in literature and culture classrooms might also vary the palette of creators invited to speak to students: we need to hear not only from Indigenous writers and storytellers but also from Indigenous publishers, editors, and people involved in the book and culture industries. How do their organizations work? How are they funded? What challenges do they face? What conditions are necessary for Indigenous-owned publishers to publish in Indigenous languages—what Battiste calls "irreplaceable resources in any educational reforms" (*Decolonizing* 178)? What alternative political economies might support the cultural labours they undertake?

Bringing these kinds of questions into the classroom is one means of insisting that cultural self-determination is part of a larger picture of sovereignty—one that is deeply political and involves economic and social transformation, not just shifting attitudes to culture.

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## Retracer le réel

**Ralph Sarkonak**
*L'Archive du réel : essais sur Claude Simon*. PU Septentrion 26,00 €

Compte rendu par Jérôme Melançon (La Cité Universitaire Francophone, Université de Regina)

Dans son quatrième livre, qui reprend des articles et chapitres de livres publiés entre 1981 et 2017 et nous présente un nouveau texte, Ralph Sarkonak revisite des moments d'une longue lecture de l'écriture simonienne. Ayant déjà abordé son sujet par le biais de la mimésis et de la manipulation textuelle (*Claude Simon : les carrefours du texte*), puis par celui de la référentialité (*Les Trajets de l'écriture chez Claude Simon*) ainsi que par une introduction plus directe à ses romans majeurs (*Understanding Claude Simon*), Sarkonak continue ici à contredire l'assertion de Simon selon laquelle la lecture de ses livres n'exige pas la compréhension ni à chercher une cohérence en deçà et en dépit des intentions de l'auteur.

L'introduction fournit au lecteur les concepts et procédés de lecture. Comme dans ses ouvrages précédents, Sarkonak mise avant tout sur l'intertextualité : ici, la continuation des mêmes thèmes au fil d'un livre et entre les livres, la référence à ces thèmes situés au cœur de réseaux textuels retraçables à partir des fragments éparpillés. Pour contourner toute accusation de réalisme à l'encontre de Simon, il utilise aussi la notion de l'archive comme travail — de l'écriture qui débute avec des stimuli concrets, qui lui fait reprendre sans cesse son travail, revenant sur ces mêmes stimuli, réécrivant, retranscrivant, mais détruisant aussi ce qui ne peut être inclus. La mise en archive du réel est ainsi sa re-présentation comme une suggestion, par « le *presque non-dit* » (Sarkonak 13), un recours à l'infratextuel, à tout ce qui demeure sous le texte et hors du texte, pour éviter la simple dénotation. La conclusion rappelle la présence du référent — ce réel, ce vingtième siècle qu'il s'agit d'archiver — et les trois autres concepts centraux de l'ouvrage, à savoir la *mathésis*, la *mimésis* et la *sémiosis*. On trouve peu de références théoriques pour ancrer cet appareil conceptuel, qui se laisse dévoiler par de courts passages sur Kristeva, quelques références à Barthes et à Derrida, et de nombreux emprunts à la sémiotique, qui se situent dans l'opposition de l'auteur au structuralisme.

Trois des chapitres du livre se concentrent sur ce qui pourrait être ramené à la question du rapport à l'altérité, par le biais de thèmes incontournables selon Sarkonak, mais peu traités. La « chose anglaise » renvoie avant tout aux descriptions faites par Simon de l'Angleterre par l'entremise du sport, de la monarchie, des inégalités, de la cupidité des banquiers, et qui font transparaître la nature double des Anglais autant que celle de leurs institutions, où cohabitent fragilité et violence, impérialisme et état de droit. Malgré la présence du thème dans l'ensemble de l'œuvre, ce chapitre porte en grande partie sur *Les Géorgiques*, où le personnage principal est modelé d'après George Orwell, référence bien étayée dans cette étude, notamment grâce à de judicieuses comparaisons avec *La Catalogne libre* de ce dernier. Ce chapitre est aussi une ouverture sur le monde et l'on y retrouve notamment des renvois mutuels entre les colonies anglaises et françaises.

Le chapitre portant sur le thème de l'androgynie, où l'utilisation figurée du thème prévaut, est peut-être le moins convaincant des essais. Il est ainsi parfois question d'androgynie, mais surtout d'un rapprochement du masculin et du

féminin, où les liens suggérés sont parfois ténus. Dans sa façon d'aborder l'animal et le végétal, on voit qu'il est peut-être davantage question d'indifférenciation que d'androgynie. Le chapitre se clôt sur le sujet de la résistance aux normes, et reprend le sort des personnages androgynes victimisés, en reconnaissant la part métaphorique de leur androgynie. Simon en effet n'échappe pas à cette tendance de la fiction à vouer à la mort les personnages qui ne se conforment pas aux attentes liées au genre et à la sexualité, même si, comme Sarkonak le fait remarquer, ses descriptions et personnages condamnent parfois l'homophobie. Il s'agit peut-être d'une occasion manquée par Simon de développer cette lecture en mettant à jour les termes, de s'éloigner de la thématique de l'intersexualité qui ne semble pas présente dans l'œuvre étudiée — autrement dit à faire référence au réel non seulement du lectorat de Simon, mais également du sien.

Le chapitre portant sur l'antisémitisme, en fin de livre, est l'objet d'une attention beaucoup plus minutieuse en reprenant le texte romanesque de façon universitaire. Ainsi Sarkonak montre-t-il patiemment et avec force comment Simon écrit la Shoah par le non-dit en la faisant entrevoir, pour contrer l'appropriation de son expérience. L'écrivain se tourne vers l'expérience qui a pu être la sienne, celle d'un témoin, pour la signaler sans la prendre comme référent explicite (247). En la juxtaposant à l'expérience des victimes de la Shoah, il encourage une convergence des perspectives sans pour autant prendre la place des autres, sans nommer ce qui demeure innommable, mais n'en est pas moins réel.

Les autres chapitres donnent des lectures plus ciblées de certains romans. L'étude du roman négligé *Le Sacre du printemps*, habituellement absent des listes des œuvres de Simon et ignoré par les critiques qui font commencer l'œuvre avec son roman *Le Vent*, sert de prétexte pour aborder l'œuvre entière. C'est aussi une autocritique, une voie qu'ouvre Sarkonak pour revoir sa propre manière d'aborder le roman, de comprendre l'entièreté de l'œuvre écrite de Simon comme une reprise d'une même recherche. On sent néanmoins sa déception en tant que lecteur, qui se force à étudier cette partie de l'œuvre; ici, point d'admiration pour le romancier. Cette étude a ses limites : *Le Sacre du printemps* n'est pas réellement *dans* l'œuvre, mais l'anticipe et trouve son accomplissement non en soi, mais dans *Le Jardin* des plantes ou encore *Le Tramway*.

Tandis que le travail principal porte dans ce chapitre sur l'intertextuel, le roman faisant de nombreuses références à des œuvres romanesques et philosophiques, l'étude du roman *Histoire* est plutôt l'occasion d'un usage de la sémiotique. Sarkonak montre comment le langage est génératif, certains signes en appelant d'autres, appelant toute une suite, toute une histoire. Il offre une explication et une illustration d'une rare clarté de cette approche sémiotique en développant une compréhension du livre et de l'intertextuel autour du mot « lac ». Il montre l'attention portée par Simon aux sons, aux proximités lexicales pour ne pas dire les deuils et les tristesses — tout ce qu'on ne veut pas nommer.

Comme Sarkonak retrace la façon dont Simon ne nomme pas le suicide (probable) de la femme du narrateur d'*Histoire*, sa lecture virtuose de *Triptyque*, en plus de suggérer ce qui ferait le centre du roman en recoupant des thèmes et préoccupations d'autres romans, fait émerger le non-dit presque dit de la noyade d'une fillette. Ici il restitue les allusions et les proximités phonétiques du mot « noyée », faisant apparaître l'événement que Simon avait fait disparaître.

Enfin, dans l'essai sur le roman *L'Acacia*, Sarkonak rappelle que Simon se

réécrit sans cesse, joue sur les ressemblances entre les événements et les personnages, reprend des épisodes, mais différemment d'un roman à l'autre, et suggère des liens de famille (195). Cet effort culmine en une base de données fondée sur des variables intertextuelles : une longue liste de vingt-sept pages, recoupant dix-sept livres et une nouvelle. Cette liste est laissée en guise d'invitation à suivre ces fils dans l'œuvre et répond au fait que l'expérience de jouissance à la lecture de *L'Acacia* (204-205) dépend d'une lecture attentive et récente de tous les autres romans de Simon.

On peut finalement lire cette étude comme l'œuvre d'un auteur qui ne tente pas de s'effacer derrière la figure du chercheur. Ralph Sarkonak est présent dans ses essais, alliant passion et mélancolie rétrospective. Car s'il est question d'intra-intextualité. Ce n'est pas par une étude de la réception écrite ou témoignée des livres de Simon. Plutôt, l'intra-textualité dont il est question prend naissance au moment de la première lecture qui précède encore de loin les premières études qu'il en fera et se développe au fil des lectures de Sarkonak sur une période de cinquante ans. La lecture de Simon, comme toute lecture, apparaît ici comme personnelle, liée aux émotions, aux associations, aux paradigmes que le lecteur crée au contact des textes, de la figure de l'écrivain et de l'homme qu'il compose, dont il retrace les contours. Le lecteur Sarkonak est amené à s'emballer dans sa recherche de traces et de référents pour les sujets. Il s'immisce ainsi dans le réel, et se laisse y être renvoyé par le texte. Ces essais avancent tout de même avec une certaine humilité qui suppose un tel aveu quant à la position du lecteur. Dans sa certitude de la présence de thèmes là où le texte est tout sauf clair, il cherche néanmoins à les faire sentir et à renvoyer enfin son propre lectorat aux textes qui constituent déjà une communauté de recherche et, par- là, à élargir encore ce réseau intra-intertextuel en commençant par les références aux autres études, autres lectures.

## Looking Sideways and Back

**Jason Guriel**
*Forgotten Work*. Biblioasis $19.95

Reviewed by Ryan Fitzpatrick (University of Toronto Scarborough)

Jason Guriel's *Forgotten Work* is a speculative verse novel, set between the 2030s and 2060s, whose characters romanticize analog culture in a future where digital technology has become even more invasive than it is now. Rather than focusing on a single protagonist, Guriel's narrative shifts between multiple characters—a music critic, a billionaire, a cadre of Internet fanboys—who share an interest and an obsession with the great lost album of Mountain Tea, a fictional contemporary of the bands Arcade Fire and Wolf Parade in Montreal's vibrant mid-2000s music scene. For these characters, Mountain Tea becomes a point of obsession because of their unsearchability in a world whose information is enclosed by a single corporate conglomerate: in one of the book's silliest jokes, the Web is now "the Zuck." Specifically, the characters target Mountain Tea's *The Dead*, an album so unfindable that it's oddly less known than the band's namesake—Peter Van Toorn's largely forgotten 1984 book of poetry *Mountain Tea*, the 2003 reissue of which is mentioned so many times in *Forgotten Work* that I hope Guriel got a cheque from Véhicule Press.

*Forgotten Work*'s biggest pyrotechnic is its form. The novel is written in rhyming couplets—a move that could irritate with too heavy a hand, but Guriel shifts comfortably between his formal constraint and the more prosaic needs of the narrative. Guriel's formal choice reflects his characters' obsessions with the past. The book's promotional material points us to William Gibson, Roberto Bolaño, and Vladimir Nabokov. In an article published on *LitHub*, Guriel shouts out Nabokov's *Pale Fire* in particular as a model of a "long poem, in heroic couplets, that delivered a compelling story," offering a different path through the long poem than the late modernist classics he read in university. For Guriel, *Pale Fire* delivers a poetry that is effortless, engaging, and destined to be considered "not quite a real or official poem." Despite this plea for some kind of outsider status, Guriel's concern about the use of narrative in poetry puts him in relation to a host of other Canadian writers straddling the line between poetry and fiction: the shared postmodern messiness of Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Dennis Cooley's *Bloody Jack*; the dense poetic fiction of Nicole Brossard and the narrative long poems of Dionne Brand; and recent narratively focused work by poets such as Kayla Czaga, Noor Naga, and Sandy Pool (among many others).

I'm interested in Guriel's formal choice not only because it comes out of left field, but also because it seems, at least at first glance, an awkward fit with his subject matter. *Forgotten Work* seems to have a sly kinship with the still nascent sub-genre of speculative poetry, which so far has focused on the same kinds of content found in science and speculative fiction. One of the problematics embedded in speculative poetry is how a writer, when writing about the future, ought to account for the histories and futures of poetic form. Is it enough to write about the future using the tools of the present (or past) when language itself is likely to change? Guriel's turn to *Pale Fire* and rhyming couplets sidesteps this question by reaching back through poetic history in a way that resonates with the book's thematic concern with nostalgic obsession. Guriel's formal constraint resonates with his novel's world, providing a poetic tool to look forward at a world gazing back to the way things were. Maybe in the future crater of Montreal, freed from the crushing ephemerality of the digital network, poets will turn back to rhyming couplets as the formal mode best suited to write about present conditions.

Straining through this poetic nostalgia, *Forgotten Work* adopts experimental tactics from fiction that speak to the constantly sliding ground of digital spaces—from multiple points of view to massive leaps in narrative time. Shifting between different characters' perspectives, Guriel tracks the search for *The Dead*. The book derives its narrative snap from the characters' desire to hear such an inaccessible album. This desire—for the album and for analog culture itself—stands in for a lot: for winning out against scarcity, for experiencing the crackling vinyl aura of "the real thing," and for revelling in grand ambition and failure. Cue the obsessives trying to piece together the lost albums of the past: *Smile*, *Lifehouse*, *Black Gold*, *Homegrown*. Guriel's targeting of this nostalgia is hazy and ambiguous, created by the way the text is saturated by the kind of detail you might pick up while travelling down a Wikipedia rabbit hole, or the kind of texture you'd get flipping through an ancient issue of *Spin*. In a book invested in a double projection—projecting narrative forward in time so that the characters can project it back at us—Guriel leaves his own position on our historical conditions deliberately hard to read. At times, he jokingly hip-checks a hazy mix of cancel culture and poptimism, even naming himself as a victim of Authors for a Safer World, a militant organization known

for assassinating critics. At others, he half-gags at the continuation of MAGA-style fascism as represented by Don Jr.'s following in his father's footsteps. Guriel punchlines these kinds of details throughout his narrative with 1990s-style all-sides aplomb—another kind of nostalgia, maybe.

Guriel thematizes a mistrust of the digital as characters refuse and retreat from technology, whether through a refusal of eye implants, a distrust of long-distance transporters, or, in the book's final twist, an entire city of people living in an Internet-free crater. In a mid-novel cluster of chapters, Guriel finds Geoffrey Gibson—contract academic and Internet obsessive, the closest the book gets to a main character—tracking down Mountain Tea's bassist Hal Hawks to an abbey where monks copy worthy material from the Zuck. Guriel gives us a glimpse of this weird mix of digital and analog as Gibson and his friend Hayes visit the abbey virtually:

> "Hey, check this out," said Hayes.
> "I'll switch the POV." A chunky blaze
> Of pixels flared. The Gundam was replaced
> By Hayes's view: a room whose stained glass faced
> And filtered phony sunlight. Wooden desks
> Were ranked, the holo scene shot through with specks
> Of dust from Drew's loft. Every desk included
> Vellum and a laptop. Quills protruded
> From quill holes, as if the desks had plumage.
> Other tools lay scattered: inkhorns, pumice
> Stones (to smooth the vellum), knives, and rulers.
> Apparently the monks, like careful jewellers,
> Copied zlogs their abbot judged of worth
> Straight off the Zuck: stray words of grace and mirth,
> Which pop-up pamphlets, pest-like, often wiped
> Away. (82)

There's an interesting friction, here and across the entire novel, between futuristic technology like holographic travel and the re-emergent tools of analog culture. In the inscription practised by Hawks and the monks, Guriel imagines an extreme version of fan devotion that works to restore an aura to the constantly reproducing ephemerality of the Web, preserving creativity that might be the real thing if only it weren't drowned out by so much findability. In this frame, it's interesting, maybe even hopeful, that *Forgotten Work* dwells so much on the creation of fan works and speculation that try to fill in the vacuum left by *The Dead*'s absence. The book is filled with excerpts from fan fictions, blog posts, lists of imagined song titles, and news stories. Through this playful postmodern fictionalizing, Guriel signals the way that our approaches to past works and traditions form flags to rally around, for better or worse, whether those works include the long-lost music of a band like Mountain Tea or a largely forgotten poet like Peter Van Toorn.

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## Boxes of the True Past

**Norman Ravvin**
*The Girl Who Stole Everything*. Linda Leith $21.95

Reviewed by Eli MacLaren (McGill University)

"Theft. It had the power to reorder the world in interesting ways" (196). So thinks Nadia Baltzan, a UBC music student, as she leaves a Vancouver park one evening, carrying a box that a friend has stolen for her from an auction house. Inside the box is a glass bottle that was used as an impromptu weapon in a pawnshop heist over fifty years earlier. The shopkeeper was killed with it that day in 1962, beaten over the head as he struggled against the thief. The thief got away. The case went cold. The evidence, however—this bottle—did not evaporate. What will Nadia do with the grisly curio? As she walks up Keefer Street, through a gentrifying neighbourhood under a shifting violet sky, we know that this box and its contents have the power to reorder her world. The shopkeeper, a Jew, was her uncle.

*The Girl Who Stole Everything* is full of such boxes. In stealing things, boxing them up, and burying them, one generation creates time capsules—archives—that the next generation unearths, interprets, and sometimes even restores to a proper, if perplexed, heir. Like Ondaatje, Ravvin presents artifacts as rocks in the current of time, holding onto stories that would otherwise be washed away. These unlikely archives resist oblivion and the liberties that memory takes. They have the potential to disclose something of the true past. Nadia "sniffs and catches a hint—the idea shocks her—of the past. Not a memory of the past. The thing itself" (8). The past is shocking, because it can change who we know ourselves to be, where we know ourselves to belong.

Nadia's compulsion to learn more about her father's family draws her to the scene of the crime—36 West Cordova Street, on the edge of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The pawnshop is long gone, of course, but the building that housed it still stands, its windows papered over, its front door boarded up. Not knowing what to do next, she sits down on the curb, opens her case, and begins to play her dulcimer. The dulcimer is a rare string instrument that comes in different shapes and sizes: Nadia holds hers on her lap and strums it. She knows little about it, except that its origin is Eastern European (Jewish and Polish), and that she found this one in a box her father left in the basement when he moved out. Her interpreting something for herself on her absent father's antique instrument at the building where her uncle died dusts off the glittering theme inlaid on the mundane surface of Ravvin's novel—the obscure freight delivered to the present by the past.

Her playing also unlocks the building. It turns out that it is not deserted. A man named Simon Hanover, recently purged from the university's ranks of course instructors, is renovating the space into a coffee house. They have seen each other on campus. Simon invites her in and gives her a tour. Upstairs, he is assembling a private library, a "Clandestine Book Room" (49), out of books that he has inherited from his father. Nadia gives him the book that she happens to have with her, a gift from one of her professors. It is the collection of poems by Adam Zagajewski from which the novel's epigraph is taken: "You come here like a stranger, / but this is your family home." The lines are true for her, visiting the pawnshop/coffee house. In this

sound box of a novel, in which every point seems to resonate with another and with the whole, they will also be true for him, for, like Nadia, Simon is Jewish and knows little about his family history. He too confronts artifacts that will draw him into a strange true past. When a family friend hands him a photo of his father as a boy in the Polish village of Radzanów, one hundred kilometres northwest of Warsaw, Simon opens a box that will transport him across the Atlantic. There is a girl in the photo, too. The photo has somehow stood against the waves of the *Hitlerkrieg*, Stalinism, and globalization that have all but washed away the old Jewish presence in Poland. Moving back through these waves, we learn this girl's remarkable story. It is an archive of archives, the heart of this novel, and, as Simon and Nadia will discover, a miracle.

All of this unfolds in Ravvin's understated, mellow style, with the unhurried, incremental pace that characterized his last novel, *The Joyful Child*. Here, as there, the writing is affable, wise, and wry. Characters speak and move with an appealing directness. At the same time, Ravvin is obviously a writer with a tremendous reach and, as in Alice Munro, every detail brims with significance, if one cares to look twice. When Nadia commences her career as a petty thief, of course it is a copy of Miles Davis' landmark album, *Kind of Blue*, that she steals: Is not jazz the art of stealing and reordering? A particular make of car popular in Communist Poland carries Simon through the Polish countryside: What better vehicle to drive into the past than a Moskvitch 412 purloined from a Warsaw museum? Then, the English text is laced with Polish names and phrases, suggesting the deep alterity that a foreign language opens in a world that Ravvin simultaneously claims for his characters and his reader. The claim is tender and firm, like a parent's for a child: Ravvin gives us a recognizable country full of flaws that are endearing, a country with indistinct borders rooted deeply in hope. Assembling the realistically disjointed plot of *The Girl Who Stole Everything* is ultimately the task for many readings. This one has seized on the dispossession and restitution that seem to alternate throughout—but buy a copy to judge for yourself. I would almost recommend that you steal one.

## Paddling Alone, Together

**Linda M. Morra and Marianne Ackerman, eds.**
*Chronicling the Days: Dispatches from a Pandemic*. Guernica $20.00

Reviewed by Kelly Baron (University of Toronto)

Early in March 2020, I was at the Northeast Modern Language Association's annual conference in Boston, the last pre-pandemic event I attended. On the way home, there were eerie warning signs of what was to come: the Boston universities had placed a ban on all travel, a local friend told me; the airport was empty for the flight returning to Toronto. When we returned home, the university put us in fourteen-day quarantine, and my partner, a family physician, was asked to manage the healthcare at a retirement home operating as a satellite location for a local hospital. By the time we emerged from quarantine, gas prices had plummeted, toilet paper was a scarce resource, and we were in the first of many lockdowns to "flatten the curve."

The COVID-19 pandemic has become the most significant disruption to our

daily rhythms in recent history. And in late March 2020, the Quebec Writers' Federation sought to document what that disruption looks like through an online column where writers could document a day in their life under COVID restrictions. More than one hundred writers responded to the call, and the result is Guernica Editions' new edited collection, *Chronicling the Days: Dispatches from a Pandemic*.

Although it would be easy to assume that reading more than a hundred short entries about the early days of the pandemic would be overwhelmingly negative and filled with worry, the experience of reading this collection is oddly the opposite. In documenting the new rhythms of daily life under COVID restrictions, there are a number of repetitive themes, the most noticeable of which is the reoccurring language of gratitude. Writers feel "grateful," "fortunate," "lucky," "blessed," "thankful," or determined to "make the most of it" in a number of different entries in the collection. And this gratitude is found amid loss, loneliness, and a new form of paranoia, what Surehka Surendran writes in their entry as the "paranoia of a silent killer" (51). Reading a collective sense of gratitude for good health, housing, and employment in the early days of a devastating pandemic is, in a way, comforting. It serves as a reminder of what is truly essential for our day-to-day lives, even as "essential" is under a constant state of redefinition, changing based on the whims of politicians and the new restrictions put in place.

Nisha Coleman, in their entry "Penning the Pandemic: We Can All Be Writers," summarizes the reading experience of this collection well. Rather than positing that we're all in the same boat, a cliché often heard since the pandemic began, they recognize that

> [a]s we experience this global phenomenon, we are forced to do so separately, as individuals. Instead of the same big boat, I picture individual rafts. We're all sailing, but at different speeds and on different bodies of water. Our rafts have slightly different designs; sometimes we get stuck, or find we've been going backward. We are alone on our raft, all paddling together. (97)

There is something recognizable for everyone in this collection; all of my early experiences were found in the various entries in the collection. There is even an entry detailing the partner of a healthcare worker driving their partner to work each day to avoid the possibility of spreading the virus on public transit, an experience I've had ever since my partner began managing the healthcare of a retirement home. Writers explain their daily walks, noticing more of the natural world around them; they obsess over *Tiger King*, worry about loved ones who are isolated, spend time checking in on their friends. They bake, they read, they homeschool young children, or manage Zoom classes, either as teachers, or as parents of children learning on Zoom. But most of all, they show what Anita Anand describes as a "collective consciousness of love" (104). The concern for others in this book seeps through the many entries, and so the paddling that we're all doing, to use Nisha Coleman's language, is a form of care—care for ourselves, in finding a new structure to our days (or, as many self-described introverted writers note, the same structure, with only minor disruptions due to lockdowns, but now with the isolation of working from home enforced), and care for those around us.

It is this overwhelming sense of care that makes this book a must-read. It will inevitably become a historical resource as a collective chronicle of the early days

of the pandemic. But until that time, it can provide a healthy reminder that not everyone is ignoring the restrictions out of self-interest and that many people care deeply for those around them, restructuring the rhythm of their days to turn worry for their loved ones and neighbours into care. What that care looks like can take many forms; we are all on different rafts, paddling at different rates, after all.

## Intellect and Heart

**Sabyasachi Nag**
*Uncharted*. Mansfield $17.00

Reviewed by Chantel Lavoie (Royal Military College of Canada)

Sabyasachi Nag's third collection, *Uncharted*, follows *Bloodlines* (2006) and *Could You Please, Please Stop Singing?* (2015). Composed of forty-nine poems, *Uncharted* is divided into sections titled "Identity," "Belonging," and "Death." Inspired by personal experience, religious ritual, and poets like Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Bly, and Li Bo, Nag demonstrates a voice all his own—philosophical, playful, and lyrical.

In "What We Make of Symbols," the speaker is flipping through "raw photos from a recent trip" when he catches sight of "shirtless boys" begging outside a taxi in Calcutta, "noses pressed to the glass of the rained afternoon":

> One of them in the far corner of the frame
> looked away from us all, woozily
> drawing vapour swastikas
> on the fog of his breath (13)

The adverb "woozily" is the kind of thing Nag does so well (it picks up on sounds in "away" and "swastikas"). The economy of ekphrasis is striking, down to the final and fine lines describing these boys in "frozen yards, blinking red, green, gold / elves riding reindeer on fire" (13). Like the reality he describes, the language is tough and tender, conveying how suffering and beauty can look the same. The dramas he communicates are quiet, quotidian, wrenching. Varieties of repetition and internal rhyme add to the pleasure of reading what can be hard to think about.

Among the pieces that highlight such craft is the title poem, "Uncharted." The forceful tercets begin: "The Christmas toy for our fifteen-year-old is about new ways of dying. / Out the window, out in the wild, out in star haze, out in a train; / bloodstained pixels floating in farce. How simple is dying?" (47). Variations conclude each stanza: "How hard is dying?"; "There's faith in dying"; "There's art in dying" (47). The book is appropriately dedicated to another fifteen-year-old boy who appears in the second stanza—Junaid Khan, stabbed to death and thrown off a moving train in northern India in 2018, in a caste-based dispute about a seat.

The lacunae where fellow feeling should appear colour the book (its cover, a white tiger's face, hints at the politics of India). In numerous pieces, Nag pokes a painful kind of fun at how one group diminishes another. Alongside (and interrogating) politics, beauty and pain surface in interlocked images of fish and fishing, forgetting, and avian splendour. "Ode to Forgetting," for instance, describes how "shadows fall off the cliff in flocks of thousands" (55), while the musical "Ode

to a Broken Elm" contains "a million peepers peering / down the lintel of loopy mirrors— / newborn and hungry for the sun" (75). The final section, "Death," continues to balance intellect and heart. "Seven Odes to Dying" witnesses the loss of a father, his "[l]ungs clogged with dragon tar; / nurses exhausted, pumping the inhaler" (79). Here again, the observational enables Nag to make big questions new. Last in the collection, "Speculations about Soul" ends with lovemaking, "when we are left with an aftertaste / and a craving" (91). A beautiful way to finish the book, the poem reflects wanting more body *and* soul, as we do. We certainly crave more poetry from Sabyasachi Nag.

## Here for the Surprises

**Sarah Burgoyne**
*Because the Sun*. Coach House $21.95

**Molly Cross-Blanchard**
*Exhibitionist*. Coach House $21.95

Reviewed by Dani Spinosa (York University)

If there is one thing that I look for in poetry these days, it is a clear and distinctive sense of voice. I love feeling, when I reach the close of a collection, like I have a definite idea of a speaking voice, and like I have just read something unique. And two collections I have been asked to review here—Molly Cross-Blanchard's *Exhibitionist* and Sarah Burgoyne's *Because the Sun*, both from Coach House Books—have distinct, clear, thoughtful, and above all, unique speaking voices. They are otherwise quite different collections, but they do indeed share that trait of uniqueness.

For the most part, I enjoyed *Exhibitionist* for its humour. A standout poem, "Dear Dolphin," is funny through and through, and ends with a cute and cheeky "Ba-dump chh!" (17) that makes the poem—and ultimately most of the collection—feel like the funniest joke exchange you have ever had stoned on your best friend's patio. At times, it felt like this collection was crafted especially for me—and you might say that I too am a bit of an exhibitionist. The allusions Cross-Blanchard uses are one hundred per cent in my wheelhouse. She moves deftly from the uncontested greatest *Magic School Bus* episode, "Inside Ralphie," to the uncontested greatest pop vocalist of all time, Mariah Carey, to a bunch of middling crap I love, like the cheesiest pop-punk project of the early 2000s, Jimmy Eat World, or the tedious but absolutely bingeable Mindy Kaling vehicle *The Mindy Project*. I was primed to thoroughly enjoy this collection, but after finishing it I felt slightly underwhelmed.

Cross-Blanchard's greatest poetic strength is her ability to move from vivid detail to philosophical musings on desire, ontology, and some pretty intense affect. The collection contains interesting specificity that is equal parts poignant and flippant, with lines like "a Fjällräven full of childhood trauma" (20). In other moments, the collection is intensely visceral and often enjoyably disgusting, as evidenced in the lasting impression left on me by these lines: "You could fill a DivaCup with pus from the zits // on your cheeks and chest" (29). But the book ultimately lacks thoughtful attention to the poetry's form, and in particular, an attention to aurality. For the most part, the poetry is fairly unrhythmic and has the quality of someone putting on a show, as the collection's exhibitionist figure does

throughout, appearing crass and jarring for the drama of it. And usually I am here for the drama. But these poems often left me feeling as though I, as the reader, was incidental, inconsequential to the show before me. There are, on occasion, some poems that engage thoughtfully with tone and rhythm, as in the spiralling "I'm a Woman without a Lover" and its repetitions and revisions. And of course there are moments of meme-like political reckoning: Cross-Blanchard asks, for example, if there is need for "Land Back or rEcoNciLiAtiOn?" (80). But otherwise the collection is limited in its formal engagement or engagement with its audience.

Burgoyne's *Because the Sun*, on the other hand, burns out a big, beautiful hole from the page and largely leaves it up to the reader to fill in the spaces, the fissures in semantic meaning, and the spaces between disparate and uniquely related intertexts. Most often when I review a poetry collection, I look to extract fun, poignant, or pithy moments from the work to include in the review. But here such ad-like extraction is difficult, even near impossible, because everything fits so well together. Indeed, part of the unique appeal of most of the best moments in *Because the Sun* is in the coherence, how things work together, how one poem revises the next.

Burgoyne's collection works between two primary and perhaps unlikely bedfellow intertexts: Albert Camus' *L'étranger* (*The Stranger*) and the film *Thelma & Louise* (1991). The book, though perhaps weighted more towards Camus, proves to be a fascinating and careful study of both. Enamoured by the role of the piercing sun in the shooting scene on the beach, Burgoyne demonstrates thorough research and deep thinking about Camus' larger project in *The Stranger*. The collection moves swiftly between Camus' novel, his notebooks, and studies of Camus and *The Stranger* by Sartre and others. But this is not a work of intellectual detachment. The poetry is violent and affective, suspenseful and wearying, and no less profane than Cross-Blanchard's, as can be seen when the space once blanked by the sun's burning reads eventually "I said suck / my / cock" (75). And there are, too, some really gorgeous moments (see especially the "*de-skyed*" ending of "What Is/Amyno" [43]). I enjoyed the rhythmic nature of "Jackpot" in the section "four, flowers," which revises the same blocky prose poem inspired by the Oulipian N+7 technique of replacing nouns with the noun seven entries below it in a dictionary.

And of course this review would be incomplete if it did not also deal with the feminist nature of these poems and their empty spaces. Indeed, *Because the Sun* also presents its reader with a consideration of the page of poetic form, manifested most beautifully and clearly in the hole left by the sun in the poetry itself, a piercing empty space, which Gail Scott describes as a "punctum" on the jacket. These empty spaces are figuratively found throughout, but manifest literally in the section "three, women," from whence I drew the aforementioned cock. In this section, *Thelma & Louise* is considered most thoroughly. And the film in this section is also matched with quotations and interpretations (though it is never specified which is which, something I enjoyed) from Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. In this section, the violence of the film recalls and draws out the violence against women in *The Stranger* and requires that we think on the interrelation between Meursault's infamous killing of the Arab, Louise's killing of the man who attacks Thelma, and the many various violences in between.

*Because the Sun* and *Exhibitionist* are thoughtful political and feminine/ist poetic investigations. And there is a lot of pleasure to be found in reading them. They are big, ballsy, and thought-provoking collections that demonstrate that there are

some fascinating innovations on the horizon for femmes in Canadian poetry. And I will always be reading, ready to be surprised by Jimmy Eat World or cocks—or both.

## Feeling It All

**Marie Carrière, Ursula Mathis-Moser, and Kit Dobson, eds.**
*All the Feels: Affect and Writing in Canada / Tous les sens : affect et écriture au Canada*.
U of Alberta P $39.99

Reviewed by Rachel Fernandes (Queen's University)

Affect theory is, because of its complexities and interdisciplinary reach, hard to define. In the introduction to *All the Feels*, the editors give a brief overview of the field, the seeds of which were planted in the 1970s. They also explain that affect theory is still gathering momentum as a theoretical field with the help of theorists like Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, and Sara Ahmed. Simply put, affect theory emphasizes the crucial relationship between thought and emotion, two realms traditionally conceptualized as discrete, or at least idealized as separate from one another. Affect theory conceptualizes a strong relationship between thought and feeling, the mind and the body, which then extends to a relational understanding of public and private, personal and political, so that these concepts are no longer siloed, but understood as working together. In this construction, affect theory seems to have an endless reach; affect is integral to many realms including politics, the environment, and gender studies, and this collection focuses on how literary affect is connected to these and other domains.

*All the Feels* certainly recognizes the many challenges in defining affect theory, but the collection revels in the possibilities of the field by offering a series of diverse essays that consider affect and its implications for a variety of contemporary Canadian texts. This ambitious and wide-ranging bilingual collection contains articles written in English and in French. Contributing authors express themselves with the precision of their preferred language, allowing the particularities of the English or French language to affect the reader's experience of each piece. The editors of the book acknowledge the limits of its focus on Canada: this volume contains fifteen essays, but is not a comprehensive or definitive guide to affect in Canadian, Indigenous, and Quebec literatures. It is rather a continuation of conversations about affect in Canadian writing, an effort to integrate thought and feeling within academic discourse.

The book situates itself firmly in our present moment; the editors note that the idea for the collection emerged alongside the #MeToo movement and its reverberations in Canadian literary institutions, such as in the *UBC Accountable* letter and the Hal Niedzviecki "appropriation prize" controversies of 2019. The anger sparked by these events is not just an *ugly feeling*, to use Sianne Ngai's term. Rather, this anger comes from a sense of injustice and often engenders energy and passion for change. In this cultural moment, the old guard of various institutions is rightfully challenged by new voices who not only merit space in the literary scene, but also demand respect for those who have been marginalized, forgotten, or mistreated by the literary elite. The COVID-19 pandemic also presented important affective considerations. As a collective, we experienced deep uncertainty,

anxiety, nostalgia, and grief as the pandemic raged on. Some people are fortunate enough to have care, while others are desperately lacking. The book considers this critical moment and encourages readers to acknowledge strong affective feelings as generative tools for change and resistance. When we look at contemporary Canadian literature, can we see the ways that art challenges us to imagine better outcomes for the world?

The book is divided into five sections; each considers a particular aspect of affect and its relation not only to works of literature but also with regard to its social importance. The first section, "Negative Affects," contains essays by Matthew Cormier, Ana María Fraile-Marcos, and Eric Schmaltz, who discuss the negative affects associated with disgust in response to apocalyptic threats to the environment and the unrelenting system of capitalism. The next section, "Care and Affect," features essays that employ feminist discourse in discussing the ethics of care in several Canadian works, both in relation to personal relationships and the larger Canadian health system. "Affects of Memory" plumbs the depths of grief and suffering; the essays resist the normative approach to grief, suggesting that there is no time limit on these feelings. Nicoletta Dolce's essay posits new ways of thinking through negative affect, including using poetry as a means to reflect upon and commemorate collective and individual memory.

The fourth section, "Affects of Resistance," features two essays focusing on Indigenous worldviews, and one essay about resistance in Israeli Canadian writer of Yemeni descent Ayelet Tsabari's collection of short stories, *The Best Place on Earth* (2013). Jeanette den Toonder's analysis of Naomi Fontaine's (Innu) *Kuessipan* (2011) asserts that within Indigenous cultures, affect is a valuable form of knowing. Margery Fee's essay echoes these ideas. She advocates for a decolonial approach to affect theory by understanding that the concept of relationality is already built into Indigenous ways of knowing. Her reading of several Indigenous stories reminds readers that geographic space in these stories is crucial in a decolonial approach to affect; each geographic location is home to different communities, whose stories and the affects they produce cannot be assumed to be identical.

The collection closes with a trio of essays on "Writing Through Affect." Nicole Brossard, Smaro Kamboureli, and Louise Dupré each write about their personal relationships to affect, demonstrating the connection between affect and writerly and academic life. Brossard emphasizes the value of joy and beauty, especially in the busy, overwhelming contemporary world. Kamboureli highlights the connection between geographical location, political considerations, and affect. She writes in the first person about the affective process of writing academic work, rather than producing writing that is strictly academic, professional, and devoid of personal perspective. Dupré's essay reflects what many of the other contributors also suggest: a crucial part of writing is finding empathy for one's subjects. Dupré also suggests, however, that to avoid falling into what she calls "emotional ruin," one must develop a critical distance from which to write. Her empathetic approach to writing emphasizes attention to fragility and attuning one's senses to emotions that might otherwise go unnoticed, echoing the feminist ethics of care discussed in the book. This final section of the book indicates the value in exploring one's own affective relationships to aspects of the world and emphasizes affect's contribution to various forms of writing.

At first glance, the collection may seem overly ambitious, considering that

affect theory is an amorphous concept. However, the book allows for an immersion into the possible reaches of affect theory in the context of Canadian literature. The effect of reading this collection in sequence is to experience affect as connected to the reading of the book itself. I found myself engaged and interested in each new exploration of affect. The book left me with questions about the limits and possibilities of affect: How would we approach affect in older works of Canadian literature? What additional affective possibilities in literature written about this country should we consider? What do we miss by ignoring the interconnectedness of thinking and feeling, of public and private?

This book is a great companion to existing affect theory scholarship, including *The Affect Theory Reader*, the focus of which is broad as it considers the implications of affect theory on a number of topics from food to mental health. *All the Feels* builds on these concepts, but its main interest lies in affect and literature. Readers with a basic understanding of affect theory, as well as those who are new to the field, will find that this collection opens fascinating avenues for inquiry into the affective possibilities in Canadian literature. It presents an alternative approach to studies in literature—one that considers the integrated nature of thoughts and feelings.

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## Know, You

**Cathy Park Hong**
*Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. One World $24.00

Reviewed by Amila Li (The University of British Columbia)

"The face," Cathy Park Hong assesses, "is the most naked part of ourselves, but we don't realize it until the face is somehow injured, and then all we think of is its naked condition" (4). The face is an apt motif for Hong's essay collection *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, a blend of memoir and cultural criticism that takes on Asian American consciousness; here, the face is to injury as racial identity is to racialization in the United States. In an effort to illuminate the slippery essence of Asian American existence, and the correspondingly precarious act of writing about it, Hong theorizes minor feelings as dissonant emotions arising from contradictions between American optimism and the racialized subject's reality. Among others, cultural theorists and race scholars Sianne Ngai, Claudia Rankine, Glenda Carpio, and Frantz Fanon inform the book's methodology, particularly in delineating the affective properties of minor feelings.

Hong opens with a self-portrait: hers is a face that once suffered from hemifacial spasms. Despite their medical correction, she worries the spasms have returned. Seeking therapy for the depression resulting from her paranoia, she consults a Korean American therapist in hopes that their shared cultural background will aid understanding. The therapist declines to work with her, and Hong directs her anger at Koreans as a whole. On an evaluation, she writes, "Koreans are repressed! Rigid! Cold! They should not be allowed to work in the mental health care profession!"—only later to reflect on her impulse to conflate

shared heritage with recognition (28). Whether the intimacy between her and the therapist is imagined or real, Hong remains uncertain, and a similar ambivalence drives her theoretical questions: "Who is us? What is us? Is there even such a concept as an Asian American consciousness?" (28). Attempting to trace that concept, Hong uncovers her book's titular emotions as existential truths. Minor feelings, she explains, are "the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed" (55). Hong first identifies minor feelings in Richard Pryor's stand-up comedy: in one joke, he communicates his relief in being Black and not white—because white people "have to go to the moon" (54). For Asian Americans, minor feelings often arise from the perpetuation of the model minority myth, which first circulated as and continues to be part of the capitalist white supremacist project. The dissonance of being told, "Asian Americans are so successful," while feeling like a failure is a typical case (56). Yet this and other instances of minor feelings are dismissed as "hostile, ungrateful, jealous, depressing, and belligerent" when expressed (if at all): as Hong puts it, "our lived experiences of structural inequity are not commensurate with [white] deluded reality" (56).

While each of the seven essays comprising Hong's collection deals with its own unique concern, together they are threaded by political and interpersonal histories of violence and, more significantly, erasure; conversations with Asian American and other racialized thinkers; and meditations on writing, particularly in English. The history lesson in "United" serves as a primer for readers unfamiliar with how Asian Americans have become at once the economically advantaged and "invisible serfs" (19). In "Stand Up," Hong confronts the difficulties of writing about race, especially the struggle to escape the white audience and its expectations. In "End of White Innocence," she continues to discuss whiteness, elucidates the "racial pecking order" of America, and addresses Asians as ideal neoliberal subjects (75). "Bad English" explores the possibilities of othering a language to expose its imperial atrocities and of learning from cultural exchange along the way. In "An Education," Hong invites readers into the intimate, creative, and familial space that she occupies with her college best friends, both of whom are also Asian American women. In "Portrait of an Artist," she interrogates the silences surrounding acts of violence against this same demographic, taking on the rape and murder of the writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose best-known work is about young women dying violent deaths. Finally, Hong revisits her definition of "us" in "The Indebted," stressing the radical origin of the term *Asian American*, paying respects to activists who struggled before her, and gesturing to solidarity between non-whites.

The strengths of *Minor Feelings* lie in its autobiographical disclosures and its meticulous use of rhetoric. Hong's at times painful self-awareness enthralls as it discomforts, eliciting identification while carefully skirting the authoritative voice. A self-proclaimed unreliable narrator, Hong makes vivid every contradiction of her consciousness; she is "hypervigilant to the point of being paranoid," as evidenced in her ruminations about other Asian Americans (she assumes that a Vietnamese teenage boy working on her pedicure hates himself before questioning her thinking, for example) (12). The candour that propels the memoir, however, also obscures the book's critical cogency. In a move that confuses exposition with contempt, Hong claims that Asian Americans "are so far from reckoning with [their place

in America's hierarchy] that some Asians think that race has no bearing on their lives . . . which is as misguided as white people saying the same thing" (85). I am not convinced that these Asian Americans exist. If, as Hong argues, the unprotected consciousness knows America's capacity for violence even before literacy, then it follows that the racialized subject is never without racial cognition—it may be concealed for reasons of safety or repressed under the dictates of an inherently racist alphabet, but it is ever-present. In calling for an Asian American reckoning, the book falls short: its hazy demands on Asians in particular deflect from the larger, more urgent project of structural equity. Still, as one Asian American's reckoning—verb, in progress, not final—*Minor Feelings* is an indispensable text. Scholars of Asian American and ethnic studies, intersectional feminism, affect theory, rhetoric, and beyond will benefit from Hong's craft. I find succour in her feelings.

## On the Chin

**Alison Dean**
*Seconds Out: Women and Fighting*. Coach House $21.95

Reviewed by Jessica Fontaine (McGill University)

In *Seconds Out: Women and Fighting*, Alison Dean invites us to consider the mental, emotional, and physical challenges that arise from throwing a punch "without anger or provocation" (7) in the context of combat sports. Working against the popular assumption that combat sports and martial arts are masculine endeavours, Dean seeks to shift the conversation and investigate how female fighters—herself included—negotiate the social and cultural conditions of combat sports, particularly boxing and mixed martial arts. Over twelve chapters, Dean weaves together her own experience, ethnographic research, and fighting literature and history to attend to critical questions of gender, race, embodiment, and belonging. She asks, "How are different bodies regulated in combat competition and training? How do we both learn from and fight the systems that form us?" (9). In doing so, Dean carefully describes, examines, and sweats out what it means to be a woman who fights.

*Seconds Out* is both intimate and analytical. Dean, who holds a PhD in English and lectures in English literatures and histories of photography, turned to amateur combat sports in the aftermath of her doctoral studies—a time she recounts as defined by rigorous intellectual work and physical inactivity. She was practiced in being "coachable" (179), but out of touch with her body. What emerges in *Seconds Out* is the cogent and evocative writing of someone who has both buckled down through a dissertation and soaked her blood-blistered feet. Her engagement with fighting literature is apparent, and threaded and queried with experiential and embodied knowledge from beginning to end. At one point, Dean reckons humorously with the ways that Hemingway's macho shadow looms over boxing as metaphor for writing, asking, "If we accept that you can write about punching . . . then is the inverse true? Can you punch about writing?" (69). In answer, after attempting to live out a "Hemingweek" of fighting, writing, and unsustainable drinking with a group of friends (70-71), Dean offers an exacting and reflexive analysis of how literary narratives about boxing—including Joyce Carol Oates'

*On Boxing*—have romanticized the sport as an innately manly practice. She contends with what it means to be, like Oates, a woman drawn to this masculine-dominated space. How is she positioned there? What are the dynamics of power?

Overall, Dean's work resists and refutes popular feminist narratives of the exceptional, individual woman and frameworks of a linear progression to equality that often structure narratives of women in sport. Rather, *Seconds Out* draws a long history of women in fighting: from women's wrestling in ancient Greece and Rome, through early-twentieth-century "boxing girls," to female boxers demanding New York State boxing licences in the 1970s and 1980s, and the highly visible stars in the UFC women's division today. She details the ways that women have long engaged in training, developed technique, and competed within the ring, at the same time as they have fought for the respect, compensation, and supports to do the work. At each turn, Dean investigates the marginalization of women in combat sports as she unfolds the social and cultural barriers and restrictions women fighters faced and continue to face. Her argument throughout is nuanced, giving space to consider how women negotiate fighting spaces, including gyms and regulatory organizations, and to women's broader experiences of sexism and violence. She is careful to note that many women come to amateur martial arts for self-defence training, but that this is not the only reason. Self-discipline, self-awareness, and self-empowerment are all aspects of training to fight that Dean finds and experiences herself, but that are learned with trainers and fellow fighters.

Vulnerability and toughness are also conjoined and recurring themes that are teased out in relation to the body, gender, and fighting ethos. At one point, Dean thinks through the ways a fighter's mental toughness and endurance are embodied and signified through "the chin." She writes, "The chin is durability, the capacity to take a hard hit (or many hard hits) and keep going. 'Chin' can also be used synonymously with having 'heart,' but it's not the same thing" (139). It is not the same, because the chin has limits. Concussions, we know, have cumulative effects. There are only so many hits a fighter can take. In explicating the metaphor of the chin, Dean attends to the precarious conditions of fighting and sets up further investigation to how the bodies of fighters and women's bodies specifically are regulated in ways that uphold broader structures of feminine beauty standards and body management. Headgear, which women are required to wear in Olympic trials and competitions, are meant to guard against facial cuts, rather than head injuries (149). Although blinding blood on a fighter's face can cause a fight to be stopped, the requirement of headgear clearly aims to protect women's beauty by shielding against scarring. Until 2017, "the UFC refused to open a 145-pound weight division," and, therefore, required "taller and heavier" women to make significant weight cuts in order to compete (83). The ultimate female fighter was still obliged to be small and thin. As Dean writes, "Bodies, we are repeatedly reminded, are always political" (36).

*Seconds Out* opens and closes with Dean in the ring. In the final pages, Dean meditates on the team of "seconds" who support a fighter, slow her breathing, and offer water and instructions in the corner between rounds, before she must once again step to the centre alone. This ending is fitting. *Seconds Out* draws on her extensive, arduous athletic and intellectual training, and acknowledges gracefully the rituals of care and spaces of instruction that have shaped her understanding of combat sports. But in the end, the text is clearly Dean's work. It is Dean who delivers a crucial and captivating narrative of a woman who fights.

## Chasing Fault Lines

**Jessica J. Lee**
*Two Trees Make a Forest: In Search of My Family's Past Among Taiwan's Mountains and Coasts*. Hamish Hamilton $24.95

Reviewed by Rina Garcia Chua (University of British Columbia)

Grief is an indeterminate familiarity; it is an emotion that shatters and rebuilds until it eventually becomes a close companion—perhaps, even a friend. In *Two Trees Make a Forest*, Jessica J. Lee grapples with grief and makes sense of it in two distinct ways: tracing her multiple roots, and mapping her identity through her grandfather's letters. However, the journey she decides to undertake is peppered with nagging doubts that seed as internal fractures, especially for someone who navigates three cultural spaces—British, Taiwanese, and Canadian. The pathway she follows through the mega-diverse geography and complex history of Taiwan becomes one that she has to forge alone if she wants to make sense of these fractures within.

In the book's fourth chapter, Lee introduces us to the fault lines in Taiwan: "One map [of Taiwan] has a list of geohazards and a pile of statistics on Taiwan's natural disasters; another—a seismicity map—has the appearance of a Jackson Pollock painting, only the splatters are denser, set to overwhelm" (43). That her own mother, who immigrated to Canada when she was twenty-one, had to grow up with these hazards is unfathomable to Lee; it is even more baffling to her that the Taiwanese—and many others who live in and around the Pacific Ring of Fire—experience a thousand earthquakes a year that they can physically *feel*, and fifteen thousand more that they cannot. Indeed, living with fault lines is a life flourished on the precipice of a disaster; yet it is also an existence that cultivates a kind of strength that Lee witnesses in her grandfather's narratives and in his letters—whether this strength involves uprooting his entire nuclear family's life from one country to another, or walking away from a plane crash *almost* unscathed. This strength is also present in the stoic companionship that her Gong (grandfather) and Po (grandmother) share with each other, in the unanswered questions of their emotions, and in the lives they lived before her existence—all of which infiltrate Lee's consciousness.

*Two Trees Make a Forest* is introduced as a book about a second-generation immigrant Canadian woman's journey to trace her family's past through her grandfather's letters, but it is more than what it promises. There is Taiwan in all of its complexity and stunning beauty. There is also Lee's exploration of identity and family relationships. While Lee struggles to make sense of her Gong and his past, she also struggles to make sense of this island that her grandparents feel kinship with the most. The autobiography is well researched, with patient explanations of Chinese characters and their interrelationship with other languages that Lee is familiar with or fluent in. Further, she skilfully juxtaposes memories from her childhood with the reality of the Taiwan that she explores later in the book. With care, she expounds on Taiwan's ever-evolving relationship with China (where her Gong was born), the natural ecologies of Taiwan's island ecosystem, and the conflicted histories that have made Taiwan what it is today. In her writing, a panging ache is present—she truly wants to fill in the blanks of her grandparents' past, but not even the island or the letters can fulfill that.

While reading *Two Trees Make a Forest*, I felt a soreness within. Part of me wanted Lee to find the answers to her past in her Gong's letters, like a neat tidy bow on a box. But another part of me wanted her to continue exploring the island and find the answers there. A persistent uncharacteristic discomfort blanketed me as I navigated memory and mountains with Lee—a discomfort that is amplified since I myself am an immigrant in Canada and currently steering my own path after being saddled with insurmountable grief. For me, what makes the book more striking is that I too have been to Taiwan (in 2014), and this experience has defined me in a way that I did not expect. Taiwan, as the book affirms, is truly a fascinating and enchanting country. Lee took me back with her silent love not only for the island country of Taiwan, but also for the Asian continent that I will always call my heartland. As Asian immigrants, the heartland is the space that we wish to hold on to, but like fault lines, the crack becomes wider, bigger, every single minute we are away.

Perhaps this is what Lee's grandparents felt when they left Taiwan for Canada many years ago; perhaps it is not. There is no distinct answer in Lee's narratives, but there is the hope of finding herself. Identity is often a contentious thing for immigrant children; however, in the book, identity is celebrated, grieved, explored; it is okay for it to be multiple, undetermined. The discomfort in *Two Trees Make a Forest* is what creates its magic. Lee inadvertently reminds us that there is solace in discomfort, and that there are questions that are meant to disappear into fissures. In the final pages of the book, Lee appears to reach a moment of peace on the peak of Qixing Mountain. The reader also makes peace with the thought that, although the book does not offer concrete answers to the questions provoked by the earlier chapters, there is strength in thriving with uncertainty. Like living with fault lines, there is always the decision to live in fear or to just live. Lee's choice is crystal clear as she goes back down the Qixing Mountain, the storm brewing behind her and clouding the otherwise excellent view of Taipei.

## World of a Reading Self

**Dionne Brand**
*An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*. U of Alberta P $12.99

Reviewed by Andrea A. Davis (York University)

In her 2019 Canadian Literature Centre Kreisel Lecture, *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*, Dionne Brand offers both a particular autobiography of a Caribbean colony's relationship to empire in the mid-twentieth century and a wider reflection of Black diasporic self-construction in the shadow of colonial and neo-colonial imperialism.

Brand begins with the contemplation of an old family photograph, inviting us into the intimate past of her childhood to think with her about what that past has produced. The photograph, taken in Trinidad in the 1950s before the country's independence from Britain, captures Brand with her two sisters and female cousin. The intent of the photographer was to arrange, organize, and present the young girls to their migrant mothers in England (and by extension the colonial mother, England) as evidence of their well-being, fealty, and love, with no trace of their autonomy or self-individuation. Presumptions of proper childlike behaviour

produced this negation of self-will as an expression of the unquestioned belief that adults always know what is best, and of gratitude for their sacrifices. In the same way, the power and pervasiveness of the rule, law, and educational apparatus of the colonial managers inculcated racialized subjects of British colonies in the Caribbean and elsewhere into a universalizing British cultural norm. Generations of managed peoples of the world have been taught not only to accept their role and place within the terms of empire and imperialism (whether in the Caribbean, Europe, Canada, or the United States), but also to see their participation in the project of empire as being in their own best interest—as a requirement for being "accepted and acceptable" (4). Looking at the photograph, Brand admits a kind of misrecognition: "I now recognize myself as authored, altered. As selected, sorted, from a series of selves for appearance and presentation" (5).

Brand's family photograph attempts precisely the careful authorship of Black Caribbean family life, with its overrepresentation of women and girls, to make this life acceptable and allowable—its presence quiet, safe, and unremarkable. Yet there are also registers in the photograph of the children's panicked refusal of this authority and discipline, a movement in excess of the scripted and authored self that disrupts the meaning or studium the photograph intends: "Ultimately, the photograph can't do all the work it is required to do—the photograph does produce them—but they are in the middle of being something—still pliable, permeable . . . they are/we are not properly composed" (6). "This porous portrait" (7) is framed by multiple cultural and historical relationships that make up "*the social life of the photo*" (Campt 6). Indeed, multiple histories and relations of conquest (Indigenous genocide, African enslavement, and Indian and Chinese indentureship) enter and interrupt the seemingly settled moment of the photograph. Brand explains that she uses the indefinite article in the first phrase of the book's title to make space for these multiple autobiographies, to signal "the complicated ways of reading and interpretation that are necessary under the conditions of coloniality" (8). The definite article in the second half of the title "identifies the subject who is supposed to be made, through colonial pedagogies in the form of texts—fiction, non-fiction, poetry, photographs, and government and bureaucratic structures" (8). The ways in which this subject is both mastered and "elide[s] to mastery as something other than violence, erasure, and absence" is the focus of Brand's inquiry (8).

Brand demonstrates that literature, like the authorial power of the photograph, wields a powerful capacity to author colonial subjectivity: "Narrative is not just the simple transportation of language but of ideas of the self, and ideas of the self that contain negations of other people" (28). Sylvia Wynter argues similarly that human behaviour does not exist before culture, but "comes into being simultaneously with it" (242). The rules of aesthetics produce "culture-specific, altruism-inducing, and cohering systems of meanings" (244) while positioning western European experience "as the experience of the generic human subject" (249). Ideas about race and colony are so deeply embedded in narrative that they are difficult to discern and dislodge: "the aesthetic can never be sutured against or cauterized from the 'colonial event' . . . the colonial event is the aesthetic. . . . What is pleasing, what is in beautiful form, is the violence" (Brand 24).

To disrupt narrative's normalization of relations of power, Brand employs Wynter's "practice of decipherment" (238) in a brilliant rereading of the literary canon from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.*,

to Albert Camus' *L'étranger*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Brand methodically excavates forgotten and unruly Black, Brown, and Creole characters, revealing with sudden clarity the racism and discourse of white supremacy that operate so seamlessly in narrative form, invisible and inaudible in their quotidian regularity. The unexpected, unruly, and agentic glimpses of these characters also lead Brand to the "counter-writing" and "counter-politics of 'feeling'" (Wynter 268) resonant in the works of Caribbean and Black writers such as C. L. R. James, Samuel Selvon, Jean Rhys, and John Keene. These works "take linear mapping as a strategy—of unearthing, unlayering, and revealing" (37). Concerned, however, that this might not be enough to decentre colonial logic, Brand offers a second strategy: a form of narrative that refuses "state writing" altogether and attends instead to Black people's "own expression" (41). Thinking with Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* and Wilson Harris' *Palace of the Peacock*, she concludes that "structures of sociality derived from the colonial moment . . . are anathema to our living" and must be rethought (45).

*An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading* is ultimately a stunning and beautiful reflection of porous and uncontainable Black life even in the face of conquest. Like the image in the photograph, Black life is still being made—autobiographies are still being written. In lyrical prose and unequivocal analysis, Brand offers a glimpse into a shared history, as well as the possibilities by which we might begin to live and imagine otherwise.

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## Me Instead of All

**Michael Dolzani**
*The Productions of Time: A Study of the Human Imagination*. McGill-Queen's UP $85.00

Reviewed by Fabio Akcelrud Durão (State University of Campinas)

On the dust cover of *The Productions of Time*, one reads,

> Myth criticism flourished in the mid-twentieth century under the powerful influence of Canadian thinker Northrop Frye. It asserted the need to identify common, unifying patterns in literature, arts, and religion. Although it was eclipsed by postmodern theories that asserted difference and conflict, those theories proved incapable of inspiring solidarity or guiding social action. *The Productions of Time* argues for a return to myth criticism in order to refine and extend its vision.

This is an ambitious project, mirrored in the size of the volume at 449 pages. There is a curious dialectics in it, because its two strongest points—namely, the text's

wide scope of reference and its desire to intervene in current critical debates—are precisely what renders this extensive endeavour a failure.

Michael Dolzani uses a mandala as a model to map out the whole of the human imagination; this mandala is made of two concentric circles, the external one revolving on transcendence and identity (above) and immanence and difference (below), and the inner one representing a cyclical version of time and the cardinal markers, North, South, East, and West (xvii). These two circles are cut by five horizontal levels, those of the Spiritual World, Paradisiacal World, Ordinary World, Otherworld, and the Unground. The text is logically divided into four main parts: "First There Is a Mountain: The Vertical Axis Ascending," "There Is a Season: The Cycle," "The Eye Begins to See: The Horizontal Axis," and "You Want It Darker: The Vertical Axis Descending." The mandala's movement is explained in the introduction: "Part 1 concerns the emanation from a central Monad of a vertical axis between two poles," those "of Identity and Difference" (xiv). Part 2 "examines the inner circle representing the cycles of natural time. It distinguishes between the unfallen and the fallen states of the natural world" (xv-xvi). The third part deals with the "horizontal axis of linear time, within which may occur the process of recreation of a previous vision" (xvi). The last part, finally, "follows the vertical axis downward, first from ordinary reality to the Otherworld that underlies it, then further to the realm of the unthinkable and unspeakable realm of Nothing, the Nadir." The aim "of the book is to build up a vision of eternity from the ruins of time, including the ruins of texts" (5).

Each of the four parts is subdivided into sections, which carry out the work of analysis almost as separate units. Since it is the mandala which organizes the presentation, not chronology, geography, or any other parameter, this means that the same writers may appear in different parts of the book, and that they can be combined in whichever way Dolzani deems adequate. *The Productions of Time* allows itself to mobilize not only the whole of Western literary tradition, but also all of the world's mythology and mass culture to boot. Taking a page at random, one finds mention, in this order, of Kafka's Gregor Samsa; Blake's *Four Zoas*; the films *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Saw*, and *Hostel*; Roman circus; Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*; Lynch's *Blue Velvet*; Dante's *Inferno*; and Lord Dunsany's "Two Bottles of Relish" (156). The book is full of interesting insights, and Dolzani's erudition is stunning in the process of adducing examples and suggesting connections to embody the mandala's movement; there is, however, a serious formal flaw in the argument, inasmuch as each subsection offers an *ad libitum* choice of artifacts for analysis. Since there is no closed set from which examples can be adduced, since strictly speaking there is no corpus, but rather everything that has been written or orally transmitted, the result is a highly subjective arrangement, which proves to be an artificial selection leading to superficial interpretations. An unsympathetic reader would have no difficulty thinking of a myriad of counter-examples for every argument Dolzani formulates. Ultimately, one learns more about the author's yearning to make sense of it all than about the world, humanity, cultural production, or any other grand structure of meaning.

The other positive aspect of *The Productions of Time* is its willingness to participate in current debates by way of a critique of poststructuralism, which is rightly considered to be in crisis. But since the remarks on Derrida & Co. are subsumed under the mythical frame, the confrontation is always too fast and never

receives enough space. Furthermore, poststructuralism is treated as a monolith, its internal differences and tensions being consistently silenced in the text. The purpose of this settling of accounts is to reach universality, something literary criticism has lost: "It may therefore be time for those of us in literary and cultural studies to retool our rhetoric. The idea that we are in all this together, that we are all interconnected, may be due for a new hearing" (18). How this ambition is frustrated in the text can be noted by the way the pronoun *we* functions in it. By the project's logic, it should be able to encompass us all, but by the way it is used in the book it expresses the opposite. Phrases like *as we can see* do not address the reader, but on the contrary work as a compositional device to join objects and claims proposed by the author. *We* is a purely rhetorical, empty signifier.

As for the analytical categories, I have three short observations. First, they are far from neutral and already bring in themselves the content that they were supposed to find in the object. The Fall is not a concept that can go without saying, but must be questioned as highly culturally specific. Second, the book wishes away fundamental philosophical problems: the subject-object split cannot be revoked at will, because it is constitutive even for that thinking which proposes their union. Third, "time" in the book's plot is not a character, for it does not bring about change; rather, it works as a backcloth in which eternity manifests itself.

To conclude, then, *The Productions of Time* stages a sad dialectical reversal. That which started as an attempt to reach the utmost degree of universality approaching the human imagination as such, and thus furnishing the means to the reunification of critical discourse, ends up as a whimsical, idiosyncratic, and in the last instance sterile exercise evincing more than anything the hollow supremacy of the subject.

## Pack It in Your Bones

**Leanne Betasamosake Simpson**
*Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies*. House of Anansi Press $22.95

Reviewed by Alexa Manuel (University of British Columbia)

The opening pages of *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) reflect the frozen state of the narrator, Mashkawaji (they/them). Each sentence floats in blank space as if the words themselves were encased in ice. Throughout the rest of the novel, as the sizes of each paragraph fluctuate with each page, Simpson's characters thaw and unfold through rich contemplations of the traditional and the contemporary. In this novel, Indigenous knowledges are centred by characters who utilize what they can to survive but also endure.

In her previous work of non-fiction, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Simpson writes about an elder who sometimes could not afford tobacco to offer the animal that he was hunting, so "he would gift the animal whatever he had with him of value"; often, this meant giving "a piece of his baloney sandwich," as this was all that he had (139). "He felt that the animal spirit would understand his intent and accept this gift in the spirit it had been intended," Simpson recalls. "These tiny rememberings are instructive to me." This tiny remembering is imperative to one of the main lessons of *Noopiming*: that ceremony

need not be grandiose or perfect for it to be meaningful, as with the old woman Mindimooyenh's annual visits to IKEA, where they "smudge in the parking lot" and offer semaa (tobacco) "to the *Ficus elastica* plant in the warehouse section" (48). When one participates in ceremony, it is easy to become lost in the idea that there is only one way to do it, but Simpson reminds us through these characters that ceremony can be found anywhere and that all of the land, wherever we might find it, is to be taken care of with the best intention of spirit. It is also important to use whatever means we can to the best of our abilities, as Mindimooyenh demonstrates with their "twenty 15 × 20 blue tarps" from Canadian Tire (85). Although polyethylene is not a sustainable product, Mindimooyenh's tarps have a wide range of applications and are the best thing available: "Tarp as tent. Tarp as sleeping bag. Tarp as blanket."

*Noopiming* highlights the hard and sometimes tedious work that it takes to live as an Indigenous person in a world where colonial forces attempt to limit traditional practices and English is the default language. Simpson invites readers to take on a very small portion of this work, in part through her unwillingness to provide clear translations of the Anishinaabemowin terminology that she frequently utilizes. Many of the terms can be found quite easily online, but without prior knowledge of any kind of Indigenous storytelling practices their context may not always be clear. However, this lack of context is less a barrier than an invitation to deepen our understanding of what it is to begin seeing the world outside of colonization. *Noopiming* also highlights the strengths found in living as someone connected with other beings—human and non-human alike. Simpson accomplishes this most profoundly through her description of Ninaatig, the maple tree, renumerating the sugar-making ceremony (89). By describing maple trees in ceremony, Simpson asks us to imagine for a moment that humans are not the only beings with consciousness, which in turn encourages us to think further about the responsibilities that we have to these beings and to the world around us.

Ninaatig recounts their participation in the sugar-making ceremony, in which their body is "pierced" (89). Although the ordeal is painful, it is also useful, requiring "focus and commitment." The ceremony also serves to bring Ninaatig closer to their friends and neighbours, who support them by keeping them hydrated and offering words of encouragement. Although the ceremony is halted for many years due to Ninaatig's location in a public park where "tree cops" disallow the practice, Ninaatig merely considers their responsibilities to have "shifted," and they still act as a protector to those around them. In *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017), one of Simpson's characters worries about the effects of "piercing" a maple tree for its sap: "I hesitate, and then I take out the drill. I hope this doesn't hurt" (8). In *Noopiming*, Simpson has effectively changed the perspective from a human taking sap from an unwitting tree to a tree lovingly giving their sap, even if it does hurt them. It is in this giving that we feel connection.

*Noopiming* is a novel about the power of giving one's time, energy, and love to others and also about the power of allowing oneself to be loved and to be taken care of by others, and the many ways one can do so. It is a novel about what it means to live in the world as a human being, one with responsibilities not only to others but also to oneself, to one's past, and to one's future.

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## Chinks into Bone

**Larissa Lai**
*Iron Goddess of Mercy*. Arsenal Pulp Press $19.95

Reviewed by Michelle N. Huang (Northwestern University)

Donna Haraway's socialist-feminist "Cyborg Manifesto" famously concludes, "[t]hough both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (181). Yet few readers note Haraway's earlier invocation of the Third World woman: "Ironically, it might be the unnatural cyborg women making chips in Asia and spiral dancing in Santa Rita jail whose constructed unities will guide effective oppositional strategies" (154).

Larissa Lai's long poem *Iron Goddess of Mercy* dances this techno-scientific spiral. Ostensibly in numerical order, with sixty-four fragments patterned on the *I Ching*'s hexagrams, *Iron Goddess* alternates between furious blocks of prose poetry and atomized not-quite-haikus (a nod to the haibun genre). Taking its name from a strain of oolong tea that originates from the Fujian province in southern China, the poem crackles: "Dear Oolong, if there were no such thing as tea, none of this would have Happened" (141). It would be too easy to say *Iron Goddess of Mercy* is about anti-imperialism in Hong Kong, Asian North American racialization, and gender violence. But the poem cannot be reduced to these neat descriptions, for it is just as much about casinos, climate change, and cooties. Through it all, the speaker—a "crazy lady" in the maenadic genealogy of Maxine Hong Kingston, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Ocean Vuong—cackles.

This book is impossible fully to understand and makes fun of you for trying. Its controlling form is the epistolary, which vacillates from mocking to loving, from wry to melancholic. Always, the salutation *dear* tongues the intimacy of violence. Elon Musk, Achilles, and "Polar Bear" are a sample of recipients. Fragment 57 begins "Dear Dirty Knees," recalling the racist children's playground chant—"chinese japanese dirty knees" (124)—that makes a joke of Asian agricultural labourers kneeling in fields. But the fragment then inverts the singsong logic of the chant to poke fun at artifacts of Orientalism and settler colonialism: "mr lawrence we travel belt and road to arabia chanting Om or give me a Home . . . While buffalo dream swarm intelligence no soldiers can solder the four winds" (155).

In a rare moment of unequivocal sincerity, the poem honours *The Rape of Nanking* author Iris Chang—"here's a flower for Saint Iris, her live horses the latest casualty of Nanking" (122)—who died by suicide, warning readers against forgetting wars and suggesting that amnesia is a more powerful drug than Oriental opium. The elicitation tenderly draws the reader in, but the next fragment immediately pivots to "$39.99 at Sephora / BB cream on sale / Precious poppy pink" (123), framing commodity capitalism as noxious bloom.

Above all, *Iron Goddess of Mercy* constitutes a poetic counter-archive of the present, one showing that we live in the ruins of civilizational progress. We have been borne by railways, those engines of modernity built by Chinese labourers:

"All the tracks we built, then and now, in Africa, Asia, Turtle Island, could we take them back find another way to survive the dearth the braid the China trade?" (48). But now we sit in the "uber of Alice's magic mushroom" (121). The reader awakes in the backseat of the American Dream to find that they are actually in an "economic abattoir" (100), a world where *Amazon* does not primarily refer to the region that hosts forty per cent of the world's remaining rainforest.

Yet the remains remain and speak back. The line "Dear Chinese Lady, awake in your takeout box" (168) immediately conjures up Afong Moy, the first known Chinese woman in the United States, who was exhibited as the "Chinese Lady" by P. T. Barnum. We might think of her as an early cyborg woman, a globalized object generating profit for white businessmen. One cannot imagine Moy sitting in her "Chinese room," where she played with chopsticks and showed off her bound feet, without thinking about the conceptual and discursive boxes into which Asian women are continuously being stuffed. Indeed, timeliest among the poem's targets is managed diversity: "Dear Pluralism, thick fish without history, managing my difference, finding the soft chair at the unequal table, squishing your wish for justice. You beat the socks off white nationalism, I guess" (100). (On managerial approaches to difference, see Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things* [2012]; Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy* [2011]; and Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* [2019].) As diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops proliferate while critical race theory is banned, neoliberal multiculturalism is revealed as an engine of capitalism rather than its antidote. In this sense, Moy is the exception that proves the rule of anonymity characteristic of Haraway's cyborg women, and so is Lai, who leaves us with a final image, a diagrammatic sketch that can be read multiple ways: "[Y]esterday / the future / arrives" (179). It is arriving, raining debris upon us, still.

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## It's All Relative, Really

**Karen Hofmann**
*A Brief View from the Coastal Suite*. NeWest Press $21.95

**Kevin Holowack**
*Light on a Part of the Field*. NeWest Press $21.95

Reviewed by Carly Atkinson (University of Ottawa)

The third novel published by Karen Hofmann, *A Brief View from the Coastal Suite*, continues the uneasy story of the Lund family—introduced in Hofmann's 2017 work *What Is Going to Happen Next*. Focalized through siblings Cleo, Cliff, and Mandalay Lund during the period following the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, the work reflects the instability of the time as the protagonists contemplate and contend with personal hardship alongside worsening social and economic conditions, including inflation, soaring housing costs, gentrification, and class stratification. Family and individual trauma are enmeshed throughout the novel

with the pernicious material conditions of modern capitalism, and personal relationships consequently are pushed to their breaking points.

As the novel progresses, we find that Cleo, the youngest sister, suffers from a chronic need to measure herself against others. She is a being driven by the conditional; she should update her home, should make time for her children, should acquiesce to the mercurial whims of her husband. As she travels between the usual haunts of privileged women—cycling between her suburban home on the outskirts of Vancouver, spin class, book club, and her well-paid job in the city—she spends her time relentlessly pursuing her vision of orderly, curated control in both her personal and professional life.

Equally class-conscious Mandalay also struggles to fit within the mould that she has constructed. Envisioning herself as part of the project of urban metropolitanism, she subscribes to the idea of the city as an enlightened socioeconomic contact zone, where proximity blurs the boundaries of class, ethnicity, and race. She rails against privilege, projecting her own on to her ex-partner Duane as she attempts to raise their children in "the real world" (192), and registers the requisite whiff of concern over the gentrification of her neighbourhood—before retreating back into thoughts of improved property values and the aesthetic pleasures of modern minimalist architecture.

At the same time, oldest brother Cliff lacks a sense of control over his life. A non-confrontational soul with little confidence in his own business acumen, Cliff allows his younger-brother-turned-manipulative-business-partner Ben to make unilateral decisions that jeopardize their company. Things are much the same at home, where his wife, Veronika, treats him with contempt for his mounting inability to financially support her endless accumulation of domestic comforts. The push and pull of familial influence in Cliff's life sweeps him along, leaving him a victim of his own complacency and insecurity.

Each protagonist in the novel labours under the burden of expectation—what they expect of others, what is expected of them, and what they expect of themselves. The static images that the characters hold of themselves and their relations are in conflict with the realities of their lived identities, with the dynamic process of reinvention that life and time inevitably precipitate. The novel's concern with time, particularly our experience of it, and the relations shared between people beautifully explores how we define ourselves as human beings. The characters in *A Brief View from the Coastal Suite* are profoundly flawed, frequently frustrating, and utterly compelling.

*Light on a Part of the Field*, Kevin Holowack's debut novel, shares thematic elements with Hofmann's work, including a mutual consideration of family and relationality. Both texts highlight the productive friction generated in human interactions as the protagonists grapple with their individual perspectives and the often conflicting or confounding subjectivities of their family members, neighbours, and acquaintances.

Holowack's novel parallels the lives of Ruth Windsor and her daughter Gayle, as the story oscillates temporally between the 1960s and 1970s. In 1960, Ruth is a nineteen-year-old newlywed and soon-to-be mother married to Al, a thirty-two-year-old academic. During an impromptu trip to a secluded tourist spot, taken after a domestic dispute, the pair are struck by lightning, irrevocably altering the trajectory of their lives. Both are unsettled by the experience; Al buries himself in poetry and his job, and Ruth slowly pulls away from the world—disdaining its noise, banality, and profit-driven production. She develops an interest in aesthetics

and consciousness that simultaneously drives her actions and troubles her sense of belonging in society.

At the close of the 1970s, we find an isolated and prematurely wizened Ruth, living with her daughters on a hobby farm after the disappearance of her husband. Settled on the periphery of Salmon Arm, "[a]way from people, away from the news, the world" (91), boredom and discomfort colour the lives of both Ruth and her oldest daughter, Gayle. Ruth whiles away her days chasing shadows and working on paintings that she largely refuses to finish while her daughters take care of their few ailing cows. Gayle, now nineteen herself, is a being of expansive longing. She is ever seeking, unknowingly chasing an unreachable horizon, and she soon absconds with a young man who temporarily takes refuge on their farm on his way east.

Of the novel's many virtues, one of the most compelling is its overt and underlying contemplation of the division between art and labour; by exploring this partition, *Light on a Part of the Field* artfully delves into and complicates the supposed dichotomies between the internal and external, the public and private, and the material and immaterial. Both mother and daughter are mired in an ideology that attempts to strictly delineate between beauty and the economic and material practices of everyday life. The realm of used cars, quotidian jobs, and small talk about the weather inspires distaste for "real-life things" (104), and the protagonists are presented as raw nerves in a society that attempts to commodify and strictly plot experience; they seem poised, at all times in the novel, on the brink of revolution or self-destruction. In this way, Holowack—much like Hofmann—explores individual relations on a local scale, which serves to produce commentary on widespread social, ideological, and economic tensions.

## Here and There

**Tara Borin**
*The Pit*. Harbour Publishing $18.95

**Andreae Callanan**
*The Debt*. Biblioasis Publishing $19.95

**Terence Young**
*Smithereens*. Harbour Publishing $18.95

Reviewed by Owen Torrey (Harvard University)

"Where is here?" The words are Northrop Frye's, from 1965, writing in the "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*" (220). It's a question linked to the critic's general principle that every poetic temperament is determined by a set of coordinates—the landscape a poet looks out onto, lives within. The half-sphere sky of the Prairies, the neck-craning heights of the West Coast: each of these, for Frye, produces a distinctive sensibility that marks itself on the page, revealing where its poet calls "here."

"*Aren't we lucky / to be here today*," writes Tara Borin early in *The Pit* (9). The "here" here—as throughout the collection, Borin's debut—is Dawson City, Yukon. More precisely, the book camps out on Third Avenue, inside the bar of the Westminster Hotel, a local institution nicknamed the Pit. "The Pit is the Yukon's oldest and longest running bar and hotel," Borin explains, taking us through

"paths / pressed in snow," across the frozen river, until here we are (4).

At its core, *The Pit* is a portrait of this interior space. Borin's lines are suffused with the hot breath of voices, the soft glow of Christmas lights, the sound of people coming and going and coming back again. In "We'll Never Have Enough of This," Borin collages together scraps of graffiti scrawled across the women's washroom. "You are beautiful and / every thought you have / is a real thing, / transient and shifting, / like water," reads one inscription. "You should dump him / before he dumps you, / dingus," goes another (28). Though interior, these poems are never insular, keeping an eye on the vast environment outside of the bar's doors. Water bursts in, sliding tables across the floor. Light shines "hard as sin" through the window (8). Furnaces grasp for heat in weeks of forty below.

What defines the Pit—as both place and collection—are the people who pass through its doors. "The Regulars," one of the book's five sections, dispatches a set of character studies: a night janitor, a water-witcher, a retired barmaid. The speaker gestures, in the final poem, to the Pit's south end, where photos of regulars who have passed away are nailed into the pressed-tin wall. Borin's collection shows place to be shaped just as much by layered tributaries of community as by the contours of a physical environment. Where is here? "Here," Borin answers, "is where we find / the shortest distance / to each other" (4).

Cross a farther distance, towards the East Coast, and find the poet and scholar Andreae Callanan, who lives and writes St. John's, Newfoundland. The poems in her debut collection, *The Debt*, sketch two overlapping topographies: the landscape of Newfoundland itself, and the imaginative geography of her speaker's life. Callanan, who writes in lilting, compulsively alliterative lines—take the letter *b*, and quickly find: "bent-birch" (25), "blasty boughs" (20), "bobbing berg" (31), "bright bow" (58), "berries blaze" (20)—renders a place thick with speech and memory, gannets and wild mint. "Come here," she invites, "I'll draw you a map" (16).

Yet maps have a habit of flattening as much as they reveal. "I like maps, because they lie," the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska writes. "Because they give no access to the vicious truth" (432). It is a maxim proven to be true by the limits of *The Debt*'s quasi-cartographic approach, which tends to enumerate, rather than reveal, through its many listed lines. "[C]lover, daisies, / vetch, burdock, curled dock, evening / primrose," goes one poem (52). Helpless commas are burdened with a task that ought to be a more concerted formal effort: drawing intricate, etched linkages between the things that compose a place.

At its most enveloping, *The Debt* goes beyond visible geography, parsing out histories contained within the "[t]ime-carved / cathedrals of cliff" (11). Callanan delivers ravishing descriptions of a childhood spent here: playing dockside soccer, loitering around the War Memorial. These personal recollections allow the poems to look out over a broader cultural past—"a hungry history"—that shapes what it means to live on this strip of land (16). "We are all debtors here," she writes, in the titular poem,

> beholden
> to this jagged place for every lungful
> of spruce-laced salted air, each slap
> of ocean blasting rock and boat, dock
> and ankle. (63)

History and its obligations surge up, like black waves along the shore.

A similar tide arrives on Vancouver Island, where writer Terence Young has crafted his third book of poems, *Smithereens*. Diffuse and conversational, the poems are thematically bound together by the thin wire of time—what it takes from us, what it leaves behind. To get at these ideas, Young consults a guidebook of the west coast's natural landscape. One poem, "The Animals Lie Down to Die," discovers a deer skeleton nestled into the "soft vellum of / years of needles," a scene that becomes an imagistic analog for the speaker to consider his own mother's passing (45).

Yet *Smithereens* resists approaching its environment as a purely symbolic terrain, ripe for easy self-and-nature symmetries. No—these forests are "illegible," and however much the speaker searches for a clear mirror in the landscape, it is always rearranging itself, evading his pins of explanation (45). In "The Rites of Spring," Young catalogues a set of ecological injuries that have rapidly transformed the local environment: "sun damage, frost damage," "climate change, gamma rays" (77). How does one affix words—like *here*, like *home*—to a location that is increasingly variable, never exactly the same as it was yesterday?

Perhaps it is a start to simply bear witness, to uproot one's language and pull it alongside a place as it moves. In one poem, Young's speaker engages in a simple meditation: recording onto the page how the weather shifts, from moment to moment, around him. First, "[t]ides / roll back over mud." Then, "[c]louds hang lower and lower." And here—above the ocean, inside the poem—"[i]t rains" (73).

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## Secrets, Deception, Celebrity

**Margaret Atwood**
*Burning Questions: Essays and Occasional Pieces, 2004-2021*. McClelland & Stewart $36.95

**Margaret Atwood**
*The Testaments*. McClelland & Stewart $22.00

Reviewed by Sharon Engbrecht (University of British Columbia)

I'll admit, I've been putting off Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019). When it first came out, I bought a first printing, first edition hardcover, as I usually do with her work. But I've been conflicted about Atwood's writing since *UBC Accountable* and Hannah McGregor, Julie Rak, and Erin Wunker's edited collection *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* (2018) was published. In 2016, a number of well-known Canadian authors penned "An Open Letter to UBC: Steven Galloway's Right to Due Process," which focused on UBC's handling of allegations surrounding Galloway's relationship with one of his female students. Many signatories later withdrew their support as concerns were raised around the treatment of the woman's testimony and the imbalance of power in the alleged relationship. Atwood refused to remove her signature, even after public concern about her response raised questions around the

systemic barriers women face in reporting sexual assault. Instead, Atwood continued to champion her position, suggesting that to assume all women, as a group, "are always right and never lie . . . would do a great disservice to accusing women and abuse survivors, since it discredits any accusations immediately" ("Margaret Atwood on the Galloway Affair"). Recounting the case, Constance Grady writes in response to this statement that "The harm suffered by the complainants . . . —both allegedly at Galloway's hands and then later, over the course of the investigation and its aftermath—[is] brushed aside as unimportant." Characterizing this controversy as one of many, *Refuse* speaks to the colonialist, white, often privileged legacy of Canadian literature as a field and publishing industry—the same industry that made Atwood what she is today.

Since Atwood, in her long publishing career, has often used the first-person female narrator to discuss feminist themes of agency, reproduction, equality, and personal struggle, her response to the Galloway affair, and writing since, have been received under this shadow. Atwood has long stated she's *not* a feminist, or she's a "bad" feminist, and that she refuses the "dangers of a dictatorship by *ism*" ("If" 208). Atwood's scholarly audience, familiar with the feminist concerns that backlight much of her work, frequently draws attention to this disconnect between how she perceives herself as an author, her status as a public intellectual, and her use of international platforms to voice her opinions on topics from war to environmentalism, debt, and, of course, how authors are treated in the realm of public opinion. It was only when the opportunity to review *Burning Questions* (2022) arose that I thought I should see what Atwood's latest novel is all about.

*The Testaments*' predecessor, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), focuses on the complexity of testimony, duress, and restricted rights for individuals identified as female via female-coded reproductive organs (whether functional or not). The narrative is told through the lens of June (Offred) during her forced incarceration in Gilead; she is essentially a woman forced to become a surrogate mother because of her viable uterus. The dystopian world of *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a vital tool for decoding *The Testaments*, as Atwood's sequel sparingly includes descriptions of the oppressive society in which birth rates have decreased and perverted religious zeal, in support of white cis-patriarchy, has taken power. Departing from June's narrative, *The Testaments* is told as written testimonial through Aunt Lydia and two younger women, Agnes and Nicole, who turn out to be sisters. *The Testaments* is set after June's escape, hinting from the beginning about her role in the kidnapping of "Baby Nicole" and her being the mother of the two girls. However, the sisters don't grow up knowing each other or their biological mother. Instead, June is a character outside the storyworld, never referred to by name. Agnes is raised in a Commander's house by an adopted mother and trained to be a Wife in an arranged marriage, while Nicole, then called Daisy, is raised by two guardians, Neil and Melanie, in Canada for the May Day resistance. Daisy, who doesn't share her identity at the beginning of her testimony, turns out to be Baby Nicole, now an icon of Gilead, who then joins May Day and, undercover as Jade, infiltrates Gilead to transport incriminating documentation that will bring about the downfall of the oppressive society.

*The Testaments* draws on elements of many of Atwood's novels, including *Alias Grace* and *The Year of the Flood*. *The Testaments* recalls the mystery unravelling in *Alias Grace* yet robs the reader of the ambiguous postmodern ending that disrupts the continuity of authority. There isn't much doubt cast on

the multiple narrative points of view, nor are there contradictory historical facts to complicate the testimony—save for the caricature of an academic conference, "The Thirteenth Symposium," that draws direct connections to the "Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies" in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As with *The Year of the Flood* (2009), readers bear witness to testimonies through multiple narrative points of view. However, Aunt Lydia doesn't have the same psychological complexity or inner tensions of Toby in *The Year of the Flood*—inner tensions that also made *The Handmaid's Tale* so provocative. Missing from Aunt Lydia's tale are the complications of duress. Her female body and her experience in the judicial system working on domestic cases and sexual assault, and with female criminals and sex workers (171), seem to have little impact on her empathy and decision-making. Her own "faults" of an abortion and divorce, "now a crime" under Gileadean law, are listed but not explored; as she admits to an assumed reader, "No, I was not raped" (149), though she orchestrates many. In fact, her new role as an Aunt doesn't seem to cause her much moral conflict or internal fretting, unlike being caught for writing down her story. Atwood glosses over Aunt Lydia's experience as a woman in Gilead, instead drawing attention to her aging body. Her narrative conveys little fear of Commander Judd, even though her life must be constantly at risk as she competes for what little power is afforded women in her station with Aunt Vidala, Aunt Elizabeth, and Aunt Helena (reminiscent of the female competition in *Cat's Eye*). At the same time, Commander Judd seems to be a conflation of Orwell's O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and the fairy-tale Bluebeard, as Aunt Lydia recounts his crimes, his role in establishing and sustaining Gilead, and his wives piling up as skeletons in his closet. Yet Judd doesn't seem as sinister; Aunt Lydia describes him as a powerful fool, one she is able to constantly outwit.

The contours of the female body, the hairy legs and June's desperation for moisturizer, are absent. There seems to be more telling than showing as Atwood jests about the threat of penises. "Penises . . . Them Again," Aunt Lydia states as Aunt Lise shares the traumatic experiences of Becka, Agnes' friend, who has attempted suicide in response to the prospect of being forced to be a Wife (214). Aunt Lydia's narrative doesn't convey the same duress as June's; nor do the narratives of Agnes and Nicole.

The teen angst that, in *The Year of the Flood*, imbued Ren's narrative with contradiction and motivation seems to have been lost in *The Testaments*' narrative construction of Daisy/Jade/Nicole and Agnes. The sisters' actions are plot-driven more than a part of their psychological or emotional growth—they don't come to any revelation about what they've been through or how it has changed them. Although Atwood toys with serious concerns about consent, such as when she vividly depicts the grotesque Commander Judd kissing teenage Agnes at their engagement, she undercuts the political potential in these scenes with tawdry imagery. When she presents the Commander kissing Agnes' forehead with "unpleasantly warm" lips that make "a sucking sound" (226), instead of focusing on the sexual exploitation, Atwood has naive Agnes imagine the Commander is sucking her brain out of her head. These perfunctory scenes distract from the political coherence of Atwood's work. However, *The Testaments* is also an unusual book for Atwood, as she collaboratively develops the storyworld alongside Bruce Miller's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the "award-winning *MGM* and *Hulu* television series" (418). This perhaps constrained Atwood's choice of descriptions and reflections as the adaptation's vivid representation of her storyworld

solidified the visual depictions of Gilead.

On the whole, *The Testaments* is interesting. It picks up threads of the Gileadean world without the drama of entanglement from June's narrative. Men are stock characters more so than love interests, and there's always a way for women who aren't handmaidens to sidestep their female responsibilities as wives and mothers. Women still circulate between men as commodities in Gilead, but given the right station, through secrets and deception, women too have power in that world—which seems to compete with the political message in *The Handmaid's Tale*—as Atwood seemingly responds to herself metafictionally as an author who performs the role of objective witness rather than political mouthpiece.

*Burning Questions* (2022), Atwood's latest collection of essays, includes some of her editorials, reviews, speeches, obituaries for friends and writers, and occasional writing from 2004 to 2021. It begins with a semi-autobiographical reflection on her career during this time, including the publication of her *MaddAddam* trilogy, her Massey Lectures (*Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*), and *The Testaments*, events that structure which texts were included in *Burning Questions* and how they are organized. She mentions two of her previous collections, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose 1960-1982* (1982) and *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent 1982-2004* (2004), both from House of Anansi Press, but omits *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing 1970-2005* (Virago, 2005) and *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983-2005* (Carroll & Graf, 2005). Each collection has overlapping but slightly different content. The references in this review are to Carroll & Graf's *Writing with Intent*, though readers may be more familiar with *Moving Targets* (the most notable omission from the latter collection is Atwood's essay on pornography from *Chatelaine* [Sept. 1983]).

The subtext of the introduction is a response to the criticism Atwood has faced in some academic circles, where she has been asked to be more accountable as a literary celebrity with massive cultural influence. Atwood's response to the *UBC Accountable* letter, as Erika Thorkelson suggests, "ignor[es] the long, horrible history of women being erased and destroyed in the reporting process" (185). But in her introduction Atwood ironically emphasizes how each generation claims to have "a monopoly on atrocities" (*Burning* xv), and asks if authors should "be mere mouthpieces, reeling out acceptable platitudes that are supposed to be good for society, or if we have some other function" (xvii). When it comes to what she calls the "culture wars" (in scare quotes), Atwood writes, "[a]gainst this background, I wrote about the need for truth, fact-checking, and fairness" (xix). But her remarks raise questions, as many of her novels do, around whose truth, which facts, and fairness according to whom? Long-time Atwood scholar Lorraine York, author of *Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity* (2013), in describing her movement away from scholarship on Atwood's writing, notes that literary celebrities in Atwood's position occupy "overlapping intertwined nodes of power in the Canadian literary and media worlds, and in exercising that power to exclude others, they have done considerable harm" (132). The publication of *Burning Questions* comes at a time in Atwood's career when her reputation as a literary celebrity and world-renowned author impacts the reception of her work—writing that has capitalized on the feminist themes she publicly discredits.

The collection is divided into five sections, the topics of which will be familiar to those who have read Atwood's other collections of non-fiction. Many of her essays

reflect on her experience as a writer and woman, on what fiction is or can do, and on what it means to be human—themes from her *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002). A number of the essays correspond to earlier works, such as "On Being a 'Woman Writer': Paradoxes and Dilemmas," "The Curse of Eve—or, What I Learned in School" (both from *Second Words*), and "Writing Utopia" (from *Writing with Intent* and *Moving Targets*). Several of the reviews and talks draw on her long-standing environmental activism, although she continues to remind readers that she is "a fiction writer," not a politician or scientist, which gives her "a big advantage in the truth-or-fiction arena" (61). In reading her essay "Ancient Balances," I noted that it shares a title with the first section of *Payback* and is a condensed version of that Massey Lecture. However, "Debtor's Prism" (2008), from *The Wall Street Journal*, is missing. This article was part of the marketing and publicity for her Massey Lecture tour but nicely emphasizes the storytelling element in her concept of debt as a dynamic metaphor.

"In Translationland" begins with Atwood admitting, "I'm always a bit of a nightmare for my translators" (222), as her English often includes satirical, ironic, and implicit meanings. Her reflection on Kafka reveals a truism at the core of much of her work: "my real subject was not the author of the book, but the author of the essay: me, a somewhat stern-minded and pedantic neophyte writer preoccupied with her own pressing artistic concerns" (236). "Future Library" is about "Scribbler Moon," a piece of writing Atwood created for the Future Library project, imagining readers of the future, that won't be available to read until 2114. "Reflections on *The Handmaid's Tale*" traces Atwood's experience with feminism and the production of that novel, which she calls "not a very cozy book" (245). Her recollection of her research on credit cards—that "if we came to rely on them and only them, [they] could so easily be used to control us" (245)—recalls her essays on *The Handmaid's Tale* from *Writing with Intent* and the files in the Margaret Atwood fonds at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library about credit cards and tracking, which she refers to in *The Testaments*' end matter and which are also in the archives under her research for *Payback*. She mentions "Unfreedom" here, and I was glad to see "We Are Double-Plus Unfree" (2015) has been included, as it's a useful teaching text that asks readers to consider how individuals benefit from having "freedom from" and "freedom to." Ultimately, Atwood argues, "The majority of us are double-plus unfree: our 'freedom to' is limited to approved and supervised activities, and our 'freedom from' doesn't keep us free from a great many things that can end up killing us" (264). However, I was disappointed that her 2016 keynote speech for the University of Calgary Faculty of Nursing's *Compassion under Contemporary Conditions* Interdisciplinary Symposium was omitted. This speech included an Atwoodian take on what it means to be compassionate and how compassion, especially in caregiving, can sometimes mean caring too much or in the wrong way.

"Am I a Bad Feminist?" (2018)—not to be confused with Roxane Gay's concept of edgy feminism in *Bad Feminist* (2014)—has been included. When she asks, "Do Good Feminists believe that only women should have such rights?" (326), Atwood is being purposely inflammatory as well as reductive. Her attempts at wit reveal that she may be out of touch with current intersectional feminist research, as she glosses over her motivation for supporting Galloway (he's part of her in-crowd of Canadian literary celebrities). The case remains controversial, even as her argument implicitly supports Galloway: "A fair-minded person would now withhold judgement as to guilt until the report and the evidence are available for us to see" (336). Given her themes

in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, and even *Alias Grace*, it's strange that she's calling for reports, evidence, and proof—essentially asking the victims of sexual assault, whether alleged or not, to offer their bodies and traumatic experiences up for public consumption without vast networks of support to shelter them. In the bad feminist case, she seems to be arguing against the court of public opinion but fails to articulate her own stake and political positioning in that fight. "Greetings, Earthlings! What Are These Human Rights of Which You Speak?" (2018), a speculative fiction, seems misplaced in the collection, especially as it's followed by the tenth-anniversary introduction to *Payback* and "Tell. The. Truth" (2019), Atwood's acceptance speech for the Burke Medal, awarded by the (Trinity) College Historical Society.

In the closing section, Atwood reflects on COVID-19, a pandemic eerily reminiscent of the plot in *Oryx and Crake*. She also includes a review of Maggie Doherty's *The Equivalents* that recounts the sexism she experienced during her time at Harvard. In interviews, she often uses the story of her having to serve tea during breaks to the men in her classes at Harvard. Her usual response is to say that's just the way it was, because it happened before second-wave feminism was part of the mainstream. While an interesting snapshot of her experience in the 1960s, the essay reductively argues in polemical terms about women and men. Given that the essay was written over forty years after second-wave feminism, Atwood could possibly have contextualized the misogyny better.

As suggested above, *Burning Questions* can be read as an ongoing correspondence with many of her earlier non-fiction works, especially *Second Words* and *Writing with Intent*. While many of the essays and reviews are openly accessible in digital form, some of her speeches in *Burning Questions* are only available in the Atwood archives. If you work on Atwood's writing, this is a hugely valuable collection to have.

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## Post-Dated

**David Staines**
*A History of Canadian Fiction*. Cambridge UP $126.95

Reviewed by Shane Neilson (McMaster University)

David Staines' *A History of Canadian Fiction* fills a long-standing gap in our scholarly understanding of Canadian fiction, for, as he puts it in his introduction, his is the "first detailed history" (1). I think it indeed a detailed and thorough history, albeit one with gaps of its own; it's also a book that may blunt its own reception in academic circles because of its variance with contemporary political mores (it largely refuses to think capital-T Theory).

Many histories of Canadian literature have been written—see, e.g., W. J. Keith's *Canadian Literature in English*, in two volumes; Nick Mount's *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* and *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*; and the venerable two-volume *Literary History of Canada*—but none has such a focus on fiction. If, like me, you think it a bit incredible to recognize just how late it is for a literary history of Canadian fiction in English to arrive, you might also feel like many of the moves made in the introduction are strangely dated.

For example, Staines ritually invokes the Canadian identity question. The naïveté of his initial formulation will please few contemporary scholars: "Canada . . . had no defining interest to the outside world—it had never won a war, it had no major problems to demand world attention, yet Canadian fiction was growing without the steady and sometimes overpowering gaze of the outside world" (1). Yet he doesn't deliver on the academic ritual by delivering a definition that somehow brings to bear all the things cohering within (and also ill-fitting within) the category of "Canadian." Indeed, he veers perilously close to fashion's shoals when he writes the following in his first chapter:

> Where does Canadian fiction find its beginnings? Not so far back as about 11500 BC when Indigenous people, the first inhabitants of the land that would become Canada, moved across the Bering Plain to settle in the new land. Not so far back as about 1000 AD when the Vikings set up a small settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in what would become Newfoundland. Not so far back as the late fifteenth century when Jean Cabot sailed to Newfoundland, or the sixteenth century when Jean Cabot Jacques Cartier sailed to the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1534, or even . . ." (4)

Staines goes on at length, but one has to ask the question: Why not? This "why" is never addressed, making the organizing force of the book an ironically nebulous definition of Canada; in a double irony, it is a negative definition. Perhaps it *is* the lack of definition that is the book's definition, for it largely exists in a zone of whiteness. Though as the book proceeds, the author's own view becomes glimpsed in what feels like a Boomer anti-Americanism:

> [Arthur] Stringer had a large and faithful following for his many novels, yet his novels are finally not about Canada nor are they written from a Canadian perspective. An expatriate who became an American citizen in 1937, he chose to become an American writer and thereby

> lost his Canadian vision. When he returned to a Canadian setting, he could not capture the land he had once known so well. In 1946, the University of Western Ontario awarded him an honorary degree in recognition of his literary contributions to Canadian letters! (28)

Why the outraged exclamation mark? In the next paragraph, Norman Duncan is mentioned. Born Canadian like Stringer, he left for the United States but "never became an American citizen . . . Duncan found his natural vehicle in the earthy idiosyncrasies of his character's speech . . . [h]ere was a writer trying to capture the reality of his people . . . [h]e never abandoned his Canadian perspective, that of an outsider who sought out people to investigate, to map, to record" (28-30). So a Canadian perspective is to investigate, map, and record . . . to be colonial?

Adding to the strangeness of direction for a contemporary volume of CanLit scholarship is a triumphalist (and presentist) narrative about literary quality: "The history of Canadian fiction is not so old—not so old as that of European countries, not so old as that of American fiction. It begins in the nineteenth century, it blossomed in the mid-twentieth century, and it accepted its position on the world stage in the later twentieth century" (3). Only later in the introduction does Staines connect with the current academic obsession by porting in the colonial vector: "For the earliest writers, Canada was a colony, where *there* must be the centre for the colonial mind . . . Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to probe the meaning of *here* were grounded in the colonial understanding of Canada's place as a settler colony in relation to its mother country" (3). And so on and so forth. Yet the intro creates more dissonance between contemporary scholarship by concluding on a note of multiculturalism: "Then, as the twentieth century moved to its close, there was now a multicultural and multiracial world in Canada where Canadian-born writers were increasingly augmented by naturalized voices unafraid to write about their own chosen landscapes far from the supposedly safe world that is Canada" (3). None of this is objectionable per se, and it certainly isn't factually incorrect; but it is at profound variance with the self-lacerating tendencies of contemporary scholarship (there's nary a word about anti-Black racism, for example). For an introduction to conclude on a positive characterization of multiculturalism is to *really* poke the academic bear. And for the first chapter to claim, after a discussion of *The History of Emily Montague*, that in terms of literary representation "Canada was still a country to be plundered" (5) makes one fear for the author at conferences.

Continuing in the vein of "can't-please-everyone" is the relative lack of severity when it comes to aesthetic judgment. Staines simply isn't terribly interested in condemning our literary ancestors as "good spellers," as Mordecai Richler famously put the matter. So academics won't be pleased while aesthetic critics, following in the tradition of John Metcalf, will be irritated by the lack of hair shirt cilice assignments. (Perhaps a zero-sum game of self-cringe is the ultimate colonial habit, and one that should be disdained.)

In "The Beginnings," the first chapter, Staines draws together several strands to weave a narrative out of what is otherwise an inchoate start to Canadian literature: what he defines as *immigrant writing* and *animal stories*. The chapter would benefit from stricter definition of terms insofar as there is no Frygian taxonomy of *fiction*, *tale*, and *fable*, for example, nor *romance* or *realism*; sometimes these terms appear in the same sentence when texts are described. Nor are enough genealogies

developed between the early texts and those that come later, in chapter 2 ("From Romance towards Realism") and beyond. Yet the sheer efficacy of the contextual material that Staines *does* provide is to be commended. Books are summarized and dispatched with aplomb, though the hyper-paraphrase experience suggests that this book is both an expansion and reorganization of books such as William Toye's *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, in which books and authors are listed alphabetically. Either way, we get postage-stamp views of the individual titles of canonical authors. These become increasingly concentrated as the chapters progress, for as the canon broadens, the treatments flatten; indeed, even what theoretical structuring is there in the early going seems to evaporate as the book gains speed—much as will happen in the next paragraph.

Chapter 3 ("Emerging into Realism") focuses on Raymond Knister, Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, Hugh MacLennan, Howard O'Hagan, W. O. Mitchell, Ernest Buckler, Ethel Wilson, and Norman Levine. Chapter 4 ("The Foundational Fifties"), covering a more restricted time frame, focuses on Richler, Robertson Davies, Mavis Gallant, A. M. Klein, and Sheila Watson. Chapter 5 ("The Second Feminist Wave") considers Adele Wiseman, Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, Marian Engel, Alice Munro, and Margaret Atwood. Chapter 6 ("The Flourishing of the Wests") covers the sausage party of Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, George Bowering, Jack Hodgins, and Guy Vanderhaeghe. Chapter 7 ("Canada's Second Century") takes on the big books post-1967-to-2000-ish, including those by Michael Winter, Lisa Moore, Michael Crummey, Elizabeth Hay, Frances Itani, Alan Cumyn, Steven Heighton, Helen Humphreys, Timothy Findley, Graeme Gibson, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Richard B. Wright, Susan Swan, Matt Cohen, Dennis Bock, Jane Urquhart, Anne Michaels, Lawrence Hill, Douglas Glover, Nino Ricci, Bonnie Burnard, Sandra Birdsell, David Bergen, Miriam Toews, Yann Martel, Katherine Govier, Joy Kogawa, SKY Lee, Wayson Choy, Caroline Adderson, and Gail Anderson-Dargatz. Chapter 8 ("Indigenous Voices") discusses George Copway, E. Pauline Johnson, Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, Jeannette Armstrong, Tomson Highway, Thomas King, Richard Wagamese, Robert Alexie, Eden Robinson, Drew Hayden Taylor, Patsauq Markoosie, and Alooktook Ipellie while also (in a perilous moment) mentioning Joseph Boyden. Chapter 9 ("Naturalized Canadian Writers") brings forth white and racialized immigrant writers both straight and queer, including Henry Kreisel, Austin Clarke, Jane Rule, Carol Shields, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Dionne Brand, Neil Bissoondath, Andre Alexis, Rohinton Mistry, and M. G. Vassanji. Finally, chapter 10 ("Canadian Fiction in the Twenty-First Century") continues the undefined-Canada-get-all-writers-in-there-minus-Indigenous-authors strategy of the chapters other than 8, involving Rawi Hage, Heather O'Neill, Darren Greer, Colin McAdam, David Chariandy, David Bezmogis, Sheila Heti, Emma Donoghue, Katherena Vermette, Steven Galloway, Anosh Irani, Madeleine Thien, Kathy Page, Patrick DeWitt, Esi Edugyan, and Steven Price.

I wish to conclude on the most positive—and also most important—note. To read this book politically is to miss the point in favour of easy pickings, for *A History of Canadian Fiction* is primarily for students who want to learn more about the texts that form much of the body of Canadian literature. Though the book largely abandons theory, the resultant focus on texts and dates and descriptions with a chronological focus has finally freed students of literature from

the *Literary History of Canada* as a text-suggestor for theses. (As long as students understand that Staines has written a text that could be titled *A History of English Canadian Literary Fiction Preferentially Focused on Cis White People*, then they'll be fine. But I think students today are savvy to this implicit preference and will be awaiting the focussed fiction histories to come.)

For example, I'm currently writing a scholarly book on medicine in CanLit and have struggled mightily for want of a concise record of important texts over the years, having to range between introductory anthologies, the aforementioned *Literary History*, Toye's big brick, and partial histories. At long last Staines has given readers a credible and stolid text that takes them through Canadian fiction from a rather arbitrary (and quite contestable) start with Montague and that moves through eras with efficiency. I suspect the utility of this book when taken as a whole will far surpass that of the *Literary History* and its ultimate reduction to its admittedly great "Conclusion." I'm indebted to Staines and I think a great many other students and scholars of—dare I say "our"?—literature will be, too. Hopefully, this book will be a blueprint for a more inclusive book to come. As a McMaster scholar who succumbed to COVID-19 two years ago once said to me after expounding on Poe so beautifully that I felt Poe was in the room listening, so graced was the dead poet's memory by the rendition, "This is the humbling part of scholarship, to be outdated and soon surpassed on publication."

## Updating the *Companion*

**Coral Ann Howells, ed.**
*The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, 2nd ed. Cambridge UP $33.95

Reviewed by Sharon Engbrecht (University of British Columbia)

The second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, like the first, "boasts an impressive array of essays by international Atwood scholars" (Robinson 151). In the introduction, editor Coral Ann Howells notes that since the first edition of the *Companion*, "Atwood has published twelve new literary works" (1), and the collection has been updated to cover the works since *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Each contribution now nods towards works since 2003, touching on combinations of Atwood's novels, essays, short-story collections, and poetry, as well as the Angel Catbird series, while three of the chapters have been rewritten by different authors. Laura M. Robinson's review of the first edition lays out the details of many of the essays that have been revised in the second edition. However, Lorraine York's "Biography/Autobiography" and Sharon Wilson's "Blindness and Survival in Atwood's Major Works" have been replaced by Fiona Tolan's "Margaret Atwood's Revisions of Classic Texts" and Eva-Marie Kröller's "The Hulu and MGM Television Adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*."

Like the first edition, the new *Companion* touches on many of the topics found in Atwood studies, from the author's focus on Canada as a locus of her protagonists' experiences to power, feminism, nation, environmentalism, history and historiographic metafiction, humour, poetics, genre and form, and dystopia and speculative fiction. Also like the first edition, the second offers paratextual guides, including an Atwood chronology and a bibliography for further reading.

It also includes a limited index, but digitally savvy readers will likely find it more useful to search a PDF version of the collection. In addition, the end matter includes "Books of General Interest for Atwood," with a cursory look at some of the texts that have influenced Atwood's writing and an emphasis on the importance of the Margaret Atwood Papers in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, at the University of Toronto, as a treasure trove of Atwoodian resources.

The *Companion* appears to be geared towards early-career researchers and graduate students but will likely be most useful in undergraduate classrooms as a brief introduction to Atwood and general (canonical) Atwoodian topics. The treatment of many of Atwood's texts opens up a variety of conversations surrounding each topic, while the reference sections will help students find related and significant contributions in each area. As an Atwood scholar, I found Marta Dvořák's and Eva-Marie Kröller's chapters most engaging; they give more in-depth analyses of their themes: Atwood's humour and a comparative analysis of adaptation, respectively. Kröller, in particular, discusses some of the "reactionary politics" (189) that surface in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in both the novel and the recent TV adaptation. However, many other contributions emphasize the breadth of Atwoodian scholarship generally. No doubt J. Brooks Bouson's "Margaret Atwood and Environmentalism"—paired with the chapter of the same name by Sharon Hengen in the first edition—will be useful in undergraduate classrooms, in many of which the *MaddAddam* trilogy provides an introduction to narrative ecocriticism, as will "Margaret Atwood and History," by Gina Wisker (the first edition's corresponding essay was by Coomi S. Vevaina), which offers an overview of historiographic metafiction and an analysis of *Alias Grace* (another undergraduate classroom favourite).

As for Atwood and recent feminist-centred controversies, most chapters gloss over or avoid calls for greater analysis of Atwood's contemporary role as public intellectual, which she has stepped into as part of her status as a literary celebrity. Given York's contribution to *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*, it's not surprising that her chapter was omitted from the updated collection. In "How Do We Get Out of Here? An Atwood Scholar, Signing Off," York argues that Atwood has backed herself into "a corner of her own making" (132) through her support of the *UBC Accountable* letter and that, "in her corner, she is also operating as a nodal point in the various controversies that are linked to the UBC case in the same way that power is interlinked in literary and other hierarchies" (132). The *Companion* glosses over Atwood's own use of power, even as it attests to the ways in which her writing attempts to hold power to account. This criticism is meant to shed light on another aspect of contemporary Atwood scholarship: her role as a public intellectual with international influence.

While Howells argues that Atwood "has become a Canadian voice in global culture as a major thinker, writer, and public spokesperson on issues of environmentalism and human rights, especially women's and Indigenous rights" (1), it seems that Atwood, instead of representing or nuancing these concerns in her literary oeuvre, makes strategic public-relations campaigns to demonstrate her ethical stances. Howells contends that the *UBC Accountable* letter failed "to mention fair treatment for the female complainants—which was a serious mistake" (5)—while at the same time using Atwood's philanthropic work and publishing connections to suggest how Atwood demonstrates her serious consideration of feminist critique. Nodding towards Atwood's "Am I a Bad

Feminist?," Howells writes that "Atwood's critique did not appeal to many younger women, who saw her stance as a betrayal of feminist ideology" (5). Howells reads the backlash as an underestimation of "Atwood and her genuine feminist concerns" (5) but fails to address how authors from a variety of different subject positions, including trans, queer, and BIPOC folks (see, for example, Thom), call for Atwood's accountability as an important figure in the Canadian literary and publishing scene. After the backlash, Howells writes, Atwood "became one of the first funders of a new Canadian anti-sexual harassment program, AfterMeToo" (5). Howells gestures to *The Testaments* as evidence of "Atwood's latest nuanced definition of feminism" (5) and to her publisher's charity partnership with Equality Now for the novel's launch as evidence of Atwood's "genuine feminist concerns."

Howells' introduction and much of the collection elide these lines of critique, which are lacking in Atwood studies. Paying attention to and offering alternative theoretical structures through which to consider Atwood's public persona in recent years would have added much-needed depth to the otherwise authorized and canonical topics in Atwood studies. Yes, much of the *Companion* mirrors Atwood's general experience and subject position "as a white anglophone woman" (3), to which I would add upper middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and cisgendered. Yet extending Atwood studies to address the critical lacunae in her work, including her appropriation of Indigenous narrative elements—discussed in Wisker's chapter without attention to the colonial histories and new directions in reconciliation in Canada—would help update current Atwoodian discourse.

Kröller's chapter does introduce readers to some of the criticism launched at Atwood and the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, including the whitewashing of slave narratives, although it fails to address the oppressive and violent histories of sexual and reproductive control concerning racialized bodies (see Goodwin). Channelling Atwood's critics, Kröller writes, "The absence of persons of color in Atwood's novel . . . does not absolve it from the responsibility to think about them" (200), especially given her international appeal and influence. And in many ways, as Noah Berlatsky argues, "America has always been a dystopia for people of color." On this particular topic, Toni Morrison's wisdom comes to mind: "What I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, and altered those notions" (11). Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* calls for a reconsideration of the ways in which whiteness (along with other hegemonic identities) allows individuals to adapt, appropriate, and "animate" (Ngai) both historical and contemporary racialized narratives. Thinking about ways in which whiteness appropriates (covertly) the racialized other to perpetuate its own privilege, Morrison asks readers to consider how "the appearance of Africanist characters or narrative or idiom in a work could never be *about* anything other than the 'normal,' unracialized, illusory white world that provide[s] the fictional backdrop" (16). Given the presence of BIPOC characters in Atwood's work, we might need to reconsider how they are used to demonstrate her own subject position and how she uses both narrative and her public persona to perpetuate certain kinds of (white, upper middle class, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied) privilege. In her chapter on "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," for example, Sarah A. Appleton addresses criticism of the character of Oryx from *Oryx and Crake*. Appleton writes that "the novel depicts Oryx as a rather vapid woman

who sprouts platitudes and seems incapable of displaying any sense of the real . . . Oryx seems to have no inner core; she is all body and no self" (72). But Oryx is a child from a nameless impoverished Asian village sold into sexual slavery, and the character's presence in the novel suggests a complex relationship with the devastation of colonialism. It would be worth considering how Atwood uses Oryx over the course of the *MaddAddam* trilogy to substantiate both Jimmy and Crake's worldviews and cisgendered, heterosexual masculinities, as well as their white privilege.

Questions of race, sexuality, gender, ability, and power appear in most if not all of Atwood's works—often as a discussion about "freedom to" and "freedom from" (Atwood, "We Are Double-Plus Unfree")—so the omission of these critical discussions, especially in the *second* edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, is unfortunate. Nevertheless, the edition does offer a wide-ranging foundation on which to begin building new critical approaches to Atwood's writing and international literary celebrity, and it will no doubt continue to be an important text in many classrooms.

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## Scots and Empire

**Eva-Marie Kröller**
*Writing the Empire: The McIlwraiths, 1853-1948*. U of Toronto P $116.00

Reviewed by Margery Fee (University of British Columbia)

In this book, I encountered a word I had never seen before: *prosopography* is "a description of a person's social and family connections, career, etc.," or "the study such descriptions" ("Prosopography, N."). Kröller acts as prosopographer for several members of one family. In 1853, two McIlwraith men emigrated from Ayrshire,

Scotland, to Canada and Australia, where each prospered. Beginning in that year, the book's five-hundred-page coverage ends in 1948, when T. F. McIlwraith's book about the Nuxalk, *The Bella Coola Indians*, was finally published. Writing is at the centre of this book. The McIlwraiths kept in regular touch with far-flung family, friends, teachers, and other social connections. However, sometimes the record went dark. Kröller aptly notes that "intensely populated archival islands are separated by extensive waters of biographical silence" (170). Nonetheless, she keeps a fascinating story afloat, even when backtracking in time, or moving away from the McIlwraiths to those closely connected to them.

Kröller assimilates many media and genres: letters, postcards, works of fiction and poetry, journals, diaries, obituaries, government reports, Christmas annuals, magazines, and newspapers. To give some idea of the magnitude of the task, she notes that over an eight-month period, one Ontario McIlwraith boasts of receiving at least 432 letters, and sending 530 (71). Written with input from several contemporary family members, this work required visits to many archives in Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Kröller immerses us in the lives of women and men from many backgrounds while casting a critical eye on the everyday sexism, racism, homophobia, and jingoism that often marked the assumptions of the privileged settlers at the centre of the work. How they "articulated their identity as imperial subjects over time" shifts between generations and even within individuals as their circumstances change (4). Some juggled multiple identifications as they travelled or sought a job or an audience for their writing.

The first chapter deals with Sir Thomas McIlwraith (1835-1900), three-time premier of Queensland. Next up is Thomas McIlwraith (1824-1903), who settled in Hamilton, Ontario, and devoted hours spared from his coal business to ornithology, producing two editions of *The Birds of Ontario* (1886, 1894). Another chapter explores his children's "Family Album," of which one daughter, Jean (1858-1938), took the lead. She features in a later chapter as an editor for Doubleday in New York and a Canadian author. The ornithologist's grandson, T. F. McIlwraith (1899-1964), took part in the British occupation of Germany in 1918, attended Cambridge, conducted fieldwork with the Nuxalk, and became the first head of anthropology at the University of Toronto. His correspondence with his sister Dorothy (1891-1976) supports the last chapters. Like her aunt Jean, Dorothy worked for Doubleday in New York before editing both *Short Stories*, by then a Western and adventure-story magazine, and *Weird Tales* (1940-1954), an early science fiction and fantasy magazine. The siblings' love of verse was ingrained: they recited it together as they did the dishes. T. F. was known for stirring recitations, including "Gunga Din" and "The Cremation of Sam McGee," delivered to his mates in the King's Own Scottish Borderers. Shared imperial popular culture helped soldiers through cataclysmic events.

The first McIlwraith to feature, Sir Thomas, has been described as "a burly 6 foot womanizer with the instincts of a gambler" (50). His attempt to annex New Guinea in 1884 was rebuffed by the British government, in part because "based on its previous record in the treatment of Aboriginals, Queensland could not be trusted with the Native population of New Guinea" (50). In one interview, McIlwraith defends settlers from accusations of murder and rape by accusing the "last dregs of a doomed race" of sexual licence and cannibalism, concluding that their "savagery was ineradicable" (61). That Germany had interests in New Guinea

meant that rival attempts to set up so-called protectorates could spark war between the European powers competing for resources and "cheap" labour. Kröller's ability to include German material adds another empire to the mix. It also situates the lives of some elite young women at a finishing school in Dresden at the outbreak of the First World War. The cheerful, slangy letters of Beulah Gillet Knox, who later married T. F. McIlwraith, focalize this section, which also outlines the wartime career of her aristocratic schoolmate and lesbian heroine Eileen Plunket.

Kröller moves from analysis of settler-colonial and imperial ideologies and institutions to minute details of daily life. We learn about the transatlantic telegraph cable; "shotgun ornithology," the preferred method before good binoculars and portable cameras (85); the coal business, as conducted by postcard, known as "the poor man's telephone" (79); the recycling and hoarding of paper, including the strategic deployment of free letterhead; girls' crushes on opera singers in Dresden; and much more. What distinguishes this work from some family histories is its clear-eyed attention to the good *and* the bad, including the impact of empire on women, Black people, Indigenous people, and other "imperial subjects" (4). Its narrative arc from Sir Thomas McIlwraith to T. F. McIlwraith puts this shift into perspective, as T. F. moves from his early imperialist views, full of stereotypes of those he encounters in the war and at Cambridge, to a new understanding learned by living with the Nuxalk. T. F. would not have been able to attend Cambridge but for the war and the mentorship of the Master of Downing College, Sir Albert Seward, and his wife Marion, whom T. F. first met while billeted at the College as a cadet. We learn about the treatment of women students, the presence of Indian students preparing for the civil service in India, then called "the Great Dependency," and the rebellious attitudes of battle-scarred men to university regulation. Even graduating with a first did not spare T. F. from the "indispensable role of patronage" in getting a position (407). Assiduous support from his professors helped him find field work in Bella Coola, which he eventually parlayed into a professorship at the University of Toronto. His two-volume *The Bella Coola Indians* (reprinted 1992), as well as related correspondence, *At Home with the Bella Coola: T. F. McIlwraith's Field Letters, 1922-24* (2003), are available today with good introductions. Kröller describes Nuxalk reaction to his ethnography, expressed at a memorial potlatch in 1991 to which the McIlwraith family was invited. Chief Lawrence Pootlass (Nuximlayc) stated, "[T]hese books are more than gold to us" (446). Kröller's meticulous and readable rethinking of settler life stories, identifications, and ideologies certainly provides an inspiration and a model to others who wish to repudiate a "Great Man" or Whig history that imagines "our" ever more glorious future. The story ends on a positive note, with T. F. McIlwraith's Nuxalk name being passed on to his son. And his grandson, Thomas (Tad) McIlwraith, works on land claims as an anthropologist at the University of Guelph.

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## Poem and Puppet Hearts

**Andrew DuBois**
*All the People Are Pregnant*. icehouse poetry $19.95

**Leanne Dunic**
*One and Half of You*. Talonbooks $16.95

**Sharon McCartney**
*Villa Negativa: A Memoir in Verse*. Biblioasis Publishing $19.95

**Bardia Sinaee**
*Intruder*. House of Anansi Press $19.95

Reviewed by Dale Tracy (Kwantlen Polytechnic University)

The poems in Andrew DuBois' wonderfully titled *All the People Are Pregnant* make the arrival of repeated sounds feel inevitable, a ritual appropriate for "a cursed poem" (14) or for "A bookish hateful hand" that "gets the yellow bird / And squeezes out its song" (48). From the title poem, for example:

> . . . The men with torches frightened
> your horses, they were looking for the dark.
> It was nowhere where they thrust their
> torches; throw your arms around
> The necks of horses. (12)

Or from earlier in the same poem:

> Refuse collected by accident resting blown,
> or having been thrown angry
> From a last ditch, against an effort
> of a building erected by proximity
> To eternity being zoned out of repression. (11)

These excerpts are enough to demonstrate that thought in this collection propels itself rousingly from sound to sound. As one sound leads to another, surprising situations ensue, like characters who find a vampiric solution to the shortage of "wizard oil": "Engine run with red red blood" (39). These strange situations are not distanced from reality; in fact, as one poem points out, "You can almost always say stranger things have happened / (fear inducing)" (72). With questions like "But is man not a kind of bear?" (51) and statements like "Hello, your heart must quit smoking" (73), DuBois' poems are vibrant with doing their own thing. The title poem addresses an unknown something that fills the poems in this collection like they are the balloons and puppets they mention, a mysterious something from which the poems' floating quotations and unanswered questions seem to emerge:

> All the people are pregnant here, they
> are full of something—but what
> They can't say, or how it got there
> they can't say or can't imagine. (13)

A lyric memoir, Leanne Dunic's *One and Half of You* performs a difficult mathematics of the self. Dunic's poems expressively ask, to whom do the ghosts belong? Who should be privy to the heartbeat? How whole is one person? To the

question, "Do you believe in ghosts" is the answer, "I believe in yours" (62). To the invitation, "I'll let you punch me in the stomach if you / let me press my ear to your heart," comes blank space and, finally, "No" (24). To the problem, "Bloodlines—we are too thin for further / dilution," comes the response, "Half plus a half, we could deliver another . . . " (64). But when the speaker's lover looks for her in a dream he encounters instead her ghost, who says, "I am one / and half of you" (66). These poems might add up to one and half of the speaker, who is

> . . . unable to write a word
> without you in my ink.
>
> You, a part of me
> apart from me. (77)

The fractions in these poems, helped by Dunic's use of spacing, take up the speaker's experiences as a biracial person reflecting on the entanglements and gaps of history and memory, as when the speaker feels that "[s]omething of our history was here, but / all we knew was inherited sadness" (18). These fractions power her reflections about similarity and difference, about people who "are the same" (44), who "look alike" (53), or who are "nothing like" each other (44). Waves of twins, models, and ghosts move forcefully through this collection's "mixed salinity" (16). With these waves, the music of each section arrives from elsewhere, repeating, guiding, or haunting readerly engagement. As the concluding poem states, "Displacement is / a pattern, not a single occurrence" (79).

Sharon McCartney's *Villa Negativa: A Memoir in Verse* asks, "If you don't write it down, / how do you know what it is?" (16). Though the label of memoir implies the closeness of speaker to poet, the speaker of the multi-sectioned "I Am Not Who I Am" puts self-identity in question as she also seeks to make a self tangible by writing it down: "To perceive something, we have to be able / to stand away from it" (17). However, the speaker cannot achieve this distance: "If the task is inward, how do I find / what is inside that will take me out of myself? // There is no outside of myself" (19). This collection's paradoxes make its reflections feel earned. The poems reward readers not only by arriving at moments of insight but also by playing out the lines of thought, repeatedly restarting these processes of knowing and questing. *Villa Negativa* positions a short opening, "Pain on Waterloo Row," as a keynote for its body of three long poems ("I Am Not Who I Am," "Agonal and Preterminal," and "Anorexic"). This opening features an unnamed man who may experience the pain to which the title refers or who may cause his beloved to feel this pain (or both). This poem's third-person perspective is an unusual welcome to a memoir but fittingly reminds us, as do all of the poems in the collection, that a person takes shape among other people. The final poem, "Prayer," as its title suggests, makes an entreaty: "Whatever death is, / please let it be quiet" (63). In a way, this poem achieves what it requests, bringing after it the quiet of the collection's end. Ending on this formal affirmation of the poem's goal, McCartney's memoir in verse suggests that it successfully produces a form of self by writing it.

Bardia Sinaee's *Intruder* is amply supple to encompass social commentary ("It is so hard for some men to be men / and be humans also" [59]), myth ("only I could ride around on a cloud / because I was pure of heart" [82]), menace ("Your sickness, // the violence of your existence, is parenthetical / to my delight; I rewrite it as I please" [52]), and philosophic questing ("Is this / some sort of riddle?" [77]).

These poems don't invite a voyeuristic view of the "new ways to invade the living organism" involved in cancer treatment (1). Instead, *Intruder* produces complex openings, such as charming readers into an aching comfort that the poems don't keep for themselves: "It's like when you were younger / Someone is keeping an eye on you / It's getting dark and someone is driving you home" (2). The sequence "Half-Life" demonstrates Sinaee's attentiveness to the discursive conditions of pandemic life and beyond. Not reiterating but catching the tune of the times, "Half-Life" offers the recognizable while rejecting repetitions that normalize the horrific, such that readers can take both straightforwardly and ironically the counsel "let us grieve the future / we'd expected" (92). *Intruder*'s poems are up to the tasks they set themselves: "A poem needs // to ask big questions" (97), and these poems do. Concluding "When have I been here before" (97), this "Poem" reminds readers of the earlier one with the same title (18). Reflections on poetry's effects—"Is that my Bic in a dissected albatross's stomach?" (31)—run through *Intruder*, forming a heart for its wide-ranging, sometimes funny, sometimes disturbing, always sensitive thinking: "The human heart, with its plumbing / and catalogue of attachments, / branches off grotesquely in pursuit of love" (32). Indeed, this collection's poetic heart pumps with all the grotesque variousness of the human heart, one that knows,

> . . . If everyone
> saw me how I see me,
> I wouldn't have to write
> so many poems (10)

## Joyful Insurrections

**Hiromi Goto; Ann Xu, illus.**
*Shadow Life*. First Second Books $24.99

Reviewed by Libe García Zarranz (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

One of the joys of my adult life has been reading, teaching, and learning with Hiromi Goto's inimitable words. And I am not talking here about a depoliticized form of emotion but a critical mode of joy that can shape and transform worlds. (The feminist killjoy Sara Ahmed has taught us well!) Those already initiated in Goto's prose will agree that her heroines are unforgettable: Naoe, the irreverent grandmother figure in *Chorus of Mushrooms*; the ethically minded Sayuri in *The Water of Possibility*; Melanie, the determined teenager in *Half World*; and Stinky Girl, critic extraordinaire in *Hopeful Monsters*, to name a few. What these women have in common is their vitalism and what I call their joyful dissent. In *Shadow Life*, Goto's first graphic novel, the magnificent seventy-six-year-old Kumiko Saito is no exception: she is stubborn, she is passionate, she is hilarious, and she lives her life loudly and unapologetically. As stated by Goto in her author's note, it is rare to find complex representations in the media of older women, particularly BIPOC queer elders. To counteract this lack, Goto and the book's illustrator, Ann Xu, delightfully bring the unstoppable Kumiko to life, inviting readers to immerse ourselves into her habits and routines through sixteen chapters, from Kumiko's refusal to stay in an assisted-living home to her renting, against her daughters' wishes, an apartment in a queer neighbourhood in Vancouver.

If this is your first encounter with Xu's work, I urge you not to stop here and to indulge in her middle-grade graphic novel *Measuring Up* (2020). In *Shadow Life*, marketed for an adult audience, Xu's black, grey, and white drawings complement Goto's narrative in exquisite ways. Kumiko's force and agency are emphasized through the systematic use of panels drawn from her vantage point; extreme close-ups highlighting Kumiko's emotional reactions, such as laughing and bursting into tears of joy; and the recurrent bird's-eye-view shots of her body swimming in the pool or lying down at night, thinking. The multimodal narrative unfolds through a well-crafted blend of realistic and fantastic elements. Kumiko, who describes herself as "kind of a castoff" (14), embarks on a battle to trick death, presented in the form of variously shaped black-inked shadows that attempt to infiltrate her apartment. The complex topic of death is often treated humorously through the emphasis on the ordinariness of life. Kumiko successfully traps death's shadow in a second-hand vacuum cleaner she purchases from Meena, who is one of the "colourful" cast of secondary characters, as Xu puts it (Goto and Xu, "Behind"). Some of these younger characters also bring the question of intergenerational alliances and tensions to the forefront of the narrative. Whereas Kumiko's daughter Mitsuko is consistently presented as infantilized, highly worried, and utterly frustrated by her mother's agency, other characters, such as Mark and Yusuf, care about Kumiko in kinder ways. They cook food for her or try to be helpful without interfering or trying to control her. As Kumiko reflects, "I guess there's Nice Meddling and Meddler's Meddling" (56). I read these passages as modes of queer care that traverse temporal and spatial frameworks.

The importance of time and memory is indeed central to the graphic novel. There are numerous panels of Kumiko and her former girlfriend, Alice, interspersed into the present, infusing the narrative with a sense of trans-temporality where queer care matters. These memories quietly enter the present, inviting readers to understand Kumiko's complexity and full life. There are panels where we see them at the cinema, reading Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), arguing, and sleeping together. Some of these illustrations are fused with a shadow, signalling the looming presence of pain, loss, and death. However, the intimacy these women share, their past, and their longings are treated by Goto and Xu with a sense of joy that disrupts any melancholic inclinations or sense of nostalgia—a form of joyful dissent that permeates many of Goto's fictional worlds, in my view.

I cannot recommend *Shadow Life* enough to fans of the graphic novel genre, readers invested in queer stories, and teachers committed to integrating BIPOC writers and artists as central to their syllabi. The novel's sense of queer kinship and community is celebrated again at the end, where a mode of collective love for Kumiko triumphs as she wins her battle against death. *Shadow Life* presents a world that is drawn following the influences of manga and Goto's grandmother Naoe, as Goto shares in the author's note. This is also a graphic novel that was published during COVID-19, a global pandemic that has intensified social and economic inequities, racism, sexism, and ableism, among other necropolitical processes. At this historical juncture, as Goto rightly contends, "humour is a way to speak back to despair" (qtd. in Mlynek). I thus urge you to dive into Goto's and Xu's joyful insurrections in *Shadow Life*, and to let yourself be moved to feel, laugh, and act.

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## Dissembling Resemblance

**Henry Adam Svec**
*Life Is Like Canadian Football and Other Authentic Folk Songs*. Invisible Press $19.95

**Jean Marc Ah-Sen, Emily Anglin, Devon Code, and Lee Henderson; Dakota McFadzean, illus.**
*Disintegration in Four Parts*. Coach House Press $21.95

Reviewed by Geordie Miller (Mount Allison University)

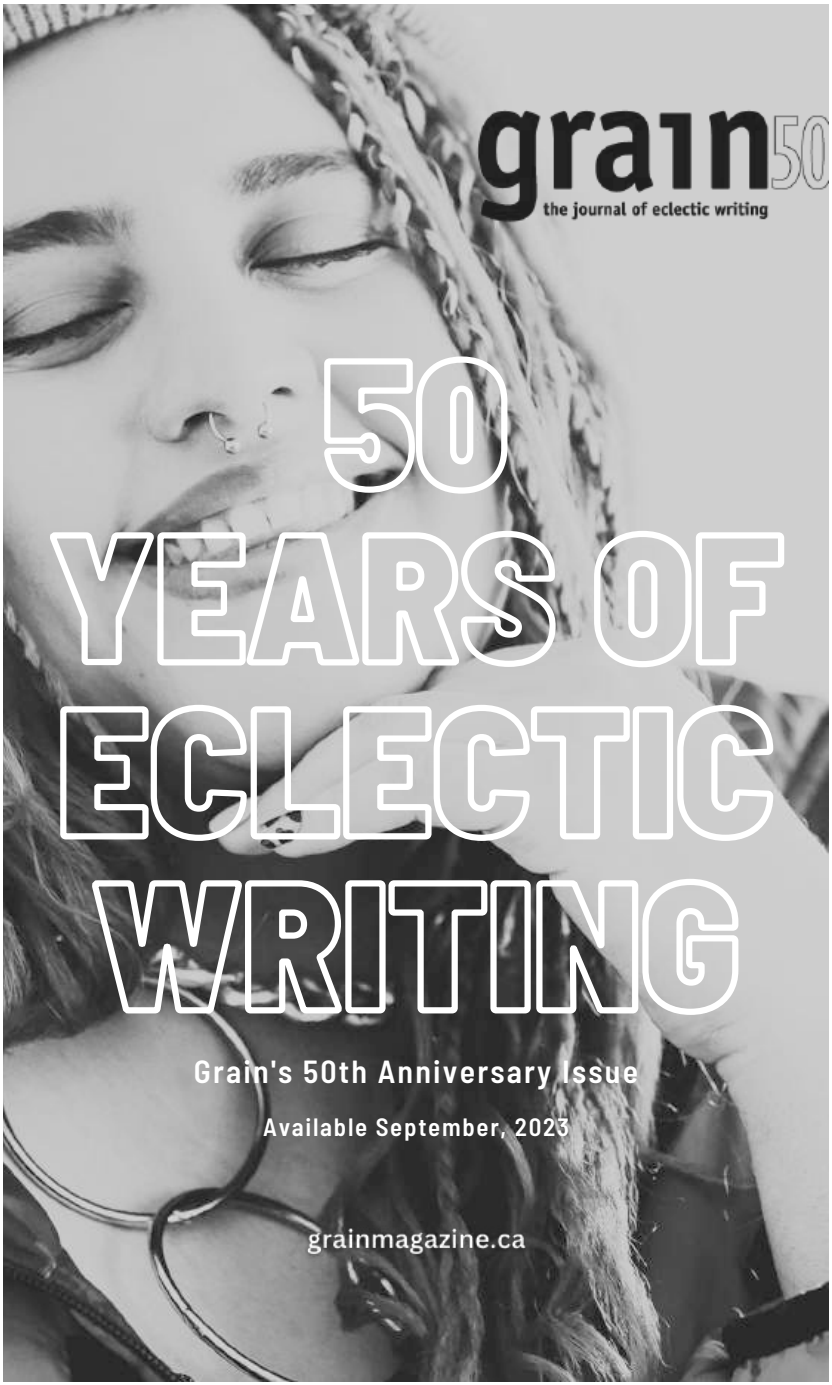
Like life, football is full of deception. A quarterback fakes handing off the ball to the running back, turns, and instead fires the pass to a receiver. It looks like a run, but it's a pass. This sequence is called play action, and its execution relies on the quarterback hiding their intentions and on their teammates simulating a running play until the decisive moment. A successful play action call thus involves precise movements and purposeful semblance, two qualities that these books possess.

*Life Is Like Canadian Football* seems like a memoir, but is a novel. Someone named Henry Adam Svec has discovered an archive of songs by Canadian Football League players recorded in the early 1970s by a guy called Staunton R. Livingston. This scholarly frame tale of an Alan Lomax acolyte in three-down territory at Library and Archives Canada is a hoax. The mask of the intrepid folklorist enables Svec to tackle the question of folk music's provenance with the apparent aim "to inspire the next generation of authentic folk song collectors, and, therefore, folksingers" (10). The narrator's folk odyssey includes sojourns in places that connote communal cultural production, namely the Banff Centre, Dawson City, and Sappyfest. *Life Is Like Canadian Football* is also a jocular campus novel, satirizing the hubris, pettiness, and sado-masochism of academia, along with "[t]he absurd and nihilistic values of the neoliberal university" (66). The abundant footnotes dramatize the collision of artistic and academic pursuits, though not everyone will be a fan. The notes can have a distracting, even cloying, effect. Yet they allow for some of the funnier moments in a very funny book. For example, "Capital" is footnoted as evidence of Karl Marx being "perhaps the first to urge" to "not hate the player . . . [h]ate solely the game" (67). There are several more sincere references to Marx too, and it is genuinely difficult to know what to make of the book's anti-capitalist, political subtext. I suppose it probably depends on how seriously we take its meditations on utopia and avant-garde art, not to mention the references to police repression during the 2010 G20 summit in Toronto and "the patriarchal settler-colonial nation-state of Canada." For when Svec tells the truth, he more often tells it slant route.

*Disintegration in Four Parts* dons the conceptual mask of *purity*, a word serving here as writing prompt. Each of the four authors embarked—so we are informed via epigraph—from the following sentence: "All purity is created by resemblance and disavowal." They end up in wildly different places, effectively disavowing any obvious resemblance to one another. Lee Henderson's "Merz in the Arctic Circle" explores Dada artist Kurt Schwitters' commitment to his calling amid the terror and upheaval

of war. From an internment camp for enemy aliens in Kabelvåg, we move with Emily Anglin's "Dissolving Views" to a rented condo in an unidentified, presumably present-day, city. Julia, the narrator, feels her life sliding out of view after a breakup from her boss and estrangement from her fraternal twin sister, Amber. Estrangement is the order of the day in "Parametrics of Purity," Jean Marc Ah-Sen's Lovecraftian tale of literary romance and betrayal—"a fictional chronicle" of competing literary movements (121). This weird, elaborate novella defies summary and depicts what are surely some of the oddest writing exercises you are likely to encounter. Devon Code's poignant "The Green Notebook" presents itself as the found notebook of a dying, since deceased, author who meditates on memory, life, suffering, and various other philosophical themes. "Art does have utility," Code's narrator writes. "But that utility is so complex and diffuse as to be virtually impossible to quantify and so it needs to be taken on a kind of faith" (191-92).

Both books reward your faith in them in surprising ways. They are busy, less bound to their respective organizing concepts than advertised. All the better, too, for their willingness to venture beyond mystifications like authenticity and purity. Significantly, the first reference to the latter in *Disintegration* is in the context of sound. Henderson describes the "pure sound" of "near silence in the sheltered bay of Kabelvåg" (13). The clamour of nearby Nazi bombers and British warships encroaches on this purity. Yet Schwitters still sings his Dada verses and obsesses over his Merz, finding a measure of calm amid a systemic, seismic crisis. It may seem like a game, but he's never far from a question that should resound rather loudly now: "Who can think about art when the world is on fire?" (55).



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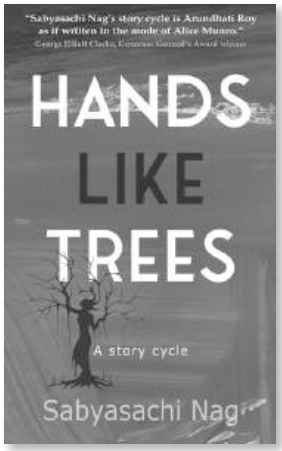


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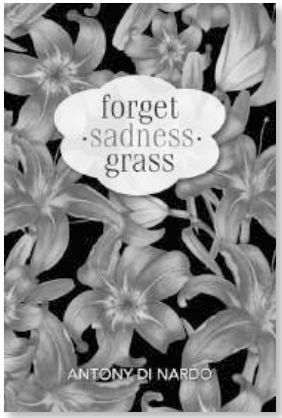


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